# Muv-Luv Reversal

**By: Zuoriel**

Takeru has been leading a normal life until now. During the summer vacation of his second year in college he's invited by his high school friends to meet up again, to which he agrees. Shirogane doesn't know that this decision would release the nightmares that have been haunting him for some time, nightmares that would be better left forgotten.

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Introduction
One Last Day in Peace
Innocent Fighting
Integrate
Break Point
Back to the Battlefield
Unexpected Aid
Beginning of his Strife
The Remnants He Left Behind
Ace Recruit
Entangled Threads
Sore Point
As the Fog Sets In
Watering the Seed of Doubt
The Start of the Storm
Before the Downpour
Muddy Water Moody Hearts
Turbulent Winds
The Eye of the Storm
Clouded Horizon
Towards the Downpour
Isolated Rains
Rekindling Point
The End of the Storm
Conflict
Into the Undercurrents
Suspicions and Misunderstandings

Invited to a Masquerade
Ignited
First Answers
Ripples of Change
Introductions of the Masquerade
Links of the Undercurrents
Reluctance
Their Sacrifice
Turning Points
His Sisters
Debris Junkyard
Kriegspiel
True or False?
A Mistake Worth Making
Key Words of the Masquerade
Evoking Bonds
Resolve
Underlying Shadows
Weary Homecoming
Ignoble Integration
Lull in the Masquerade
Left Behind
Disciple
Interference in the Masquerade
Enduring the Restart
At Square Zero
Guidance of the Claret Hollows
Stranger
Lupine Seed
Shirogane (I)

My Beloved Brother
Shadows of the Silver Blossom
Burdens of the Setting Sun
Lurking Threats
Downtime in the Masquerade
Behind the Mask
Downtime in the Masquerade (II)
Downtime in the Masquerade (III)
One Last Night in Peace (I)
One Last Night in Peace (II)
Nicks in the Edge
Dancing in the Masquerade
Despair After Death
Rumbling Hearts (I)
Rumbling Hearts (II)
Rumbling Hearts (III)
Inflection Point - Waking the Dragon
Mind's Off Matter
Iceberg of the Soul (I)
Iceberg of the Soul (II)
Shirogane (II)
Riding the Undercurrents
Jester of the Masquerade
Nidhogg & Freyja
Tuning Duty
Roses and Ashes (I)
Roses and Ashes (II)
Landmines in the Masquerade
Link of Desire
Jester's Trickery

Pulling and Being Pulled
Jester's Quiz
Cracks in the Masquerade
Jester's Dagger
To Be or Not To Be
Unnumbered Excuse
Shrouded Silver Blossom
Steering in the Undercurrents
Small Steps
Wavering
Anchor
Distortion
Goodbye

# One Last Day in Peace

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*Names, characters, organizations and events depicted in this story are either a product of the author's imagination or portrayed in a fictional manner to serve the narrative. Any relation to actual persons, living or dead, organizations, existing in the present or from the past, or actual real life events is purely coincidental.*

*The views and opinions shown in this story do not represent the author's nor the original source material author's.*

*This story is made as a direct sequel to Muv-Luv Alternative and it is recommended to have read the original VN trilogy already , due to the large details of the world that the narrative will assume the reader already knows.*

*However, as you'll see down below when you start reading, Reversal works as a sort of AU, Alternate Universe that is, and will diverge from canon at some points. Do not expect a carbon copy of Alternative's events in this fi c . This is not the story to read if you're looking for canon-compliant content.*

*There also will be unmarked spoilers present throughout the plot , pertaining to other media from the Muv-Luv franchise and other works from AGE, like Total Eclipse, some side-stories from the Photon games, and Rumbling Hearts/Kimi ga Nozumu Eien/[Insert official localization name here], to name a few.*

*This fic is also the starting point of its series, most of my other works for the Muv-Luv fandom will be related to this story in one way or the other. Author notes at the end of certain chapters will indicate when it is recommended to go and take a peek at the other material I write.*

***WARNING :***

*This story will contain themes that may upset certain sensibilities and aren't appropriate for some audiences. Reversal takes all the darkest elements of Muv-Luv Alternative and brings them into the lime light, exacerbating them at times. While not all chapters will contain such subjects, the story as a whole will employ said topics, at times without notice and out of the blue.*

*Thus, the following tags apply to this story:* **AU - Post-Canon, AU - Dark, H eavy Angst, Cruelty, Torture, Blood and Violence, Bigotry and Prejudice, Graphics Des criptions, Mental Health Issues and Anguish, Repressed Memories and PTSD, Tragedy, and Doomed Timelines .**

***Reader discretion is advised.***

**If any of the above tags could affect you negatively, do not proceed any further. Don't let the dark contents of this story ruin your day.**

*At times, I shall leave chapter-specific warnings at the start in an author's note when I deem the content warrants it. Do not take the warnings lightly, they are there for a reason. However, a lack of a warning does not mean the content cannot take a dark turn. Proceed at your own discretion, and do not expect this story to be anything other than what it's showing itself to be.*

*Due to the repetition of issues different commenters have had with th e plot of this fic , I suppose I should give you all a small heads-up:*

*S ome of my headcanons and takes on Muv-Luv have been considered toxic by a few , at times this story has been referred to as*

*'dark angsty shit', 'misery porn', and other derogatory adjectives and phrases . I know my writing isn't what the average Muv-Luv fan enjoys or seeks in a story but, while I appreciate constructive criticism, hatred won't be tolerated.*

*Reversal might be a swan dive into depression and does have a large serving of narrative and pacing issues , but this is my story to write. If it isn't to your liking, all I ask is for you to close the tab. Let's keep this civil and not resort to insults if the content does not align with what you hoped the story would be .*

*You're free to comment what you feel about the story, just please spare me the flames.*

*Also, as a little point of advice, the prologue on its own more or less tells the tone and way the story as a whole will go. If you don't enjoy what you' ve read by the end of chapter five, then you probably won't find the rest fitting to your tastes.*

*With all that said and without further delays , be welcome to my ride. Sit tight, bring some tissues, some cookies, and abandon all naive thoughts and romantic expectations.*

*Here's hoping your stay is a pleasant one* .

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*"All I see is shattered pieces*

*I can't keep it hidden like a secret*

*I can't look away*

*From all this pain in the world we've made*

*Every day you need a bulletproof vest*

*To save yourself, from what you could never guess*

*Am I safe today?*

*When I step outside in the wars we wage*

*Our future's here and now*

*Here comes the countdown!"*

Rise, by Skillet.

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**Muv-Luv Reversal**

**[ Prologue *: Unalterable* ]**

*Chapter 1:*

**One Last Day in Peace**

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*August 5th, 2003. Extra Timeline*

*(Hiiragi District. Takeru's House. )*

**[Takeru]**

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"Come on, you have to straighten your hair! You can't meet her with these looks, Takeru!" Mom nags at me with a frown, getting closer and brushing my fringe, trying to 'fix' my hair.

So I raise an arm in defense, taking a step back. "That's enough, Mom! Leave my hair alone. And… it's not what you think. We're just meeting to pass the time, that's all."

"Yeah, right. And I'm a three-headed monkey," giving me a side glance for a second, she takes out her perfume and starts to shower me in it. "After all the prep work you did yesterday. You're not fooling your mother, young man!"

"Come on, sto- *Cough* ! Stop it with the perfume! Do you wanna kill me or what?!" Coughing a bit, waving a hand to send away the clouds of vanilla she had poured on me, I take a few steps back towards the door. "Really, it's… just a meetup, nothing more."

Narrow eyes, pursed lips, she then shakes her head. "Fine, whatever. But at least do your hair again. Why haven't you cut it already? It's the middle of summer, too."

"Shut up. It's not even that long, anyways," curling some of it behind my ears, rechecking everything was on me already, a shiver ran down my spine. Finally, it's time to set off. "Well, I'll be back before it's dark."

"Yes, you do that. But if you end up… sidetracked, make sure to at least call to-"

"Mom!"

"What? Come on, Takeru. Read the hints!" Waving a finger at my nose, her eyes start blazing. "You didn't do all this prep for nothing, right?"

"Sigh. Just… It's complicated."

"Ha! Now you finally look like an adult." Smiling much, she gives me a strong pat on the back. "Have fun, and don't be too nervous, okay?"

"Yes… Thanks, Mom. Later," putting on my shoes, giving a nod, I walk to the door.

"And if you do go to a hotel, make sure to use a cond-"

"MOM!"

Crossing her arms, she sighs and shakes her head, telling me to be careful out there in the city. Sighing, feeling empty all of a sudden, I just open the door almost apathetically and step outside. Taking a

sharp breath, feeling the heat of the sun on my skin, I start making my way to the station.

Luck seems to be on our side today, though. We've had random rains every day recently but for now the sky is clear, it's nicely hot and according to the forecast it's not raining today.

As I walk out on the street of another summer, parents with their children on a trip, couples huddling close, and the usual bustling of the season, the soft caress of the wind reaches my face as it blows around. This summer has been weird, with all of these random rains, but it's also not that humid heat that always brings my mood down. It's nicely warm, yet not oppressing.

And yet, as I breath in, my legs grow heavy, a quiver in my ankles delays my steps. Running a hand over my hair, I can't help but to sigh. Plucking my lips as I see my reflection on a house's window, can't help but to wonder if she'll come.

And even if she does… What do I tell her? I gulp, placing both of my hands on my jean's pockets. Kicking the air as I pick up my pace, feeling the coldness of my keys and the odd shape of my wallet, I close my eyes and try to remember the lines I had practiced to break the ice, and yet my mind comes as blank as the clouds up there.

"Sigh… What's wrong with me?" Everyone else is gonna be there too, at least.

"Takeru-chan! Wait up!"

A voice I know well snaps me out of my inner worries. As I stop walking and look back, I see a red head running towards me.

Dressed with a cerulean sleeveless blouse with lines of white, cream colored shorts and her trademarked yellow ribbon, the woman in question leaves a cloud of dust in her trail as she rushes towards me.

"I said wait up! Why're you leaving without me?!" Sumika says, or rather shouts, while flailing her arms in the air as she tries to catch up to me.

Fuck… I totally forgot. Me and spacing out, name a more iconic duo. Thanks to Mom's nagging, it slipped my mind Sumika insisted on us going together to the meetup, even if it meant waiting for me. Looks like, for once, I was ready before her.

"Sorry, my bad," giving her a small bow, I try to rise a smile as she comes closer. "Mom was being real nosy, so it kind of slipped my mind."

"You're horrible!" Puffing her cheeks to the brim, she hits my shoulder once she arrives by my side, "I always, *always* wait for you. Why didn't you ring the bell to tell me you were ready?"

"I would have, but Mom was… well, being nosy."

"About what? You're not just lying to cover the fact that you forgot, right?" And again, that dubious side glance, that tilt of her head.

"Sigh… I'm not, she just got too bothersome at the last second. That my hair is too long, that I didn't put on perfume, to remember to use a… A-Anyways, sorry for not waiting."

"Well… Doesn't matter. So, everything's good?" Her usual smile back up, we start walking to the station.

"Yeah, same as always."

Making small talk, we keep going our way to the station. Crossing the streets, squeezing through the crowds that grow when we leave the calmness of the neighborhood, dodging rushing kids and douches that decide to make out in the middle of the fucking road, the station becomes visible in the distance. Just a few minutes more… Gulping, I hide my hands on my pockets, aware of my heartbeats for a second.

"H-Hey, don't walk so fast!" Sumika complains, slowly dodging the stream of people to come back near me with a light jog, and puffed cheeks.

"Come on, Sumika. I ain't even walking fast, you know?" I scratch my head, readjusting my jacket while she catches her breath once she comes closer.

"Lies, you're marching as if it were the end of the world. You didn't even slow down in the middle of that giant crowd."

"What? It's not like I was trying to. I just dodged the people, that's all."

"… Hmm. But really, don't walk so fast. We still have plenty of time, right? Let's just chat for a while, it's been so long since we had time off to hang out."

"… Did you forget why we're out so early today?"

"What's with the glare?" Plucking her lips, she again punches my sides as we wait for the red to turn green. "But yeah, I get how you feel. I'm anxious to meet everyone after so long, too. Being in college sure is hard, right?" She lets out a small sigh as I nod in complete agreement, but Sumika quickly recovers her smile as we start walking again. "So there's a lot of catch up to do today, especially about how we did on our tests! But, I wonder what should we eat? Takeru-chan, think some ice cream before coming back sounds good?" She asks with a tilt of her head and a smile.

So, she really forgot about it. How did someone with such a short attention span ever made it to college is a mystery to me.

Sumika has been in a great mood since she passed two major tests with a really good score and hasn't shut up about it for a single second, so it's understandable she's so eager to meet again with the gang. And yeah, ice cream before we part ways sounds real nice.

However.

I, on the other hand, have something to do today. Sure, meeting up with the gang is gonna be fun. But there's another reason why I made sure to get up early today.

Leaning closer to her shoulder, I narrow my eyes. "Sumika-kun, surely you *did not forget* why we're meeting *specifically* today, right?"

So she pouts. "What's up with that tone? We're meeting today because the weather has been awful lately and Yoroi-kun asked us to-" she stops mid-sentence as the realization comes to her, eyes going wide. "The tournament! You're gonna be late for the registration!" So she shouts while a single hair of hers starts to convulse violently as a few sparks fly off it, drawing the stares of a few onlookers.

Now that I think about it that antenna is always on the move, almost as if it reflected her feelings. What's the deal with her hair?

"If you remembered then let's hurry, if I don't make it in time you'll have to apologize to Mikoto."

As soon as the light gave us the okay, I start to pick up the pace. So Sumika starts shouting at my back to not go so fast. She keeps at it until we finally reach the train station, despite the onlookers. Despite the whispers, smiles, and gazes that assume the wrong thing about us.

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*A few minutes later.*

*(Train.)*

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Par for the course for this time of summer, the train is packed. Little children happily play with their Game Guys as their parents relax on their seats, friends chat away their excitement about something or

the other, and a few lucky fellows lean closer to each other, speaking in whispers. Absentmindedly, I look out the window, towards the city that stretches far and wide. So little has changed, yet so much has.

"But for real, I think everybody is going to be shocked when they see you," Sumika says with a grin.

"It's just been half a year since we last got together. It's not like I got a new haircut or anything," I look away from her shiny eyes, choosing instead to play with the keys on my jean's pocket.

"Just look at you! You're so diligent now, you wake up super early to go jogging, haven't failed a single test yet, and you even learned to cook!"

"Well, I have to keep my shit together now. Can't be bothering my parents anymore and eating something you make yourself is a really nice thing, you know." It really is, I don't know why I didn't start cooking sooner.

Sumika gives me a dubious look as she pokes my arm, groaning a bit, clearly dissatisfied with my answer. "Then, what about this? You've been obsessed with training as of late. What's gotten into you?"

"I just want to be fit. With all the time I spend sitting if I don't exercise a bit I'll end up slow as a slug."

Not satisfied with my answer yet again she keeps poking my arm as the train shakes. "Really? Then, why are you so jacked? Just being fit is not the same as being a bodybuilder. Are you going to enlist in the army or something?"

"Maybe. 1st Lieutenant Shirogane, it has a nice ring to it, don't you think?" I smirk while moving my brows up and down, to try to lighten the mood.

"… What's up with that?" Expression sobering up, her shoulders fall as deep as her tone. "Joining the army? What about your studies, or your parents, or…" she trails off, her eyes locked on the floor.

Lightly hitting her sides with my elbow, I shrug back at her. "I'm kidding, you know? I'm not dropping out of college or anything."

"Okay, but you better not go join the army for real or-"

"I'm not. My bad, my bad. Sheesh, you're so dramatic as of late," I let out a small chuckle as the announcer marks our stop, as Sumika's stare falls down, as she says not a single word more.

Once the shaking ceases, I exit the train along the stream of people, someone stepping on my foot, making me bump into someone else, which then turns into the usual complains that happen when the trains are this packed. Waiting for her nearby, we double check everything is still on us before going to the stairs and out to the street. And again, we squeeze through the waves of people, Sumika complaining as a few rushing suits almost bump into her, me cursing them under my breath.

"But, hey, why are you so insistent on training as of late?" She asks once we begin walking side by side again.

"… I need to do something besides studying, that's all," I shrug, rolling my eyes. She holds my gaze, a finger on a cheek. I know I gained a lot of muscle in the last months but you really need to lay off.

"Well, whatever," she regains her smile, taking a few steps forward. "So, how do you think everybody else is doing?"

I reply with hums, thankful that she dropped the questions. It's been real hard to talk with you as of late. Always asking about why I do stuff, saying I'm being weird. I know you mean well but give me some space already. I'm not a kid anymore.

… I know. I'm a coward. I shouldn't have left things in the air. And now I can't bring myself to crush her hope.

Though, I do kind of understand her, since I did change my usual routine. Then again, she wasn't this bothersome when I started to do stuff on my own, and stopped her from coming to wake me up. Wonder why now of all times…

"So, hey…" Sumika speaks up as we crossed a street, her voice getting low, her shoulder touching mine. "You feeling fine today?"

"Yeah? What's up? Do I look sick to you?"

"No, I didn't mean it like that." Her gaze burrows away, the hand holding her purse tightening its grip. "You didn't have any of those nightmares today?"

"… Don't worry. I've got the thing under control."

"Are you sure? If you want to talk about it, I'm-"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I slept as well as I haven't in a long time. Don't worry, Sumika."

"If you say so. So… Oh! Did Meiya-san reply in the end?"

"… No. Mom told me nobody called, so I don't know if she'll accept the invitation," I look down, letting a sigh out.

"You didn't say anything weird when you called her, right?" That tilt, that sideglance again.

"Of course not. Tsukuyomi-san just cut me off suddenly. We might just be bothering her now that she's the head of the group," sighing again, my shoulders drop a bit.

"Well, yeah… Shame, I wanted to chat for a while with her," Sumika also sighs, a hand playing with her hair. "You think it's because of that scandal?"

"Yeah, I'm sure they must still be very sensitive towards showing themselves in public. I was hoping Meiya would find some minutes to come to a place she was comfortable with, but since they didn't call me back…"

We both look down, I pluck my lips again as I start to slow down, remembering that talk. I had never heard Tsukuyomi-san being so cold and direct to me. I don't know if I should be happy or not. On one hand, I don't have to be so nervous about what will I tell them today, on the other, I still wanted to see them, even if only one last time.

"Come on, Takeru-chan," Sumika pulls my arm, again getting as close as she used to back in school. Close enough to let me see my reflection as her eyes remain on mine, as she gives me a wide smile, bright as the weather today. "There's nothing we can do now. You called them and invited Meiya-san. If they come or not, that's their decision. Let's just chill and enjoy the day. And if Meiya-san doesn't come, we just call her later tonight. Okay?"

"Sigh… Yeah, I get it. Sorry for getting so down."

"It's fine. I wanted to see her too, after all this time," she moves back, making a small smile while looking up, slowing down her pace.

We stop at another crossroad, waiting for the light to change. Yet, the conversation dies down silently, like the Dreamcost. Still, she's stealing glances at me. Sigh… You just won't stop looking after me, no matter what I tell you. Though, it's not like I can blame Sumika.

These stupid nightmares are still fucking with me even during summer break. I had thought it was the pressure from the exams that was getting to me, but they don't stop coming. Always that same wasteland that extends everywhere, always that same feeling of emptiness in my gut as me and the guys from school get sent to war or some shit. Sometimes I survive and I see that eternal wasteland littered with corpses and debris, and a lot of black fire. Sometimes I die and feel like I'm being devoured by some horrible monster.

Maybe I'm scared of the eventual grind that will come once we enter the workforce? I mean, everybody seems rather tense lately about the economy and junk.

… But still, there are a few things that are way too weird and disturbing, even by my dreams' standards. There's this girl with silverish white hair in the dreams, a girl I've never seen before. She looks really sad for some reason but when I try to reach out she runs away from me. There's also a lot of other people with uniforms that are kinda mixed within the wasteland, buried or fused into it as they get devoured by the shadowy monsters. I knew I shouldn't have read Furiae, that damn eclipse must have fucked my brain up. And here I was, thinking the Dark Blader arc was too metal already.

But, thing is, that wasteland is not the most disturbing thing I see in the nightmares. Looking to my side, pacing right alongside me, vibrant and bright. She looks so full of energy, maybe a bit too much. The complete opposite of the Sumika I see in the dreams. Lying in some sort of bed, dressed in some perverted skin-tight suit, holding something close to her chest. And completely still, unmoving. And every time the dream gets to that part the girl with white hair appears, saying that Sumika is dead.

Focusing on my studies has been hard as of late, so jogging, cooking, and exercising have done wonders to keep my mind clear of the images and screams from my dreams. I haven't yet told Sumika about my nightmares in detail, but she kept insisting that I was being weird. The things being so vivid I sometimes couldn't even look at her in the eye, she got real nosy about what was going on. So, I once told her I have these recurring nightmares and that it's been hard to sleep sometimes.

That was the worst mistake I've made in this year since it only made her worry more.

Today, however, there were no nightmares, no echoes stuck on my ears, no cold sweat covering my back as I wake up. A welcome change, it was F-ing time this stopped. I absentmindedly look at the

sky, so clear today with only a few rebel clouds dancing above. It's so different than the one I see in my dreams, turned gray and intoxicated. And yet, somehow, that emptiness comes back to my gut and I swallow the breath I was about to release.

Why does it make me feel so sad, thinking about these dreams?

Sumika keeps making small talk as we move towards our destination, with me answering in hums. About what to talk about first, what to eat, poking fun at how we'll play in the tournament.

"But really, it's such good luck today's so nice!" She says, as bright as the sun when her face enters my view to get my attention.

"Well, the fucking rain had to stop at some point. You all have been trying to find a good date, we just got lucky everything coincided like this," I shrug, nodding.

"Yeah, no joke. Sakaki-san and Miki-chan really pushed to see us all again but the weather was so shitty for so long. Lucky you, Takeru-chan," smirking, she chuckles as she sways, moving a finger at me. "You get to finally spend some time away from the text books, worrying about your grades, to play your beloved Valgern-On."

"Oi, don't get cocky. Just because you got some good scores doesn't mean you're suddenly a genius."

"Oh, I dunno. All I know is, you haven't scored anything near a ninety yet!" Pointing a finger at the sky, flashing an evil smirk, she cackles for a second. "But really, are you two serious about the tournament?"

"Yeah? Why, got a problem?" Narrowing my eyes, I eye her sideways. You better not have something against my beloved Valgern-On, Sumika-kun.

"Sigh… Just don't start sulking when you lose, okay?"

"Who's gonna lose?"

"You, of course."

"… Say that again, you punk. I fucking dare you."

"Hohoho, why so mad, Takeru-chan? Why so defensive all of a sudden?" Again chuckling, she bumps her shoulder on mine.

"Ugh, shut up. You're such a bother, really."

"What? Not my fault you're so serious about a game."

"It's not just a game!" Feeling my eyes blazing, I rise a fist and inhale sharply.

"C-Come on, don't shout. People are looking."

"The reason why Mikoto asked us if today was a good day wasn't just because there's a Valgern-On tournament in the Tokyo Grand Salon. The winners not only get prize money but they also get to try the new version of the game one full month before its release! Don't you get it, Sumika?"

"… I get the money part but, why are you so hyped about a new game? Isn't it just the same thing but with different graphics?" She says, void of fire and motivation, giving me a sideglance as we hurry to cross a street.

"Not at all, you stupid idiot. The engine's completely new, and Zegga said they want to make it their flagship series for the fighting genre, to strike back at Nientendo's Squash Mereenge. After how the Dreamcost failed, they're pumping everything they've got into their upcoming games," circling a finger in the air, I retell as we stop for a sec to catch our breath, nodding to myself.

She doesn't seem too enthused, merely blinking in silence as she crosses her arms. "Huh… But if it's just that, why not wait a month to buy the new game?"

"Because there hasn't been any leaks yet. Nobody knows what's the new game like, what new units will there be, or what the story mode is about, so that's why I wanna at least give this a serious shot." Also, because it's gonna come out in the PlayStallion 2 and I don't have the money to buy one.

"But if it's all about fighting robots, I don't think you'll be missing out much, right? Not like you have the time to regularly play in the arcade anymore."

"… Siiigh." My weakness hit, shoulders sag as my feet drag a bit over the indifferent asphalt.

"Come on, don't get so down," patting my shoulder slowly, she gets a bit closer again. "If we endured the allnighters until today, we'll brave all the ones coming right up!"

"Yeah, I guess. But still, I miss playing Valgern-On."

"Then manage your time well, and play it on the Dreamcost."

"It's just not the same as doing it on the cockpit or against other people. And there's only so much you can enjoy replaying the same story mode over and over again. That's why I really am looking forward to anything that's shown of the new game during the event. Maybe not at release date, but I really wanna see how they handle the sequel in a small PV or something like that," smiling again, picking up the pace, I place both hands behind my head.

"But, why are you so hyped about it?" Brows crossing, she stares as her arms overlap. "It's just giant robots exploding all over."

"Sigh… Not at all, Sumika," coughing, straightening my posture and pushing back both shoulders, I inhale to fill my stomach with as much air as I can. To make a good teaching impression, a stoic voice. "You see, Valgern-On's original setting was all about human warfare, about fighting off the cyber legion made of automatons commanded by Tango, a quantum supercomputer. All the

foreshadowing points to the next game happening right after Tango's self-deletion, but some people in the forums have brought up a few finer details in the most recent updates, as if there were something else lurking behind curtains besides the threat of the automated robots going rogue. Many theorize that's the real reason why Tango spared the life of the main character instead of simply letting him die. So, since the game's remained under wraps for so long, this event is expected to be a very competitive one, since all the fans want to be the first to enjoy the new version. Don't you get all exited when you get to try out a new recipe or something, even if it's a variation of a dish you already knew?"

"Ah… Yeah, I can see that. Some spices and different steps can make a totally new plate," smiling, she nods in agreement. "But still, to think you'd be so hyped about a game… Oh, how childish of you, Takeru-chan," and again, she chuckles at my groans.

"I know I should be dropping the games now that I'm in college, but Valgern-On is that one game I can't let go off."

It's even making a nice impression in America and it looks like there's going to be official tournaments there too, but with the console and PC versions of the game. Poor Americans, they will never know the glorious feeling of playing in the arcade cockpit.

Sumika, you will never understand this feeling, this rush one feels when duking it out in the cockpit. Moreover, since this tournament was made to promote the online multiplayer functions of the new version, the format is going to be a two player team battle. Between my studies and the nightmares I wasn't planning on even going to watch, but when everyone else agreed to meet today and Mikoto asked me if I'd like to team up with him I couldn't say no. And so, today I go to my first, and probably last, competitive Valgern-On event, the Tokyo Salon Fighters tournament.

"Well, whether I win or not is besides the point. All that matters is, I get to play with Mikoto again, even if we don't learn anything new about the game."

"Yeah, I get that. Kinda surprising, how fast time flies. I swear, I think graduation was just a few months ago."

"Same. I think the books and towers of papers have warped our perception of time."

"More like they distorted time-space itself! It's been two years since graduation, and I still wake up some days thinking I have to climb that hellish hill," she then laughs, and I can't help but to join her.

Yeah, time sure flies, doesn't it? Two years, huh. It's kind of surprising, honestly. Maybe that's why Mikoto was so pushy on meeting up today. It has been a long time since we got to play together, and we only cross paths when we leave our classes nowadays. However, games aside, I thought this could be a good time to… well, see if we could talk with Meiya again. That enough time had passed, that she would be under less pressure now to at least come and say hi. It does seem like my invitation wasn't well received, though. Sigh…

"Oh! Takeru-san, Sumika-san! Good afternoon!" A cheerful voice returns me to reality as a small girl with pink hair approaches at full speed.

Wearing short jeans and a clear turquoise t-shirt with images of cat pawns all over it, along a small black purse, Tama waves her hand in the air vigorously as she crosses the street.

"Hi, Miki-chan! How's everything going?" Sumika moves to greet her, returning the vibrant smile.

"A-OK, I just scored a bit less on my last test than I expected. But everything else is good! How about you two?" She asks with her usual smile, slightly bouncing up.

"I'm great! I scored over ninety on my last two tests, can you believe it?!"

Why am I not surprised that's the first thing she mentions. Tama looks surprised as she asks about the questions and how Sumika studied for the tests. They exchange some tips as we move again to the TGS.

"Takeru-san, how about you? How's college treating you?"

"That's 1st Lieutenant Shirogane for you, civilian Tamase," I say in an exaggerated stern tone, giving her a stoic gaze, trying to poke fun at her.

"Eh? What's this about? 1st Lieutenant?" Tama's brows start to narrow as she slightly tilts her head.

"I dropped out of college to answer the call of du… honor to serve our nation, and I now am no longer the man you used to know." Straight and firm as a pillar, I strike a pose like the ones in my dreams to add more effect to the speech. "I am now 1st Lieutenant Shirogane of the Squad 207B of Yokohama Base. But to answer your question, life is treating me just fine," I say with a nod.

"Awawa… You joined the army? When? How? Why?"

"Miki-chan, he's just messing with you. He made the same joke to me when we were in the train."

She just had to go and ruin my fun. Teasing Tama is one of the things I miss the most of school. Damn you, Sumika.

"Takeru-san, you meanie! But it looks like you're fine. Are you doing okay with the tests?" Quick to forgive, she gives me a curious gaze.

"Yeah, my grades aren't that great but I haven't failed a single test yet," I say, puffing my chest in pride.

"Um, Takeru-san, when did you… get so fit?" Tama asks, trying to not stare.

"I began exercising around half a year ago, but I just started seeing the fruits of all the training," I scratch my head, looking up. It's kinda embarrassing to see her fidget like that.

"He's been obsessed with training, I tell you," Sumika says with a grin, poking one of my arms. "He even learned how to cook just to keep track of how much protein he eats. I think the pressure of college was too much for him and broke his mind," she giggles, making circles with a finger near her forehead, which makes Tama also start giggling.

Sumika, you have no idea how much I wanna flick your forehead right now, you little devil. Well, it's still all fair game. I laugh quietly along them as we walk.

"But if training makes you feel better then more power to you! I haven't been able to practice much with my bow as of late."

"For real? That's a damn shame, you were real good after all."

"Ahaha… I still get really nervous from time to time," she says while scratching the back of her head, then narrows her brows and loses her smile. "I do have to start training again, since I have a rematch coming up."

"Oh, about that thing that came up during the lacrosse match?" Sumika asks.

"Right, you had some sort of duel back then, didn't you?"

She laughs weakly, making a small fist and rising it to the clouds. "This time I'm gonna win for sure. But enough about me, how have you two been?"

We keep on doing some small talk as we go our way to where we'll meet up with the rest. Since the entrance for spectators is really cheap and there's supposed to be a resto bar in the building it's a perfect place for the meetup, and thankfully it seems Tama also has

enough money just in case. So she's in full agreement with getting ice cream after the tournament. As we get closer to the TGS, through the crowds of people I spot a few familiar figures. Everyone is already waiting near the entrance.

Or so I thought, everyone except one person. So she really didn't accept the invitation, huh?

A short boy wearing an orange shirt with small red dots on it and white trousers starts jogging towards us as soon as he sees us- "Oooh! Takeru, long time no see! It's been like three years since we last saw each other!" Mikoto shouts as he gets in close range, followed by a strong high five between us. As lively as always, never change, Mikoto.

"Long time indeed, buddy. How's everything?"

"Hehehe, perfectly! Man, I can't believe I'm keeping up with the lectures," he laughs again jokingly, scratching the back of his head.

"Good for you, man. Frankly, I'm on the same boat," we both share a grin, then he turns towards the other two.

"Miki-san, Sumika-san, long time no see! How are you?"

"Hi, Yoroi-kun. I'm in a reaaally good mood, because I got two-" And while Sumika starts to brag about her scores, I go to greet the other two girls of the group.

The first one, with her brown hair let loose and her usual glasses on, was wearing an olive shirt with white stripes, and a matching white purse.

"Hey Class Rep, how's it going?"

"Hello Shirogane, all's good. You're still going to call me Class Rep after all this time?"

"Yeah, it just feels right."

"Haha, always doing your thing without a care. How are you holding up? You wouldn't be worrying Kagami again?" Despite the smile, she taps her glasses as her eyes bore into me.

The real meaning not lost on me, I play dumb and try to throw some misdirection. "Heh, I'm a disciplined student now Class Rep. I even learned to cook by myself!"

"Huh?! Really? That's a surprise."

"Chizuru-san, good afternoon!" Tama came over to greet Class Rep, saving me from her questioning.

I let 'em talk as I go to the raven haired girl eating a yakisoba sandwich. Her red blouse is doing a rather a poor job at hiding her deadly frontliners, but she looks as expressionless as always. A dark trouser reaches just above her ankles, and a pair of matching bracelets are on both wrists.

"Yo, Ayamine. All cool?"

"Yeah," as reserved as always, huh, "until some wild glasses appeared," she says with a slow, almost solemn, nod as she took a glance at Class Rep.

Oh God, not again.

"Ayamine, what do you mean?" Class Rep looks at her with furrowed brows.

"What do you mean?"

"Don't mimic me."

"Do I look like her?"

"No, you don't." Please guys, don't start fighting now.

"Oh, thank God." Ayamine says, with a dramatic sway of her hair as she wipes her forehead. I think Class Rep just popped a vein.

"You haven't changed at all!"

And there they go arguing again, here thar be dragons. I think Ayamine missed trolling Class Rep. And she doesn't seem to be that upset, I think they actually get along really well now. Ever since the lacrosse match, they stopped quarreling as they did before. Who would have said they'd end up as friends. Life is weird.

"Takeru, let's go register before they run out of spots!" Without warning, Mikoto grabs my arm and starts pulling me to the line. Sadly for him, with all the muscle I gained lately, he can't even move me an inch.

"Don't pull me! I can walk."

"Takeru, did you gain weight? You shouldn't just eat junk food, you know," he says with a worried look, waving a finger at my face as he gives me a once over.

"Dude, it's not like that. I've been training since-"

"You know, I read this article about a guy that lived only on coke and hamburgers."

"Mikoto, I learned to cook. I'm not so lazy to-"

"So, one day he collapsed on his job! His cholesterol was really high, between his horrible diet and all the pressure from his work."

I'm not going to get through him, am I? Sigh…

"Takeru, are you listening?"

"You're the one who's not listening!"

"Huh? About what?"

"Been training. Learned to cook. Got muscle." Perhaps if I speak in short sentences he'll listen.

"Really? Wow, you're right," a surprised look fills his face as he pokes my arm. "What happened? Is there a girl in your class you wanna date?"

And with that simple sentence and an innocent smile, Mikoto opened the gates to hell. I can feel the piercing gazes of the four girls standing behind us, with an overflowing killing intent.

He just had to go and say it. I know, he doesn't even register the teasing or the tension, but you really need to start paying attention, dude.

"… Takeru-chan, what's this about dating a girl in your class?" Sumika's eyes turn dark as that one hair stands upright with sparks flying out of it. Seriously, what's wrong with her hair?! Her tone may be small and calm, but it's hiding a scythe behind her teeth.

The other girls just stare silently at me. A knot forms on the base of my neck, preventing me from gulping or breathing in. No, I have no one in my sights, but if I let the conversation flow into the romantic realm I know what they'll ask.

And I don't want to answer.

"Mikoto, let's go register in the tournament. Ahora!" Swiftly yanking his arm away, I pull him towards the line.

"E-eeeeeh! Wait, don't pull meeeee!"

"Don't run away, Takeru-chan!"

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*A minute or so later.*

*(Salon's Reception.)*

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The roof has many rows of lights ready for the night of the event, some marble pillars decorated the entrance of the TGS alongside a dark blue carpet. Above, covering part of the upper part of the entrance, a banner with Valgern-On's logo and all the sponsors of this event hangs as it's swayed by the wind. The reception is no different, with its shiny white floor and walls, with some seats to the side.

As we take our place on the line, I let go of Mikoto's hand and finally sigh. His swirly eyes took a second to stabilize, letting out a groan he recovers his usual expression and gazes around. The line was not as big as I expected it to be. Well, Valgern-On is more of a niche game and its competitive scene isn't that big yet. Considering that, the people behind us, and the hour it is, I say some might get left out.

"Seriously dude, don't joke about that. You should know by now that the girls are really touchy about all the love business," shaking my head, feeling my back cold, I stare into his eyes.

He laughs weakly, nodding in apology. "Sorry. But it's truly a surprise to hear you're exercising, since you were always so lazy. Did anything happen?"

"No, not really. I just felt like doing something to not be sitting all the time. By the by, how much have you been practicing?"

"Once a week on Sundays, except when there's a test close. Valgern-On is that hobby I just can't drop."

So we are just the same in that regard. Great minds think alike. "I totally get what you mean, I can't believe we have tournaments that have to take place outside of an arcade. Two years ago this would have been a pipe dream."

"Yeah, after the console version was ported to America and Europe last year it totally blew up! All the net was in an uproar about it!"

Bouncing up, rebounding upon himself in excitement, his eyes shine bright.

"Yeah, it was great seeing all their reactions in the forums. Oh right, guess what? I finally got to play Magorea's Mask recently."

"For real?! So, what do you think?" Getting closer, he hurries.

"Man, you were right. Ocarina of Ages just doesn't compare."

"Hehe, I knew you were gonna like it more," he grins, nodding once. "I personally loved the Ice Temple, which one was your favorite?"

"Mmh… You're gonna hate me for this, but the Water one."

"Huh?! Really?"

We keep talking about games, about what little we did in our sparse free time until we reach the counter.

"Good afternoon, the inscription for the tournament is 5000 Yen per person. Please hand me your GR cards to register you in the tournament."

When she inserted the cards our stats appeared on the screen. Man, seeing my stats always gives me such a thrill. 48% Win-rate? Eh, I've been worse. My mech play-log is so unbalanced, 97% Kaiser usage. Haha, I really did use it exclusively for a long while. Wow, Mikoto has a 53% Win-rate. How the hell does he do that? Well, he is really good.

"Here are your passes with both your personal ID and the terminal's ID that you are to use during the event. Have fun!" The receptionist smiles as she hands us our cards and the passes.

"Hey Mikoto, how much time do we have before the tournament starts?"

Looking at his watch on his left hand, he groans a bit. "Less than an hour, wanna go to the bar with the others and grab something to eat?"

"Yeah, let's go."

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*Around twenty minutes later.*

*(TGS Resto Bar.)*

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"So, while it's been hard, I'd say I'm progressing just fine!" Mikoto says with a smile, clearly proud, before diving into his sandwich without mercy or restrain.

We've been catching up while we ate in the lounge. I told everyone I was progressing just fine in my engineering career, to their surprise. I can do my math just fine, you pricks.

Mikoto has gotten good grades on his medic career. He says that he wants to travel to harsh places where no other medics want to go, while also getting to keep traveling and doing something good while doing so.

Class Rep assaulted us with all the languages she'd learned while studying some corporate career. Ayamine is still studying to be a nurse. When she told the group we were all surprised, since she didn't look like the type to pursue such a career. I can't even imagine her treating patients with that personality of hers.

Tama is doing fine in her psychiatrist career. She had said she wanted to help children overcome their anxiety and fears, especially those who suffered from bullying and parental abuse.

While everyone kept talking and sharing fun stories, I can't help but to start thinking about the one that wasn't here. Meiya, why didn't you even call me back?

Tsukuyomi-san had given me a number to contact her after they left my house, but she didn't seem like herself during when I called, as if surprised I had the guts to call her for something like this. I already knew Meiya's schedule must be packed for quite a few months ahead, but I was hoping for her to spare some minutes to talk, even if one last time. Guess that's impossible. Given her position, we calling may be a bother to them now. Even I heard the news of the scandal, despite my obliviousness towards the news. And to this day, just thinking about that shitshow is enough to make me clench my fists. So I gulp some more juice, biting on my sandwich as Sumika goes on another tangent about her good scores and the others laugh. Looking to the TV, as if to mock me, a headline of the news comes up.

"-as there hasn't been a press conference done by the Head in quite some time, it is expected the occasion will be attended by many to hear the announcements the Mitsurugi Group has to make."

Heh, of course she hasn't done more conferences herself. All thanks to you vultures dunking on her, despite not knowing shit about who Meiya is.

One of the older men of the program shifts in his seat, sporting a shit-eating grin. "I wonder, could this finally be the announcement of her new suitor? After all, there are rising concerns from certain sectors about-"

Tch, fucking asshole. Turning around and finishing my hamburger, the rest hadn't paid attention to the program and were lost on a string of jokes about some teachers and campus. Sigh…

The debate on the news still reaches my ears, and I can only close my eyes and look away from it all. They dare to keep on feasting on all rumors and conspiracy theories about Meiya's life, but they ain't even talking about the bastard that screwed her over. Fucking vultures of the media.

To have been chosen for an arranged marriage with Meiya, the guy must have been some crazy important dude from high society, so I can see why no one wants to talk shit about him. Even the Mitsurugi Group backpedaled from their claims thanks to threats of the guy's family filing suing them over a case of defamation and slander. Worst, these same stupid vultures even defended it. That it's an affront against their brands' reputation, that it's dishonorable to make a show of their personal differences.

Shit, I don't even wanna eat anymore. Leaning back on the sofa, looking up with my mouth hanging open, feels as if I were being drained down a waterfall, and hearing the discussion on the program going on only makes my stomach more upset.

Things got heated real fast back then, since it seems that an investigation linked Meiya's ex to a murder attempt on her grandfather. That's when I heard of this, thanks to almost everyone and their mother gossiping about it. Someone from the staff was caught in a 'compromising situation', and the leads and testimonies linked to Meiya's husband as being the one responsible for it all. But then, all of a sudden, he stopped being mentioned in the news and blames started to be placed on Meiya and the Mitsurugi for jumping to defamation without 'conclusive evidence'.

Lots of debates flared up just like the one that's again starting on the TV again, composure shining for its absence as fingers and yells rise in accusation. The sad spectacle of gray-haired assholes that continue to talk shit on her, which causes the few younger ones' composure to melt into a rather unpleasant and heated pace of words.

Sigh… At least the little kids watching find it funny, I guess. But it's just like what I see around, some looking with a mild frown at the narrative told in the program, others instead nodding to it. Some people took Meiya's side back then, others started scorning her and saying she shouldn't be allowed to lead the group. Can't believe there was an actual fucking march in protest over this made by common folk. 'Don't corrupt the Group', 'Dishonor to Japan', and

other banners like that were everywhere since, unsurprisingly enough, it looks like the Mitsurugi are actually related to the Imperial Household. Maybe I was the only one who didn't know, but Meiya having noble blood didn't really come as a surprise for me.

Back then, Sumika had to drag me out of a fight once when some of those jackasses made a protest in the station, talking shit about how 'letting a woman lead the Group was a mistake', before a cop came in to stop the commotion. Kind of how the host of the news program has to raise white banners in between the debating journalists that would rather add fuel to the bonfire.

Relaxing onto the seat as the topic in the news changes, I go back to eating. Yet, the face Meiya had back then remains in my mind, and my bites are slow, I can't really feel the taste of the thing. Still and grayed out like a statue, stoic and emotionless. Frozen, all alone in front of the judgment of the unending flashes of cameras and whatnot.

Some time after this accident, Meiya's grandfather took care of the conferences again, announcing that he had decided to let her stay in charge of the group despite not remarrying. He said that the safety of the Mitsurugi family should be their priority and that being married shouldn't be a requirement to lead the Group anymore as well as how women should also be allowed to inherit the position, which landed superbly with most younger people, that were happy to see change and a woman in charge, and horribly with the older generations, that still see this as treason to 'muh traditions'. Still, her grandfather didn't even mention the name of the suitor, and the guy was never brought up again.

And yet, the media kept on piling the pressure on Meiya, going as far as asking her if she had any plans for marrying during press conferences. Some journalists even started saying that there were rumors of her being into women. Every single little decision she took was put under the microscope, and the fucking yellow journalists had a field day during those months. And every time she comes back to the public eye, the same shitshow happens like it was just a while

ago. Makes me sick that they only thing she can do is deafen herself and push through the horde of questions and tripwires.

I know it's for the better to keep a low profile and not stir up trouble, but fuck me sideways if it wasn't hard not to snap at the idiots talking shit in the trains and streets. The bastard that plotted to hurt her grandfather gets to not be named anymore, probably is out of jail too, and no one bats an eye. But quite a few kept dunking on Meiya for the stupidest reasons.

Sighing, my back and neck slump into the cushioning of the sofa. Given all the unwanted attention and issues that rose up, it's obvious why Meiya doesn't want to expose herself in public. Of course, if I didn't have the guts to answer to her way too obvious approaches back in school, much less could I bring myself to call her back then, as much as I wanted to let Meiya know all the gang was worried sick about her. And I can kind of get why she didn't even answer my invitation. Part of me thinks she might have taken us not calling her as a betrayal, but that might be my own guilt talking. Chances are, she doesn't care anymore, she has bigger fish to fry.

Absentmindedly drinking, slowing down as an image of her appears in the TV, stoic and imposing as an obelisk, my eyes flee the gaze from the TV. I knew it was a long shot, and the silence is enough of an answer. Maybe we can buy her a present or something, and I'll see if Tsukuyomi-san is willing to give it to her. Though, going by how the call went, I think they don't want me to contact them ever again.

That feels, for some reason, like a fitting end to our relationship. Sudden, yet once it was over, neither of us gained much from the other. Even after I remembered the promise at the park, many days after graduation, I couldn't bring myself to do anything. She went out of her way to literally live with me and spoil me for months, it's embarrassing to think I didn't get a clue.

Staring at her image until the commercial starts, I look up as my lips fold in. Resting my arms on the table, hunching over, a piercing sensation slices my stomach apart from inside.

… No, I chose to be oblivious. For some reason, I didn't want to choose. I didn't want to commit to a relationship. I also don't want to do that now. I just wanted to apologize to her, for all the trouble I must have caused her in those months. For being a coward that couldn't bring himself to at least call once when shit was hitting the turbine.

Sigh…

Whenever I think of Meiya as of late, there's this hollowness on my chest, needles or some shit tearing under my ears. It's as if I were thinking of someone who passed away. In a way it's almost like she's gone for good, since I'll probably never talk to her again.

"So Takeru, about our strategy…" Mikoto yanks me out of dreamland, back to the table. I thought I had left this bad habit of spacing out behind me.

"Yeah, what do you wanna do?"

"You haven't told me what mech you're gonna be using yet. I'm still maining the Xao-Myun, are you still using the Kaiser?"

"No, I switched to the Takemikazuchi a few months ago."

Coughing in surprise, bubbles rise up in his drink, a few stains on his shirt now. "The Takemikazuchi?! But I heard it's really difficult to control, and since it focuses on melee combat it doesn't have such a good range either. It's said to be one of the worst mechs in the game," Mikoto looks at me with downcast eyes, lips twisted, clearly worried about my choice. He's in for a nice surprise.

"But its speed is on a whole 'nother level, dude. It's perfect for my new hyper offensive style of play, since I abuse it to make many attacks in quick succession at close range." It also looks like the Greatzon from Mega Mecha Taisen, and thinking I'm fighting with Darkest Prison as my BGM is enough to hype me up.

"That's just reckless, if it were me you'd get countered without even hitting me once," he grins back at me, I return the gesture.

"No, because if I hit you with its machineguns you'll get stunned for a few seconds, which gives me just enough time to rush in and get a clear strike to the core with swords in both of my arms," I say, rising a finger and drinking a bit, leaning back on the couch.

"Hmm… I see what you mean. But more speed is not the same as more mobility, so your accuracy might not be so good against opponents like my Xao-Myun. The enemy can easily kill you when you run out of fuel and can't boost away."

"Not if I kill first, that's the whole point of my game. And even then I still have the Thunder Cannon if I'm grounded or I can't get to CQC. To give you an idea, I raised my Win Rate by 5% with this method just going to the arcade two days a month in this year. Do you understand how awesome the Takemikazuchi is? I definitely think it's been overlooked."

"Okay, I get your game now. So you rush in while I cover, we aim to split them up so we can pick them off in one-on-one with our superior agility. If you corner someone and they escape, do I join the chase?"

"Yeah, they're going to try to regroup. If you can keep up with me then we can split up and then pincer them. If we get split, try to keep 'em busy so they don't barrage me with more shots than I can dodge until I get them in my machineguns' range."

He nods, folding his arms, eyes focused onto nowhere in particular. "Okay, but what if they stay hidden to surprise us?"

"I go scouting with you following on land, when you detect anything go for a cannon shot and we start the chase. Even on Yguloch Fortress' narrow corridors the Takemikazuchi can do a back flip or an Albright Turn, so don't worry about me getting ambushed," I finished giving him a thumbs up, a wink, and a dramatic pose for bonus points.

"What's an Albright Turn?" Mikoto looks at me as if I were speaking in another language, slowly tilting his head.

"You know, it's that thing you do when you rush into a wall and just before crashing you turn the mech around by first slightly slowing down, jumping on the ground and immediately after going hard on the accel as you hit the wall. Then you propel at full speed towards the opposite direction."

"I never heard about that! Where did you learn that move?"

"Where? I… uuh… I think I saw it in a replay once." Why do I feel like I'm forgetting something?… When did I learn to do the Albright again?

"You're so lucky! You're full of surprises today Takeru, you changed your mech and you talk like a tactician. Are you sure you haven't been skipping classes to go play at the arcade?" Mikoto smirks as he leans on the table, then starts giggling.

"Dude! That's just rude, you're just jelly I finally surpassed you!"

"But I've never heard you doing such a through analysis. You sound like a regular at tournaments," his eyes glow up, surprised for real.

"It's been awhile since I got to talk about the game, so I guess I got carried away with the analysis." I shrug, lips pursing as I look away. Man, I miss the days when I could just laze about, talking nonsense with you back at the arcade.

"So guys, think you can go far in this?" Class Rep asks as she stares, raising a brow.

"If the Takemikazuchi is half as good as Takeru says it is then we may get into the top 48."

"Forty eight?" Tama's eyes widen a bit, "How many players are participating?"

"I think there's a total of 192 spots open, which means 96 teams in total. Teams will be grouped in three zones, fighting in one direct-elimination matches. The winners of each zone will then all fight in the final at the same time for the gold," I say with vigor, speaking from my stomach, trying to hype them up.

"That's going to be amazing! I remember when we played for a bit in the hot springs, it was really fun. Seeing so many games is going to be great!" Says a now sparkly eyed Tama.

Tama, you truly understand us. You are one of us, unlike the other three uncultured swines on the table.

"I wonder about that. I'm sure they'll lose on the first rounds and there will be no stopping the salt. I can already see Takeru-chan's tears, haha," Sumika says with a twisted and evil smirk.

Sumika you ungrateful girl, I'm not sharing with you any of the food I make anymore.

"I can already see Shirogane throwing a tantrum about how he pushed the button but he didn't attack or something," Class Rep comments, triggering her signature skill: Chain Teasing.

"Yoroi, hang in there." Not even Ayamine has any faith in me, huh?

"Heh, we'll show you guys a nice fight at least so do look forward to it. Right Mikoto?"

"Yeah! Even if you do get taken out immediately as usual," he says with a wide grin.

"Hey!"

We all share a laugh, it clears all of that awful cold feeling off me. I didn't knew I missed this kind of thing so much. Feels really nice just to hang out with all of them, sharing some laughs without a care.

"To all participants," a voice rings through the speakers, "please go to the Showroom. The event shall commence in thirty minutes. I repeat-" The announcement repeats itself as me and Mikoto stand from our seats. I grab my lemonade and finish it in one gulp, Mikoto also finishes his drink and gives a nod.

"Well, looks like its your call, guys. Yoroi, Shirogane, best of luck!" Class Rep gives us a thumbs up.

"Good luck, guys!" Tama says as we high-five before leaving. Ayamine merely gives us a slow nod while smirking.

"Takeru-chan, Yoroi-kun, no matter how it goes we're going for some ice cream after the tournament, so have fun and don't overworry, yes?"

"Yeah, you better be ready to be surprised! Let's go Mikoto, it's showtime!" I roar, unable to calm down my excitement anymore.

"Hehe, don't think I'll let you have all the fun, Takeru."

We joke around as we walk to the Showroom. This place is huge though, if there weren't any maps on the wall I'd get lost. How long is this hallway anyways? We also can't run, these tiles are really bothersome. We'll end up sliding if we try to hurry up.

After a short while we reach the place, and we both are taken aback by the vast expansion of the room. The Showroom is even bigger than the rest of the rooms combined! The walls painted in dark blue and white, with some wooden pillars every now and then stretching to the ceiling, where many lights hang from the metallic bars all over, illuminating the windowless space with cold white light. The place's big enough to hold all the terminals, give some decent room to walk around, and even has a small rest area to my left, where some people were finishing their meals before going towards their spots.

But man, look at those terminals! They're the latest models, and there's many rows of 'em all lined up as if this were some sort of

training facility for Valgern-On. Kinda like, uh, a simulation room? Hmm… Yeah, sounds about right. Official tournaments are the best thing ever.

"ooOOOHHH! Takeru, look at them!" Mikoto says as he skips towards the terminals, fanboying over the things. Not that I blame him, I'm super pumped up for this, too.

Now, let's see… our ID is 51, so our terminal should be… "Mikoto c'mon, our terminal is this way!"

"Going!"

The terminals are just like the arcade ones but with two separated seats and monitors instead of just one. Once we reach ours, I see that there's a pair of headphones available in the units as well. The usual hyper music of the game welcomes us as we insert our GR Cards, we share a nod as we get on our seats and start the configurations.

In one of the last updates the devs added a lot of weapons to the game, so now each mech has a list of armaments you can equip to it. They're supposed to be balanced to fit different play styles, which seems to have brought a nice diversity to the meta according to the forums.

They put color customization in, so now we can paint our mechs in our favorite colors too. There's also a fuel bar and a timer now, to avoid the matches to drag on forever, and now certain parts of the mechs can be broken, like the boost thrusters and some weapons. So, setting your custom loadout is of utmost importance. Sure, you can run with the default set for each mech, but where's the fun in that?

Now, let's set two PB Longswords, two PB Shortswords and the Take's signature Thunder Cannon. Let's mark the 20mm machineguns on the waist as equipped and that should be it. For the last touch, let's get the color scheme done.

"You done Takeru?" Mikoto asks as I'm fiddling with the RGB sliders.

"Yeah, just finishing the color. Wanna go for a practice run?"

"Yup, let's do two short matches."

"Okay, I'm all done." I put on the belts, pushing the seat forward and locking it in. Putting the headphones on, the request for a match was already coming up in the common lounge. Tapping the mic to place it near my lips, I cough a bit. "Can you hear me, Mikoto?"

"Yeah, loud and clear. You ready?"

"You bet. Here we go!"

As the field description and the opening battle screen appears, showing both of our mechs and their loadouts, my breathing eases up, eyelids flicker as my back sinks onto the seat's cushioning. I've been like this for awhile, I don't know why but playing Valgern-On in the arcade makes me feel at ease. Like I'm in my element, doing my thing in my turf kind of feeling. Maybe the nostalgia of high school is already getting to me.

"Hweh? What's up with your mech?!" Mikoto's shout surprises me and for a second, taking me out of my relaxation.

I though there was a problem, but checking my screen everything is as always. "Nothing's wrong on my end, what's up Mikoto?"

"Pfft… Ahahaha! Look at your mech, it's so purple! Hahahaha!" Mikoto keeps laughing, repeating purple over and over.

"What's wrong with it being purple?!" All of you have been really awful with me today! Is this what people call karma?

"Sorry, I mean, I'm so used to see you maining the Kaiser that I didn't expect you to choose that color for your mech. I thought you'd use white instead."

"There's nothing wrong with this, and it's a striking shade of purple so it fits the Takemikazuchi perfectly!"

I don't know why but when I saw the Takemikazuchi for the first time all I could think was that it would look great in purple. And I wasn't wrong. However, Mikoto keeps snickering and chuckling. You prick…

"Alright, let's see if you think it's funny after I mop the floor with you!"

"We'll see about that! Show me how good your purpleness is!"

As we both roar taunts at each other our mechs flew off their starting positions, locking into each other in combat. I still feel really calm despite the screen blurring a bit due to the Takemikazuchi's speed. It's like this should be the normal speed of the game, even if it was already quite fast paced.

Mikoto opens fire from my left, nothing serious. He's still moving around, not letting me get near. I flick my joystick forward, boost jumping over his cannon shot and closing the gap. Unlike the Kaiser, the Takemikazuchi is very fast and can be difficult to maneuver precisely with, but even so I feel perfectly fine in it. It's like riding a grip-focused car tuned to do sharp turns on the curves on the racing games, if that makes sense.

He's charging another cannon shot, but not retreating further into the more narrow terrain filled with buildings. Reading him, I boost jump again and dodge, but this time I take some consecutive jumps to get closer in a few frames faster. He was expecting me to chase after him and then get me with his saber, so the Xao-Myun comes to meet my aggro. However, it's clear he doesn't know how fast this purple beetle can be!

"You're not getting away now!" I shout as I fire the machineguns, little sparks illuminating the otherwise vacant dunes of the stage.

Just 4% damage? Doesn't matter, because small jolts cover the Xao's entire body, its limbs twitching in paralysis. With the stun in

place, I'm in the clear to approach and strike at you! Hit with the longsword, 20% damage.

The stun wears off, I sidestep away from a fast riposte, the Xao blasts away but Mikoto can't get the Take out of his shadow, nor can he stop boosting without getting into my machineguns' range again. Within the crumbled buildings and sand mounds, we play hit and run. He tries to shake me off with some missiles and doing some acrobatics between some buildings, but for some reason his jumps are kinda off and he's gliding too much.

Let's take a shot! I do a triple boost jump to dodge his missiles, getting to a nice position on midair. Now I can use the backthrusters to spin myself and shoot the TC at him at minimal charge. As my machine glides away in its spin, avoiding the cannon shots, my own cannon finds a frame in the eye of its storm. Unlike other weapons, the Thunder Cannon is a beam-based armament. So I get that the Xao-Myun is flailing like a bird under the rain, all to get away from the red lightning that pours off my weapon as I softly flick the button. A dune gets flattened, the cooldown icon appears in my sight, and a nice chunk of health vaporizes off Mikoto's health bar. Take that, 17% at minimal!

"I got you now!" Mikoto shouts as the Xao-Myun charges at me, my Take still descending in the air.

I got my guard down, unable to dodge while holding the large and bulky thunder-shaped cannon, and his saber smacks one of my shoulders for 26% damage, my Take ending up tumbled along the sand dunes. I'm not letting you get away! And yanking the lever, blasting a cloud of sand to the sky, the Take restarts the chase.

But something feels off about this…

Mikoto's tells and signs are too obvious, did she get rusty? I can't imagine her missing those shots on purpose, she's not even doing the barrages right. And she didn't punish me for lowering my guard in the air and not teching to return to the ground faster. What's with

her jumps, too? She's relying too much on the air thrusters. On this kind of map, she could easily surface on the dunes or hide in between the few buildings that are around, to try and get me from afar. My speed on the Take is enough to dodge, yeah, but still…

Wait, if I go at her at full speed with all the boosters I could probably get in close range, and then I'll break the Xao's thrusters to show her how reckless she's being! I know, I'll let her corner me and then I'll show her an Albright while I'm at it. Two birds with one-

Beep!

**BAM! BAM!**

I hold my breath as two missiles graze me, forcing me to make a sudden dive to the sand. Shit, that was a close one. Her mid-range fire is still awesome. I can't let my guard down around her for a single sec.

…

… Her? Did I just refer to Mikoto as a she? The hell is wrong with me? Why did I say that?

Sigh… Whatever, let's show him what a good pair we are, Takemikazuchi!

He's keeping his distance to avoid the weapon shift. Alright, now!

I boost jump using all the thrusters, launching myself like a dragster after the Xao-Myun, the screen blurring and shaking. Slightly tilting the joystick to the left, the searing slash hits an arm, missing his body on purpose. Just as I thought, he takes his chance to take a jab at me at point blank instead of retreating, aiming at my core, but the reaction time of my other hand with a shortsword is enough to block you!

Sparks fly off, a small screech comes up in the phones, a momentary blade struggle ensues as our mechs fall and land in violence on the sand, sending small waves to the air. As I ready my other hand, Mikoto quickly boost jumps away like crazy. Once the weapon shift is over, he starts firing at me, turning this into a bullet hell game.

Hehehe… Now's when I lay my trap.

Instead of jumping to keep up the pressure, I retreat on land and take cover behind some fallen buildings. Just before retreating further in, to where his auto-lock cannot track me, I take out the Thunder Cannon and start to charge it, even though I unequip it right away when I got out of his sight.

Since I'm already near half shields, the TC would do a lot of damage now to a low defense mech like the Xao-Myun. If it did 17% at minimal before, anything above that is a curtain's call for Mikoto. It's dodge or die, and against a beam weapon there's no cover to save you. That's why he will surely try to get close without entering my range and using missiles to interrupt the charge or ruin my shot, to force me to return the aggression and drop the TC usage.

He took the bait as he starts to chase me, going by the bleep in the radar, but thanks to me going downhill on the sand mounds he can't close the gap fast enough. Alright, those cliffs up ahead look good. I take a sharp turn to my left in between some elevations, he shouldn't have gotten a clear view of me since he's still getting closer. Good, all these cliffs are perfect to do the Albright. Let's go, Takemikazuchi!

I advance into the passage with a boost jump, then just before jumping again I shift my direction without stopping the boost. Slightly lower my speed as I approach and the wall, and now…

"FULL ON THAT ACCEL, BABY!"

Our feet hit the cliff-side as I spin the joystick to change the direction of the thrusters. Immediately the screens flickers to shift my view as

I'm now charging at Mikoto, who thought that he was safe just around the corner of the cliff since I couldn't hit him with the Thunder Cannon there.

"Eat this, Mikoto!" I roar as I let the machineguns loose on the Xao-Myun.

His shield drops to 23% and I damaged his thrusters. Landing hard on the sand, a bit farther than I wanted to and almost slipping when the heels sink on the sand, I quickly step hard on the pedals and yank the controls. Balance regained, I tap the triggers and change to my melee weapons.

As the stun wears off, Mikoto tries to boost away but can't, small sparks and smoke comes out of his thrusters. As soon as the small circle of the lock-on appears, my finger starts mashing that button and the machineguns again blaze up in life. The small stun time is enough to let me get a clear hit to the core of the Xao-Myun with my longswords, slicing it in three parts.

BOOM!

[MATCH OVER - PLAYER 2 WINS]

I throw a fist to the air as I pull the seat back, after a chuckle I remove the safety belts and do some circles with my neck.

"What the hell was that? What did you do?! How did you even change directions so fast at the cliffs?!" A bewildered voice rings at my side as I see Mikoto getting out of his seat, fuming more than my TC at full charge.

"That was the Albright Turn, but I kinda screwed up the timing and almost ruined my landing."

"When did you learn it? All your moves are on a whole 'nother level today, but that thing was Pro level for sure!"

"I told you the Takemikazuchi was great. Who's laughing at the purple one now?"

"I can't believe you actually dodged most of my attacks," he closes his eyes, brows low and lips twisted. It's obvious he'd be frustrated, Mikoto has never lost so badly against me.

Actually, I don't recall ever winning against him when he got serious. There's a first time for everything, I guess.

"Haha, well, it was weird that you kept gliding so much. It was easy to read you."

In silence, he stares at me. Sighing as he taps his foreheads, he gets closer. "Hey Takeru, let me see your play log."

"Sure, but what's wrong with you? You're really rusty, you know."

"I'm not rusty, you've gotten really good at this! You sure you're not skipping class?" Mikoto says as he throws a suspicious look at me, narrowing his eyes.

"Making excuses? Who would have said I'd see the day!"

"You jerk! Now, lemme see how you did those stunts."

Nodding and moving aside, I let him sit on my terminal. Man, to think I just beat him. I knew all that practice would pay off. Who's laughing at the purple one now?

"… Hey, Takeru."

"What's up?"

"Were you playing with these settings just now?"

"Yeah? What's wrong?"

"Well, you were playing with the first person camera then?" Looking right back at me, his own eyes seem kinda firm and confrontational, unblinking.

"Yeah, been feeling better with it since I switched to the Takemikazuchi."

"Are you for real?! But… But, how are you even aiming?"

"Like I always did?" Why is he so surprised? Sure, it was kinda hard at first, but now I can't see myself ever using anything other than first person controls, even if third person is the standard. "Well, lemme show you how I roll now."

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*Around the same time.*

*(Resto Bar.)*

**[Sumika]**

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Since the guys left, we started talking about fashion, cooking, and random stuff. About how Miki-chan is preparing for her rematch in her dojo, how Ayamine-san is planning to take a trip to Tokyo to search for more yakisoba recipes, and how Sakaki-san is anxiously awaiting a concert from a pair of violinists. I myself told them I've been progressing fine, and haven't dropped my cooking as well. Ayamine-san actually recommended me a restaurant, she said their curry is an otherworldly treat despite the staff being… a tad bit eccentric. Coming from her, who's never fazed by anything, makes me really wonder what's up with that place. I… did give up wanting to become a chef, in favor of a more traditional career. But that doesn't mean I'll quit my passion, even if I'll work as something else. Plus… I wouldn't be able to stay near him if I hadn't… Sigh…

"So he just decided to exercise out of the blue?" Sakaki asks as she finishes her drink.

"Yeah. Same with the cooking. It's like he woke up one day, said 'Oh, I'mma do this!', and then just kept doing it." Honestly, it is weird. Takeru-chan never cared about cooking, or about doing physical activity. But I had to go and end up blurting I'm worried about how he's being, and they took it the wrong way. Sigh…

"Weirdogane being Weirdogane."

"Kei-chan, that's rude! But maybe he's just releasing his stress?" Miki-chan tilts her head a bit.

"Maybe? He's progressing fine, as far as I know."

I can't help to think those nightmares are to blame. He never told me anything about them, but the day when he finally did he looked as if he had been crying for a while before. What are those nightmares about? Why doesn't he want to tell me?

… I wonder if he's regretting not speaking with Meiya-san before. Maybe… he actually has feelings for her? But despite the invitation she didn't even reply. Well, not like I don't understand, with all that she has on her plate. But Takeru-chan never gets so down without something serious going on in his head. Sigh… I press my legs together, drinking what's left of my juice, unable to purge the quiver in my chest.

I wanna be there for him. I wanna see him earnestly smile again. But does he want my help anymore? Should I… give him some space? I mean, after all this time, after all I do… he still hasn't…

"To all spectators," a voice comes from the speakers, "the event will start in 10 minutes. Please go to the main hall. I repeat-"

"Well, shall we go? Let's get some nice seats," Sakaki-san says as she stands up.

"Yeah, let's go. It looks like a lot of people just arrived, so it's going to get packed," I grab my purse and stand up along the rest. Let's not

worry about that for now.

Talking about how things could play out, we go towards the hallways. Yet, in the exit of the resto bar, two men in suits stand watch, expressions neutral and wearing sunglasses. Despite letting most people leave without a sound, one of them raises an arm as we get close.

"Excuse me, could you be Sumika Kagami?"

"Eh? Yes, that's me. What do you need?"

"And would you all be Chizuru Sakaki, Miki Tamase and Kei Ayamine?" The other man asks, the rest nods and we all share a puzzled gaze. What could these security guys want with us?

"Forgive the inconvenience, but please come with us," the first says with a firm, commanding tone as he takes a step forward.

"What's this about?" Ayamine says as she also takes a step forward, a slight frown in her face.

"We'll have you follow us. This way," he says, pointing a hand towards another hallway.

Before we could react, two more men in suits came up behind us, blocking our path. The first two gesture for us to follow them, the ones from behind take a step closer, insisting that we do as they say. What's going on here?!

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A/N: To explain the situation a bit: This fic takes place after Alternative, where Takeru returned to the Extra timeline instead of going to the Altered Fable world. After returning he lives normally, but due to the repressed memories he stays indecisive and cannot choose any girl, thus stays alone like in Extra's normal end. The story starts two years after the "end" of Extra, with Takeru now in college.

Also, Valgern-On's version of the Takemikazuchi is exactly the same as the one in the BETA timelines, just that it has two machineguns built into its frame on its waist, Paildramon style.

# Innocent Fighting

*A/N: I don't know how to describe the robots that Takeru and Mikoto are going to be fighting against in their matches without going overboard with the descriptions. So, to give you a mental image of how I see them I'll just compare them to the following mechs from the Super Robot Wars franchise. The Elefante is like the Gust Lander but it hovers instead of being grounded, the Frei is like the Bellzeute and the Ravager is like a Huckebein Mk. III.*

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*Chapter 2:*

**Innocent Fighting**

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*(Showroom - Terminal N° 51)*

**[Takeru]**

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Azure skies with pixelated clouds veer in the screen as I do a barrel roll, landing hard onto the rocky soil, making the awful, teeth-screeching sound of a hard landing rise through the speakers, making my brows narrow and wrinkles to appear on my nose. The alarm continues to beep like birds in the morning, the explosions keep silence at bay like cicadas in the summer.

I lick over my lips, taking a second of pause, as I land with one leg and do a sidestep to take cover under the large cliff I was near, its pixelated crunchy-looking surface shielding me from the missiles. Once the dust and stock explosions fade away, I move my Take forward into the narrow, bumpy canyon road in between the towering elevations that obstruct the direct sunlight, carefully watching my steps as I walk the pathway full of jagged rocks and pillars that looks

like the last fashion trend among hedgehogs. A second later, the missile alarm begins to ring out again.

"Mikoto, I need back up!"

"I can't! The Elefante is blocking the way, dang it!" He instantly replies, his tone a bit faster than before.

"Tch, they got us good!"

Yanking the controls, my Take bursts into a double jump as more missiles come my way. In this narrow space I can't even try to counterattack, barely able to squeeze myself through the pillars and incoming missiles. Let's go for a triple boost jump then!

But as soon as I do, another wave comes at me. Spinning into a barrel roll, to not crash onto the cliffs or the stone pillars, I'm left with no choice but to go back to my prior position.

"Shit, fuck this shit, man."

These guys are the real deal, pro players. As soon as I went scouting they bombarded us with missiles, and when we got separated the Elefante took its position and started firing at Mikoto, while its partner cornered me with many consecutive long shots to my ankles from behind, forcing me to get even further away from Mikoto.

It doesn't help that we are playing on the Mirraoph Canyon, which has a lot of narrow pathways and tall cliffs. My speed works against me here, I can't boost as much as I'd like since there's the risk of crashing myself. That means game over in this situation. And to make matters worse, this field plays to the strengths of our rivals since they're a pair that focuses on long range attacks.

The Elefante, a dark gray and extra large sized mech, is the slowest in all the game but thanks to its size and defense it's the best tank. It also can equip more weapons than the other mechs and is one of

the few that can equip an OTH Railgun and move with it. It looks more like a floating fortress than a humanoid robot, to be honest.

What were the devs thinking when they made it?! This guy should have gotten nerfed to hell a long time ago! Well, at least they removed its Beam Shield. With that it was practically unkillable without another heavy weapon.

Its partner is a Freikugel, a white coated, small frame mech that excels at long-range shooting but its completely average in everything else. Its range and accuracy are to be feared, since it can attack from beyond the radar's area you could get hit without any warning in big maps. Like what's happening to me right now.

Another wave of missiles comes my way, this is stupid. We're not getting anywhere like this, not with the Elefante blocking the way. We gotta do something now.

"Mikoto, how are you holding up?"

"I'm on the run, trying to get past it but it's hard due to the machineguns and the occasional missiles," he groans a bit then he seems to let out a puff of air, with a bit of strength since I could hear it through the mic. He won't hold out alone for much longer. "If it didn't have than OTH, I could try to fight at midrange, but if it charges that thing up I'm dead."

"Yeah, I know, this fucking sucks," I say, rolling my eyes sharing the sigh. The OTH can't hit you if you're up close and personal with the mech using it, since it needs to charge while remaining still, but fighting on CQC against a tank as the Elef is borderline stupid. "Alright, just keep it up for awhile. I'm going there now!"

"Won't you get stuck between their attacks?"

"At this point it's do or die! We're just getting worn down."

My Take draws an arc in the sky, doing a backflip to dodge another missile, getting into position to rush through once it lands. Alright, I've gotten the timing of the barrages more or less figured out. Since the Frei has to stay out of the radar's area it should be relying on its partner to get my position, so it doesn't know exactly where I am. Which means, staying in such a narrow space is doing them a favor.

As soon as the next wave hits, I'm forward dashing the hell out of here! I'll just use the TC to blast away the bigger rocks to make me a path forward. With my instincts as my guide, I'll maneuver through the rest of the canyon. It's better than to leave this go on and on. Now, they should appear in the radar right about…

… now?

What the… Where are they?

Still nothing. A few clouds pass over in the distance, the BGM keeps playing. No alarm is coming up, not even as I take a few careful steps in between the stones. Could it be that it went after Mikoto?!

"Mikoto, the Frei may have gone after you! I'm no longer under attack so I'm rushing there," I say while starting the dash, blasting the bigger rocks with a minimally charged TC beam shot.

"What? I can barely keep up with the Elef, how do you want me to dodge the other's attacks too?!"

"Just hold out for a bit longer! I'm trying to get there!"

Dammit, I'm too far away. I could get there faster if I use all the boosters, but that would use up a lot of fuel and I might crash myself. I have to make some sharp turns, some at a few crossroads in a 90° angle, so it's going to be risky. My swords aren't that good against the Elefante, so if I deplete my fuel by flying high to avoid the rocks, then I won't be able to go for the hit and run approach. Then I'm going to be a sitting duck against the fortress, even with the Thunder Cannon I can't possibly try to fight that monstrosity at long range. A

single shot of the OTH and I'm dead. Mikoto is probably rather low on fuel with how much he's been dodging, so I can't leave him alone against two enemies for long.

Use all the boosters and risk losing the grind game or crashing? Keep this speed and risk losing Mikoto? Either way, it looks like we're screwed. If only I could hit them from- Wait a sec.

"Mikoto, retreat to a safer position right now!" I stop my boost, repositioning the Take's feet forward and stopping with a hop against a rock.

"The hell you're talking about! You'll get bombarded if I run!" Can't blame him for snapping like that.

"You can't take attacks from both at the same time, so if you try to retreat they'll surely try to block you. Just buy me ten seconds!"

"Ten seconds? What are- Oh! Got it!"

Heh, smart one. He got it in no time. Looking around, I'm met with the tall cliffs and pillars that litter the innermost side of the canyon. Alright, here should be fine. Gradually slowing down my boost, I take my position under a cliff while getting out the Thunder Cannon. Aiming it towards the exit gains me a small red lock-on circle. The giant ass of the Elefante is right at the end of my range, but I'm under lots of cover so I should be fine, no shot it can detect me from this position. Otherwise, they would have already effed me with the OTH as I was dodging missiles, after all.

Going prone, aiming at its core, I start the charge to full power, small sparks gyrating in my weapon. Thanks to all the missiles they shot at me I'm at 53% shields so this will definitely do a lot of damage. If Mikoto manages to distract them I'll get a clear shot to the core, which will probably put it near red numbers. Thanks to the cliff I'm safe from incoming missiles as well, so the charge won't get interrupted. And since the place is full of jagged rocks and obstacles, the Frei can't come near to snipe me in such little time.

10, 9, 8, 7…

A dot appears on my radar, what's the Freikugel doing there? Right at the edge of the radar, on the top of the canyon.

4, 3, 2…

**BAM! CRASH!**

An explosion shakes the cliff I'm under. Small at first, then larger by the second, rocks and boulders rain down on my Takemikazuchi, the screen vibrating and spinning as my machine is tumbled to the ground. But I still manage to shoot, after all the cooldown icon is flashing on my screen and I felt the vibration that comes through the controld when you fire a strong weapon, locking your position in.

Once the camera readjusts itself, I see my mech got stuck in between some fallen rocks, suffering 10% damage. Sigh… Thank God the Takemikazuchi is one of the sturdier mechs in the game, the Kaizer might have ended up really messed up after an avalanche like that. To think the Frei would use all of its missiles to destroy the environment… This means its loadout is probably lacking a melee weapon. Full commitment to the playstyle, kudos for that. Still feels cheap as hell.

"Mikoto, the cliff I was near collapsed on me. I'm stuck between some rocks, how did the shot go?" My Take's torso swings back and forth until I get fed up and use a sword to stand up again. On the plus side, the rock slide cleared most of the pillars on the area so now I can boost without worries.

"You got a clean hit on its head! Took 33% of its shields!" He yells, a bit too loud for my ears.

I was aiming for the body but wound up doing a head-shot. Well, at least I hit it.

Wait, if I didn't leave it in low health, that means… Mikoto is not going to be able to finish it off. And that means he's now in the range of both of them. Alone.

As I finish my trail of thought an alarm appears on my screen. Mikoto has 10% shields left.

"Mikoto, get outta there! Let's regroup somewhere else!" I flick my joysticks and pull the right lever hard as I stomp the pedals, entering a sudden full boost towards Mikoto's position, grazing a few pillars as I do.

"I can't escape! They're synchronizing their missiles to block me, and my air thrusters got hit so I can't glide anymore!" He shouts, I can hear the clicking noises of the controllers as he yanks them around.

Shit, they outsmarted us again. That's why the Frei didn't come after me immediately with missiles and instead tried to bury me under the cliff. He wasn't really trying to stop me from shooting at the Elef, he wanted to off Mikoto to later projectile spam me to death.

"Takeru, I'm sorry. I couldn't get past this thing and didn't do much damage to it."

"Hey, don't give up! We still haven't-"

"It was fun, you know! Playing together again. We should do this more often. Now let's go for that ice cream!"

Mikoto's dot stops moving in the radar, the missiles approaching its position. A loud explosion echoes in the distance as a message appears on my screen.

[PLAYER 1 KILLED]

Dammit! *Dammit!* ***Dammit!*** They read us like an open book! If I had dashed out of there faster this wouldn't have happened. Because of me, Mikoto is…

My eyes are glued to the crimson word flashing in the screen. I ease up on the boost, bringing my Takemikazuchi to a stop in between some rocks as the red fills my view.

Killed.

Mikoto got killed. He's… dead?

I know Mikoto isn't dead, this is just a game after all.

But as the crimson word flashes, as I'm showered in the red light, as I speak the words inside, a faint pain raises up on the back of my head, like a bunch of needles poking my scalp. A shiver, a shock runs through my arms, making me claw at the controls. Echoing closer and closer, distant yet constant, sounds I've heard before start coming back.

The sounds of a ruined world, of the eternal wasteland I see in my dreams. Fire spreads through my eyes, explosions blast away everywhere, dark smoke covers it all as if it were foggy. My breaths freezes in my throat as I once more hear the blossoming screams begging for help, disgusting munching sounds as well. Death, death as far as one could see. There is no sun, no light within this place. I see no hope, no salvation here.

The image of Mikoto being blown into a thousand bits fills my view, then it's Tama, then Class Rep, then Ayamine, then Meiya. Sumika appears in that bed, the white haired girl looks at me.

*"Sumika-san is dead."*

My throat wrings itself shut tight at the sight and sounds of this nightmare, hiccups in my chest as if I were trying not to puke for some reason. And yet, the taste, the acid taste of bile burns my tongue as some sort of melting echoes reach my ears, too. But in the middle of all the chaos, of all the smoke, something red is advancing towards me. Then slowly, so slowly, a black fire engulfs the battlefield, leaving nothing behind. The sky parts away, completely

clear, the searing hold of the fighting was all burnt away from it. The screams stop, the red things are all gone, the fire also simply retracts and disappears. There's nothing left behind.

It's cold.

It feels so, so cold.

Complete, utter silence.

No screams, no begs for help, not a single voice. No one else alive is near…

No one…

… Alone.

" *-like hell this'll be the end…"*

Huh?

" *If it comes down to it…"* A voice, hoarse and low, creeps from behind me.

And looking back, a small dart encrusted itself onto my heart, making me choke on empty air. Yet, what I now see… is different than the rest of the nightmares. Rushing through the wasteland like a thunderbolt, a metallic human-like thing struggles against the red sea, making tidal waves of gore rise high beyond the cliffs. With the fire of war as its cloak, the machine keeps on braving the storm of the unending waves of monsters of this eternal wasteland.

Even in the middle of all this madness, someone is still pressing on? Why?

A tall, very tall shadow falls upon me. Looking up at it, some… odd monster tilted its head at me, shrouded in fog and shadows. Or… well, not at me exactly, but in my general direction. What the fuck is this thing?

And yet, that metallic mech-like thing blasts away towards the shadows, slicing its underside.

*"Give me my world back!"* Shredding its lungs out as it did to the flesh of the monster, the voice shock me into dizziness, pain all over my body, fingerscurling in as if hit by a hammer, nails crushed in half.

Is that… me? A voice like mine roars from within the steel giant as it rushes through the wasteland slashing at some kind of monsters with swords in each hand, enduring alone the onslaught. There is no road to follow, no clear hope of victory, and yet the force of his struggling does not yield to the monsters.

The screams, the voice, even some of the movements and backflips the mech does… That has to be me.

Who else could someone who speaks like me be? No one, except myself. But… why is his voice, or rather mine, so crushed? Screaming non-stop, cursing everything in sight, repeating that over and over. 'Give me back my world'.

Slowly, the haze of the smoke grows dimmer and dimmer, distant and distant. Everything sinks beyond the horizon, or maybe the tidal waves grow larger than the horizon itself. Feels as if I were floating on water but while standing up.

A small warm feeling lingers on the back of my head, like small raindrops gently falling on me. Covered by that faint lukewarmness, a deep breath fills me whole with fresh air. The tension evaporates, the pressure releases my chest. My unfocused vision clears up, my throat eases up as I yawn and scream at the same time. Blinking a few times, I'm back in the arcade cockpit, game still in session, cold sweat on my face and back, my heartbeats clanging against my chest as I gasp for dear air.

… What was that? I've never had such a vivid daydream in my entire life. Was I having a panic attack? Over a game?

Yes, I screwed up. But I was never that good on Valgern-On, truth be told. Then, why am I gritting my teeth? Why are my fists clawing at the joysticks? Why can't I wipe the frown from my face? Why… am I so pissed off? What's this cold feeling all over my back, this hole in my stomach?

"Am I gonna have a break down? Just for this shit?!"

Having to move slower than usual? Fighting two on one? Being low on fuel? I feel like I've been through worse things in my life. Or was it in my dreams? Am I dreaming about a ruined world to pump myself up? Or am I dreaming about this peaceful world to rest from all that carnage?

A flicker on my screens snaps me back to reality. Two waves of missiles incoming. I grip the joysticks tightly, to calm my shaky hands. No way in hell I'm losing like this. *If I'm gonna lose it all then I'll struggle to the very end. I'll despair after I'm dead!*

"Full accel on all boosters! I'm outta here, forward dash!" Stomping the pedals, the rocket boosters flare up and roar alive before sending the Take blasting away.

Grazing a few large stone pillars as I boost dash non-stop, the beeping alarm warns the closeness of the missiles. Heartbeats calm down, stop crashing against my chest even when the beeps intensify. Rebounding off the cliffs as I jump, the stock explosions fail to reach me. Sighing the pressure away as I lick over my lips, boosting so fast that the screen became as blurry as if this were a racing game and I was going at over 300 km/h, the cold feeling on my back finally disappears.

"Some simple dodging like this… won't hold me back!"

Getting the TC back online, focusing again onto the pixelated and blurry map ahead, I move my boosters so they're fully backwards and fly just a bit over the ground as red thunders roar within my cannon, the alarm of more missiles coming resonating yet again on

my ears. Inhaling slowly through my nose, easing up the grasp on my joysticks, blinking fast, I let out a groan as the beam of red lightning blasts away a few pillars and rock formations on the cliff, creating a small escape route for me. Doing a power slide and squeezing the Take under the artificial tunnel my beam built for me, no damage I receive from the downpour of missiles. Exiting the tunnel, a vast expansion greets me, the cliffs parting wide and revealing a small desert in between them as the explosions roar behind me. Sand rises to the sky as the missiles miss their mark, yet for some reason, the sound of the explosions feels so… fake.

Why was I so nervous about these missiles? It's not like I'll… die or anything. Peeking at my health bars, the light yellow color tells that I barely took damage in my escape.

"Huh, check that out. Well, compared to that nightmare, dodge-tanking a few missiles seems like easy work." Finally resting my full weight back onto the seat, easing my pressure on the pedals, my purple mirage exits the cramped inner side of the canyon.

I should go for the Frei first, since the Elefante can't move much. Fighting at the top of the canyon should also give me some cover from the OTH, since it needs to have a clear line of sight to lock onto me. Even if it has a ridiculous long range, it can't break through a mountain like beam weaponry does. Thank God there's no beam cannon in the game.

Judging from where the missiles came from, the Frei should be somewhere around northeast of my current location, above the cliffs. Heels press onto the pedals, sending my Take into a double boost jump. Landing on a large pillar, jumping off it towards the cliff, and then jumping again off the rock walls to not lose momentum, veering the orientation of the boosters to draw an arc in the sky with a sharp yank of the controls and a sharper breath in. The Takemikazuchi safely reaches the top of the canyon before we lost more altitude or fuel, or missiles came in pouring.

I take a small breath, smaller steps into the terrain. The large view of the barren wasteland with all signs of life shining for their absence sends a shock through my back, another dart into my heart as those tall shadows crept into my vision for a sec. Gulping hard and exhaling strongly from my nose, my lips regress into my mouth, the cold feeling swallowed back down while I start to dash through the sinkholes and cracks in the map. I can still feel the sweat rolling down my face, though.

"Don't have time… to waste on hallucinations. Let's get moving, the Frei's bound to appear on the radar sooner or later." And not a second after, a dot bleeps to life in the corner of my radar. A few meters away, right in the middle of the area full of sinkholes. "Alright, position locked! Don't think your missiles will keep me back!" And neither will this bumpy terrain, it's nothing I haven't done before!

The boosters flare to life again, the Take shoots out like an arrow towards our target. Noticing my approach, the dot starts to escape before its white shape enters my vision. And yet again, the alarm beeps alive on my ears. As the missile clouds get closer, my hands choke the joysticks while I carefully give the terrain a good look, at the cracked floor and pitfalls in particular.

"Alright. Can't take damage and can't lose tempo. Piercing forward is the only choice left!"

Sidestep, half a tilt, dash, boost jump, tech, crouch, cancel, forward dash!

Sand explodes, the screen shakes, my controllers cry and click. But my health bar remains unchanging, and my lane of choice remains undisturbed. Missiles avoided, no speed lost, and no damage taken in the dodging either besides a small twinge in my wrists. Heh, and the Frei is almost in range.

"Time to rumble, spammer!"

The Frei might be one of the best snipers but on the open terrain at the top of the canyon it should be no match for the Takemikazuchi, so long as I don't fall in one of the sinkholes. And, if it gets too far away, my TC's charge should be a few frames faster than its weapon shift back to missiles. No need to rush, I'm the one hunting here. So I circle around it waiting for an opening, stalking its shadow, dodging missiles and occasional volley, opting to run on the ground to not waste fuel. And for a few seconds, it keeps trying to get me off as we play chase, hide and seek in between the creaks and crevices of this wasteland. But since it's trying to get me to the area full of sinkholes, the Frei also has to take care to not fall into them. And once it loses some speed-

I go into a full boost for a second, my unwary rival stalling a reaction as the purple beetle pierces through the twisting clouds of dust and approaching fast, enough to let me see the lock-on circle. Letting its shoulder pads cascade onto its back, the Frei cancels the missiles and switches to the machineguns, beginning to backboost as it sprays and prays. A quick press of the buttons sends me up into a jump, yet I pull the lever and immediately cancel it. The short hop turns into a tech, returning me to the ground in just a few frames as the missiles caresses the horn of my beetle. Heh, I got you to aim upwards!

"How do you like my machineguns?!" I shout as I push the triggers.

My bullets making their way to the Frei's platinum and slim body like moths to a fire. It couldn't dodge all the shots at this range, and now that you're stunned I'm gonna do you in! Falling towards it in a spinning dash, both shortswords lunge for its core and get a direct hit, sparks flying off alongside the screeching of twisted metal.

… Wait, why is he still moving? He's not down yet?!

The Frei punches me and tries to boost jump away as my Take stumbles back, but I finish it with the machineguns before it gets away, after button mashing like mad to regain my footing. The

pincushion that it was made explodes away, its dot vanishes from the radar. I'm left in silence in the wasteland, wiping my forehead.

"Sigh… Damn, that was dangerous." If it was any other mech that little percentage it had left could have costed me the game, thank God the guy didn't have a melee weapon.

Now, let's see how I'm holding. Shield at 31%, fuel at 24%. Since I barely used my swords they're at full durability, but even then I can't go for the hit and run. I probably can do only one full boost if I'm careful. If we're talking about range there's no way I could fire the TC, even if I somehow dodge a shot from the railgun the Elef probably has either a rifle or long range missiles to disrupt my charge. And my speed does lower a bit while charging the TC, so dodging and charging at the same time is out of the question against an Elef that has an OTH. So, what do I do? Where's the safest place to attack such a giant enemy with my available weaponry?

I have an idea, but it's completely stupid. It's better than letting the timer run out on me, though. C'mon, Takemikazuchi! Let's show 'em how good we are together!

After running to almost the edge of the canyon, I start boost jumping towards the Elefante's signal in zigzags. I'll assume it has the OTH charged already and is waiting for me to appear in the radar. No sooner do I start descending that the danger alarm bursts to life, a twinkle in the distance that in seconds grows larger by the second.

Gulping emptiness, heels on the pedals I send myself into a barrel roll while descending at near top speed. Right besides me, the flow of bullets passes through. Almost looking like beam, the stream of charged ammo that explodes about, piercing across the wasteland… Ugh, why?

Shit, my head hurts again. What the fuck is wrong with me? Again, my vision twists a bit, my eyes hurt as if something were pressing them into my skull, and a ringing echo zooms into my ears.

A blasting beam of light… piercing a wasteland… while I fight and do some tight dodging… Did I have a match like this before? Huh… Feels like, for some reason. But why does this hurt so much, fuck.

No, no time to space out! Coughing, blinking fast to get back in the game, my Take is still safe. Sigh… To think I'd manage to dodge an OTH. I got lucky this time, so let's get close before OTH gets reloaded.

"Now's my chance, full boost ahead!"

Again, the background grows blurry as the Take exerts itself to full speed, as the engage alarm appears once more. Dodging some shots from the Elef's rifle and some missiles using the cliffs and rocks as cover while again grazing some as I moved, I'm safely approaching the towering fortress that now appears in my sight. Hovering in the middle of the cliffs, blocking the main crossroad of the map, the massive metallic gray hunk of metal shines amidst the heatwaves of the Mirraoph Canyon, its high-res model contrasting with the lesser details of the environment.

Mikoto was right, this one relies more on its guns than on the missiles, though. Carefully reading its shooting timings, I manage to get near the open area where it is, using stone pillars as cover. A second of peace later, it switches to using a heavy machinegun on each arm and I'm forced to sidestep to get out of harm's way, hiding behind the rock formations of the pathways. Luckily, these cliffs can't be destroyed so easily… but if it starts charging the OTH again while I'm still not close enough I'm as good as dead. Well, not *actually* dead, but… eh, whatever.

Peeking my head from behind the rocks, my Take's horn receives a hit. 2% damage, but the horn got destroyed. Two Heavy machineguns, long range rifles and missiles, a fucking OTH railgun, seems to be its loadout.

"How did this OP mech not get nerfed yet?! Seriously devs, what the hell?! How the fuck is anyone supposed to have a chance against

this damn monster?"

Moving to another pillar in a sudden boost dash, the Take circles around the giant fortress, running through the dust and pixelated large rocks in the area that is being showered by incoming sunlight from the clear sky and searing smoke from the volleys of my adversary.

I just gotta dodge for a little while more, the heavy machineguns gotta cool down after a while. Dammit, my shields are at 21%. Am I gonna make it?! There's not enough places to take cover in if I wanna get closer. The recharge window should be coming up in-

The shooting stops, the player takes a little too long to switch its weapons, so in a sudden burst my Take approaches the floating fortress from behind. Just a bit more, if I land a hit with my machineguns it's as good as dead. It starts to spam the missiles again, but it's no problem! Forward dash, sidestep, boost jump to the left, cancel, boost jump to the right!

TC out and bolting, aiming it upwards as I rush on, all incoming missiles fall to the red lightning. Sand and smoke rising everywhere in my view, the red bolts shielded me well, explosions surrounding my unit, that inches closer and closer to red numbers, oil and bloody murder oozing from its visor.

Right behind that cloak of violence that surrounds me lays a towering shadow, the gray fortress filling my view as I look up. But now, unlike before as I circled around it, a small red circle appears in my view. The Lock-On is active, which means-

"Hehehe… You're in my range! Having such a big ass must suck right now!"

Diving like a meteor were my fingers onto the controllers, flicking the trigger with all my might. The machineguns hit its lower body while I dodge the fire from the turrets it has equipped on its sides.

"Hahahaha! 0% damage! This is hilarious!"

I can't help but laugh at this. Who on Earth designed this monster?! And you're telling me it had a Beam Shield when it was introduced? Seriously, what were they smoking? I want some of that shit.

The Elef spasms as little jolts cover its body, the stun now in effect. So, landing hard onto the sand, I rush forward towards it. Finally, I'm in position to execute my plan. Let's see if my gamble was worth it!

Back in my college class there's this guy called Onimura. He's also a gamer so we hit it off immediately. He plays this game where he's just a medieval guy hunting monsters with a giant horn that plays music or something. The thing is, one day I asked him how did he even approach one of those giant dragons he fights, to which he answered: "The safest place to fight a giant dragon is below him, ironically! Since most of its attacks can't hurt me if I'm there, and I can just keep beating it up no problem!"

Basically, what that weird shadowy me was doing in my daydream in that odd robot to whatever that tall monster was. Onimura, if this plan works I'm buying you lunch for a week, I swear.

The stun wears off as I take out a longsword and start slashing at the Elefante from below while shooting the TC without even charging it.

Slash, 2% damage. Slash, 2% damage. Laser Beam, 9% damage. Little by little I lower its shield, little by little its modular plating gives away like the skin of boiled chicken.

The Elefante tries to move, but since the Takemikazuchi's speed is better even on foot I can remain below him. He can't attack me with its turrets or any other weapon while I'm here, and the Elefante cannot jump since it's always hovering. So my Take keeps slashing and slicing, blasting it away with the TC. Repeating the rhythm time and again, yanking the controls and stepping on the pedals as if in a daze, in a dance. Metal starts to burn, yielding to the hammer.

sparks and screeches jumping as if you poured water onto a frying pan with warm oil in it.

"You son of a bitch! You okay winning like a scrub?!" I hear the venomous yell over the headphones, and a small yanking noise of controls. Heh… the Elef's pilot, I see.

"You two tried to win this by spamming projectiles, so I'm sure you won't complain about me taking the easy way out!" I retort in my old cocky tone, chuckling at their groans, speeding up my combo, tearing the Elef apart.

"You've no skill, noob! Sucker! Cheater!" The other guy of that team keeps calling me names, his voice heating up more with each insult as I cackle back.

The Elefante's shields are in red, let's finish this!

"Hey you two, GG. And by that I mean *Git Gud* !" I say, holding a chuckle.

Rising my blade above my shoulder, lowering my stance, I push the controls forward. The dash allows the Take to rise from the ground for a moment, releasing a vicious slash towards the damaged machine. And with eyes blazing, the Takemikazuchi slices its longsword into the Elefante, piercing it like a cannon ball would do to defenseless sheep.

Smoke rises up, sparks give way to a fire cloak that envelopes the entirety of the metallic titan, a loud explosions soon follows. Once the screen stops shaking, I see my Take taking on its victory pose.

[MATCH OVER - TEAM N° 51 WINS]

"WOOHOHOO!" We made it into the top 12 of our zone! "We won! Check that out! Wryyyy!"

Gasping, panting, I take off my phones and run a hand over my head. The back of it is still beating, and I can't stop feeling my heartbeats in full force near my neck. Leaning onto the seat, simply looking at the message with a goofy smile, I keep taking breaths with my mouth open, feeling a shiver on my sides. Sighing hard, I pull the seat back swiftly.

"Hey, Mikoto! Say something! What do you think about that?!" I must sound like a kid, but I can't hide my excitement right now. All that anxiety completely gone from me, I cannot help but smile like an idiot.

There's no answer. I get out of my seat and look around but I don't see him anywhere. Where could he… Don't tell me that he went away! He's not in his seat, not outside the terminal. And I can't see him near the rest area, either. It's odd he didn't chime in during the fight, now that I think about it.

How long has it been since he got shot down? Don't tell me you immediately got up and left… Mikoto, if you left and we get disqualified you'll never hear the end of it!

"COME BACK HERE, MIKOTOOOOOOO!"

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*5 Minutes later.*

*(Showroom. Rest Area.)*

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"I can't believe you! You have no faith in me!"

"What were you expecting?! One of them was unscathed and the other was a friggin' floating fortress with an OTH Railgun! You had less than half of your shields and fuel! I really thought it was the end of it!" Mikoto says, returning the blazing gaze. I mean, I guess anyone would think it'd be impossible to turn the tables on a situation like that.

"Whatever, let's go for a drink or something. Just lemme tell you that you missed one of the best matches in the tournament!" I shrug, walking towards the rest area in the showroom with my cheeks a bit puffed.

He sighs, scratching his head with an eye closed. "I'll just watch the replay later. But that was enough, you know? I mean, I was really happy that we made it to the Top 24 of our zone. I can't believe we're in the best 36 teams of the whole tournament!" He says as the glee returns to his face.

"Yeah, but from now on we stick together and watch each other's back. The next fight is gonna be brutal, too."

"Wait, you wanna win it?!" Mikoto looks at me with a surprised face, resembling an electric rat, little jolts on his cheeks and all.

"You don't?"

"Eh? Ah, no. I mean, yes, I wanna win but, you know, you kinda carried us here. Not just the last fight, I've not been much help in this," he lets out a sigh as his entire body hunches over like a little flower under the rain.

"Dude, this isn't like you at all. And last fight was all on me for not acting faster. You kept the Elefante at bay for, what? Two full minutes? That's awesome, you know?"

"Yeah, but I got taken down in the end. And it was your idea that took down the Elef, and you dealt with the Frei all by yourself too," he looks away, his pace slows down.

"That was more thanks to the Takemikazuchi's exceptional speed, if you had tried to get below that thing I'm sure you could have done it."

"You think?" Barely whispering the retort, his eyes remain glued to the floor.

He looks super down, dammit. How can I cheer him up? I'm not good at giving speeches, I always end up preaching when I do. Hmm…

"… What? Is this how you wanna go, with me showing you up? What's next? You're gonna start calling me Takeru-sama?" I say, smirking as I shrug, raising a single brow. Let's just do what I usually do, no point in overthinking this.

"Wha… I-Idiot! You're such a stupid idiot, Takeru!" Flaring back up, he lightly slaps my arm. "That's it, next fight is my turn to shine!" Yes! There's the competitive Mikoto I know!

"That's more like it! Now let's get some juice or something."

"… Hey Takeru, you alright?" He stops in his tracks, locking his gaze on me.

"Hmm? Yeah, why?"

"You look kinda… different. No, you look like you usually do."

"Huh? Then why did you ask me if I'm alright?"

"Because you've been weird for awhile. You didn't smile, rarely joined in the jokes, didn't react when you got teased. Even the tone of your voice sounded down."

"Well, what can I say? Beating someone up sure is nice. Especially with a sword!"

"Hahaha, see? That's our usual Takeru!"

"Ha, well, is it what it is. Let's relax for a bit and keep doing our best. Then we're hitting that ice cream harder than a triple boost jump landing!"

"Yeah!"

*40 minutes later.*

*(Showroom. Rest Area.)*

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"AAAAHHH TAKERU!"

"Stop screaming. And stop running. Sit down already," I do sit down, finally biting into the sandwich I ordered.

"B-B-B-But we made it to the **FINAL** ! How do you want me to calm down?!" He starts running in circles again as he shuffles between all his character sprites at the speed of sound.

"Mikoto, you must chill! We just won a super close game, too. We're already here, so no matter the result we went way beyond our limits. Let's fight with no regrets!"

"Ah, what are we gonna do?!"

This is pointless. Ayamine I wish you were here to help me calm him down. And by that I mean suffocate him until he calms down.

"If you didn't want to be in the final then, why did you land all those cannon shots?" You really creamed the opposite team real bad last match while they ganged up on me. Still can't believe you got the two kills, to be honest.

"I was just having fun! And you were trying so hard to corner them, so when I saw my chance I just took the shot, I wasn't even aiming at the core. This is the first time I do more than 40% with a single attack!" He crashes into the seat in front of mine, sparks flying out of the thunderstorm of amazement that laid in his eyes.

He got not one, but two fully charged cannon shots to the core of the first enemy, taking 45% off its shields with each hit. Imagine my surprise, I'm having trouble at CQC while tightly dodging some mid-range fire, when suddenly one mech explodes outta nowhere. And

then as I stunned the other, it exploded too in a flash after Mikoto got yet another cannon shot at its core, shaving its remaining life away.

A match that was at a standstill for two minutes ended in less than half of one, thanks to Mikoto's exalted mode activating or something.

"Well then, let's just keep having fun! This time it's really hard to think we could win it. So, let's go out with a blast!"

"Uh, but everyone is gonna be watching. And the final is going to be uploaded to the official website! What if we screw up and it ends up there forever?!" He keeps shaking, forehead full of sweat beads as he takes the first bite of his food.

"All the more reason to calm down, so that we don't make any stupid mistakes."

"Uuuh…" He seems to have calmed down a bit. But it's not like I don't understand him.

The last two matches were very hard, even when Mikoto upped his game. We went against pros and managed to somehow get out victorious. Honestly, if it weren't for the Takemikazuchi's speed and Mikoto's deadly cannon shots we wouldn't be here. So much for weapon balance! So many things are broken in this game! Though, I suppose that for my rivals my speed is broken too.

There's also this seething motivation I've been feeling since that match with the Elef and the Frei. Like, I don't even wanna lose this. Yet, this seems kinda… pointless? I mean, we're losing the final no matter what we do, we're nowhere near the level needed to actually win. But, I dunno, it's like something's missing here.

At least this is the end of the tournament. I'm really glad I got to be here, even if after this it's another half a year until everyone can get together again. After this we get some more time to hang out. I really shouldn't let my nightmares bring me down so much. I really rather

be hanging out with the gang right now. I wanna spend some more time with them.

As I lay back onto my seat, I notice Mikoto playing with his keys. His gaze is clouded as he eats a sandwich, it's also rare for him to be so quiet.

"Alright Mikoto, let's make a bet!" It may be a stupid idea, but I want him to at least have fun in our last match.

"Huh? About what?"

"The first to go down has to give the other half its ice cream!" I say with a huge smile.

"What? No, you're just gonna rush away and leave me to die!"

"Of course not! We're both rushing in at the same time, since I don't think we stand a chance either way. Might as well go for the surprise attack."

"Huh? But…" He doesn't look convinced. Let's give him one last push.

"Wow, someone is not confident. Highschool Mikoto would laugh at you right now!" I see his face tighten, changing from doubt to anger in a second. Baiting: Successful!

"What?! Don't be a jerk, Takeru! I just… I'm really nervous, you know? Like this is the kind of thing I was always dreaming about when we were back in school!" He says as his face lights up, smiling again as he looks up to nowhere. "I was always getting dragged to the sea or the jungle, so when I got back home playing games was one of the things I looked forward to the most. But I could never go to any events… and now not only I'm in one but, I'm in the final match of the event! Do you get it Takeru?! We are on the final of an official Valgern-On tournameeeent!" And then his eyes start rotating

in a counter clockwise way as he grabs his head, shaking a bit. Seriously dude, you must chill.

"Then all the more reason to go and give your best, right?"

"Huh?"

"With college and work in the future we probably won't be able to come to another event like this. This may be the last time for a long while that we can just have fun without worrying about what hour it is or if there's any studies to catch up to. So you must chill, dude. We came here, we played, we took down some pro players, and we got to the final. What else could a fan ask for?!"

"Yeah… I mean, today was great! I guess there's nothing else a fan could ask, aside from winning the thing. Thanks Takeru, you've matured a lot, you know?" He gives me his usual smile. I'm really envious of how easily you can change your mood.

"That's hardly a good thing, considering how much of a brat I was before. If I didn't grew up a bit I'd be in deep shit now that I'm in college."

"Hahaha, don't be silly!"

"To all finalists, please go to your terminal. The final match shall begin in five minutes. I repeat-" The voice echoes through the showroom.

All the players that lost have gone to the hall, I think, so the showroom feels empty right now. We were on the rest area but the other players didn't come at all. Who knows what kind of people we're against now?

"Let's go, Takeru! It's showtime!"

"Yeah, let's!" Let's do our worst and go down without regrets!

Heh, who would have said it? A videogame is what got me out of my cloud of negativity of these last months. Though, I do wonder what the hell is up with these nightmares. I hope I don't start having lucid daydreams while in college.

After getting ready and sitting back in our terminal, we heard the announcer on our headphones introduce all the teams before the match started. Can't believe they used our full names, I better not make a fool out of myself here or my college life might become hell. Please guys in my class, don't watch this!

Then, as we accept the connection for the match, we got to the field select screen and the battlefield is-

Heh, of course it would be this. Yguloch Fortress, the narrow circle of hell as they call it. Well, at least we won't have to worry about Rigulla's damage hazards. A small mercy, I guess.

And then, with a loud cheer of the announcer, the three-headed dragon match begins, the loading screen giving way to the map.

The Technopolis comes into view, imposing as always. Curved structures, shining silverish metal, oval shapes and lines of energy beams holding the city together. I'll never get tired of praising some of the maps. The backgrounds, BGMs and style they have is top notch. Yguloch really is very similar to the cities of Galaxy Wars, though. Still, if they wanted to make a reference to that, why do we not have any lasersabres? Imagine how cool that would be, dual wielding crimson lasersabres as you rush through the enemies while screaming 'Unlimited Poweeeeeer!'.

"Takeru, can you see any enemies?" Mikoto asks, again yanking me off dreamland.

"… Nope, nothing nearby or in the radar. Stay close, I'll go over that tower."

Walking on the platinum white streets, between the perfect cubes of the structures, I hop on top of some smaller buildings to get to the tower in question, that looks like an anchor in reverse pointing to the sky. I wait a few seconds but I can't see anything on the screen or in my radar, not even as I look about the place.

Yguloch has an open exterior filled with all kind of sci-fi, futuristic looking buildings and in the center of the map there's the fortress, that is a clear homage to the Doom Moon. But still, there's nothing in sight.

"See anything?" He asks.

"Not yet, no. Anyways, better make haste and get closer to the fortress."

"Huh? Why? Shouldn't we stay under cover to catch the enemies by surprise?"

"Have you ever played this map, Mikoto?" I ask as my Take hops back to the ground, landing besides the Xao-Myun.

"No, not really. I haven't got the time to try all the new maps from the last updates."

"Well, you see, Yguloch's interior is very narrow, kind of like an actual building. It's perfect for hit and run tactics, or just to hold the fort. There's very few mechs that have the speed or defense to traverse one of the hallways while under constant fire. But there's one special thing about this map," I stop, on purpose to make the silence all the more grand, licking my lips and inhaling sharply, to speak from my stomach. "In the dead center of the fortress there's a room with a control panel, and if you interact with it you'll make nukes rain down on the outside. It basically destroys all the outside map, forcing players to fight within the fortress." But the nukes are programmed to drop automatically after three minutes anyways. So waiting is kind of pointless.

"So you want to win by using those nukes? This… feels really cheap, you know," He sighs as we start walking, the Xao-Myun lagging behind my Take.

"The inside of the fortress is like a labyrinth, so it's not like we have a clear road towards the panel. And we can get sniped on the outer sections of the building. But as soon as any team shoots for the fortress, there's gonna be little we can do besides rushing to it. So we have no time to waste, we gotta try to get close to the entrance in case anyone pushes the red button," I say with a nod, Mikoto groans a bit but still agrees.

Even if fighting breaks out outside Yguloch, getting closer is for the better. And if the match drags on, the nukes are gonna come down raining anyways. So, chances are, someone is gonna chase that control panel. Or we could just rush and do that ourselves? Nah, no way in hell that's gonna work, we'll be exposing ourselves unnecessarily.

"Takeru! Enemy to your left!" He warns and we both stop walking, crouching behind a spinning anchor-tower.

I check my radar, there's two signals near and getting closer. Wait, I got another reading to my right. Two more coming from over there. Are they… rushing into the fortress? Looks like, at the speed the dots are moving. So much for being cautious.

"Can you see anything, Mikoto?"

"Not yet, I still can't- wait, is that… an Elefante?!"

"Times two actually, there's another to the right," I say as another Elef becomes visible to my right as it flies above the buildings in the distance.

"Eh?! For real?!" That match against the gray Elef must have left quite the impact on him.

So much for a balanced and diverse meta. Let's see what are the others piloting.

"Mikoto, stay on the ground. Let's lay low for awhile."

"Huh? What about rushing in case the nukes come down?"

"Just let me see what are the others piloting." Just a little more and they'll get in the radar's area.

And there we go! Let's check what are they… Slim build, spiky head, long backthrusters. Huh, well shit. This is gonna suck.

"Takeru, can you see them?"

"Yep, both of them are using a Ravager," I say as I start advancing again, Mikoto following me.

"Both? So the other teams are identical?" He asks, a bit puzzled.

"Yeah, balance and diversity be damned. I can see what they were going for, but this is just ridiculous. Both teams are rushing to the entrance, and if I were a betting man I'd say they're trying to block it with the Elefante while the Ravager gets to the control panel to wipe all other players with the nukes."

"Huh? And you think that'll work?"

"Honestly, yeah. The Ravager is the fastest mech in the game, and while most of its weapons are light and don't do much damage, its signature weapon, the Homing Missile, is really good. It dodges covers and obstacles and can stun just like my machineguns. With those it can keep any pursuers at bay or hop in for the kill if it needs to."

"So what do we do?" He sounds worried. Can't blame him.

"What we were going to do anyways. Rush 'em!"

"R-Really?" I can feel his incredulous look through his voice.

"Yeah, the Elefantes are going to knock each other trying to seize the gate, while the Ravagers will infiltrate the fortress. That way if we get past the giants we can kill off each Ravager individually. Since the hallways are so narrow the Elefantes can't get inside the fortress, so once the nukes get sent they're as good as dead."

"Sigh… I *really* don't like where this is going," He complains, sounding sour.

"Not like we have a choice, do we? The second Yguloch was chosen, this became a possible outcome. No point in complaining, right? Let's go have some fun!"

"Okay, right behind you!" Again sounding cheery, he replies as we both start boost dashing through the streets.

As we get close to the entrance, crouching and hiding behind a building, we see that the fight has already started. Explosions littering the sky, a few buildings blasted away, debris filling the streets. The once pure white of the Technopolis, ravished in an instant by all the missile spam. A green Elef has taken the gate while the other team tries to get past it. This one is firing missiles everywhere, not letting them get close. Another spammer, huh? The green one seems to have equipped missiles for all ranges and is holding a single machinegun.

The other team has an orange Elef repelling some missiles with its own, trying to cover a blue Ravager. Sadly, the crossfire of missiles leveled the entire area near the entrance to the fortress, the buildings reduced to ashes and small mounds of burnt metal.

All right, they seem to be so focused on the gate that they haven't noticed us getting closer, or they just don't give a damn. Whatever, I think that one full boost dash followed by a triple boost jump should get us close enough to just dash under the green one, then we can

slide under it and enter the fortress. There should be one Ravager inside the fortress already so we should hurry.

"Mikoto, on my mark we go for a full boost dash followed by a triple boost jump, that should get us close enough to get past the green one. You ready?"

"Wait, don't you see that mark on the radar? Just above the gate?" Mikoto says with a shade of doubt.

"Huh? I just see one dot, what are you- It moved! There's two dots!" They're overlapping their signals? Is that even possible? I'm sure this is as legal as a loli.

"What do you think they're doing?" He seems surprised this kind of thing is even possible, watching as the explosions keep on screeching, yet the dot above the gate remains still.

"If they didn't get into the fortress, then I have no idea. There's no advantage to fight on top of the gate, since launching homings from inside would be safer now that all the cover got blasted away to hell."

"What if they were waiting to catch them by surprise? Takeru, you said that the Elefante can't get inside, right? So, if they kill the Ravager of the other team…"

"They have the match in their pocket! You're totally right!" Mikoto, you're a genius.

Of course anyone would assume that rushing to the panel is the safer strategy. But when they saw that the other team also had an Elefante, they decided to seize the chance to kill its partner, to have no one to compete for the panel later, since it seems they don't care about us or think the Elef is enough to either deal with us or keep us away from the fortress until the nukes come down.

Still… Look at all those explosions. It's literally a field of fire and smoke. Can we really make it safely inside the gate? If they have a

Ravager ready to stun us with the homings, we're gonna be target practice for the Elef.

"What do you think we should do, Mikoto?"

"Um, the Homing doesn't do much damage, right? The Ravager on the gate must be waiting until they get low on shields, to use the surprise factor to its fullest and get rid of the other Ravager. So, I think that after the other team realizes that they're hiding on top of the gate, they'll try to kill it. And that's when we should rush into the fortress, while they fight between each other."

"Why don't we reveal the Ravager to them, then?" Light bulb moment right now, I have an idea we can exploit.

"Reveal it? Charging in into those two Elef's range? No, thanks!" He really is scared of them, after all.

"I was thinking of sniping it, we're in range I think. They haven't focused on us because we are not a threat to them, or they don't care, but when they look at where we shoot, even if we miss…"

"They'll see the other Ravager! Nice thinking, Takeru!"

"Nah, this is all you noticing the second dot."

We slowly approach a building, but we gain no attention so we take our position. Mikoto readies his cannons, I prep up the TC. Looking with the scope, it's obvious there's a mech above the gate, but if you don't look closely you can totally miss it. Looking at it from the front must be almost impossible, since it's hiding behind those light poles and the Elef's missiles deserve more attention.

Alright, let's get this baby charged up. Let's aim at the light poles!

"I'll use my TC to blow up the lights and most of the cover, you target the Ravager."

"What do we do after we shoot?"

"Wait and see, depending how things turn out we either take advantage of the chaos or wait until they stop bombarding each other with missiles. No point in rushing if we can't get to the gate in one piece."

"Okay, got it."

3, 2, 1… GO!

Both of our mechs shoot in unison towards the gate, our volleys parting the pixelated smoke. Burgundy streaks of lightning course through the air, melting what little protection is above the gate, everything blown up to smithereens. The ensuing smoke does not get a chance to settle down and rest as Mikoto's shot pierces through and further cracks the entrance. Yet, a small frame sways away from within the mushroom of dust and fire caused by our shots, the red Ravager that was forced to jump to dodge Mikoto's shot. The other team stops moving, taken aback by our attack to the gate, but as they see the other Ravager the missile spam immediately follows suit. The green Elef now has to cover its partner, and more explosions cover the sky in its entirety. Happy New Year, I guess?

"Looks like that went well. What now, Takeru?"

"They're nuking each other, we should- Mikoto, to your left!"

A homing missile heads towards Mikoto, luckily he reacts in time and shoots it down.

A screech comes through the speakers, followed by a livid voice. "You damn casuals! Go back to the Dreamcost with your low tier shit!" I think this is the guy in the red Ravager.

"What does he mean by low tier shit?!" He better not be insinuating what I think he is.

"You don't check the tier list, Takeru?"

"No, I just read the summaries on the forums and saw some replays of each mech." I thought the Take looked sick as fuck, so I gave it a spin one day. Been maining it ever since, and my Win-rate skyrocketed since then.

"Really? No wonder you of all people picked up the Takemikazuchi, then." What's up with that sarcastic tone?

"Which tier are our mechs in?"

"Mine is Mid tier. Yours is in Bottom tier."

"What?! This baby is at the bottom?! I call bullshit!"

"You're the only one I've seen to be able to use that mech without crashing and exploding at some point."

Our chat is interrupted by more missiles coming our way. Seems like camping is no longer an option for us, now that we got ourselves noticed.

"Mikoto, let's go! No point in staying here taking the missiles!"

"All right, right behind you!"

We dash towards the gate dodging and taking cover to avoid taking damage. This doesn't look like a battle that just started. Both Elefs are already at less than half shields and the blue Ravager is around 60%. I think this is going to turn into a slaughter, control panel be damned.

The red Ravager turns around when it notices us, shooting a homing along two grenades. Dammit, he's trying to split us up!

"Mikoto, to the left!" We take down the homing and get out of the grenades' damage area.

"Aren't you good for being a casual? At least you'll put up a fight!" The red's pilot screams at us.

"Masa, stop screwing around and leave the weaklings to me!" A women's voice rang on the headphones. So she's the green Elef's pilot. Weaklings, you said? Heh, we'll show you!

"Takeru to your left!" Just as Mikoto warns me, a grenade was about to explode. I quickly boost backflip out of danger, luckily sustaining no damage. That was too close.

"Thanks dude!"

"Stay focused, who should we target?"

"Let's go for green and red! The other two have taken more damage than them and will keep getting damaged in the crossfire. Don't let your guard down though, they'll surely try to hit us when they get a chance. I'll try to get under green to get red's attention, then we can pincer him. After that we can deal with the blue one as we retreat into the fortress. Give me some cover!"

Stomping the pedals, bringing the boosters back to life, I dash towards the green Elef at top speed. Now that I know how much damage it takes from below I know I can lower its shield enough for it to get killed by the other Elef.

The red Ravager tries to go after me but it's stopped by the blue one, then Mikoto joins the fray and sprays his deadly cannon shots about. Both Ravagers run away, but the red one ain't leaving me out of its sight.

Alright, let's do a full boost and do this quickly! Once we bait the red one, we can retreat into the fortress.

The warning chime beeps, a grenade is already falling my way along a homing right behind. A few buildings turn dark, covered in smoke, as the Elef's shots miss me by a hair.

"Heh, now we're talking. Come on, let's play ball!"

# Integrate

*Chapter 3:*

**Integrate**

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*(Showroom. Terminal N° 51)*

**[Takeru]**

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With a blasting sound, my Take gets sent into a wall again. Its joints shouting at me in complain, it takes a sec for it to come back to its feet. By then, the red frame is again out of sight.

"Sigh… Damn, didn't think it'd take me so much to knockout a single enemy."

If Mikoto were here, we could have done this quickly. The damn blue Ravager got in the way of our plan, disrupting our pincer maneuver. The green Elef bombarded us with all it had to let Red run into the fortress, and I tried to give chase. Being left in between two Elef's missiles, it's a miracle I made it into the fortress, to be honest. Mikoto and the blue Ravager got done in during the crossfire, so now it's just me and-

**BEEP!**

"Me and the fucking homing missiles every damn second!" TC out, I don't even bother to charge it, releasing a small ball of red sparks that collide against the missile.

Taking a second to sigh, I run a hand over my forehead to clean the sweat that's been tickling down to my chin for a while now. The red Ravager has managed to keep its distance from me for about two minutes. I'm at a disadvantage in this fight, not only he can shoot

homings at me from anywhere as soon as he locks onto me but also has better range with his guns and grenades. The guy is also not bad at CQC, though I did manage to get two clear hits.

But simply by hearing the creaking sounds of my Take as it walks, the once regal purple painting now peeling off and revealing the crude metallic gray beneath, one can see I'm almost a dead man walking. Down to my last long sword, I gotta make this count.

Blasting into a jump just before the corner, the Take keeps boosting in midair. No sooner do I take the turn that the alarm starts beeping again, the homing is coming already. A quick flicker, I shoot it down with the TC and start dashing forward as I land. Sidestepping and moving through the clogging smoke to avoid as many bullets as possible, my Take keeps on rushing while firing the machineguns. I don't care if I'm not in range yet, I have to take down the grenades before they get too close! The red frame is at the end of my radar, I can get close if I deal with these!

Grinding its feet against the ground, the Take comes to a sudden stop. The explosions start ahead of me, missing their expected target, as I quickly click and yank the combo. Pulling out the big and clunky TC again, the red circle of the auto-lock appears on my view despite the fire and smoke veiling my sight.

In a quick counter, my red adversary fires off a few more of his weapons at me. Sadly, I'm too far away for him to interrupt my charge. Lightning surges forth, grenades burnt to mere pixels, the beam roars through the hallway. The Ravager is forced to boost jump in a panic to avoid it, and shoots another homing as it does.

"I'm starting to think that having infinite projectiles is not a good idea. At least make the cooldown a bit longer, dammit!"

Piercing the clouds and flames, exploding the homings when required, I advance and try to counter. The Ravager manages to stay always out of range, a hazy shadow nearing the horizon, while never stopping to send those damn grenades to not let me use the TC

again. But since that's what he thinks is my win-con, as soon as he gets locked into the animation-

Now's my chance! I pull the joystick forward, crouching first then going into a full boost dash, readying my blade. Red throws a grenade upwards, which misses my Take entirely as it crouch-dashes, my eyes see again that nice red circle of the auto-lock for a second. Instead of fleeing, Red starts taking out its saber. Feet planted on the pedals, joystick kept in place, I push my Take forward while ignoring the grenade.

Explosions tickle the Take's back, taking 3% off my shields. Couldn't get out of the damage area, at top speed? Whatever, I take my stance and slash at the Ravager. We trade blows, sparks and screeches echoing about, parries and ripostes exchanged like trading cards, but neither of us can get a clear hit either on the frame or the limbs nor find the space to use our guns without risk of a hit to the core. As we try to outmaneuver each other, taking sharp turns and power-sliding on the corners and around the few pillars that divide the hallways, our slashes keep meeting the other's blade time and again. This guy's technique in CQC is really something else, he must have played a melee-eccentric mech before.

After reaching a hallway with a 90° curve, the Ravager does a sharp drift and moves further in as it barely grazes the wall, leaving a trail of grenades in its wake. With a sharp yank of the controls, almost hitting my ribs, I take my distance from the corner as the stock explosions fill my view. Taking a second to sigh and do a circle with my neck, a chill runs down my spine as another chime appears. A homing again zooming towards me.

"For fuck's sake!"

More thunders meet the missile, more smoke fills and paints the once sleek walls of smooth and curved metal of the place. Once the pixelated smoke scatters, I resume the chase on foot again. He's gone into the next open area at the end of the hallway, he's trying to ambush me for sure. As I reach the place in question, however, I see

a giant hole in the middle of the area. A giant, triangular elevator that is already activated.

"Oh… Oh, fuck no." A hand firmly planted on my forehead, all I can do now is is just close my eyes, shake my head and… and just… Man, fuck this shit. "How could I forget about this. The damn tunnel to the underground, fuck!"

Worst part is, the underground part of Yguloch is even more narrow than the aboveground building. This is bad, there's no way I'll be able to keep dodging his shots in the underground. *Once he gets the lead and arrives at a narrow enough place, the Ravager can simply opt to employ a stationary defense tactic with the missiles .* If my TC can't blast away the walls, which I think it shouldn't, then its all up on whether I can dodge the ammo or endure the damage.

And looking at my numbers, it's enough to make me gulp the sigh I was about to release. Fuck… Well, he still should be descending so I gotta be quick! The chase is on!

As soon as I set foot on the room a homing appears in my radar. Dammit, barely had time to take out the TC to protect myself from the damn thing. But now I can't shoot at the Ravager on the way down, the cooldown of the homing is shorter than that of the TC's if I base myself in how quickly he's been shooting the damn things when I was chasing him around.

"If I let him get away now that's it, it's my loss. I tried so hard and got so far, but in the end…"

The tunnel changes directions twice and he already has a lead on me. The Ravager is faster than the Takemikazuchi, so I suppose I won't be able to catch up.

"Well, at least I'll keep fighting to the end! *Despair after you're dead, Takeru.* No point in admitting defeat before the final curtain!" So, with a strong stomp on the pedals, I bring my Take to life, making it run and jump into the downwards spiral of a tunnel that's ahead.

Is there anything I can do to catch up to him? If only there was a way to get him by surprise. Without the TC or missiles, is there anything I can pull off? Hmm…

Lost in thought as I descend into the tunnel, looking at the gray walls that resemble some sort of odd research facility, my head starts to hurt right below my ears. It isn't a strong pain or anything, but it's definitely bothersome. Too much time in front of the screen, maybe? Focus on the match, man. Sigh…

But, wait… Haven't I done something like this before? Chasing something down a tunnel, rushing it at top speed. I haven't played much games on Yguloch, much less in the underground. I wonder what's this weird tickling sensation in the back of my head. But it does feel like that, kind of… nostalgic. Huh.

Leaning back onto the seat, I exhale loudly. Licking my lips, I simply stare at the tunnel while thinking through the small pain in my ears. Looking at the patterns that the metallic shine of the hexagonal steel plates and the twister of cables in between them makes in the tunnel's walls, at the blinking firefly-like lights of whatever the equipment is made to represent, at the blurry and momentary sight as I rush downwards… Ugh, it hurts.

My vision grows a bit narrow, as if everything were graying out. What the hell is- Why is my body feeling so heavy all of a sudden? And why am I not scared? I can barely see anything well but, again, it feels oddly calm. Blinking fast to try and get rid of this dizziness, a blurry darkened mess fills my view when opening my eyes fully, voices distorted by static reach my ears.

*"Eight Laser-Class firing on the Hangar 90 barriers! There's still some of the bastards left!"* Says a voice that sounds like me, despite the fact that I am not moving my lips. Laser what?

*"Let's take 'em all down!"* Roars a female voice I don't recognize.

Light flashes before my eyes as a flurry of bullets fly towards some hazy shapes in the distance.

*"HQ to Alpha 2! We're… and 5th barr… your route!"* Another female voice I don't recognize speaks but I can't hear clearly what she's saying.

*"We'll be boost vectoring in reverse forty meters above the barrier. Kick off the walls to change directions twice!"* The first female voice says, dry and harsh, almost as if out of breath.

Wait, what? Boost vectoring? In reverse? Kicking the wall? Does she mean to do consecutive Albrights in reverse or what?

*"Feeling nervous, Shirogane?!"*

A jolt in my stomach, a twist in my gut, I can't help but to bite my lips as acid rushes up my throat.

I clearly heard it, she said my name! Well, duh, this is a daydream after all. However, hearing that voice… Why do I feel as if I had a tight knot on my chest?

An alarm snaps me out of my daydream, a homing is coming my way. Taking a sharp breath, blinking fast and feeling my eyes almost molding shut as if it were spring and the air was full of pollen, my heart is still rumbling inside. Swallowing whatever caused this acid taste to come up, I lick my lips and readjust my position on the seat, my hold over the joysticks.

I'm already at my limit in this game. There's nothing to lose, right? I feel strangely good now, the light pain is gone, everything seems so much more clear. Could I try to do that thing the woman was saying in the dream? I mean, I was there and everything sounded so real, even if it was all kind of blurred. And anyways, I'm losing either way. Might as well take the shot. Yeah, as she said I am nervous right now, so let's just have some fun!

Alright, let's do this reverse consecutive Albright or whatever the hell it is! You don't just screw a Storm Vanguard and get away unscathed!

"… Storm Vanguard? What's that?" Man, I need therapy. Whatever is causing these hallucinations has to go, I can't keep living like this.

Taking another deep breath and gripping my joysticks firmly again, feeling the thin veil of sweat that had built up, I start to accelerate towards the wall.

But instead of lowering the speed, my feet remain firmly planted on the pedals for a little while longer as the Take breaches the wall's personal space. Rebounding off it, the Takemikazuchi is sent flying away towards another wall in the narrow spiraling tunnel. I keep doing the same every time I kick the walls, and as I keep rebounding off them I get closer and closer to top speed. Since I'm using the momentum from the jumps I'm using less fuel, since I just boost when in contact with the wall.

When the alarm beeps in my ears, when the homing starts to get closer, I try to get an image of what was happening in the dream. How the maneuver turned out, how the thing played out.

The wall is getting closer. I spin the joystick, press the trigger, and go hard on the accel. The homing explodes just above where the Take kicked the wall, but my purple beetle keeps on dashing downwards without losing any speed or receiving damage.

"Ha! Take that one!"

Usually you can't stay at top speed for long, even during a full boost, without eating up a lot of fuel. But now I managed to just lower my remaining fuel to red.

Falling down like a meteor, my Take reaches the pit of the tunnel. An odd giant egg-shaped machine awaits at the bottom with something

that resembles exhaust pipes coming out of it, releasing cerulean mist onto the underground facility.

For a second, the voice I had heard before seemed to return in the distance. Looking at the map, there's some sort of command center nearby. A low polygon model of an attendant with long hair is in it. Seeing it as I fly by, for some reason, makes my throat close up. Something turning in my stomach, red flashing in my eyes for a sec, I have to pull back my tongue to not bite on accident.

A small ding rings in my ears, a dot appears on my radar. Located in a hallway that is connected to the bottom of this tunnel, there is my target. Letting out a short sigh, clearing these odd feelings before I end up daydreaming again, with a simple click I start to charge the TC.

"Just one shot, that's all I need."

My heart starts beating in my neck, the screen keeps moving fast, the walls of the underground blur, filled with those hexagons and cables, and now also accompanied by the mist and shine coming from the egg-machine.

Looking away from the odd machine, I kick the ground to keep my momentum and fly into the hallway leaving the mist and odd cerulean glow behind. After a second to focus on what's ahead, the red frame comes into view. Pressing hard on the triggers, I shot at it.

Clearly startled, the Ravager just barely jumps out of the lightning's way. But now that you're in the air, you won't be able to dodge this! Spinning on itself, the Take propels itself from the walls again, long sword ready to slash.

Sparks, screeching, a beep in my ears. I hit his left side, but not his body. Damn, he dodged at point-blank when I was at almost top speed?!

Instead of stopping my rush, I keep my feet on the pedals as the Take fires off towards another wall. With a few quick pulls on the controls, I spin around and land feet first onto the machinery, jump units blazing up in full force. With a smirk, I pull the accel lever again.

Blasting away from the wall, my purple beetle again charges at the red frame, a killer arrow diving straight for the heart. The Ravager, that now has its saber out, does not retreat. With a light dash, it comes to meet my aggro as the auto-lock circle confirms my target. Gulping hard, I swing my sword downwards as he tries to do a low slash after a crouch cancel.

Our mechs crash into each other, everything gets blurry in the screen as it shakes after a moment.

And then, fire. And smoke, and an explosion, and my controls lost their response from them.

Within the smoke, on top of a wreckage of parts, a pair of damaged red eyes glimmer through the fire. And raising its sword, the haze of fire as its cloak, the Takemikazuchi takes on its victory pose, a golden sign with confetti and fireworks filling my screen.

[MATCH OVER - TEAM N° 51 WINS]

…

Letting out a long and heavy sigh, I slump onto the seat. Gasping for air, I wipe the sweat of my face and move my bangs away. Eyes close tightly as I throw my head back, both hands come to cover my face. Ants march on my back, and I can only quietly breath in.

"Hehe… Hehehe… Ahaha… I won? For real?"

I relax into the seat and take off the belts, barely managing to undo the bindings. I'm feeling real tired all of a sudden, a small jolt comes through my ankles as I try to move my feet off the pedals. I stay like that for a minute, until I hear Mikoto.

"Takeru!" He calls out from behind the locked seat.

I pull the seat back to greet a teary eyed Mikoto with a small smile, shrugging.

"Looks like I ended up winning us the tournament, I guess."

Lips shaking eyes sparkling, he looks at me, at my screen, back at me, dazed like a deer in front of a dragster. "You won, right? This ain't a dream, right?"

Curling my fist, I punch my stomach, making me cough. "D-Doesn't feel like it."

He pinches his cheek, stretching it a bit, leaving it reddening. "Ow," he rubs it slowly, making a silly grin, "this isn't dream. We… We won the tournament? We won the tournament!"

"Ahaha! Yeah, we won the entire thing, dammit!" I raise a hand, we slam into a high five, laughing like idiots. "We are the champions, my friend!"

"And we'll keep on fighting till the end!" He sings along, we finish the song as I get out of my seat, striking a pose, raising fingers to the overhead lights. "Damn, that match was so tight! How did you even manage to avoid all those homings on the way down the elevator?"

"What can I say, you don't just screw with a Storm Vanguard and get away with it," whatever that means.

"But man, those consecutive wall jumps were truly something else. One thing was the Albright, but chaining so many in a row? You gotta totally tell me where you learned that!" He says, lightly slapping my arm.

"Ahaha, I was kinda desperate so I just improvised on the spot." Laughing dryly, I scratch my head. Can't exactly tell him I had a few fever dreams while I was playing.

As we keep doing idle chitchat about the match, complaining about the Elef, Mikoto telling me he got stunned by a homing from the blue Ravager as he tried to follow me, then me going on a tangent on how broken the homing felt to play against in such a narrow map, someone from the staff approaches us.

"Excuse me, it's time to give the prizes. Please follow me."

The attendant guides us to a room that looks like it's used for press conferences, painted completely in an unassuming light blue. It wasn't that big, but there were four rows of seats, already occupied by journalists, and a lot of cameras and cables going around, and people hurrying about too.

There's a lectern on the stage with the logo of the game on its front and some monitors on the wall behind it, the other teams is already up there. We're guided to the stage, and try to greet the other players but they barely respond, giving one word answers. I guess it can't be helped, they did lose the final. Must be hard for pro players to get here and then be the first ones to lose.

The journalists are all bustling, waiting for the conference to start. How many cameras do they need for this? Well, I guess that if Zegga wants to do another announcement of an announcement, this might be the day to do it.

One woman in a suit has the medals and two trophies, and that one there dressed all in black looks like the announcer. After he finishes talking through a small mic, they tell us where to stand and, after confirming something with the staff, the announcer makes a sign to the people behind the cameras, and he starts his speech with a grand swipe of his hand.

"And now, it's time for the awards of the Valgern-On Tokyo Salon Fighters Tournament! Here we have the three teams that made it to the final match, a round of applause for them!" The announcer makes a gesture towards the camera, clicking his fingers, making the cameras lock onto us.

He introduces the two members of each team as he hands them a medal and an envelope with the prize money. While each team member gets introduced the monitors shows footage of their fights, numbers of their performance in a table to the right, the details of their chosen unit and weapons to the left.

Mikoto's shivering a lot. Looks like his joints are made out of plastic. So I elbow him a bit. "Chillax, man. We're just going to get the medals, right? The worst part is already over, dude," I whisper to his ear, smiling.

"Y-Yeah. Just nod to the camera… just that. Look ahead, and just smile and nod."

It doesn't look like he calmed down at all. Sigh… As we are introduced and a reverberating clapping starts, I take the first step towards the center of the stage. Mikoto slowly follows behind, but the announcer moves aside, again gesturing to the cameras as we look at each other, wondering what the hell is he doing.

And raising a hand up in another grandiose gesture, he brings the mic to his lips, "And for the champions, the creators themselves shall give them their prize!"

**WHAT?!** The devs themselves?!

"… Takeru, did I hear that right?"

"Yeah… I think we did."

Two faces I know well enter the room from another door behind the rows of seat. Slowly, they come towards the stage in style. It feels as if the floor was giving out on me, my knees shaking as I pinch one of my cheeks. This isn't another of my weird daydreams, is it?

"Hello! We're MofuMofu and…"

"Andoku! Congratulations on your victory!"

The devs introduce themselves with their artistic names as they bow to the cameras, before turning around, coming up towards us with a smile, giving me and Mikoto our medals, offering us a handshake later.

This is a dream come true! THE makers of Valgern-On in the flesh, dude! Looking at Mikoto, he has a giant silly grin plastered on his face as his hands tightly join. We both can't help but to laugh a bit. Colored papers fly out for a while and, after a round of applause, MofuMofu steps forward with a mic in hand.

"We hope everyone enjoyed today's event, from the participants to the spectators here, on TV and through the net. As you know, in one month, a new version of Valgern-On will be released to the market." He starts explaining things about the next game, whose official name is Oratory Tango, like how many new mechs it'll have and its new online functions.

On the screens behind us, a few scenes with the new models of the mechs play out as they fight each other in some old and new stages, moving way faster than in the current version.

"Wow, they really reworked the mechs?"

"Now they really look, you know, smooth," Mikoto says, barely stopping himself from squealing or doing a short hop.

After answering some questions from the journalists as the logo of Oratory Tango was displayed on the screens, MofuMofu takes a step back and hands the mic to Andoku.

"However! That is not all there is to it! There's a new style of gameplay added to both single and multiplayer mode. A brand new campaign setting, with harder missions than the original one. And a new multiplayer mode in which the players will have to fight together against our new AI and defeat it under strict conditions! We've fine tuned it with the help of the best players in the game and took inspiration from other, more hardcore games to bring a new

challenge to the Valgern-On universe! And it's this new mode that the champions will have the privilege to enjoy after this celebration!" He strikes a pose for the camera as both devs point at us.

Right, I forgot all about the new version trial!

"This is amazing, Takeru! What do you think it's gonna be?!"

"I dunno, we've been fighting against machines gone rogue in the first setting, so maybe aliens this time?" Maybe like the red things from my dreams? Heh, would be hilarious if that were the case.

As the makers finish their speech and the questions, they come to our side and gives us the trophies. Me and Mikoto send our poses to everyone watching, unable to not make the silliest of grins. We wave for the camera one last time, and the celebration is finished. The journalists surround the devs for some off-the-record words, and the announcer takes us to another room. One that looks like a Headmaster's room, with a table in fine black, a few nice looking sofas, with a jar full of cookies in the middle. After a brief wait, the devs come in along some other people in suits.

"Well, Shirogane-kun, Yoroi-kun, what did you think of the tournament?!" MofuMofu ask us with bright eyes as he sits down on a sofa in front of us.

"It was so awesome! Team battles are really great, but I'm a bit shocked at how much better a few mechs are." Honestly I still don't know what were you two thinking when you made the Elefante.

"It was so much fun! Especially the last fight, I was on edge all through it!" Mikoto says with a giant smile, leaning just a bit forward, eyes shining while wiggling both hands up and down.

"Shirogane-kun, could you explain me how you came up with those wall-kicking moves? It's the first time I've seen them, and I watch a lot of replays of the Top fights!" Andoku asks me, with clear

expectation in his unblinking stare as he takes out a notepad and a pencil, which makes his partner chuckle.

I try to explain the Albright Turn and the consecutive jumps I did in the tunnel as best as I can, without mentioning anything about the dream I recalled midfight. Yet, he kept his eyes firmly on mine, noting everything down so quickly as if this were some top secret interview or something. It's kind of embarrassing…

They keep firing questions at us, about why I picked the Takemikazuchi, how it felt to play, how did Mikoto felt the Xao-Myun compared to its rivals in its game style, which mechs and weapons we thought were unbalanced or unfair, and what would we do to fix it.

It's no wonder this game is rocking it right now, with such passionate developers behind it.

"Well, we've kept you long enough. They should be ready with the set up, are you two ready to try the new version?!"

"Hell yeah!"

"Of course we are! Let's go Takeru!"

We then go back into a hallway and into the showroom again, walking as if pushed by the wind, as both of them tell us to keep what we see as a secret if at all possible, that we won't be able to take pictures of the new mode and all, but since we had no such plans the conversation devolved into more gameplay talk, to the distress of the official Zegga staff that follows us. Reaching the showroom again, this time we go to a terminal in the far back, separated from the rows of units used for the tournament.

"Knock yourselves out! I hope you have fun with it!" MofuMofu says with a giant grin.

Man, oh man! This is gonna be great! I share a look of pure joy with Mikoto before boarding the terminal.

As I jump in the seat and fasten the belts the screen lights up. The opening starts playing after the usual logos.

"Oohh! Hear this thing! It's so epic!"

The menu music is so much hype! It has some trumpets making it sound like you're charging into a war or something. Wait, these vocals… Oh my God, is it JellyProjection?! Shit, they got them for the opening of the game?! This is so fucking awesome! I'm definitely buying the OST as soon as it goes out.

The epic intro ends, the usual angular logo appears with a slick cyber theme, but unlike the prior version this menu looks kinda ashen, burnt and bruised. There's also a small and low rumble in the synth that's in the background music, kinda ominous.

"Man, even the menu song is a banger. Now, let's see… this is a single player terminal. Damn, now I wanna keep fighting in a team with Mikoto after the tournament. Oh well, let's get this started! Campaign Mode, here I come!"

An anime opening of stars and galaxies plays out, the colony ships from the first game slowly come into view at the distance, a slight trail of light in the vacuum of space. So it is a direct sequel, huh.

*The year is 213X. Humanity has survived the onslaught of the cyber legion after Tango's rebellion .*

*Now, all the surrounding star systems are in control of the solar system's Human Race.*

*Decades of peace and prosperity dulled humanity's fangs, they stopped to develop weapons and starcraft,*

*instead choosing to live in gigantic star colonies filled with luxuries and pleasures that numbed the mind.*

"Man, this opening looks so sick!"

The anime-like 2D models, the music, the ambiance sounds. It looks like I'm truly in space, flying in some gigantic fortress or something, watching the stars from the window. Even the futuristic yet luxurious relax zones of the cities look, you know, smooth. Kinda hard to believe just a few years ago the polygons were all spiky and shit.

*But this peaceful dream is about to be shattered by a horrible adversary…*

*… that was nothing like anything mankind has ever faced in its history.*

*From where they come from? Nobody knows.*

*What are they after? Nobody knows.*

*But what we do know is… they want us dead.*

*And they will stop at nothing to kill every one of us!*

This is so hype! I knew it was gonna be the aliens! I wonder what kind of twist they are going for. Would be kinda lame if it ends up being the same cosmic horror ending, like most mech animes have gone for since Gospelion. Since they got JellyProjection for the opening, maybe they got some other insert songs? Would be awesome if this had an endgame like GhettaMech Armageddon.

The cinematic plays on, showing a large crater from which shadowy silhouettes crawl out from, surrounded by the many mechs of the franchise.

*They came in a meteorite, and started attacking us without warning.*

*They don't speak, they feel no fear, they don't retreat.*

*It's almost as if they were soulless beasts.*

*Since we don't know where they come from but know that they're our enemies we decided to call them…*

*… the BETA.*

A cold shiver went down my back, something turned in my stomach just now. "W-What did he say? The BETA?" Why do I feel like I've heard that somewhere?

*Beings of Extra Terrestrial Origin, Adversaries of the Human Race.*

*BETA for short, are the monsters that have destroyed the outer colonies and planets of our space empire.*

Short animated cutscenes on the screen show the monsters destroying a military base, blowing up an entire city with lasers, and ripping apart many mechs from the game in a matter of seconds.

Laser Class, Tank Class, Grappler Class. That's the name on the screen referring to these monsters as they curbstomp and massacre the forces of the game. The opening continues to play, but I'm no longer focused on it.

Like a dam breaking apart, vivid images and voices flood my head. Strong pain like I've never felt before sears up, as if a pair of screwdrivers were injecting themselves right under my ears. Grabbing my head and massaging it, gritting my teeth, I try to take deep breaths and relax, to touch my eyes and blink fast, but this time the daydream doesn't stop.

The sounds of the opening fade away, the animated cutscenes fade away. The pain only gets higher, tighter, as if I had a noose on my neck. And the floor is fading.

Leaning back onto the seat, closing my eyes real tight, the screwdrivers pierce in, ears ringing as if I were right besides those

big speakers from a concert while someone decided to blast off hardcore metal. It bangs, and slams, and hurts, and hurts so much.

As the sounds seem to ease up a bit, as I slowly open my eyes again, something… something hazy comes into view. Distorted, obscured, kinda like seeing something behind a glass of water. As if I were daydreaming again, or remembering something that… happened a long time ago…

A ruined house in the middle of a destroyed town, is what this looks like after everything comes into focus. Wait a- Is that my house? What's that thing to the side? A robot? What the… Why is Sumika's house crumbled apart?

Why am I seeing a ruined version of my neighborhood? What is going on here?

Then, after blinking, I find myself in some sort of office with a large blue flag in a wall, babel towers of papers filling the place. Wait… Yuuko-sensei? Why does she have a gun? Why is she aiming it at me?

… Why does this hurts to watch? Ugh… Clawing at my head, Sensei's voice distorted by static, she seems willing to shoot me. Why would you- I'm not your enemy! Why are you giving me that blazing gaze of anger?! I… *Sensei*, *you're*… *to me…*

No time left to process what the hell that was, as I put a hand over my mouth and blink again everything mixes and swirls, I see myself running in the school track field for some reason. I fall to the ground and eat dirt, as I stand up someone scolds me. But that harsh voice is… And looking up, I see her. The hell is Marimo-chan doing in a military uniform?!

Flashes of images of Marimo-chan in an odd formal dress come up, sometimes scolding me, sometimes encouraging me. In a rooftop, in some sort of odd barebones room, in an odd place as light is showered on me and I can only see her silhouette.

The freezing grip on my neck eases up, I take a really, really deep breath that clears away most of the clogging in my chest, then another image comes up. I can only hear her voice while I look at some remains of a robot, the sun seems to be setting. Distorted by the static, her voice doesn't sound hostile now. It's… heartwarming, as she always was. Like a warm blanket on a winter night.

Then, without me actually moving or wanting to, my vision turns around trying to see her-

I couldn't stop the image nor the sounds, I cannot look away. Marimo-chan's head is being bitten off by a monster.

There's an eye ball rolling down up to my feet.

Pieces of flesh teared into the floor.

Teeth falling from its roots, like small wind chimes in front of an incoming typhoon.

Behind her… the monster… the bastard…

… *No, a Soldier-Class. That's a Soldier-Class BETA.*

How do I know that?! A Soldier-Class…

And in a flash, both she and the monster… were blown up. Disappearing in an explosion of red.

Again feeling my stomach turn, I claw at my mouth and gag, sharp and sudden pain on my sides and lower back, as if just stabbed. The static getting higher, the screwdrivers now going up, the back of my eyes also begins to hurt as a cold sensation sinks into me.

Another image flashes, not giving me time to even get my shit together. Tama's corpse is being held by something while starting to become deformed. Before I could react in any way to the vision, an explosion rings out.

I can hear Meiya's voice! But what is she doing here?! But… What the hell is a Takemikazuchi doing here? It looks so… real, as it slices the monster's tentacles. The machine looks, like, legit for real. She sounds odd, though. Nothing like I know her to be, on edge, desperate…

… Different.

Air seems to be missing from my lungs when Meiya's face appears before me, she's bleeding badly. Crying, whimpering in pain. Again, it feels as if I were being forced to breath into sand.

And then, she looks my way, twitching, hiccuping, shivering as if electrocuted. Her eyes crying non-stop, the blood running down her forehead wanting to compete with the tears.

*"I would like to die… by the hands of the man I love!"*

There was a blast.

And then, silence.

It felt as if I were being rocked back and forth, like a very violent roller coaster spinning in all directions.

And then, quietness.

I could hear people cheering from somewhere.

And yet, it feels so cold, so empty.

And as I look up, I find someone near me. There she was, the white haired girl…

Kasumi Yashiro. Repeating the same words, like in my dreams.

*"Sumika-san is dead. Your fight is already over!"*

No.

" *Sumika - san is* dead. *Your fight is already over* !"

No, don't fuck with me…

" *Sumika-san is dead. Your fight is-"*

Shut the fuck up! What fight?! What the hell… Why are they dying?! What's going on here?!

Blinking, I see myself hugging the girls of my school group as they cry. They tug at me, they pull at my shoulders. They cry and cry, staring intently, begging me not to send them away. They're going somewhere. Far away.

It hurts.

I see Sumika having some sort of breakdown, screaming kill over and over again before almost falling flat on her face to the floor.

It hurts. Stop this…

And there she is, lying still in that pod while hugging a wooden rabbit. Silent. Cold. Stiff. Dead.

It hurts. Let this all end… dammit…

And, once more, the eternal wasteland comes into view. Thousands of BETA in the radar. We don't have enough supplies. I can only watch as my squad gets killed by the monsters. No, not just my squad. The whole army we were fighting with got killed. In the wasteland and inside the earth. And then, the black fire… The G-Bomb. No, not just one. Like a downpour of arrows coming from atop a rampart, that is what the unending stream of black fire looks like to me, as everything else in front vanishes from sight, both BETA and whatever remains were left of my comrades.

And then, silence again.

Everyone is gone.

How many times?

How many times did I do this?

Why?

For what?

In the end, did I save anyone? How did this madness end?!

And then, as if beckoned by my question, like a child timidly peeking from behind a door, a small glimmer comes up at the edge of my vision. And slowly, it grows, and grows, until the black fire is all I can see, shapes and voices distorted within the gigantic orb. Those images and sounds, the nightmares I had since-

"No, these aren't nightmares. These are… all the lives I've lost."

It wasn't a dream, it truly did happen. I was sent to another world. A world in ruins. Where everybody had different lives. Where everybody fought just to live one day more.

"Haa… Haa… It hurts…" My neck wrings tightly again, chest and eyes hurts as I try to suppress the acid that comes up from my stomach. I don't know if I should be clawing at my head, ears, stomach, or all at once.

And the echoes repeat themselves as the images rush through, making me relieve the unlimited pain I've had to endure across all my extra lives in that alternative world. The sting of seeing my beloved leave to a distant world, the horror of seeing and hearing Marimo-chan and my squad be slowly devoured by BETA before my very eyes, the shock as I realized everyone was again dead at the end of Kashgar.

I'm a coward.

I ran away.

I forgot them.

… I failed them. I couldn't save them. I just sat on the XG while they risked their necks. They had asked me to remember them. To be there, so that someone knew they had lived, suffered, and gave their lives for a future that seemed lost.

And what did I do?! I ran away! My eyes become strained, but they remain dry. I'm coward that cannot even cry.

It wasn't enough. Nothing was enough.

I… I… did kill the Superior. I did it. We did it. Their sacrifice wasn't… but…

A stalagmite pierces my heart as the memories come back. The Captain's and Kashiwagi's sacrifice, Haruka-san getting squashed in the control room, Hayase remaining in the Reactor to blow it up. The base getting destroyed, Munakata and Kazama sent to medbay, Akane left in bandages.

The perfect solution doesn't exist, you will always have to sacrifice something. At least I got the world twenty years more in the fight, according to Yuuko-sensei.

… But remembering that doesn't make me feel any better.

I… loved them. All of them. They were my guiding light. I could fight on because they were there. Alone, I'm worthless. I can't even… I can't even cry for them.

And now I'm here, enjoying a peaceful life. Like a coward that ran away. But what else could I have done?! There was nothing I could…

"Hic… Nothing, really? Why couldn't I at least save one of them?!" To give them the happiness we have here, even if only for a short while.

I wanted to keep fighting, to protect the base we lived in, laughed in, cried in. I wanted to stay there, where they needed my piloting skills.

But no! You had to back down! What did it matter that you were no longer a conductor?! Why didn't you stay?! Why did you run?! Why did you break the promise?! Why did you forget them?!

A loud noise plays in my headphones. A noise I recognize all too well. That rumbling… that avalanche-like shiver in the ground… Tank-Class closing in. Two hundred of them.

BETA, it's all because of you. Because… No, the Americans too. The bastards that plotted Alternative V. The bastards that used us as fodder just to save their own lawn. Fucking shitheads, the world ended up flooded because of you! And then… And then…

"Flooded? What the fuck- How do I even…"

As I shiver in cold, a distorted image of Sensei and Kasumi appears, but I can't hear them well. What are they-

I see myself ripping through the BETA in a hive, someone else dropped an S11 into a Reactor. What are those… Rafale. Those are Rafale along the Raptors and Takemikazuchi units. Did I always know about those models?

The wasteland appears again, I'm crying for some reason. Lamenting a comrade that died, a comrade I found within the hive? Who was- Ugh! Acid up my throat, a knot on my gut, vision going double. Someone, left abandoned. I… crushed them? Spared them the pain?

"K-Kgh… Gwaa! *Cough! Cough!* Shit, what the-" hiccuping and out of air, pain and pain at the pit of my throat.

More and more death is all I see. Pointless, it feels empty and void of meaning. The fighting, the briefings, the nights staring at the sky.

Hope had withered in that world, until we gave our blood to water its roots once more.

I should be proud, I should be happy. We did it. We changed history, we avoided that rotten future that still has me coughing by merely thinking about it.

… But what's the point in saving the world if there's nothing left for you? There's no joy in martyrdom. Those that have to carry on find no happiness in this solitude.

In the end, above everything else, above every formal speech, above every duty that was thrust upon my shoulders, above any and all excuses I may hide behind-

"I failed them. I wasn't enough… to protect them, any of them."

I had to leave behind Chizuru, Tama, Mikoto and Kei.

… I killed Meiya.

My failure to operate the XG in a better way forced Sumika to overheat.

I abandoned Kasumi over there, I left despite knowing she'd be all alone. Left despite knowing Sensei would be made responsible for everything, having no more allies to count on.

I knew all that and still left. And to top it all off, I forgot it all. I failed them.

… No, they didn't even believe in me. They tampered with my radar, right? Yeah, Meiya fucked up my radar. Because they didn't think I had it in me to move forward. Neither Yuuko nor my squadmates, not even Sumika or Kasumi.

They all thought I was going to screw it up, that I was the weakest link in the squadron. That's why they sent me to the XG, where all I

could do was fire missiles. They didn't even… after all we went through together… they didn't-

A sound beeps in my headphones. The Tank-wave approaches, the red fills my view. These bastards… They… They… The BETA… The Superior… They took-

It feels cold.

Really, really cold.

As everything seems to dim, as the light seems to go out within a cockpit that is in emergency mode, I look up.

Up to the sky, to the stars.

Raising my hand towards it, trying to and failing as it falls limply by my side. Arms slightly burn, can't even move my shoulders before the pressure sends a twinge of pain into my back.

Everything grows blurry, dampness in my eyes, can't feel my limbs at all.

And a final image.

A rocket that departs, far away into the stars.

A parting word I couldn't say.

A face I'll never see, a voice I'll never hear, hands which will never embrace me again.

And then, silence.

Absolute.

Total.

Unbreakable.

Complete, utter silence as everything blurs to dark.

…

Something rumbles, shakes in my hands. Hands that shake as my lips do as I blink and a few tears fall off. BETA, everywhere. No one left besides me, the Red Zone of the Tank-Class covering my sight and radar.

You… You motherfucking sons of an eldritch bitch!

*"Give me back my squad!"*

---

*Around fifty minutes later.*

*(Outside the terminal.)*

---

Legs feel as if they were chained to an iron ball. Stomach is empty, eyes hurt as if I had been using a PC without any light for hours. The lower side of my back is completely stiff, and my throat is a bit dry after shouting so much.

… None of that comes even close to whatever the hell is piking at my heart right now. I might as well have deepthroated a Fort's stinger. And yet, I still can't cry. Seems like I've no more tears left to shed. Not even for my loved ones.

"That was truly something else!" MofuMofu's brimming with happiness, voice high and spirits further beyond. "I didn't expect you to make it to Stage 12 in your first go!"

"As expected of one of the champions, you're a truly great player! So, what did you think?!" Andoku is delighted too.

"It was… a nice experience." Calm down, deep breaths.

"You look rather down, Shirogane-kun. Did the game tire you out?" They're obviously minding their words. I'm sure I must look like a mess.

"Yeah, I just got a bit too scared on one of those… gory cutscenes." Why was there a scene of… what happened to Marimo-chan built into the game anyways?

They then start talking with Mikoto about the game. I answer when they ask me some stuff, but I can't calm my hands. They're hiding in my pockets, shaking like a kitty in front of a bulldog.

It was like doing catharsis, killing all those BETA. Thank God there were no mics, I couldn't restrain myself and ended up screaming my pain away. I think I broke the joysticks, too.

Luckily, the rush of emotions has subsided by now. I can still feel my heartbeat in my chest and this cold ant march creeping its way up my back. I know, we did what we had to. But I couldn't do anything for them. I know I got lucky to survive, I know Alt V was hanging over our heads if we took too long to complete the mission, but I still feel like shit. Not only at the outcome, but at my own lack of resolve.

Who gave a shit I wasn't a conductor anymore? Wasn't my willpower what tied me to that timeline? Why the fuck didn't I want to stay and fight? Yeah, sure, I admit you were right XO, being the sole human that ever talked to a BETA would have gotten me in the nasty lists. But still, that also made me a valuable asset, right? Why did I just accepted it was all over?

… Why did I forget about you all? Sumika, was this your doing? Trying to give me a fresh start? Then, why even try if I'll end up recalling anyways? Sigh…

Head hurts a bit, and I'm a tad bit dizzy. To be honest, I don't even remember what hour it is. All these memories… Ugh. Just thinking about it is enough to make the pain blaze up. I just gotta stay chill and make it back home.

But if they made a game about the BETA, that means stuff is coming into this world. Or is this a coincidence? If my memory isn't wrong, Sensei and Kasumi said I no longer was a conductor before I returned, and that I'd end up in a world aligned to Sumika's wishes as she fixed whatever it was required to be fixed. So everything should be fine. I think.

All I wanna do right now is go home and bury myself under my pillow to cry until I fall asleep. Guys, Valkyries, Kasumi… Sorry. I forgot about you. I couldn't keep my promise. Sigh…

"So, is there anything you didn't like? Or that you would change?"

Seeing their almost pleading faces, I give them some pointers based on what I felt different from this game and how I remembered the simulators to be back home.

Home? Which world is my home? I guess both are, in a way.

They keep throwing questions at us, looking like abandoned puppies, so I suggest to them the idea of the hives as if it just occurred to me. That seems to pique their curiosity even further. So they didn't knew of the hives before, huh. Maybe it really was just an unfortunate coincidence?

When they finish questioning us, they give each of us a really sleek box made out of polished steel with the game's logo imprinted on it. Inside were the gold medal that had Valgern-On Cyber Legion Champion written in it and a special GR card with our names. They say it's a special present from them to the last champions of their first game. Now that I think about it, this is the first thing I win in my life. I never got awarded in the other world and I never won any kind of competition back here. Life sure is weird.

"You have no idea how thankful we are. The hive idea is really a stroke of genius!"

"We hope you keep playing Valgern-On! And we'll be looking forward to the next tournament you participate in! It was a pleasure Shirogane-kun, Yoroi-kun!"

"No, it was our pleasure! Right, Takeru?"

"Yeah, it was… an honor to be the first to play the new version." I force a smile and nod. I can't lose it here. I won't cry, not here.

The duo gives us one last handshake and someone from the staff takes us out of the showroom, back to the normal hallway. Giving us a bow, she sends us off and, as slow as a snail, I turn around and begin making my way to… Where to? Wait, where was the exit here? Eh, let's just follow Mikoto.

"Man! This was awesome! Takeru, how did you get so far?! It was really hard hitting those small red spiders," her tone had sunflowers blooming in every word.

She looks so… alive, dazzling, happy. Heh… At least something good came out of winning this tournament. Glad to see you enjoying yourself so much.

"Well, they're Tank-Class. Being fast bastards is what they do best."

"Yeah, but when the big one with the claws appeared I was like 'This is the boss!'. But then another popped up, and another, and then there were like ten of 'em!"

"Their numbers are their biggest strength, after all. If it were just one it would be too easy to dodge and kill them."

"Hey Takeru, what's wrong?" She lowers her brows, giving me one nice and direct stare.

"… Hmm? Nothing's wrong."

"Liar. You've been super cold since you got out of the terminal, in front of THE makers of the game, too." You're so sharp at the most

inconvenient times, you know?

"I… don't know if my brain is exhausted or I'm basking in the afterglow of winning this thing." I say as calmly as I can, looking up to avoid worrying her. Err, right, him.

This is gonna be as hard as when I first got into the other world. But I guess that doesn't really matter, Mikoto's a friend here. That won't change.

"Oh, I see. It is kinda hard to believe we ended up winning, you think people will recognize us in the street?" Quick to change moods, she… he's all smiles now.

"Please no, the last thing I need is people bothering me while I run." I already will have enough trouble facing Sumika without crying my eyes out for awhile. Or any of you, for that matter.

"Well, but man… I can't believe we're the champions!"

"Yeah…"

"I am so going to brag about this for months, you know."

"Haha… Guess fighting so hard had a nice reward."

"Hey, Takeru… You sure you're alright?"

"Huh? Yeah, why?"

Playing with his hair, lips twisting in as his eyes leave mine for a sec, he tries to hold my gaze. "Well, you've been staring at me rather… weirdly. It's odd for you to be so sincere and honest, too."

… Can you blame me? I just remembered about- No, this isn't my Mikoto. He isn't even a she. Chill down, your Mikoto is… gone. And I can only hope the fleet made it safely to the Barnard System. Clawing at my palms inside my pockets, I release a sigh as heavy as a set of full gear.

"Sorry, that gory scene really messed me up."

"Was it really that bad?"

"… Yeah. It was horrible, for real." I hold back the urge to bite my lips as the memory flashed for a sec in my mind.

"Well, don't worry. Let's go meet the rest and then we'll go get that ice cream!" She- He returns a smile as warm as my Mikoto's at me.

… Yeah. Yeah, he's right. I'll see the rest now. Huh… Right, everyone is… alive here.

Yeah, they're all alive. Safe and happy.

Huh. Weird, how just recalling that talk as we ate before the tournament is enough to make me feel giddy, to smile a bit. They're all truly safe and sound here, living their own lives in peace. Sigh…

But, is this even safe? What if… that stuff makes its way here, like when I came back for the theories? No, calm down. You're no longer a conductor. Yuuko said it herself, now that Sumika's wish to see me again was fulfilled I'm no longer an anomaly. That's why I'm back here.

That's why… I can spend some time with them. It's alright for me to enjoy that… Right, Sensei?

"Takeru? Hey, are-"

"Sorry, Mikoto. I was just lost in thought. Let's… Let's go." I smile back at her- him, and we again walked back to the hall.

We go to the tables and start looking for everyone, but we can't find them. Where could they be? I mean, they must have seen the fights, right? Maybe something came up and they had to leave? Let's see if they're near the entrance. I can also take in some fresh air while I'm at it.

"Mikoto, I'll go look at the entrance."

"Okay! I'll check the other side of the bar."

Turning back, following the maps on the wall, I pace towards the exit. A few people look at me and smile, probably because of the final, so I nod and smile back. Once the stream of visitors pipes down, my feet start to drag on the floor. Sighing hard, I close my eyes and stop, leaning on a wall for a second.

"Okay, inhale, exhale… Inhale, exhale… Calm down. Remember Sensei's words."

The more you remember, the worse it might get. It's all right, nothing is going to happen. No accidents, no deaths. I move my shoulders up and down, eyes still closed as I exhale again, resting a hand on the cold wall to propel myself off it. The loop is over and done, you're no longer a Conductor. But, what's up with the BETA in the game? Why did I regain these memories? No, why did I forget everything in the first place? If Sumika wanted me to forget, why did I remember? Why did the BETA appear in Valgern-On along the Takemikazuchi?

While walking towards the entrance, I notice someone closing in on me from behind, matching my pace. No, there's two of them. Calm down dude, you're no longer in the military. I take a turn in a hallway, maybe I'm being paranoid and they're just leaving.

… Nope, still following me. Coincidence? After taking a glance at the entrance and seeing that the girls were not there, I pick up my pace as I take random turns. Thanks to the maps in the walls I'll end up in the lounge, anyways. But those two keep following me, and they're speeding up too. What the hell is going on?! Why are they following me? I ain't walking particularly fast either, if the staff wanted something they could jog for a bit or call out to me.

As I reach the lounge, two men in dark suits were with Mikoto in the elevator just before the door closed. They were holding him by his shoulders, his expression stiff and tight. Scared.

My hands tighten into fists, I start taking loud steps towards the elevator, heels stomping the floor. Damn, what the hell? We just won the tournament, what is this shit?! How dare they lay-

"Excuse me, sir, could you be Takeru Shirogane?"

The two that were following me catch up. Both sporting the same dark attire the bastards in the elevator had, both wearing sunglasses. But their uniforms don't have the logo of the TGS nor do they have the ID card dangling from their neck like the rest of the staff. So, some idiots think they can fuck with us, huh. I'm not in the mood for this shit.

"Why do you ask? Do you need something?" Not even bothering to clear my frown, I glare at them.

Which makes the one who spoke up take a step back, cough softly into a hand hastily. "Forgive me, it's that… that I saw your fight in the finals and I wanted to ask you some tips. For my son, he likes this game a lot."

Nice bluff jackass, you better keep walking back or I'm gonna punch your brains outta your head.

"Excuse me, but I'm kinda tired and looking for my friends. Sorry." I fake a bow without losing eye contact with them as I start to put some distance between us.

Which makes the other guy shake his head, giving out a short sigh as he pinches his nose. "This is a pointless waste of time. Shirogane-san, we'd like you to come with us. Please, follow us to the elevator," he asserts, rising his voice and taking a stoic pose in intimidation.

Sincerity is a virtue, I'll give you that. But you laid your hands on my friends… And I'm not feeling merciful today.

"I refuse. I have no reason to go anywhere with you, and you can't force me to follow you." The hell do you want, bastard? Are they… Do they want to harm them for some reason? Is this some payback from a rich asshole that we defeated in the games?

"Please don't make a scene, we were just ordered to take you somewhere. No harm will come to you," the first guy says, trying to sound as amicable as possible while waving both hands down, slightly wincing.

"Would you at least let me find my friends? I'd like to tell them to wait for me." I can tell the second guy is upset by my stalling, unlike the first guy who is trying to remain chill.

"It won't take long, someone just wishes to… speak with you. Please, we assure you we have no bad intentions. We rather not have to insists, could you follow us in good faith?" he says, giving his partner a glare, placing a hand in front of him.

He sounds sincere enough. But I can't just ignore the other's glare and posture, and the fact that I saw them taking Mikoto forcefully with them. Nobody lays a hand on *my* squad and gets away with it. Even if they're not my squad here.

Smirking first, I make a gun with a hand, pointing the barrel at 'em. "So we jump to threats now? What makes you think I'll go with you?!" The staff is clearly looking away, the onlookers take their hurried leave, none of them have any intention to help me or get involved. What the hell is this?!

"C'mon kid, stop acting tough. If you don't cooperate I'll bite your head off!"

"Hey, we can't hurt him! We were ordered to escort him!"

"Screw that! Why do we gotta be so respectful towards a bunch of kids?! In my days-"

"What did you say you'd do?"

They both stop arguing and look towards me. The tough bastard smirks, chuckling a bit. "What's up, pup? Scared?"

"Say it again, c'mon. Say it." You've no idea how horrible it is. To see someone get decapitated. What the fuck do you know?

One of his brows twitches, lips contort into a scowl. "Eh? Hey, what's with that tone? I said I was gonna bite your head off, brat! Now, stop talki-"

"What makes you think I won't chop your head off first, motherfucker?" I spit out venom, cracking my knuckles as I do.

They look shocked, gaping for a sec. I'm trying to hold back, but I'm sure I must look enraged going by their expression, and that slight flinch on their postures.

"What do you-"

"I'm trying real hard not to snap here. Could you do me a solid? Leave me the fuck alone. Oh, and you wouldn't happen to know where my friends are? The dude I was with in the tournament should have been around here, but…" I take a glance to the elevator before looking at them again.

I don't like this. Maybe it's the memories of my training, but I really feel like beating them and getting some answers quickly would be the better choice. But I don't know if I'm being watched or what they want with us. I'm not a soldier and I don't have Sensei to cover my mistakes in this world. If I harm either of them is off to prison. Then, why is nobody doing anything? If someone wants something with me, why did they take my squad with them?!

"Who do you think you are talking to?! That's it! I'm gonna teach you some manners!" The second guy's face goes red as he charges at me.

He launches a jab at me, using his taller stature to try and overpower me. I block, gliding outwards by using his own strength against him. My fingers dig into him, grabbing the arm with a vice grip, and after planting my heels firmly on the ground, after tensing my lower back and recalling all the times Kei did this to me, I lift the guy off the ground, sending him crashing against a table with an STA. Compared to her you're a rookie, Pops. No way in hell I'll lose in hand-to-hand combat to anyone other than *my* Kei.

Dishes fly off, cups are broken, and the circle of the table gets split in half, the legs crumbling away. The guy is out cold, and the poor people that were nearby yell as they move away, yet they don't look away. Fucking onlookers, when they harass me it's all well and good, but the second I defend myself you start with the nasty and judgmental glare. Heh, typical.

The other guy is still gaping, before looking back at me very slowly. As I take a step forward, he rises both hands in a hurry, "Please calm down! We really mean no harm to you! If my partner offended you in any-"

"Shut it. I'm not following you. Not unless you answer my questions. Who sent you and why? Where are my friends?!" Looking straight ahead into his eyes, I take a fighting stance.

"I'm sorry, but orders are orders. I cannot answer your questions, but I can assure you your friends are-"

**THWACK** !

A clear hit to the jaw before he finished blabbering sends him onto a nearby table, making the ashtray fly off. I'm done with this. You think I'll believe you?

"Who sent you? What do you want from us?" I say in the most cold, threatening voice I could muster while grabbing and lifting him by the collar.

"… I can't tell you who, but we were told to take you and your friends with us."

"Where?"

"Floor thirteen, that's where we have to take you. I swear, they're fine and we won't hurt you or anything." Disciplined one, aren't you?

I take a look around the room. The staff is staring but they won't get closer, the normal customers are whispering and shooting venomous glares my way. So, I'm alone in this.

"Alright. You'll take me there, but one wrong move-"

"We mean no harm to you."

"Tell that to your friend."

I let him go and step back, the guy goes and tries to wake up his partner, to no success. Yeah, that ain't happening. I threw him with all my might, he's knocked out cold and probably won't wake up for awhile.

"Okay, please follow me," the man says as he gives up on waking up his partner.

We get to the elevator, he presses the button and a moment of waiting in silence ensues.

I was kinda expecting more of them to come pouring out of it as the chime of arrival rings out, but it was empty inside as the door parts away. Lodging myself in a corner, the elevator soon begins to move.

I can only hope the rest are safe. Of all the times where shit could hit the fan, it had to be now. I'm feeling awful, having trouble keeping dark thoughts out of my head. The more I think, the more images of them suffering in the other world pop up in my mind.

"We were told you were a rather happy-go-lucky fellow. Didn't expect you to be so strong. Do you practice a martial art?"

I stare at him in silence and he looks away. Can't exactly say I received military training.

Now that I think about it, my body feels a bit different. I wasn't in this good shape as of late. Did my memories trigger some sort of causality effect on me? But… I shouldn't be a conductor anymore, no, the pipeline should have been severed. What gives?

"We are here," he says, nodding back at me.

The door opens, there's nobody waiting outside. I look around, trying to see if there's a trap. Can't hear anything either. The hallways on this floor are wider than the ones back down, and it looks like this place is some sort of high class restaurant or something. Glass separates different sections of tables and areas, everything looks so regal, as if meticulously crafted to perfection. Pottery of the fine class can be seen everywhere, a few paintings guarded by glass also decorate the walls.

I don't sense anyone's presence nearby. Was he telling the truth then?

We start walking towards a grand door on the other end of the hallway, saying nothing, as I look around and about at the details of the place. Looks like this is the VIP floor, but considering there was an event just now, one would expect at least some customers or members of the dev team would be here enjoying some good quality food or-

A sudden noise behind me, a rattle of a chair or a vase.

Quickly moving away, I barely dodge a hand that was outstretched, lunging for my shoulder. Shortly after, hurried footsteps and shadows crawl out of hiding.

"Restrain him! We have to confirm that he has no dangerous objects in his possession. Take anything that could be used as a weapon," says the guy that tried to grab me as four other guys surround me, my escape routes.

"Then you might wanna cut my arms while you're at it! I'm done with this shit!" I scream as I leap at them.

They clearly weren't expecting resistance, they aren't even in a fighting position. I punch one guy in the stomach, grab him, and throw him towards the others.

Another one grabs me from behind, trying to bind my arms, but I shake him off with an elbow to the ribs and a clear back punch to the face, my knuckles hitting his nose. The others then charge at me all at the same time.

You're on! Like I'd lose to a bunch of cowards like you!

**THWACK! POW!**

**CRASH!**

These guys aren't that strong. The other world's Kei and Meiya were better fighters when I had just arrived. Hell, I bet even Chizuru could beat them up without breaking a sweat.

**THWACK! THUD!**

The five of 'em lie in the floor, knocked out cold. A few vases were broken in the midst of the fight, and a glass is cracked. Well, whatever. They attacked first, serves 'em right.

Where did the one that brought me here go, though? I was hoping they really weren't enemies, but if the staff of the Tokyo Grand Salon is ignoring them… Who the hell are these guys?!

No, calm down. Keep those dark memories out of your head. Stay cool. I can't kill them or I'll go to jail. Then… What do I do?

I approach the grand door that's in the other end of the hallway slowly, sharpening my ears for any other hidden threats, looking around at the minimal doubtful shadow. What can I do? If these guys have guns I'm done for. I don't think I could use the trophy as a weapon. And what do they want with us, anyways? They better not be harming my squad or they'll regret it.

As I was getting closer to it, the door starts opening. A slender figure slowly comes out to the hallway, closing the door and pacing forward to meet my stride. Huh… She's…

"It has been a long time, Takeru-sama."

"Tsukuyomi-san?!"

"You've changed much in these years. Kagami-sama was right, you did take your training very seriously it seems. To knock out five of our guards, I cannot imagine what kind of regime you must have undergone," she says, giving me a one over, looking further into the hall, brows and lips lowering as she sees the other guys, I guess.

… Who the hell is this? Why is she here? Their guards, she said. You're telling me you sent these guys after us?! No, this world's Tsukuyomi-san would never… Tsukuyomi-san would never do something like this! Who are you?!

"What's the meaning of this, Tsukuyomi-san? I didn't think you were this kind of person."

"Please be at ease, Takeru-sama," She looks at me with her usual smile, speaking softly as she takes a single step closer, giving a minute bow. "You've misunderstood our intentions, our men had no reason to harm you. They were just following the security regulations of the Mitsurugi Group."

"Don't dodge the question," I retort, frowning. Is she the real Tsukuyomi? Why would she send them to after us? Makes no sense.

She briefly looks away, sending a hand to her hair. "I'm certain you'd understand why we went to such lengths to bring you to this location. Away from prying eyes."

"What do you mean? Is there any reason for you to send these guards after us? Why couldn't you come to talk to us yourself?"

"It was necessary to do it this way. We couldn't risk to be noticed by a journalist, or by anyone. That's why we reserved this whole floor, to be able to come to the meeting you invited us to."

… Invited to? Oh, right.

With all the memories flowing back I completely forgot I had called Tsukuyomi-san to tell her about today's meet up. Then it makes sense for her to be so secretive about all this. Still, it doesn't justify sending those guards after us so violently. What the hell were they even thinking?

Wait, but that would mean-

Meiya's here.

Her smiling face appears on my mind, then it changes to the other Meiya's face during her last moments as tears and blood covered her eyes. Before I shot the cannon on her.

"Takeru-sama, I believe I've always treated you fairly. Please relax, your friends are all within this room. I'm certain you know who sent for you and why it had to be this way."

Her screams come back to me. Everything keeps repeating itself like in a loop.

I hug Meiya tightly as she cries, as she tugs at my uniform. I force her to use the pass for the migrant fleet, she falls to her knees. She left without us saying our goodbyes.

The image changes once more, now filling my ears with static and shards of glass.

The Takemikazuchi flies in, gets rammed into the XG, she looks at me through the blood and tears, confessing her love to me. And I shoot. I kill her.

Then, everything loops again.

She cries and begs me not to leave her alone, not to send her away. But I do.

And again, it repeats.

She hiccups in pain, begging me to end her suffering, to fulfill our mission. I hesitate, but I shoot. I kill her.

And again, it repeats.

And again, and again, and again, and again-

No, make it stop! Don't look at me like that! Shut up! No! NO! **NO! I didn't want to kill you! I never wanted to! Shut up!**

The signs of my teammates in my radar vanish. Everyone is dead. And all I did…

… was sit down on the XG and press some buttons. I abandoned them as I abandoned Kasumi at the end. Why was I so proud about it?! That's no victory for me! I was… so useless…

The best war machine humanity ever made, a pseudo-life form with a quantum brain, a fucking gravity-bending force field and a legit beam cannon. I had all of that and I couldn't even… save anyone…

"So, please give me a smile! I prepared ample servings of the pudding you favored so much. Everyone is having a great time within the room. I truly do apologize for the behavior of my men. So please, come inside. Meiya-sama is-"

Blood fills my view, her crying face fades within the light, away to the stars. She's gone. Meiya is gone. My squad is gone.

Because of my uselessness. Because they felt forced to keep up a facade, so that I didn't screw it all up. And in the end… if it hadn't been for Meiya, I would have failed them all.

… I shouldn't have been the one to survive. I ended up leaving and forgetting. What kind of comrade am I? What kind of soldier, of friend am I? So weak, that Sumika felt it was necessary to erase my memories just so that I could sleep with a clear conscience despite the never-ending fuck ups I did.

I don't want to be here. I don't want to see her or anyone.

This world's Meiya… I never had a bond with her as strong as the one I shared with the other. Sure, I did remember the promise on my own after graduation, but in this world we just fooled around in school. We never shared anything as important as all the things I've shared with the other Meiyas. All the things she taught me, all the times she helped me get up when I thought I had hit a wall. And I ended up hurting her, I didn't realize how much I meant for her.

And I sent her away, alone, to who knows where.

And I killed her. Not even out of conviction, I made her suffer at the BETA's hands before I gathered the balls to shoot.

I know I'm important to this world's Meiya too, with the promise and all. I know I'm her first love and how dear I am to her. But I can't face her. I'm going to break down. If I'm having this much trouble keeping my emotions in check now, when I see her face… No, when I see everyone…

A small, slow flash, something faint within my palms. The letters they left me come back to me. All of them, in the end, all of them loved me. Well, maybe not love… but still, they held something for me in their hearts. And what did I do for them?

No, don't cry! Don't be an idiot!

I gotta get out of here before I break down, because if I do, I'll end up talking. And the last time I did that… Marimo-chan died.

Just focus! This world's guys are not my squadmates! They're just my… acquaintances. We're not as close. We're just old classmates. Yeah, we're no longer who we used to be. Time has done its thing, I'm sure. That's all.

"Takeru-sama? What is the matter? Would you be injured?" Tsukuyomi-san looks at me with downcast eyes, taking a few steps, slow and hesitant steps towards me.

Heh, I never though I'd see that worried face on her again. At least I know the guys are safe. Yeah, she's this world's Tsukuyomi-san, alright.

But I can't stay here. After all, the fact that I remembered is dangerous. Who knows if I'm still bringing causal information to this world. Not even Yuuko-sensei could explain clearly how did I keep my memories. She once said I might not get another chance to keep them, but here I am now. This just might be an oversight in her theory or something.

… And I can't allow anything to happen to my dear ones again because of my own stupidity.

"I'm leaving."

"Excuse me?"

Not even answering, I turn around and start walking towards the elevator. I take a few breaths, letting out the vile air that now fills my chest. Wiping the water in my eyes, my feet barely lift themselves up to take me down the hallway towards the elevator.

"Takeru-sama! What's the meaning of this? Weren't you the one who invited Meiya-sama today?!" She's enraged. Of course she is.

"Tell Mei… Tell Mitsurugi-san that I'm sorry. For everything."

Changing the way I name her is just a stupid way to not mix them both in my head. And I know apologizing to her for something that happened in a parallel world is the most stupid thing I could do.

But I needed to say it. I couldn't apologize to that world's Tsukuyomi for failing to protect her when I said I would.

And I can't allow this Meiya to fall to the causality's effect. She, who resigned months of her busy life and held such a pure love for me, doesn't deserve to die like that. And like hell I'll let the rest also be affected by this shit.

"Takeru-sama, what do you mean?"

"… I remembered. All of it."

"Remembered? You don't mean-"

"I couldn't keep my promise. I wanted to apologize. Now that I'm in a different world than hers, that's all I can do. I don't feel so good, so I'm leaving." I did make a promise with this Meiya, so hopefully I can make them misunderstand my words.

"Wait, Takeru-sama! If you truly remembered the promise you made, then-"

"Don't! Just… leave me alone, okay? I think it's for the best if… I don't see Mitsurugi-san again. I just wanted to be honest and apologize… for being a dense idiot who couldn't see what was in front of him. She deserves an apology and… a-and…"

Shit, I'm crying dammit! Get your shit together! You know what's at stake here!

"And give her my thanks. For everything she did for me. Goodbye, Tsukuyomi-san."

"Takeru-sama! Wait! At least tell her in person how you-"

A strong hold over my shoulder, firm and commanding, preventing me from moving. As if reacting instinctively, I grab what restricted me and throw it off me.

When I realized what I had done she was holding her head in pain, blood dripping from her forehead and dirtying a wall, looking at me with a confused gaze and tears in her eyes.

"I'm sorry. Please Tsukuyomi-san, let's never meet again."

I run to the elevator. This time she didn't try to stop me.

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*Same day. Near 8 PM.*

*(Takeru's Room.)*

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I ran until I got to the train station, and after getting out of the train I ran home at full speed.

After resting under the shower, it feels like I'm calming down for real. So, grabbing a paper and a pencil, I sit down on my desk and start scribbling and noting down what I've remembered, trying to detail the events in the timeline.

After a few minutes, I stop and read what I wrote, images and voices coming back as I do. There's no gap in the dates and, even if some details are kinda fuzzy, I definitely remember a lot of stuff not only about last loop but about the other loops I took.

Last time all I had was some vague memory of my time after that Christmas when Alt IV was canned and the dread of Babylon, but

now I have clear recollections of those days, even if some events are kinda mixed together.

Be it planting the sauntpaulias with Tama, visiting art galleries after a break with Chizuru, going to parks and mountains with Mikoto, simply resting with Kei, or getting slashed in half by Meiya as she insisted on training me in kendo. All of those memories clearly belong to that other world.

"Sigh… But some of these memories aren't from there."

Sumika gifting me a cake, me and Meiya rolling in the snow while we laugh, Tama asking for my help to nurse some of the kitties that gather in her dojo, Chizuru hiding behind me as I introduce her in a bombastic manner to my parents, or me and Kei cooking some yakisoba together before cuddling in the sofa as we watch TV.

Huh, so I also could have gotten together with any of 'em in this world. Wait, didn't I feel kinda weird during my first loops at times? Yeah… like, when thinking before the Christmas exchange party. Hmm. Maybe some data from other possible futures in this world seeped into that parallel world and that's what made me feel weird at times?

Sigh… I may never find an answer to that. And then there's one other future that I rather think was nothing but a nightmare. Marimo-chan… wouldn't do something like that to me.

R-Right?

But, well, back to the other world's memories. Pencil in hand, I write a particular date. December 25th, 2001, the first day officially under Alt V command of Yokohama Base. From that date onward, it's as if all the memories got bundled together. For example, I know for a fact I did multiple loops in my original state, to call it something. And in those loops I ended up in different relationships with the girls in my squad.

But instead of remembering them as separate things it's like those loops happened all at the same time, from the way I remember it. From that Christmas onward, I remember some days in which I was training the sword with Meiya but I was also watering some flowers with Tama. Perhaps it's because I wasn't that different through those loops, so the memories got jumbled together? I may never find an answer to that, too.

Shrugging as I see the light fading already, I stand up and turn on the light. Cracking my knuckles again, I resume my scribbling.

The coup and meeting Her Highness during it, making the XM3, the 00 Unit and the battles that came. No lakes there, I can recall most of last loop no problem.

Hmm… There is one thing, though. I can't remember what happened after Operation Iceberg on my first loops. I know that when I didn't die during it I ended up in… Hawaii? Seattle? Well, thing is, I remember some sort of briefing in which they told us the world got fucked hard after the G-Bombs fell. I think Eurasia and Northern Africa ended up under water, and that's as much as I can remember. The rest are just bits and pieces scattered.

I'm taking out a Reactor with Japanese, American and French troops, I kind of see Sensei and Kasumi but I can't hear them, and the Shogun was also there at some point, I think? If I die, it's the same regret as I claw at the skies, if I don't there's that hollowness when I cry after putting down a 'comrade'.

" *Cough* ! Ugh… Just thinking about it all makes me sick to my stomach," I wipe my mouth, taking a deep breath to halt the echoes that try to resonate again. "Anyways, I will have to live as if I hadn't remembered anything, in the case that I'm still bringing data from that world here. Wish Sensei would have given me more intel about the next world I'd end up on."

She did say I'd find myself on a place crafted to meet Sumika's wishes, but then again, I'm not even dating her now. Don't know

what I can do if things start happening, but assuming I somehow find a way to return to that world there's still the risk of losing my memories, since Sumika is no longer alive there. Worst case scenario I'll have to hope this world's Yuuko-sensei can somehow lend me a hand in reverting whatever it is that made me remember.

But that's just a what if. Things might be fine this time around since I didn't came back forcefully, and I had forgotten everything when I came back here. There's also the chance that my memories aren't the cause of the leak but an effect of it. In which case I'll have no choice but to take cards in the matter.

Resting the pencil on the desk, I stand up and stretch. As I do, I run a hand over my biceps and chest, feeling the firmness of the muscles. So my body returned to how it was in that world for some reason, the six-pack strikes back. I wonder why did I regain my past body's muscles? That may be yet another question I might never find an answer to.

Well, on one hand I'm glad I got my memories back. If I forgot it would be like everyone who died was truly gone forever. So long as I remember, they will live with me.

**Ring! Ring!**

I can feel my heart skip a beat as the phone started ringing. Is it the guys? I'm sure they would want to know what the hell happened to me. I mean, imagine you're chilling in the room, eating some good luxurious food with the whole gang, and then Tsukuyomi-san comes back with blood on her head and tells you:

"Takeru-sama beat the living shit out of our guards, started crying like a bitch, threw me like a ragdoll against the wall, and then went home. Shucks! Here, have some more pudding!"

I suppose I'll just have to make stuff up and keep our talks short. I guess… staying away from them is all I can do, until I see whether people lose their memories when interacting with me.

Dragging myself downstairs towards the phone, I pick up the receiver.

"… Hello, Shirogane residence."

Nobody answers back.

I wait for a few moments… Still nothing.

"Hello? Is this a prank? Because I'm gonna hang up." Not in the mood today.

"D-Don't!" A familiar voice yells on the other side of the line all of a sudden, as if stung by boiling water. "Please don't hang up, Takeru."

Meiya. Why is she calling me?! No, I can't risk any causality leak to affect her. If she interacts with me and, for whatever reason, I'm still pulling stuff here she's gonna die. And a horrible death, no less.

"… Takeru? Are you there?" Don't make that creaky voice. It's going to be hard enough with Sumika coming to college with me everyday. Let's make this quick.

"What can I do for you, Mitsurugi-san?" I grip the receiver tightly, closing my eyes. Gotta keep my cool, don't do anything stupid, myself.

"Why… Why do you not call me by my name, Takeru?"

"It's not proper, I… should show respect to you. I'm just a civilian."

"That's not true! You're important to me. Takeru, you don't have to-"

"Mitsurugi-san, did you need anything? I'm kinda busy at the moment." I can hear her trying not to cry. Or is she just angry? Definitely angry. Please get angry and hang up.

"Takeru, can we meet? I'd like to have a talk with you. In private."

"No, I already told Tsukuyomi-san all I had to tell you. If you have any business with me, you can simply tell me now." I can't drag this conversation anymore. I don't wanna hang up suddenly, but she IS stubborn.

"… Are you mad at me?" A small, almost broken, voice. Again, the acid of a Fort goes down into my chest.

"What?" Why would I be mad at her? Of all the people in this world, why would I be angry at her?

"You're not upset about… how I broke our promise?"

Promise? Oh, the promise in the park? When did she… Oh, so that's it. She thinks I'm mad because she married somebody else since I told Tsukuyomi-san I remembered everything. Thanks Meiya, you just gave me my excuse.

"I guess, I simply realized how stupid I was. There's no way I could stand by your side. I'm a normal person, I don't belong in your world." Sorry, I can't risk you dying in that way.

"That is not true! I've… I know you're faring well in college. And I do not care in the slightest how others see you. These two years… Takeru, I… When Tsukuyomi told me you had called me, I…"

Such a soft, sweet voice. So honest, so creaking. Like a falling glass before it's forever shattered, slowly as if walking over spikes. Scared.

Closing my eyes, the back of my head hurting, one of my hands clutches my collar. Heartbeats present in my neck, that odd ringing returns to my ears. And for a brief second, everything goes white.

A tall mountain, a heavy pain on my shoulders. Hits and pain over my arms, that feel swollen. It's hard to move my feet, my heels wail at the mere touch of the ground. But beyond that heaviness, that crushing sensation on my nape… there was warmth, the warmth of someone's hold over me.

By my side, as when we first met. Cradling my head, whispering a good morning as she embraces me. Those azure eyes… of *my* Meiya… as we lean closer, for a morning kiss as we hug each other, enveloping the other in our body heat.

"T-Takeru? Are you still listening?" She asks, making my breathing hiccup. "Please answer me, Takeru." Crumbling like a tree in front of a Destroyer, that's her voice as she hurries me to reply. So scared, so tense.

Why… Why do you have to make this so hard?! Couldn't you just have forgotten about me?! If you keep this up… you might die. Meiya doesn't deserve that fate. No, I can't- I won't let her die like that. Hell no, never. Forgive me, but if I have to be cruel to keep you away, I'll do it.

So, taking a sharp breath in, drying my mouth, knees shaking at the images that faintly continue coming up, I speak from my stomach, "Meiya."

"W-What?" She seems to have tensed up as I address her by name. "I'm here, listening."

"I was the one who broke our promise first." I can hear her gasping. I'm sorry. "I… fell in love with someone else. But now, we can't be together anymore." This is technically not a lie. Even when one of those I fell in love with was a parallel version of her.

"… What are you saying?"

"I dated her for some time, but…" I recall the times I had to send off the girls with the Alternative V fleet, eyes watering. "She had to leave. Somewhere far away. I'll probably never see her again." My voice breaks at the end, that moment of clawing at the stars choking all air outta my lungs for a sec.

The fact that the fleet may have actually exploded before reaching its destination will forever haunt me. No, now that I know that there are

billions upon billions of BETA out there… Even if they reached the planet safely, the BETA would eventually make their way to it. They died too. There was no way they could have survived with so little people, unless the BETA took centuries, or maybe thousands of years, to reach the planet. And maybe even then…

Sigh… I truly never managed to save anyone, not a single person. Heh, to think Yuuko-sensei called me a hero before I left. You were the heroine, Sensei. Me? I just was the hammer in your hand… or maybe not even that.

"You're lying! That's… That's not true!" She screams into the receiver, not even holding back her anger. Her eyes are full of fire, I'm sure.

"So, this one's on me. Forgive me for not giving you an answer and running away when we went to the hot springs. I still don't have the guts to tell you in person. I'm sorry."

"Then, why did you call me?! Why were you so angry at the salon?! Why did you beat up the guards?! Why didn't you tell me this there, when you were the one who invited me?! Takeru, why!?"

And she finally snapped. Let's finish this, one more cold blow and she surely will never forgive me.

"Because I… wanted to apologize, because you deserve an apology. I'm sorry, for everything. Farewell, Meiya. Please don't contact me again."

"Takeru, wait! I haven't-" I hang up, slamming the receiver with a shaky hand.

"Please don't call back. Please forget about me. Just move on, and live a happy life. You deserve it, Meiya."

Slowly walking to the table, crashing onto a chair, I bury my face into my arms. Repeated strikes of cold on my back, tears that don't stop

but also don't want to come out. Just limply lying onto the wood, clawing at my scalp.

This is for the best. I can't risk anyone dying. I wouldn't be able to forgive myself if anything happened because of me. But, how can I know if I'm still a causality conductor? I mean, Sensei said I was no longer one after Sumika died since she was what turned me into one to begin with.

Should I try speaking with Yuuko-sensei? No, I should just act like I've been so far. Remember her advice, act as if you don't remember anything. Otherwise, I just may end up bringing all the death in that world here, and this time I might not be able to just infiltrate the U's nuclear reactor.

… I feel awful. I'm going to take another shower, fix me something to eat, and hit the sack early. After all next Monday is back to college, so I gotta start preparing my stuff.

Hopefully everything will stay the same. I just gotta deal with Sumika. I have to keep being cold to her, keep going alone to college, keep avoiding her on the weekends. She'll eventually get fed up with me, we stopped talking by the windows after we started college so it's a matter of time.

I turn the TV on as I go to the fridge, to have some background noise and keep the silence away. Let's see here… I'll use some eggs, the cabbage and…

"Yeah, this should do. Compared to the synthetic food we had back there, this is luxury."

Grabbing the stuff, getting the knife and table ready to start cooking, I simply rest everything there. Just looking at the food in silence as the news drone on. Looking back at my house, remembering my time with them here. My times with them over there. The now empty table, where alone I'm going to eat. As opposed to all the times when we…

"Why? Hic… Why did I…" I don't fight the tears this time, and they stain the wooden table that I was gonna use to cut the cabbage.

All that fighting. All that suffering. To end up being the only-

"No. W-Wipe those tears. I have one last duty to do."

To live. For all the ones that gave me this chance. I gotta protect this peace, so I have to calm down. I'll let it all out tonight, in the loneliness of my room. I can only hope I'm not a conductor anymore, otherwise…

Well, no getting depressed. In a few days I'll know. No, wait, I can test it out tonight. I just gotta talk with mom and dad when they come back, and if they forget me-

Then, what? What if Sensei forgets about me too before she can help me?

I'll have to steal the microwave and get into the reactor myself. Like hell I'll let this world get screwed again!

I hear the door being unlocked, their usual loud voices as they enter the house. Gulping down, feeling my body tense up, my vision grows hazy for a second as a shiver ran down my back.

Let's roll the dice. Will it be a one or a twenty?

# Break Point

## Chapter 4: Break Point

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*August 11th. Around 9 AM.*

*(Street.)*

**[Takeru]**

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A red head was spewing steam behind me, trying to get my attention. I grabbed my bag tightly and kept walking in silence. That didn't last for long.

"Takeru-chan, can you talk to me?" Sumika sounds slightly annoyed as she gets to my side, leaning her face near me. I ignore her and continue walking. "Hey, you idiot! You deaf or something?!"

Scream all you like, you won't get a reaction out of me. I'm gonna cry, I know. Been having nightmares of all the deaths every single F-ing day since then.

Mom and Dad didn't forget about me when we talked, and they also haven't forgotten about the things I asked them to test if their memories were working. Same for everyone I have interacted with, and nothing seems to be wrong. For now.

So, I think I'm safe. Probably. But I don't wanna risk it. Maybe the leak only happens with people that interacted with me in the other world. There's so much I don't know. I mean, I shouldn't have regained my memories in the first place. Sensei said it wouldn't happen twice, so much for that.

But I gotta keep my cool and not think about it too much. That means being chill and trying to avoid the guys.

"Takeru-chan? Hey really, what's wrong? You don't have to tell me why you went home alone after the tournament, but at least-"

"I'm fine. Cut it out already."

Her shoulders drop as she slows down her pace. Sumika has been trying to talk with me since she got back from the salon. At first I couldn't even look at her without having to hold back the tears, but now that I've had time to calm down I can hold it together, almost.

I know she is also stubborn to a fault, so I can't expect her to just stop talking to me overnight. I can only hope these little interactions don't cause her to be affected by the causality's influence, if I am a conductor.

There's also the possibility that I'm not a conductor and that the information is out there, waiting to be accessed by someone. Like with the Takemikazuchi and the BETA in Valgern-On. Or did that happen because I played Valgern-On a lot? I have no idea what's going on, and that only makes me more anxious.

Either way, I gotta calm down. And while I pushed Meiya away I might try to wait and see what happens, since I don't have enough info to know for sure what is going on. But openly talking about it with Sensei is the last resort, to use only when I confirmed the worst case scenario. After all I'd have to reveal a lot of info to her, and that means remembering a lot of little details from that world. I don't know if that's safe right now. I do not want to see everything going to hell again.

Today's classes went by rather fast, I didn't bump into anyone from the gang today. Some of my classmates did congratulate me for the tournament, and I told Onimura about how he inspired me to beat the Elefs, as well as my inner promise to buy him lunch for a week.

When I got out to the gate I saw two little silhouettes waiting for me. Mikoto and Tama in their casual clothes waved at me as I exited the U's campus.

"Takeru-san, good afternoon!"

"Hey Takeru! How are you?"

"Yo Tama, Mikoto, what's up?"

"We were waiting for you, since today we get out at the same hour." Tama says while tugging at her pink jacket. It looks like she wants to say something else, but chose to remain silent.

"Hey Takeru, what are you gonna spend the prize money on?" Mikoto asks me curiously.

"I saved it up, I don't really need it right now."

"Huh, I was planning on getting a PC for myself. I'm tired of having to go to an internet cafe whenever I need to search something."

"Yeah, that's a pain. Shame we can't have something like a portable browser machine, similar to the Game Guy."

"Totally that! That would be really awesome!"

We kept doing some small talk in our way home with me just answering yes, no and some three worded answers. I wonder if they'll remember this talk tomorrow. Since they have to go to the station it was a short travel.

"Well, see you later guys!" I said as I went my way.

"Um Takeru-san!" Tama raises her voice as she calls out to me. "U-Um, you see, the thing is… I wanted to… Eer…" Her eyes dart down, and it looks like she's quivering.

"Tama, I don't bite. What's up?" I try to calm her down, but I don't know if it worked.

"Takeru-san, what happened on the day of the tournament?" And there it is. THE question.

I can feel Mikoto's gaze on me too. So, here's our second chance Takeru. What do you do? Act normal or push them away?

"I was… not feeling so good after fighting with the guards, so I went home."

"Takeru, why did you fight the guards? That was really dangerous! You could have been sent to the hospital!" Mikoto scolds me, looking upset at my recklessness.

"They started the fight, and I just defended myself."

"But Tsukuyomi-san said you injured some of the guards!" Tama seems serious right now. She truly is worried.

"And they would have had no problem in harming me if it meant doing their job. It was their fault for resorting to violence first."

"I mean, you're right, but…" Mikoto couldn't bring himself to agree with me.

"I was in a foul mood and I didn't want to ruin your party. At first I thought you guys were in danger, but once I knew you had Meiya there I had nothing to worry about."

"But that's… not what I asked…"

"What was that Tama? Couldn't hear." Playing dumb is all I can do. Can't really explain what's going on in my head to them.

"Nothing. If you're fine that's enough, see you tomorrow!" Tama recovers her smile and goes her way.

"See you tomorrow Takeru!"

"Yeah, later."

I arrived at home, ate something light and went to study to my room. Just gotta keep living like I was, can't screw this up.

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*August 15 th . Around 9 AM.*

*(Street.)*

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The rest of the week went by fast. My studies were going steadily, I kept doing normal conversation with the guys when I ran into them and they didn't forget about me. Maybe I'm not a conductor after all, otherwise something would have happened already.

I've been having trouble balancing my feelings towards the girls and Mikoto. While it kinda hurts when they treat me as just another friend, it also feels weird when they do act nice towards me. It's also a problem when they remind me of the times we spent together in the other world, my heart is a mess right now.

During my walk to college I ran into Tama and Mikoto again.

"Yo guys, good morning!" I wave at them, finally releasing a bit the cuffs on my heart.

"Good morning Takeru-san, Sumika-san!" Tama's cheerful smile greeted us. Always so bright, so charming.

"Hey Takeru, Sumika-san! Morning!" Mikoto also is always smiles. Though he's usually lost in his own tempo. Usual Mikoto stuff.

Spending my days like this fills me with both bliss and regret. On one hand I'm really happy to be here, to not have to worry about a sudden BETA invasion or to always have to eat synthetic food, to be with my beloved ones spending our days in peace. And it also fills me with regret, for how I failed my squadmates. They also deserved this life, more than anyone. They didn't deserve to die like that, not the girls from squad 207, not the Valkyries, not a single of the MP of our base. I didn't stay to make sure they saw how beautiful a peaceful world can be. It makes me feel like a coward, like that time I ran away while the fight was not yet over.

No, that fight is not over. And I'm still here.

"Takeru, Takeru. What do you say of going to the arcade tomorrow?" Mikoto throws the suggestion out there.

"I'm fine with my studies, but what about you?"

"All good, don't worry! I've been wanting to challenge you to a match again!" He seems really motivated to beat me.

"Guys, do you think I could go, too?" Tama wants to tag along? Didn't see that one coming.

"Sure Tama, don't see why not. You wanna come too, Sumika?"

"Sure! Miki-chan, wanna try playing with me? You won't get better teachers than a pair of champions!" Sumika says while pointing at Mikoto and me.

"Ahahah, thanks! It does seem to be a lot of fun, so I might give it a go. Just be patient with me, please?"

"Don't worry Tama, I'm sure you'll do just fine!" I give her a thumbs up.

Having made plans for the weekend, we part ways at the gate to go to our own classes. This will be a nice chance to see if they forget something, I remember that Meiya did forget the plans we did when I got back and trying to recall that caused her to forget about me. So, this is the last test, to see whether they truly forget or not. But I'm truly at a loss right now, I don't know if I'm being paranoid or relaxed.

So far, I've been acting as usual and nobody has forgotten about me. There's also no incidents going on, no sudden accidents on Kashgar or Canada. Maybe, just maybe, everything will be fine. Here's hoping I can finally put this fear to rest.

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*August 16 th . A bit over 10 AM.*

*(Takeru's House.)*

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"I'm just going with the guys to the arcade, don't worry." I say to Mom as I tied my shoes.

"Even so, are you sure? You won't fall back on your studies?"

"It's fine. I'm keeping up alright. And I need a break." I double check everything is in place.

"Hmm… You have been strangely down for a while. OK, don't be late, yes?" Mom gave me a smile and went back to the kitchen.

This usual routine is something precious to me. I didn't knew I missed my parents so much. Of course, my feelings are kinda weird. I do remember being here for, like, forever. But I also know that I got sent to the other side.

Sharing lame jokes with Dad, receiving a hug from Mom when I come back home, always having them pestering me about my studies.

… I missed my family. Funny, I had forgotten about them back there, and yet I can't see how I could do that now. Am I such a coldhearted bastard? Maybe the war just didn't give me time to think about them.

I get my little bag and grab the doorknob. As I open the door, the clear sky greets me. The wind blows, and as I get out I look around the place. No fallen Gekishin, no ruins.

"Hey, Takeru-chan!" Sumika's happy shout calls out to me. I smile at her and we make our way towards the station.

I'm back. I'm back home. Even if I failed to protect you… We did it. As an outsider, I'm glad I could lead you to a better world, according

to Sensei.

… I think I could slowly start feeling truly part of this world again. Maybe I'll write the story of our struggles and make a book out of it. So that your memory never dies.

---

**[Takeru's Parents]**

---

"So you don't think he's being weird?"

"No? He's usually in his own world, right? Leave him be, he's doing fine in college right?" Kageyuki says as he eats his breakfast.

I turn to the sink again and start washing Takeru's plate.

"So… When do you think he'll bring a girl home?"

"What? Are you in a hurry to become a grandma?"

"Kage! Why you!" I throw a small paper that was near, he just laughs as he looks at me.

"Let him be. He'll eventually find someone. Can you blame him? That Mitsurugi girl came here and played with him in the end. I still don't know what that was about."

He's right, Takeru did seem heart-broken at the time when we came back. I was sure that Meiya girl wanted to make him her consort, but what happened? Did Takeru screw it up? Knowing him, that's probably what happened. He's as dense as his father.

"… So we lost again, huh?" Kageyuki makes a sad face as the results of the baseball games appear on the news.

"Stop getting sad over a sport."

"Oh, shut it. This season's being totally awful for us! We haven't won one… Huh?"

Hm? Kage became quiet all of a sudden as his eyes widened. He placed a hand over his mouth as he watched the news. What are they showing now?

"… the police have finally detained the man responsible for the murder of Marimo Jinguuji."

… What? What did it say? Marimo… Wasn't that Takeru's teacher during his last year in high school?

"The incident happened on the late evening of the 5th of August. Apparently Jinguuji and the murderer were in a relationship since January, and during June they had an argument that caused Jinguuji to break up with him. This is the reason why the man carried out the murder, the police found out that he had posted in an internet forum that he was going to make his ex pay for ridiculing him a few days before the murder, after they accessed the PC on the suspect's house. He already had a story of violent breakups and was addicted to a certain illegal drug."

"Honey, this Marimo was…"

"Takeru's teacher, yes."

I can't help but feel bad at this. She was such a sweet person, from the impression I got during the few times I met her.

"That's why the man intercepted her on a street near the victim's house around 7 PM on the 5th, and tried to ran over her with his car. Witnesses say that she managed to dodge him the first time but he turned around and tried again. He was clearly conscious of his actions. And when he tried again, Jinguuji-san couldn't dodge it. However, the man was not satisfied and ran her over once more, this time running over her head. After that, the man proceeded to make

his escape, and had managed to avoid being caught thanks to a friend of his that-"

I turn away from the news. That's sickening, I can feel my stomach turning as the image unwillingly made its way to my mind. Who would do that kind of stuff? What is the world coming to?

---

*Some minutes after that.*

*(Train Station.)*

**[Takeru]**

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"Takeru-chan, you sure it's okay to go have fun now? What about your studies?" You sound like my Mom, by the gods!

"If you're so worried you can leave before we get on the train."

"That's not what I… Oh, whatever. So, how's everything? Feeling fine?"

"A-OK, no problems. Hey Sumika, random question. What did I ask you to bring yesterday?" Let's see if she still remembers.

"Huh? The guidebook you lent me some time ago? I got it here, don't worry." She shows me the magazine folded in her bag.

So she does remember. Unlike last time, where people that talked to me would forget what they spoke with me the day before, now there's no such issue. It's been, what? A week? I think it's safe to say I'm in the clear. This is a different world, I don't have to be always on edge or marching at a high pace.

I exhale, relaxing my shoulders. I feel as if I got under a warm shower after a really long day.

My fight… is over.

We rode the train, and when we got to the arcade Tama and Mikoto where already waiting for us.

"Takeru, Sumika-san, how you doing?"

"Good afternoon Yoroi-kun, doing just fine. Hey Miki-chan, here!" Sumika gives Tama the guidebook I asked her to bring.

"Huh? What's this?"

"It's a guidebook with a lot of info about the last updates of the game." I said in my hype voice. "It would be boring if you didn't recognize which mech is which. It also has a very nice section of beginner tips, to give you an idea of what to expect when you get to play."

"Thanks a lot Takeru-san! Sumika-san, do you know how to play Valgern-On?"

"Not really, I just tag along. I know the controls but I'm not that good."

"Alright! Let's go! Before all the terminals get occupied!" Mikoto rushes into the arcade, only to be met with a loud roar.

It seems people recognized him. Of course they will, some of the regulars here are die hard fans of the-

"OOOOOOOOOOOOHHHHH IT'S SHIROGANE-SAMAAAAAAAAAAA!"

Wait, what?

And before I knew what was happening, I was in the center of a human twister. People asked me for autographs, pictures, game tips and who knows what else. After a little while, people literally stepped aside for us to use whatever terminal we wanted to use, the owner even said he'd let us play for free, since he'll use it as advertisement for his arcade. I let out a heavy sigh, but everyone else seemed to be enjoying themselves with the treatment so maybe it's not all bad.

We played some matches, I ended up defeating Mikoto twice. Sumika and Tama were having a lot of fun too fighting against each other. We then played a two man battle with Sumika and me versus Mikoto and Tama. Sadly I was backstabbed by Sumika, who landed a fully charged ballistic shot at my core. If she actually tried to do that she wouldn't be able to do it, but of course when she DOESN'T have to…

"Takeru-chan, don't look so angry please? I'll pay the lunch, okay?" Sumika was trying to stop my epic pouting maneuver, and failing miserably at it.

"Not even Mikoto could land such a hit! How on earth did you hit my core from that far away?!"

"I dunno! I just started button mashing because I forgot which combos to use!"

"You just had to push the first trigger to give me some support! Why did you push both triggers and the lever?! And why did you aim at me when you were charging?!"

"I was aiming at Yoroi-kun! You are the one that was jumping around super fast! I didn't even see you!"

"You bastard, I don't think anyone has ever done such a good shot with the laser ballista either. And to waste it on your partner…" That really was a nice shot. If she hadn't hit me with it, I'd be showering her in compliments.

"What do you mean, 'you bastard'?! I was doing my best to help you!" She starts punching me lightly while pouting. She's really cute when she's flustered. Sadly, she's also so much louder.

"Ahahah! That was truly something else. Who would say Takeru-san would end up being defeated by his partner?" Tama joins in the teasing. My child, how much have you grown.

"Totally! Sumika-san, the partner killer! You already have a nickname!" Mikoto gives Sumika a thumbs up. You're probably mad that she took me out when you couldn't do it in our matches.

"Don't go giving me weird names Yoroi-kun!" She makes her pouting face as she whines at Mikoto.

"Ahahahaha, he's right though." I can't help but to laugh. We all start laughing.

Today's been really fun. This is how things should have always been. I really shouldn't have let my emotions ruin our reunion at the salon.

Yeah… This is my life. I finally got my peace back.

We stayed in the arcade for a while longer, playing other games. Mikoto again beat me in the racing one, and we got Tama and Sumika some plushies from the crane games. All of us enjoyed ourselves, it feels good to let loose after so long. Then, we went to eat something at a family restaurant, sharing jokes and jabs, and after that we made our way to the station.

But as we were getting closer to it, a slight tremor could be felt. It then turned to shaking, and it grew more violent in a matter of seconds.

"An earthquake?!"

The land shook with a raging fury. We had to lay against the wall to not fall. It was becoming more and more violent. Glasses shattered, the little children started crying, some cars had to stop suddenly, almost starting a chain of crashes.

I can barely stand as it is, what about the others?!

And then, as if in slow motion, I saw it. A light post was falling on top of Tama and Sumika. In an instinctive reaction I dashed from where I was, trying to reach them.

But I couldn't.

I managed to grab Sumika by the collar, making both of us fall backwards as the shaking made my footing unstable. The thing fell just by my side. Blood was splashed onto me.

Tama's blood.

Right besides me… Tama's hair… Tainted with blood…

She was… completely… squashed, beyond recognition.

"A-Aaaahhh!" I try to move away, but my eyes cannot release themselves.

The image of the Superior turning her into a Soldier-Class returns. My throat dries up and my hands start shaking. Again, I can't even cry nor look away.

Sumika was speechless with fear, she just grabbed me, shivering with tears running down her face like a waterfall. We couldn't stand up, the shaking wasn't stopping. I grab Sumika tightly, closing my eyes. T-This has got to be a nightmare…

No. This is no nightmare.

Tama was squashed by the light post. This isn't an accident, this the causality isn't it? Is this is how she died in Kashgar? Tama… Is this my fault for interacting with them? No, wait, if this happened to Tama then…

Mikoto!

And then a tearing noise could be heard. I looked upwards, and saw how some power cables got loose and broke. Mikoto, alongside many other people that were nearby, couldn't react to it. The cables fell with sparks flying out of them. And as they hit the group of people, an electric shock was discharged.

I could only watch in silence as Mikoto and at least another ten persons were electrocuted to death, all the while the ground kept shaking.

Time stopped. At some point the shaking stopped too. Sirens could be heard in the distance. What didn't stop was the irregular beating of my heart and the searing pain that was splitting my head apart.

The scenes play one after the other. Mikoto's death in her Gekishin when we were sent on a suicide mission, the last words we crossed during Operation Ouka, the letter she had left me, the times we spent together.

Tama's sauntpaulias appear on my mind, how we grew them on the base. How she died fighting to the last breath when I couldn't help Sensei with Alternative IV. Her shape as the Superior was twisting it into a BETA.

Forgive me, Mikoto. Forgive me, Tama. I got you killed again.

What an idiot I am. What am I doing?! I was just slacking off, living the easy life and because of that…

If my memories came with me… There was the chance that something else…

No! I already knew of the Takemikazuchi and the BETA being on Valgern-On. That was proof enough, right?

So, does that mean that my inaction killed them once more?

Again… My hands are stained with the blood of my beloved. The realization makes a sting drive itself into my chest. I did this… This is my fault, isn't it?

"Takeru-chan, are you alright?" Sumika asks me, with a broken voice.

Only then I realized what was around me. A familiar and unfamiliar landscape. It's almost as if our city had fused with the city of the other world, creating a chimera with some buildings intact, some completely collapsed, and smoke rising to the heavens.

"What the hell is this?"

"What are we gonna do? How are we gonna go home?" She said with a tiny voice holding my arm tighter and tighter.

"Look, there are some officers coming. They'll get things under control." I rub her head slowly, to calm both her and me.

I can't… If I focus on the memories again… Sumika… Meiya… Kei… Chizuru… Marimo-chan and the Valkyries…

I gotta get out of here. I gotta get back before it's too late. Sensei… I gotta find Sensei!

Police officers were running around. I could hear the chimes of the firefighters. The city was probably in a horrible state. Will it go back to how it was? Or will this place turn into some ruins, too?

We, and many other civilians, were taken to this 'safe area' until the police guarantees we can go back safety. We were later questioned about what happened and what we saw. I told them that the corpse under the pole post was Tama and about what I saw in as much detail as I could, since Sumika was made a wreck of tears.

Eventually, things settled down a bit and we were made to ride a bus of the police to be escorted to our houses along many other people. Sumika's eyes were completely red by that point and she said no word during our travel.

I gaze at the aftermath through the window as we move. This was no doubt done by a leak from the other world, yet I'm supposed to not be a conductor anymore. I'll have to look for Sensei as soon as possible, assuming she didn't die during this.

Sumika's head falls on my shoulder, she fell asleep. I saved her from that pole, right? I saw how they were going to be crushed and managed to react just in time. Was Sumika going to die? Or was she going to be reduced to a brain like the time I ran away?

No, what does that matter?! That means I just changed the outcome of the causality! How was it that Yuuko-sensei said? Things get reversed so the effect appears before the cause?

Regardless, I just contradicted Sensei's theory again. Something that should have happened, didn't. So, if I sense that an accident may happen before I go back, I can try to prevent it.

Well, none of this should be happening so I can only pray Sensei has an answer for this and is willing to hear me out.

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*Same day. Around 9 PM.*

*(Takeru's House.)*

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My house was okay, but Sumika's house looked exactly like the one from the other world, minus the collapsed Gekishin of course. Her parents were found below the rubble. My parents pretty much forced her to stay with us. There's still some sirens in the distance, a lot of people are probably trapped in the fallen buildings or injured so it's going to be a long night for the rescue teams.

"… half the city has taken severe damage, with many important buildings collapsed. There's also places where the electric service is not available. The municipal forces are doing their best to both rescue any survivors and repair the basic services as fast as possible. The only hospital that hasn't taken serious damage is-"

The news continue to report the status of the city, with images taken from a copter filling the screen. It's obviously not as bad as the other world but this is still really bad for what we're used to in this world.

"… the estimated amount of casualties is somewhere around a hundred. However, since we haven't scoured all affected areas yet the number will surely rise."

My mind drifts to what happened to Mikoto and Tama. Was that how you died back there? Just to protect me?

And yet I couldn't stand up. I saw how the cables were going to fall, but I couldn't even move with all the shaking. I couldn't reach Tama, even if she was just a bit farther away. I couldn't warn Mikoto, even when he was also close by.

Again, all I could do was stand by and watch someone important to me die.

"Takeru, go call Sumika. Dinner's ready." Mom tells me.

I'm not the only one hurting, so I have to keep my shit together. Like Hayase said once, I can't go pushing my emotional burdens onto others.

I go to the small storage room where we put a futon for her. Knocking the door before I speak, I call out to her.

"Sumika, dinner's ready."

No answer. I don't think forcing her to come out is a good idea. She must be feeling horribly right now. Not only she saw what happened to the guys, but when she came home there was no home left. Not the building, not the people.

Maybe I should just bring her food here. As I was leaving, I heard the door opening. She slowly got out, gaze on the floor, and walked up to me.

She looked so faint, as if she would vanish into the air when I stopped looking. She never looked so weak, ever.

"You okay? Want me to bring the food to you here?" She shakes her head. "Okay then, let's go to the table."

We go to the kitchen, but she's walking so slowly. I wait in the hallway, just to make sure she doesn't fall or anything. She looks devastated, I can't even imagine how she must be feeling right now. How did I feel the first time I lost everybody?

I go up to her and grab her arm to help her walk.

"Thanks, Takeru-chan." Her voice is almost a whisper.

As we got to the table I was going to lower the volume of the TV, but the person on the screen prevented me from doing so.

"… believe that it's in these situations that those at the top must do everything they can to aid their fellows. That's why the Mitsurugi Group will donate the materials for the reconstruction of the city, as well as food and medicine for those in need of treatment or shelter. We will also cooperate by hiring laborers to bring the city back on its feet as fast as possible." Meiya looked completely different. Right now she was like the other Meiya, resolute and unwavering. Her usual smile and light tone were nowhere to be found. That's Meiya for sure, always ready to rise to the occasion.

And here I am, doing nothing again. If only I could do something to help, but I'm merely a civilian here.

"Meiya-san truly is amazing." Sumika said. "Even in this situation…"

"Well, we do know she always goes overboard when someone needs help. She is so used to doing things in an extreme way, this is like the perfect work for her." Even indirectly, you always bring me back on my feet Meiya.

"Sumika-chan, here. I hope you like this." My Mom had finished placing the food on the table.

"Thanks, really." She said quietly as she sat down.

There were no words to say. We just ate in silence, listening to the news. Some streets looked destroyed, a school caught on fire, the train station got wrecked.

Even if I want do something, right now I don't think I could do anything. Not only I'm just a civilian here, but I'm feeling horrible now that everything is sinking in. It's clear that this happened because of me, and with all that's going on I can't go ask Sensei for help. Not like we could just snuck into the reactor again in this mess.

I go back to my room and throw myself onto the bed. I need to get back there ASAP. Let's start preparing an explanation for Sensei. At least I can do that right now.

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*August 19th. Around 8 AM.*

**(** *Takeru's House.* **)**

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Yesterday I caught a broadcast where they said that the public security force was taking people to help as volunteer workers. Since there will be no classes with all this, maybe I should go help. With my current strength and stamina I'm sure I'll be of use. And this is my fault, least I can do is try to do all I can to help. I also can't meet with Sensei until things settle down, so, even if it's just a little, it's in my best interest to help.

I told Mom and Dad that I was going to help out during dinner last night. They objected. They don't know how strong I am now. My reflexes are also much better than before regaining my memories, so no worries there either.

As I was getting ready to leave Mom kept pestering me.

"Takeru, I know you've been exercising a lot. But you shouldn't push yourself to help. There's other people that can-"

"Mom, I'll be fine. If we young ones don't rise up to aid in times of need, this country is screwed." I know that the values I learned over there may clash with how things are here, since nationalism is seen as a rather bad thing here. But I want to help my city, in any way I can.

"There's an emergency alarm, do you know what that means in Japan? To forbid people to go to work? That's how bad this is. The city is in ruins, what can you do to help?"

"A little something is better than nothing." And this is no ruins. We still are very far from that reality.

"You're so hard headed. Why did you have to take after Mom like this?" She sighs as she fumes and complains about Grandma, apparently giving up on stopping me.

"Don't worry, Mom. I'll be back before dusk."

"You better! If you get injured, I swear, I'm not letting you off easily!" She starts waving her finger menacingly at me.

She says I'm stubborn, but she's the same. Both her and Dad are always doing whatever they want without telling me anything. And if I ask they just insist they're doing fine, because they're adults.

And then they get surprised at how I turned out, hehe.

"Takeru-chan? Where are you going?" A frail voice comes from the hallway.

"Good morning, Sumika. I'm going to volunteer to help with whatever it is I can do."

"Eh? Will you be alright?" Despite being so weak herself she still worries about me.

"Don't worry! I'm going to be fine. You rest up and eat, yes? You look like a ghost. No pushing yourself or anything, alright?" I pat her head softly before going towards the door.

"Okay. Be careful." She gives me a small smile and goes to sit at the table.

"Well, I'm off. Mom take care of Sumika."

"Like I need you to tell me! Be careful, okay?"

I wave as I leave. I catched the address of the office where they are accepting volunteers on the news while eating breakfast. I read the paper I had written the address of the place to go volunteer and take off.

They gave me one of those yellow things that the transit people use, but in blue. I was assigned to a team of another five volunteers under a police officer. It looks like they are sending my group to deliver supplies to shelters and hospitals.

The others seem to have some problem lifting some of the boxes, but this is nothing for me. I end up delivering three or four more boxes than what I should have, but thanks to that we were speeding up the process.

We started at 10 AM, and it now was around 3 PM so we stopped to have lunch.

Since I've been training I'm still as fit as when I was a soldier, this kind of work is nothing to me. The other guys asked me what kind of routine I did, I shared some advice with them on how I exercised as we finished eating our lunch and got back on the van.

"All right, listen up crew! We are going to pick up some more supplies and take them to the last hospital. Then we go to Hakuryo Highschool, that is currently being used as a shelter for people of the neighborhood until the nearby shelter is repaired. Then we will

deliver water and food to the neighborhood, since it seems some places have no water and electricity. You got that?!"

We all replied in unison. This guy… I think I've seen him somewhere. Can't remember well where. Wait… isn't he one of the MP that was on guard when I arrived at Yokohama Base?

So the school is being used as a shelter, huh? Wonder how many people are there.

We delivered the supplies to the hospital and went our way to the school. When we got there it was obvious it was filled with people. Some kids were playing near the gate, a few teenagers were hanging around the courtyard.

The leader confirmed with one of the guards our order, showing them a paper. He then gave the us the okay to take the boxes to the gym. As I was taking a box with medicinal supplies to the gym a voice called out to me.

"Shirogane? That you?" Kei was also here, with a nurse hat on her head.

"You helping out too, Ayamine?" Don't think about what happened. Stay cool.

"Yes. What's that?" She says pointing at the big box I was carrying.

"Medicinal supplies. Taking them to the gym."

"They send me to get those. Lucky." It's amazing how you can keep your cool and smile in a situation like this Kei. Even though I know that inside you're also nervous and scared, I'm still amazed at how strong you are.

We go to the gym together. The hallways are full of people, to think all of them lost their homes is just horrible. And like Sumika, they

may have lost their families too. It reminds me of how Yokohama Base was after the attack of the BETA.

We reach the gym and another familiar voice reaches my ears.

"Ayamine?! Why did you come back without the supplies?!" Chizuru berates Kei, like she usually does.

Of course this would happen. They volunteer to help and end up together. Those two are joined at the hip by some cosmic force.

"I did bring them. With Shirogane."

"Shirogane? What does he has to-"

"I'm the one bringing the supplies, Sakaki. Give me a minute and I'll bring the rest." I tell her as I put the box on the floor.

"You're helping, too? Heh, that's reassuring. Ayamine, go and help him bring the boxes please." Chizuru says as she starts taking the supplies in the box to the other nurses and doctors.

"Okay."

"Thanks for lending me a hand Ayamine." I told her as we made our way back to the van.

"It's nothing. Can't believe you are helping."

"Hey, I also a have a good side, you know? And since I can lift this is something I can reliably do."

"What's up with that? When did you get so buff?" She starts poking my sides with an accusing glare. Kei stop that, please. That dubious look…

It's just like when we got together in both worlds and she got suspicious of something. I look away, embarrassed and sad after remembering our relationships.

"I just exercise a lot, that's all."

"You're blushing. How cute." Damn you, Kei. You have no idea how much it hurts to hear that from you.

"E-Enough with the teasing, that van over there is where the supplies are."

The guys in the crew were surprised, but the leader welcomed the help. We finished bringing all the supplies in a flash.

There were more people here than I thought. I haven't had the chance to go look at the city from the top of the hill, it must be a shocking sight to behold.

"All right boys! Is that the last one?" The leader says as one of the other guys brings the last box. The man nods and we all prepare to leave.

"Alright, guess I gotta go. Keep up the good work Ayamine."

"You too, Shirogane." She smiles as we part ways.

As we were making our way to the van we hear a commotion. Someone seems to be fighting. Then a loud noise could be heard.

A gunshot.

When we got outside we were greeted by a horrible visage.

The guy we left to watch over the van and the guards of the gate were on the floor in a lake of blood. There were a lot of people with their faces wrapped up in clothing with baseball bats and other blunt weapons, one of them had a pistol. What the hell is happening?!

"Get inside! Everyone get inside!" The leader got most of the other guys back into the school, but some of them were shot by the aggressors.

"Who are those guys?! Terrorists?" I can't believe these guys choose to do this now. Why is this…

… The attack on Yokohama Base. It's repeating itself right now. Or is it the coup? Are both incidents mixing each other here?! I don't even know anymore.

"You know the orders, boys! Let's thrash this place!" One of the hooded men screamed as he started running towards the gate with a metal bat on his hand.

The rest soon followed. There were maybe thirty of them.

"Hey! All of you! I'm a police officer! Drop your weapons or I'll have to arrest you!" The leader screamed at the mob, showing his badge and pistol to them.

They didn't stop. All the other people had ran inside already, only me and the leader were at the gate.

"Shirogane, it's brave of you to stay. But I can't involve a civilian in-"

"Sir, I've received some military training. You don't have to worry about me!" I said to him while dodging a bat and countering the guy with a punch, knocking him out in one go.

As the one with a gun shot at the air, we hid behind the gate. The thugs used that slight breach to rush into the school, we leaped from behind the walls towards them, I took on three of them as they came at me.

Some of the guys flat out ignored us and ran inside the school as others blocked us. The sound of shattered glass and screams tainted the air. Five of the thugs tried to prevent us from following the rest after they had gotten inside.

We quickly knocked them out, they were just runts. I'll never lose to scum like that, it'd be an insult to the Instructor and all the people

that trained me in the BETA world.

"Shirogane, on me! If you have to use a bat or something to subdue them, do it!"

He had to shoot some of those guys on their feet to make them stop thrashing about before knocking them out. We rush into the school without waiting a second.

We had to split up since they had gone in different directions and were destroying the school and hurting the civilians inside. I smack a bat into the head of a guy that was trying to beat up some boys. There's another one on the end of the hallway chasing someone!

I ran after him, but hearing something I stop and take a step back.

**BANG!**

A loud noise rang in my ears. One guy was in a nearby classroom and threw a homemade bomb at me. I dodged the thing just in time, talk about the devil's luck.

The thug kicks me in the face as he laughs.

"What's this?! A hero! The hell you think you are, bitch?!" He starts kicking me in the stomach while I'm on the floor. But his kicks don't hurt me, if he were kicking my head that would be another story.

I grab his leg when he goes for another kick and twist his ankle. I stand up, a little sore from the kicking, and give him a strong chop to his neck. Out cold, you won't be kicking nothing for awhile.

With all the noise it's not hard to find them, but the damage is already done. Some people were hit on the face with a metal bat, some were cut with a knife.

All the training in close combat I did with Meiya and Kei allowed me to best them in combat, even when they had a weapon. And when they threatened a civilian and I 'surrendered', my reflexes and

muscles allowed me to strike them when they didn't expect it or to withstand some hits from the bats until I could counter. Luckily I wasn't the only one fighting back, but I was the only one *with training* fighting back.

After a short while, the police arrived at the school. The leader vouched for me, as well as many people that saw how I fought to stop the aggressors.

"So, is it over?" I ask the leader as I put some bandages over a cut I got on my hand.

"No, they took some hostages to the gym. Since it's separated from the school building it only has one entrance. Don't worry, we have it surrounded."

I breathe a sigh of relief. It was a rather short fight, but it feels as if I had been running around for an hour straight. I sit on the floor to catch my breath, I can feel my heart in my neck. The leader hands me an ice pack to put on my bruises. This is nothing, compared to how I was after the BETA attack on our base, I can endure this much.

I stood up and we went to the courtyard since the leader wanted me to tell the head officer that came here what happened when I fought with the thugs, in case what I knew was useful.

When we got there, it seemed that the thugs were trying to negotiate with the police, showing all the hostages inside the gym.

I felt a shiver when I saw that Kei and Chizuru were in the group of hostages. The hooded men opened the door to show that all the hostages were fine.

"So, officers, as you can see all the hostages are in prime condition. But depending on your actions, some of them may have a little accident."

One of the thugs inside the gym waves a bat towards the head of a little boy in slow motion. Those bastards!

"So, what do you want? A helicopter?" An officer that was dressed like Chief Yoroi addressed the thugs.

"Hoho, you catch on quick! That and five million yen."

"What? Five million?" I can't help but be surprised at his claim. How on earth is the police supposed to bring them that crazy amount of money?

"Crazy, right? Can't tell what these guys are thinking." The leader is as surprised as I am.

Actually, all the officers here are surprised by the claim. Where do they want the police to get that much money from?

"We do not know if we can get you the amount you ask of us. But, we can bring you-"

"Nope! Five million or nothing! Didn't the Mitsurugi Group said that they'd take care of the expenses of the city? Then, just think of this as another expense and that's it! Problem solved, amirite?"

"We can't confirm that they'll agree to do so. We can get you the helicopter and a smaller-" The thug interrupts him again.

"Stop wasting my time! For every hour that you take, we'll kill one of the hostages! So, that's what? Eight hours? So get it done, we clear? Unless you don't care 'bout their safety." The guy waves his gun towards the hostages. And with that, he went back inside the gym.

All the officers started to discuss what to do frantically, while the one with the coat took out his cellphone and made a call.

"Shirogane, after you tell us what happened you can go home. You've done enough today." The leader gives me a pat on the back.

"I appreciate your concern, but my friends are in there. I'd like to stay here, until this is all over."

He looks at me in the eye, smiles and gives me a strong pat on the shoulder, like how Kyozuka-san used to.

"Okay, boy. But go back inside the school. Leave this to the police, no matter how much training you've had, you're still a civilian."

I can't do nothing but accept that. Here, I'm just a college student. I'm not a Cadet nor a Lieutenant anymore. Imagine if I flew here in a TSF, heck even the suit would be an awesome thing to have. I bet I could take a gunshot and shake it off like it was nothing.

The man that was dressed like Chief Yoroi came over and asked me about what happened. I told him everything truthfully.

"… And then I ran into the police and the leader, who told me about the hostages. After treating my wounds, we came here."

"I see. You've done a great deed today, Shirogane-kun. You have my thanks."

Just as he said that, another younger officer comes the man in a suit looking pale, brows arched.

"Sir! We have contacted with the Mitsurugi Group, but they do not wish to cooperate."

"What?! You did tell them of their threat of killing each one of them for every hour that passes?"

"Yes, sir. Of course we did. But they claimed that this is the responsibility of the police. They do not wish to give such a large sum for some hostages."

"Damn them! It's not like I expected them to agree to that crazy amount, but at least give us something. We can't get anywhere close to that amount."

The officer then goes up to the phone they had set up and called them himself. Soon after that he started cursing whoever was on the other side of the line. I don't know who they are talking with, but it's probably a third or fourth line employee. Damn, if the Mitsurugi Group doesn't give us a hand… There's no way anyone can fork that amount of money. Kei… Chizuru…

Wait… Do I have Tsukuyomi-san's number on my cellphone? Yes, I do.

Should I… Would she even pick up? After what I did on the salon? After what I said to Meiya? No, this is not the time for dark thoughts. I can help the police. I can help Kei and Chizuru.

I'm sure that if Meiya hears about Kei and Chizuru being in danger she would definitely help us. She may even bring more than double of the amount they ask, knowing her.

They might hate me, but those two should be important for Meiya. So, even if they yell at me and insult me, I have to do what I can to help them. If I don't…

The final moments of Tama and Mikoto resurface within me. I'm not letting the causality take anyone else from me. Finding my courage I dial the number.

…

The tone rang, but she didn't pick up.

Heh, of course she wouldn't. Not with all the horrible things I said to them.

At least I tried, now it's up to the police. This is so frustrating, to have no power to do anything. It's not like I can rush in there and beat them up, that'd only make things worse. Not like the police would allow me to have a part in this.

I lay against a wall, looking at the courtyard from afar. Now that I get a good look at it, it's amazing how similar the school and the base are. Sensei must have ordered the aboveground building to be rebuilt to the smallest detail over there.

But, how did Chizuru and Kei die in Kashgar? As I was trying to recall how things went in the moments before I went into the reactor my phone started ringing.

This number!

"Hello?" Tsukuyomi-san's voice, with a cold tone, sounds on the other side as I answered.

"Hello, Takeru-sama. Did you call me before, by any chance?"

"Yes, Tsukuyomi-san. I have something to tell you."

"Is there anything I could do for you? I'm a very busy person." She's mad. Can't blame her. And despite that, she still called me.

"I didn't call you to ask something for me. Ayamine and Sakaki need Mitsurugi-san's help, would you be willing to listen?"

"Your friends? If this is a trick-"

"They are being held hostages in the gym of Hakuryo High School. We were here as volunteers, but suddenly a group of thugs broke in. They started to hurt people, and then took some of them to the gym. They asked the police for a helicopter and a crazy amount of money, or they will kill one hostage every hour. They said that the Mitsurugi Group could easily fork over that amount. The police has no way to get the money, and they are negotiating with someone from the group. But it seems that it's not going well."

"… Is this true?"

"If you don't believe me, you can ask your employees. With your position I'm sure you could get more information about this incident

than what I know." I heard her shout some orders to the Three Idiots, and after a few moments she replied back.

"So, you wish to ask Meiya-sama to save your friends, by giving some lowly thugs a giant amount of money."

"Well, yes. She's the only-"

"However, we have no obligation to do so. This is the police's job. The Mitsurugi Group is not the state, and it is certainly not responsible for the well-being of Japan's citizens. Would you have us do the same for every criminal that asks the Group for ransoms in the entire country?"

She has a point. If they do this once, other criminals may try to do the same. And if people start expecting the Group to do it, when they eventually refuse to do so, who knows what problems that will cause them? No, think of the political implications it would cause to have them fix the problems of the state. The ripple effect may just be terrible.

Now that I think about it, the first guy did say something about orders, and they specifically requested the Mitsurugi Group to bring the money. This may just be a play in someone's chessboard.

"You're right. I shouldn't have asked you to take responsibility for this. Forget I called you."

"I didn't say we weren't going to help."

"Huh?"

"If Meiya-sama finds out her friends were harmed while we knew of this and didn't inform her, she would certainly ask for our heads. So Takeru-sama, I'll talk with Meiya-sama about this. However, we won't let the criminals escape either. And I'd like you to know that we will ask you to repay this favor tenfold. Please put the police on the phone."

"Wait! There's… something I should tell you."

"What is it? Can it wait?"

"The criminals… may have powerful explosives with them."

"What?! How do you know this?!"

I remember there was a giant explosion just before I went to the reactor in Kashgar. At that point, Mikoto and Tama were still alive dealing with the door BETA, I think. And Meiya was the last one to die, so if I had to guess, I'd say Chizuru and Kei used their S-11s to blow themselves up. They died in a giant explosion. And if what's happening right now is the causality trying to balance itself…

"I have a hunch it'll be like that. I know it sounds crazy, but…"

"… I suppose it would be in our best interest to remain ever vigilant. After all, this whole accident would seem to have been staged. Thanks for the warning, Takeru-sama. Let's hope it's just a hunch. Could you put the head officer on the line, please?"

I go up to the officer, that was still shouting at the receiver, and after a short and vague explanation he agreed reluctantly to talk with whoever was on the phone. His face changed as they spoke, the agitation left his voice.

"Shirogane, who did you call?" The leader asked at me, curiously.

"An old friend. I just hope they go easy on me when they want me to pay this favor back." I say with a light smile.

I'm glad they agreed to help, but that bit about paying the favor sounded really ominous. Who knows what kind of revenge they have in mind for what I did.

"Shirogane-kun, I won't ask how you did this, but you have my most sincerest thanks. You may just have saved the hostage's lives." The officer said as he came to give me back my phone.

"I just did what I could to help, sir." I had to keep my hand in place to not do a salute.

The officer informed the thugs that they agreed to their terms, and asked them some time to bring them the copter and the money. And so, we waited for the help to arrive.

…

This may just have been the longest hour of my life. After what felt like an eternity, a helicopter appeared on the sky and landed in the track field, and from it Tsukuyomi-san came out with…

Wait a sec… Did Tsukuyomi-san use glasses? No, she didn't. Her hair color is different too.

A woman that looks very similar to Tsukuyomi-san, alongside some people in suits, came out of the helicopter.

"Hello, officer. My name is Maya Tsukuyomi, I was sent by Meiya Mitsurugi-sama to deliver both the helicopter and the money. What is the situation like?"

So her name is Maya. I wonder if she works with an attorney…

I stayed near the school building, letting the police and Maya-san deal with this incident. I can only hope that these guys truly do not have any explosives.

As the police called out to them, the same thug came out to talk. If I could explain with words the face he made I would. It's like in those manga where the eyes of a character shoot out in a dramatic fashion when they get surprised. He definitely wasn't expecting the police to bring the money, so what was his goal?

The guy goes back inside, and slowly the thugs go out of the gym towards the copter. They had a teacher with them, holding a gun to his head.

But when they got near the helicopter, in a split second, the thugs ended on the floor crying in pain. The Three Idiots appeared outta nowhere and smacked them hard. Thank God they can be reliable when we need them.

"Hey! Get off me, dude!" One of the thugs tried to fight back as an officer was cuffing him.

"This isn't how it was supposed to go, dammit!" Another was kicking up a fuss, until Maya-san punched him hard in the stomach.

I forgot how scary Tsukuyomi-san was in the other world, and if this Maya is just like her, that guy is not waking up soon.

"Hehe… Heheheh… You think this is over, dogs?!" The thug that did the negotiations with the police started laughing like a mad man.

"Hey! Stay quiet, or we will have to use force to detain you!"

"Who cares if you have me?! We won't go down without doing our part! MAY THE SAKURAS BE TAINTED RED!" He screams something at the top of his lungs. What the hell is he… Was that some sort of code? What could it-

**BOOOOOOOOM!**

There was an explosion inside the gym, wings of blazes stretched out of its windows. The hostages… were still inside. An image of Kei and Chizuru dying in an exploding Gekishin came back to me.

Just like on Kashgar, everything is repeating itself. They're… They're going to…

"Chizuru! Kei!" I leap towards the gym, but hands grab me from behind preventing me to go to their aid. "Let go off me!"

"Oi, Shirogane! Calm down! You'll die if you into the gym!" The leader and another three officers were tightly grabbing me, and even so couldn't fully stop me.

"Shut up! They're going to-"

"Shirogane-sama." A sharp and cold tone spoke to me, and Maya-san came into my vision. "There is no need to worry, Meiya-sama sent with me capable people to take care of this. Take a look."

She gestured towards the gym's gate, where the men that came with Maya-san charged into the gym wearing something that looks like gas masks and some weird looking black suits. Slowly, the tension leaves me, and as the hands release me I fall to the ground.

I can't do anything… Useless again. I can do nothing but watch…

They managed to rescue all the hostages in mere minutes, without anyone of them suffering injuries or burns. Had I jumped in to help, I would just have been a burden.

I got closer to see the people as they were carrying them out, but I couldn't believe my eyes. Kei and Chizuru were burned. Badly. Their bodies looked scorched.

I feel a twister tearing my heart from within. Again. I failed again. How many more times am I gonna screw up? I should have left as soon as I regained my memories.

… No, it would have been better if I weren't here to begin with. I shouldn't have come back if this is what it would cost.

The men took some of the hostages in the copter to a hospital after treating them with some of the supplies we had brought. The thugs were taken by the police.

This little incident was over. Was this enough? Did I manage to save Kei's and Chizuru's lives? Had I not called Tsukuyomi-san they would have died, the fact that the thugs set those explosives on the gym is proof enough they didn't have plans to leave the hostages alive. But, can I call this a good result? Are they even going to

survive? How will they live from now on? Will they recover? How long will that take?

If only I had acted as soon as I got my memories back. No, how would I have convinced Sensei to help me? Sigh… Useless…

I didn't think today would be such a crazy day too. Everything was fine last week, why did everything start happening now all of a sudden?

As I was resting against a wall while looking up, I heard someone approach me.

"Shirogane-sama." It was Maya-san.

"Hello, did you need anything from me?" Get your act together. I'll cry when I get back home.

"Yes, allow me to introduce myself. I'm Maya Tsukuyomi, cousin of Mana Tsukuyomi. I also serve Meiya-sama as one of her personal retainers." So she's just like Tsukuyomi-san. Cousins, huh?

"I'd like to thank you for coming to help today. I know it was selfish to ask you to take responsibility for this."

"Please, do not thank me. I was just carrying out the orders Meiya-sama gave me. She's the one you should be thanking."

"I know that. But you were the one that came here, along all the other people. You also deserve my gratitude. Thank you very much." I say as I bow to her. This is the least I can do, it's all thanks to them that the hostages may survive.

"Hmm, I was told you were a rather rude person. Seems like you do know how to be polite when it's needed." She adjusts her glasses as she looks at me intently. Can't blame her for thinking that, I used to be quite a prick.

"So, Maya-san, what did you need from me?"

"Maya-san?" She looks surprised I used her first name.

"Sorry, if I called you Tsukuyomi-san I'll end up confusing both of you in my head. Is it alright for me to call you that?"

"If that is how you wish to address me, you may do so Shirogane-sama. Now, regarding my business with you. You shall be receiving a call shortly to inform you of what we desire in exchange of this favor. Considering what you just went through, I believe it best for you to return home now."

"I'll be awaiting the call then. Thanks again for coming to help, tell Mei… Mitsurugi-san that I'm truly grateful for this."

"There is no need for such words. I just did what I was ordered to do. I shall relay your words to Meiya-sama. Well then, I have some business with the police yet. This will be all." She gives me a small bow and goes her way.

Right now, I don't know what could I tell Meiya regarding what happened at the salon. Don't know if I'm still a conductor or if there's a leak, but the matter is that I have to find Sensei and get her to listen. Before Meiya suffers the same fate as her other self.

The police thanked me for my actions a thousand times. Some of them even asked me if I had any interest in joining. I gave the leader the blue uniform of the volunteers before leaving. He insisted it was okay for me to leave, and that he'll take care of explaining what happened to his superiors.

I wanted to walk home, but the leader insisted on driving me there. Nothing was said as we got in and he brought the car to life. I remain looking up through the window, feeling hollow and exhausted.

"You know, Shirogane. Many officers go their whole life without firing their guns even once." I look at him, his jaw tense as he slowly drove through the ruined neighborhood.

"I can see that happening in this peaceful country."

"Yeah. I'm not one of those." His face is covered by the shadows that only someone who has seen a dead body could possess. A face I know all too well. "It was something similar to this, in a hostage situation we couldn't pacify the aggressor. The hostage ended up falling from a window at the fourth floor of an apartment. That shit messed me up. So, I'm not gonna tell you to not worry, but don't hold back the tears. These things… It's better to take them off your chest. Let it out. You did enough today, kid. If it weren't for your help, those bastards would have messed me up big time at the gate, and thanks to you the hostages might survive. You did more than the police, when you think about it." He laughs dryly.

I guess that from his point of view I did a great deed. And I can totally understand what he means, about letting things out. After all it's what I did when I came back. When Marimo-chan comforted me.

… Wait one second. The leader… He was one of the MP back at the base, right? Didn't he die during the attack? Does that mean that… I prevented his death?

"We're here." I look out the window to my right and see that we arrived at my house. I feel a palm on my shoulder. "Rest well, Shirogane. You deserve it. You'll have to go for a visit later at the hospital. Can't be all gloomy when you go there, right?"

"… Yeah, I can't look like this. Thanks sir, take care." I return his smile and get off the van.

"You too, kid."

Slowly, the van goes its way into the street. I saved him, didn't I? That means that… Chizuru and Kei will live too, right?

When I got inside Dad was in the kitchen, which is weird since he doesn't know how to cook.

"Dad? What are you doing?"

"Takeru! Where were you?!" He looks worried as he rushes to my side. Who are you and what have you done to my Dad?!

"I was in the school when there was an explosion, and…"

"You were there? I just saw it on the news. Thank God you're safe. Were you kept there by the police?"

"Yeah, something like that." He doesn't need to know, let's just shut up about it.

"Okay. Now Takeru, I want you to stay calm. I know that what I'm about to tell you isn't nice…" What's up with him? He sounds really on edge. Don't tell me something else happened… "We had to take Sumika-chan to the hospital. When your Mom went to call her for lunch she was very weak, couldn't even stand by herself."

"What?! Is she still in the hospital?"

"I came back when we saw that it was something serious. So that when you came back you wouldn't find the house empty. But you took more time than I thought." It is near six PM after all, the sun is already going down. Visiting hours may end any second now.

"Can we still go to see her?"

"I think so, get in the car. We may have to go over the speed limit. We gotta pick up your mother anyway."

We got to the hospital in no time, cutting it close to driving through some red lights. Dad took me to the room she was in. With heavy footsteps and even heavier breathing, I marched through the halls despite Dad telling me to slow down and some nurses complaining. Please Sumika, be alright. I prevented the event that would have crippled her, so she should… She has to be alright!

Drowning out every other sound, almost breaking into a sprint, pushed forward by a cold shiver on my back, recalling our times together, I kept a lead on Dad until the flow of nurses died down.

When we got to the room, Mom was crying by a bed. Sumika was laying still in it. There was an annoying sound in the room.

The sound that the thing that counts heartbeats does when a heart… stops beating.

Slowly, I went near her. She looked as if she were sleeping. I grabbed her hand, it was cold. It had no pulse.

…

Why?

"We couldn't determine the reason, but her vitals were plummeting very fast. Her heart stopped just a few minutes ago. We tried everything we thought of in the little time we had, but to no avail." The doctor explained to us in their usual slow, detached, and calm tone.

Huh? Sumika is… dead?

…

Huh?

… This can't be. Why? I avoided her death. She shouldn't have… No, wait. Just like after Operation Ouka, sleeping peacefully in her bed, Sumika laid unmoving. However, the one in my dream isn't Sumika but the 00 Unit. And to make it…

That's right, Sumika had two accidents in the other world. The first was when the BETA reduced her to a brain. The second when we killed the brain to give birth to the 00 Unit. I prevented the first one, but…

Kasumi's words echo through my mind: "Sumika-san is dead. Your fight is over."

Over. Tama's shape squashed by a pole comes back. Again.

Over. Mikoto's screams as the cables fell play on loop. Again.

Over. Kei's burnt arms and face flashed in my mind. Again.

Over. Chizuru's scorched hair and upper body overlaid themselves with my vision. Again.

Over. And Sumika… peacefully sleeping, lacking all heat and life. Again.

They're all dead. All over again.

My mouth can produce no sound as my lips part and move in vain, my eyes get hot as the tears start to pour from them. I fall to my knees abruptly, I feel my Dad arm's on me as he hugs me.

Everything became a black void. I don't remember what happened after that.

When I came to I was in my bed, and it was bright outside.

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*August 26th. 0 8:45 AM.*

*(Takeru's room.)*

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**Knock!**

I rustle under the sheets, barely opening my eyes. Looking towards the window, rays of light greet me as I frown. I cover my head with the sheets, diving back into my pillow.

There's another knock. I ignore it and shut my eyes tight. Then, I hear the door opening and a few steps coming nearby.

"Takeru? Hey, are you awake?"

"… What do you want, Mom?"

"You haven't left your room in these days and you expect me to simply leave you alone? Come to the kitchen, have breakfast at the table."

Sigh, what will that even achieve? Just let me rest, there's nothing to do now. Mom takes my blankets off, then takes my pillow from under me.

"You're getting off that bed, now. Go take a shower and come eat, Takeru."

"Sigh, I got it." She gives me a side glance, I sit on the bed letting my feet search for something to wear. "Sorry, Mom. Didn't mean to make you worry."

"Okay, that's enough of that attitude." She clenched one hand as her brows furrowed, then sighed. "I'm not scolding you, I understand how you must be feeling. But you need to take care of your health, Takeru." She turned around after giving me one last good look.

No, Mom. You have no fucking idea how I feel. But I can't keep acting like this, even if it feels like there's nothing I can do now.

After taking a short shower, I go to the kitchen and fall onto a chair. Ruffling my hair, I look up as I lean back onto my seat. Can't get a hold of Sensei, she isn't answering her house's phone. Without her, I can't do anything. Is the Conductor still active? And if it is, why? But if it isn't, how do I fix this? What if… there's nothing that can be done?

Mom serves me breakfast and we eat as the news play in the TV. A report of the contributions of the Mitsurugi Group was being shown. I wonder when will Meiya call me to tell me what she wants in return for the favor. Poking at the food, I slowly munch and swallow, drink and rest. Nothing can fill the void left running amok in my chest now.

Some days ago, when I went to the hospital where Chizuru and Kei were supposed to be, I found Chizuru's Mom crying on the reception. As well as Akane near her, looking just as she did when we left for Ouka with one eye patched up and one arm bandaged. I told them of what happened at the school, of how the Mitsurugi Group managed to rescue them before they were scorched to death. However, they told me they had died the night before despite the doctors' best efforts and some stuff that the Mitsurugi Group provided for their care.

Chizuru's Mom thanked me for calling for help, since it seems they could say their goodbyes thanks to that. Me and Akane talked for a second about how crazy everything was, as she also thanked me for calling Meiya since also could at least talk with Chizuru one last time. To say she was destroyed would be an understatement, she didn't even try to hide her tears and her creaky voice as I was doing.

But, thing is, in the middle of her cries, she told me her sister died too during the earthquake when I told her of what happened to Tama and Mikoto. Haruka-san died that day too, during the earthquake. She then was taken by the nurses so I couldn't ask her anything else, but that in turn got me to check the list of victims of the earthquake, to quell my doubts and fears.

As it turns out, all the Valkyries are dead already, save for Munakata and Kazama it seems. Even worse is that… Marimo-chan was killed in an all too similar way to her previous deaths on the evening of the 5th, just as I recovered my memories. That's all the proof I needed. I'm the cause of this shit, conductor or not. The only question that remains is whether this can be reversed or if it's permanent.

My nightmares have become more and more vivid. It's like I'm cursed, Operation Iceberg, Marimo's deaths, Ouka. I brought all this shit with me. All that's been happening just like the end of last loop, it's too similar to be a mere coincidence. Of my squadmates that died over there only Meiya is alive now, and probably not for long.

Apparently, going by the news, things are settling down and soon everything will 'return to normal'. I want to get out of here as soon as I can, but I guess it'll have to wait until we can use that reactor. And even then… What if…

I hunch over into the table, hiding my eyes behind my arms, feeling the back of my head going numb.

"Sigh…" In the end, I can't do jack shit myself.

**Ring! Ring!**

Mom was cleaning the dishes, Dad had gone to pick up the laundry. Slowly getting off my chair, I go pick up the phone and answer it.

"Hello?" A familiar voice sounded on the other side.

"Hello, Takeru-sama. Would you happen to be free as of now?"

"Yes, Tsukuyomi-san. I suppose this is about the favor I owe you?"

"Indeed. Would you be free this afternoon?"

"Yes." Not like I have anything to do now, I don't know where Sensei lives.

"Well then, Ichimonji will go pick you up at four. Meiya-sama wishes to have a talk with you." I suppose she herself wants to tell me what she wants in person, along asking for some explanations about the matter on the tournament probably.

"Roger. I'll be waiting then." She gives me her goodbyes and ends the call.

I fixed myself up, and then told Mom and Dad that I was going to visit a friend. When I heard something by the door, I looked out the window and saw the familiar giant limo. Takahashi-san greeted me as he opened the door. I never thought I would ride this thing again.

We eventually reached a very tall apartment in the nice part of the city. It looks like this part is in good shape despite the earthquake. At the door, Maya-san was waiting.

After our greetings we got inside and we rode the elevator.

"Meiya-sama will meet with you in her personal room. You shall be alone with her during your talk. I believe there is no need to remind you, however should we hear anything-"

"I'm not going to do anything to her, Maya-san." At least not physically. I don't know how she may take whatever I end up saying.

"Forgive my rudeness, Shirogane-sama. But now that Meiya-sama is the head of the Mitsurugi Group we have to be extra careful. And now that we know that you can defeat some of our best guards, it would be foolish not to warn you. Though I suppose it was just a waste of words."

"Were those really the best guards you had?" I'm genuinely curious. Those guys weren't so strong, and they were not particularly skilled either.

"Yes, while they were not as skilled as me or my cousin, they were certainly some of the best men we have."

"Huh." I never really realized how strong I got over there, compared to how things are here my squad would be like an elite team or something even before getting commissioned.

"If I might be so bold to ask, how did you get so strong? I was under the impression that you were a normal boy."

"So long as we have an objective, humans can do anything we put our minds into."

"Did you have a particular reason to pursue such strength?"

"To… protect those I care about. I don't want to stand watching when someone dear to me needs help."

"I see. So that's why you called us for help, despite knowing what you had done could have made us unwilling to listen to you."

"Basically. I knew that if it were for me, you wouldn't lift a finger. But since Sakaki and Ayamine were in danger…"

"You knew Meiya-sama wouldn't allow anything to happen to her friends. But there's something wrong with your reasoning, Shirogane-sama."

"Huh? What is it?"

"Had you been the one in danger… Meiya-sama would have taken far more drastic measures to ensure your safety."

… Huh?

"What do-" Before I could finish my question the door opened and Maya-san got out of the elevator.

She took me through some hallways until we reached a double door. Tsukuyomi-san was standing in front of it.

"Good work, Maya. Takeru-sama, Meiya-sama is waiting inside. Please, do go in. Just walk forward and you should reach the living room"

"Alright."

"Takeru-sama, if I may…" Tsukuyomi-san stops me just before I went into the room.

"What is it?"

"Could I ask you to refer to Meiya-sama as you used to? I know not of your reason, but please refrain from calling her by her surname." She was serious, I don't know what got into her.

Shouldn't it be the other way around? You should be telling me to show respect to her, not to talk to her casually. After what I did to you and what I said to her, she still wants me to call her Meiya? Does she still have feelings for me?

"… If you say so, I'll do it. Anything else?"

"No, forgive the interruption." She stands aside, leaving the way open.

I give a little bow to both of them before going into the apartment. But more than an apartment it looks like a mansion. This place is probably bigger than my house, though it's not surprising considering who is waiting for me here.

As I got to the living room, slowly minding my steps… I saw her. Couldn't help to squint my eyes, bite my lips, as I tried to bury those times where I wasn't enough. She was in a suit that reminded me of the UN uniform, gazing out the window.

Sighing hard, inhaling sharply, I swallow my fears and take that first steps towards her.

"H-Hello Meiya." I should try to start the conversation, whatever it is she wants to speak with me.

Just because she's always been nice to me doesn't mean she will always be like that, even less now after what I said. I have to give her my thanks properly.

She twitches as she heard my voice, but doesn't turn around to face me.

"… How are you faring, Takeru?"

"Feeling fine, despite all that has happened."

"I see. Please, sit down." She finally moves from the window and sits on a sofa.

I sat on a sofa that was in front of her, waiting for her to speak. She grabbed a cup and drank, keeping her gaze down. As she put it on her lap, she remained silent.

… How much time has passed? She's just there, drinking without even looking at me. Should I try to start the conversation? I can't really read her poker face now, so let's try to be civil.

"Um… Thanks for sending help so quickly in such short notice, Meiya. If it wasn't for you all the hostages would have certainly died back then."

"I see." She takes another sip, still not looking at me.

Is she collecting her thoughts? With how busy she is I don't think she would have called me here to do this.

"Uuh… I owe you an apology for what happened at the salon, assaulting your guards and Tsukuyomi-san. Sorry." I bow to her, but she still doesn't move an inch.

I don't know what else I can do in this situation. Why did she call for me? Or did she do it on impulse and is now regretting her decision? If she's having trouble putting her feelings in order, just talking might do the trick.

"Meiya, what did you want to talk about? Why did you call me here?"

"Would you happen to be in a hurry, perhaps?"

"No, just curious. It feels weird to be called by someone, and then be totally ignored."

"I am not ignoring you."

"Then, why-"

"Sakaki and Ayamine… passed away. From what the doctors I sent have told me, they had severe burns all over their body. They passed away yesterday."

"… I know. I went to check on them and ended up seeing Sakaki's mom devastated on the reception." She grimaces as she hears me.

So she was just being considerate. Sigh… Gotta stay cool. I can cry all I want back home, but for now I gotta keep my emotions under control.

"Sorry to have pressured you, and thanks again for sending help."

"You have no idea how worried I was." She finally looks at me, purple fire coming out of her eyes. "You suddenly call again, tell us about hostages and bombs, and you even expected us to give five million yen to the criminals?!" I have never seen Meiya so enraged, not even on the other world. Guess that's to be expected since we're not on good terms anymore.

"… Sorry." That's all I can say right now, since I couldn't do a thing yet again to help those I care about.

"Stop apologizing. It is unnecessary." She clears her throat and speaks again. "So, Takeru… How have you and Kagami been faring? I'm sure all this must be taking a severe toll on both of you. I heard from Tsukuyomi that Kagami's house crumbled during the earthquake, and that she is living with you now." She adverts her gaze at the end. So you still have feelings for me? "With all that has been going on, I didn't have the time to call you, and I needed Tsukuyomi by my side. Are you two alright?"

"I've been fine. Still have Mom and Dad, after all. Sure, can't say I'm alright, but I'm hanging in there."

"I see. You do seem… different, somehow." Our gazes met, she looks so different. This world's Meiya was always so shining, the other so resolute. Yet, her eyes now had a hint of a shadow in them. That confident air almost gone, Meiya was stiff as a statue. "And what about Kagami?"

"Sumika… died." No use in sugar coating it.

"Eh?"

"The day of the attack, when I returned home, Dad told me she was very weak, that they had to take her to the hospital. When we arrived, she was already…"

"What happened to her? Did she have some kind of internal damage?"

"No, the doctor couldn't find anything wrong with her. Her vitals just plummeted according to him." I know what happened. The digitalization of the brain or whatever it was called, I don't know how the causality balanced that but it's the source of her death.

"… How could this happen? Forgive me, Takeru. Making you remember this…"

"You didn't know. I'm sure you have more on your shoulders than me right now." She must be so busy with all the rescue and rebuilding efforts. And yet, she's sparing some time for me.

"Even so… Well, I'm truly sorry." She takes her cup again and drinks a slowly from it. After closing her eyes and taking a deep breath she faces me again. "Now then, about what I called you here for. Could you explain to me what happened in the salon?" She's dead serious. I don't think I'll be able to lie much, but she deserves an explanation.

"I was looking for everyone with Mikoto when we split up. I felt like someone was following me so I started to take random turns until I made it back to the lounge, where I saw Mikoto being forcefully

taken to the elevator by some men in suits. Then the ones that were following me got close and asked me to go with them. I refused and they got violent."

"Why did you not agree? And why did you react so violently?"

"They started it. I was… tired, and I thought they wanted to harm us. When one of them started to threaten me and attacked me, I defended myself and lost my cool. The other guard said they weren't going to harm me, but when we got out of the elevator five other men tried to assault me. Then I stopped caring and started fighting seriously."

"I see. Did you not hear that they were sent by the Mitsurugi Group? I told them to inform everyone of that as soon as they got out of the elevator."

"No, I don't recall them saying anything about that. Maybe I was so angry I didn't hear them."

"Alright. Now then, can you tell why did you hurt Tsukuyomi?" This time I could feel the anger in her voice and eyes, those purple embers darkening as she frowned.

After all, Tsukuyomi-san is very dear to her and I smashed her against a wall. But how do I explain this? Can't tell her about my memories, that's for sure.

"I… was in a foul mood. After Tsukuyomi-san told me you were there, I knew the others were safe. But I felt that if I went inside, I would have ruined your party. Then I tried to leave and she grabbed my shoulder, I reacted on impulse and threw her away. That was not my intention, I swear. I'm sorry, I was just… angry at the time." At myself, as I remembered how useless I was during Operation Ouka.

"You still were angry after Tsukuyomi told you I was there? You weren't… happy that you could see me again?" Don't look so sad, dammit. You're only making this harder on me.

"I had just… recalled some bad memories. I didn't want to be near anybody at that time." Meiya's death comes back again. No, dammit! Keep it inside, don't lose it.

"Takeru? Why are you wincing? Is there a problem?"

"Sorry, I just…"

"What happened to you? You told Tsukuyomi you had… remembered our promise, right?"

"The one in the park?" She gives a nod, avoiding my eyes.

"You also told me… that you had someone else. But you were lying. Why did you say that?"

"What? Lying?" How does she knows that I'm lying? I mean, technically it's not a lie. "Meiya,I wasn't lying about-" She interrupts me mid sentence, as she suddenly speaks up in a louder tone.

"I've kept a close eye on you… since I broke my engagement." She says as her voice slowly fades into a whisper.

"You got a close eye on me? You were stalking me?!" Meiya, what the hell?! I didn't knew she could be so… obsessive? Well, if she still has feelings for me…

"Huh? No, nothing of the sort! I just knew how you were doing in college and your general routine. Nothing more!" She says waving her hands around with a blush on her face.

"That's what stalking is, Meiya."

"No, it isn't! Nobody was following your every step, so it is not." Just how much does she know of what I've been doing? She's seriously scaring me right now.

"But why did you do that? Couldn't you just call me or something?"

"Well… yes, but…" Her gaze returns to the floor, as she starts fidgeting in her sofa. I wait for her to find the words to whatever she has to say. It's not normal to see her like this after all.

If anyone were watching us they wouldn't be able to tell this was the head of the most important business group in all of Japan talking with an average college student.

"Takeru, are you… angry about the promise?" Again with this?

"I told you I'm not, and I was the one-"

"No, you didn't. You haven't been in a relationship since you entered college." The way she says it as if it were a fact is somewhat scary, it's almost as if she were scolding me for even saying it. "Why do you lie? Are you trying to make me not feel guilty?"

"No, that's not it."

"Then, why? Do you not want to say that you truly are angry, and are using excuses to end the conversation?" Her cold tone returns as she shoots daggers at me with her eyes.

"Again, no. Just… I thought that you didn't want to see me anymore. That's the impression I got when I called Tsukuyomi-san to invite you to the meetup."

"Huh? Why would you-"

"She didn't talk to me like she used to. She kept the conversation short, was really cold to me, and it sounded as if I were a bother." That's how I felt after the thing, she kept answering in one or two words and hanged up without letting me finish talking.

"Tsukuyomi was just surprised. We didn't expect you to suddenly invite me somewhere after such a long time without contacting us."

"You live in a different world now, it's not like I can call you whenever I feel like. And with all that happened during the scandal…" I did feel

conflicted back then, but settled on keeping my distance. What could I have said to her? Getting closer at the time would only have given her more problems with the media.

"That… was my fault for not standing my ground and accepting to marry another. I know you must have felt betrayed when you remembered our promise. Forgive me."

"No… that's… Don't apologize for that. I'm sure you were under a lot of pressure. You did nothing wrong Meiya. I don't hate you or anything, you're still Meiya to me. And I also didn't get a clue until it was too late." That's a lie. I looked the other way so that I wouldn't have to hurt anyone.

"Takeru… Thanks, you don't know how much it means to hear those words from you." And for the first time since we started talking, she smiles. "So, um, Takeru… now that we have cleared all the misunderstandings, would you tell me how have you been since we ended school?"

"Don't you already know that? Since you've been observing me." She shoots a glare at me while folding her arms.

"No, I don't. And I want to hear it from you. As well as the tournament, I was watching the entire time and it was truly amazing!"

Is this even safe? I mean, I shouldn't be a conductor anymore. But with everything that's been happening…

She stares at me with pleading eyes. What are you, a puppy?! Stop that! No, don't remember her last gaze. Don't remember her last words. And yet, she starts groaning while remaining staring. Ugh, fine. If it'll make her stop that, I'll talk with her for a little while. My heart can't take this.

"I mean, I don't mind telling you but, do you have the time? Are you not busy?"

"Do not worry, I left Tsukuyomi in charge of everything." She declares with her usual confidence.

"Which one? Tsukuyomi-san or Maya-san?"

"Maya? Takeru, why do you use her name?" Is she… upset? And why is she folding her arms like that? Oh, she's jealous.

"If I called both of them Tsukuyomi-san it would be confusing, right?"

"Yes, it would. But you could have simply called her Tsukuyomi." I can't believe she's slightly pouting because of something like this.

"I guess… But, well, before anything there's something I'd like to tell you."

"What is it?"

"Listen to me closely, and please don't freak out. I know that what I'm going to tell you sounds crazy." If I don't warn her now, I might not have the chance to do it later. Who knows what the hell is going to happen to Meiya if the causality brings her death's information here.

"Alright, just say it. I shall remain calm."

"Meiya, your life is in danger."

"What?" Can't blame you for not believing it.

"Remember how I told Tsukuyomi-san that the thugs may have explosives?"

"Yes. What has that to do with me? Are you saying they're going after my life?"

"Would you believe me if I told you I saw what was going to happen to Ayamine and Sakaki in a dream?"

"In a dream?" Of course she wouldn't believe me, I know this sounds crazy.

"Yes, I saw them dying in an explosion in many dreams I've had. And in one of those dreams I've been having lately…"

"You see me dying?"

"Yes, you're being… restrained by something. You cannot move, and there is a blast that destroy the place you were being restrained at." That's the best explanation I can come up with now, if I try to remember anymore I might start crying again.

"I'm restrained? And the place where I am explodes too?"

"You don't have to take me seriously, it might just have been a coincidence that what happened that day was similar to my dreams."

"If you felt like it was important enough to warn me, I'll take it to heart. Don't worry, Takeru. I'm not dying so easily." She shows me her usual wide, confident smile. The one only this world's Meiya makes.

"Heh, I know you won't."

"Now then, tell me about your first year in college. How was it?"

I think Meiya spent two hours asking me all kind of questions about college, my everyday life and the tournament. She told me how much her grandfather suffered to recover from the poison, and how horrible it was to be married to that man. She made an effort to remark many, many times that there was no love in their relationship and that nothing happened between them. She also told me of how hard it was to remain calm when all the media ganged up on her. She felt so far away from the life she had led when she was living with me, and she felt so guilty about breaking the promise that she couldn't bring herself to call me, or anyone from the school group. If only I had the guts to have called her back then…

"Meiya-sama, forgive me for interrupting you, but it is rather late. Dinner will be ready in a few minutes." Maya-san spoke from the door that lead to the entrance.

"Is it so late already? Forgive me for keeping you here, Takeru. Would you like to have dinner with me?"

"Thanks for the offer, but I better go back home. Mom and Dad are surely worried about me."

"That's a shame, but we've spent enough time talking today. We'll continue our conversation another day. Maybe then I'll ask you to…" She breaks eye contact with me as her voice fades away.

"Ask me what?" She now looks somewhat sad, eyelids going down and lips twisting. I can guess what she wants to say, but since I want to leave this world I better shut up.

"… Nothing. Do not mind me. Tsukuyomi, please escort Takeru to his home. Takeru, I'll call you when I have some free time. If you ever are in need of anything, do not hesitate to call me."

"Thanks, but I'll try not to bother you too much. Well, I'll be going. Later Meiya. And… sorry for how I acted at the salon, and for what I said when you called."

"Do not worry about that, it's in the past now. See you later, Takeru." She gives me a smile as we stand.

Smiling suits you the best Meiya, I can only hope my warning was enough to prevent whatever is going to happen.

"Please follow me, Shirogane-sama."

"Sorry for the trouble, Maya-san."

"Just call her Tsukuyomi like I do, Takeru." Why is she so upset about it? She shouldn't get jealous of her subordinates.

Maya-san takes me to the elevator and later to Takahashi-san's limo. In just a few minutes I was back home.

I definitely didn't expect her to be so nice to me. It almost feels like she forgave me too easily. At least I got to warn her about what might happen.

Now, I gotta keep up with my training and wait until things settle down again. And I need to think on what I'm going to tell Sensei.

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*August 28th. 7 PM.*

*(Takeru's house)*

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The city was slowly being brought back to life. Mom and Dad returned to their jobs and their routines. My classes started again too, but I haven't gone back to college. I couldn't do a thing to help them, even though I knew something was going to happen. I find it amazing that I can even get out of bed. I usually wake up without opening my eyes, waiting to somehow find myself in my room in the barracks. Or that I would warp myself after setting foot outside. But obviously nothing happened.

I've been debating with myself what should I do now. Talking with Sensei was my first idea, but I don't know if she will help me. Last time she had some papers that the other Yuuko had sent her, so she may not believe me. And even if she did she may not be able to help me this time. At least nobody is forgetting about me this time.

Going back to the BETA world is my best option, but what would that achieve? Yuuko-sensei has forgotten about me there, going by her words, and if I'm not useful to her she won't be willing to help me. There's also the fact that if I'm not a conductor anymore I might not be able to return there in the first place.

Maybe I should just stay here and do what I can to save this world. But then, what can I do? If all the deaths in the BETA world come to this one things are going to get ugly. Who knows what humanity will do in the face of such a crisis without a common enemy to fight against.

As I left a kettle atop the fire, I sat down and turned the TV on.

"And in just a few minutes, the new power plant will be inaugurated. The Mitsurugi Group helped speed up the process by bringing professionals from-"

Right, part the old power plant stopped working after the earthquake so the new one got priority to get in working condition. It's apparently rather far away from the city since there were plans to expand it in the future.

This kind of thing will always surprise me, how on earth does Meiya arrange these plans in such a short time? We're talking about a whole power plant here, in just over a week.

She appears on the screen and starts giving a speech. She looks so different, almost as if the Meiya I know is another person entirely. This, somehow, feels as if I were seeing her imitating Her Highness as she did in front of Sagiri during the coup again.

Then the Mayor announces that they will start the plant, as Meiya cut a long ribbon that was on the gate of the power plant.

Then it came to life, many lights started shining. The news showed some houses light up again, the streets that were completely in the dark now were illuminated with bright clarity.

The city will recover from this, but that doesn't mean this will be the last incident. After all, the other side's city was ruined beyond possible repair, it wouldn't surprise me if suddenly the school got turned into a military base too.

Then, in one of the images, there was a spark. Then another. A light bulb broke. What is happening?

As the screen went back to the power plant I saw Tsukuyomi-san take Meiya away from the stage. Smoke was coming out of the power plant, then there was a bright flash. The signal was lost.

"What did just…"

"We are trying to connect to the site. We are awaiting for… Huh?" The lady in the screen made a horrified face.

I did too once she announced what had happened.

"It seems that… that the power plant has exploded. The cause is still unknown, and the damage is still being-"

Exploded? The power plant? Meiya was there, was this…

She died in an energy blast, almost like an explosion. What killed Meiya was the XG, the fact that she couldn't move was secondary. I killed her by shooting the blaster.

I don't think she could have made it out alive of such an explosion. She's… She's…

"… You've got to be kidding me." This wasn't an accident. This was, once more, the causality's ripple.

No tears fall this time despite the dread that floods my heart. It happened again. I got all of them killed again. I couldn't do a thing. Again. The deaths come back once more as I slowly shiver in place and the color vanishes from my sight as the world around me becomes black and white, a noise ringing in my ears, a cold sensation creeping up my back.

Didn't I stop being a conductor? Why is the causality following me then? Am I cursed to be followed by these disasters all the times I return here? I keep shivering in place, feeling a tightening noose on

my lungs as if I were holding my breath underwater. Unable to cry, my chest moves up and down, my heart pulsating with the intensity of a full boost jump inside.

"Why… Why did she have to die too?! Sensei, you said everything was going to be alright once I wasn't a conductor anymore!"

I hit the table repeatedly in long intervals as I rest my head on top of it. Meiya died, Sumika died, Mikoto died, Tama died, Kei died, Chizuru died, Marimo-chan died. All over again.

What is this shit?! She said everything was going to be normal, that destroying what made me a conductor was enough!

"Why? Did she lie to me?! Was this another of her schemes or something?!"

Is this what I get after all that fighting?! To watch as my beloved ones die again in front of me?! To end up alone again?! To be unable to protect them?!

Or is all of this my fault? If only I wasn't here… this wouldn't have…

I should have erased myself when I recovered my memories. The timing of all the deaths is just after I regained them. Conductor or not, this isn't a coincidence.

This is my fault.

This is all my fault.

I shouldn't have come back if this was the price that had to be paid.

Why did she lie to me? Why, Yuuko? Was that last smile of yours a lie too? Why didn't you tell me this would happen?! I trusted in you… After all that happened… Why…

"Takeru we're home! Hey, you left the kettle on the fire!"

Doesn't matter, it's just a kettle Dad. I think I'll just go to sleep, I'm feeling like shit.

Like always, I can't do anything when it matters the most. In my first loops I was just a useless Cadet, when I got full of myself I went berserk and got the Instructor killed, then when I said I was a man I made Sumika unstable and fucked up the Sadogashima Operation, and in the end…

I was just a spectator pushing buttons. I couldn't even do it out of conviction, I hesitated to do it. Meiya was the one who, like always, got me on the right path. And then I ran back here. I didn't try to argue or to question anything. I accepted that my part was finished and ran away.

Humanity's hero… I'm nothing grand like that. The Valkyries and Yuuko were the true heroines of the war. I was… a liability most of the time. And in the end… all I achieve is to bring more and more pain to those around me.

… I shouldn't have returned.

"Takeru, I'm talking to you! Help your mother make dinner or something, did you take out the trash?"

Shut up, Dad. Can't you just give me some space?

"Hey, answer me when I talk to you!"

"… What?" He took a step back, he seemed scared.

"What's wrong with you, Takeru? Why do you look like that?" He got closer, curving his brows downwards.

"Look at the news." He seemed shocked about it, Mom had her jaw on the floor.

"Oh shit, things are going from bad to worse. How many people died this time?" Dad grimaced as a heavy sigh left him.

"Meiya was there."

"Huh? What?"

"Meiya was at the power plant when it exploded."

"You mean… the Mitsurugi girl that came here when you were in school?"

"Yes, she was inaugurating it."

"I see. But you don't have to be like this because of her, Takeru. You just knew her for a few months and then she disappeared from your life. With all the ugly rumors I've heard, you got lucky she got bored of you. Don't shed a tear for that woman, you got lucky to not have been wrapped up in her sick life."

…

… Dad, what the fuck did you just say?

"What did you say about Meiya, Dad?"

"Huh? She was just a thot, she only played around with you."

"You're wrong." I slowly stand up, taking a sharp breath. You better apologize now… while you still can.

"Huh? How so? She just came here, bribed us with money to do whatever she wanted, and when she got bored she left and never talked to you again. She was just a spoiled rich bitch. Sure, I don't wish a death like that to anyone, but-"

**THWACK!**

I sent Dad crashing into the wall with a single hit.

"You take that back! Apologize right now!"

"Ouch… Dammit, what the hell is wrong with you?!"

"Shut up! Apologize Dad! Say you're sorry!" I scream my pain, shredding my lungs out. For the first time ever, I saw him shaking.

"… Hey, what's gotten into you all of a sudden?"

"I told you to apologize! You take back those words or-"

"Takeru! Calm down! Are you out of your mind?!" Mom grabbed my arm and placed herself between us, glaring at me.

"Mom, stay out from this. He better apologize, or else-"

"Hey, Takeru… I'm sorry, so please calm down. Okay?" Dad said slowly as he got up, moving both hands down as he did. I felt my heart in offside once the rush subsided. "Were you two still in contact?"

"It's not about distance. She… Meiya was…" I narrow my eyes, biting my lips in silence.

Dad sighs, rubbing his chin and looking away. What do you know anyways? You never had to fight for your life ever. I close my eyes, feeling tears come out of them.

"Takeru, why are you crying?" Mom gets close to wipe my cheeks of the rain that had started to fall. "What happened? Were you two still friends?"

"She was… important to me." I claw at my palms, having nothing to throw my frustration at. Meiya… and everybody else… Because of me being here, they had to die all over again. I close my eyes and finally let the tears out without fighting the pain.

"Um… Sorry for saying bad stuff about her. I shouldn't have… not after what happened to Sumika-chan… I'm really sorry, Takeru." Dad comes closer and clasps my shoulders, shaking me a little as he stared into my eyes. "Takeru, these things… It's completely out of

our control. I've lost many friends during these days too. I don't know how much it must hurt, but… don't take it so hard. Life goes on." That's the problem, Dad.

What's the point? Why live on if you end up alone? If I can't go back to the BETA world… I don't think I'll be able to live with this guilt. How could I carry on… How could I move on from *this?* How could I try to help this world if… all the shit over there comes here? Who would believe me? What could I do?

Nothing. There's nothing an average college student like me can do. Again… I would only be able to watch.

… I shouldn't have remembered, I shouldn't have come back. Because of me being here…

"… I'm going to bed. Night." I don't feel like dealing with these two. They know nothing, and they were never there when I needed them. Always doing whatever they pleased without any explanation.

"Takeru, you should eat something. It'll be bad for your health if you don't." Thanks Mom, but no thanks.

"I don't feel like it." I feel like dying right now. Just give me some space, dammit.

"Takeru, you sound like a dead man. You have to eat something!"

"You're wrong." I'm still alive. They died. Because of me.

"What do you mean? If you don't eat, you won't have energy to-"

"Just leave me alone."

"Takeru! Wipe that look from your face! You're having dinner and that's final!" She grabs my faces and drills her gaze into me.

She was trying to hold it together, but the darkness of worry in her eyes snapped me out of my inner misery. I'm not the only one

hurting, after all.

"Sigh… Fine. I'll go take a shower. Sorry." I really can't get mad at them. They're just worried about me. They're… all I have right now, until the causality comes for them too.

The sudden realization froze my heart. They… were dead over there, weren't they?

"That's better. Don't be so down, I know it's going to be hard, but you can't let your sadness ruin your health." She smiles and gives me a gentle push towards the bathroom.

I got in there, went into the shower, and opened the water. I just stood there, letting the water flow over me for minutes. Hidden under the warm water, my tears run amok. I lean on the wall, coiling my fists and letting the sounds of the shower drown my pained screams.

According to Sensei I shouldn't be a conductor anymore, so she was either mistaken or something is wrong here. But she said I would end up in a world that was affected by Sumika's wishes as she died… I don't see this as that world.

That world's Yuuko-sensei lied to me. Either that or this is something so messed up even she didn't see it coming.

But that… doesn't absolve me from the guilt. I could have acted before this got to this point. And I didn't.

Sumika, Meiya, Kei, Chizuru, Mikoto, Tama, Marimo-chan, everyone from the Valkyries, and all the innocents I involved in this… Forgive me for failing again.

I'll do better next time… I swear… so please…

Give me another chance… to truly fix this mess.

Please, tell me there's a solution to this madness. Please Sensei… Tell me you didn't lie. Tell me you have an answer.

# Back to the Battlefield

## Chapter 5: Back to the Battlefield

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*August 28th. Around 10 PM.*

*(Takeru's room.)*

**[Takeru]**

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I'd be lying if I said I was alright. I'm amazed at how calm I was during dinner, honestly.

The news were in an uproar, since the Mayor and many important politicians died during the explosion. Of course, Meiya's death was another topic of discussion for the vultures of the media. Mom and Dad didn't say much, but it's clear they're devastated by these events.

These two years they've been supporting me with college. They gave me freedom, trust and encouraged me to follow the career I wanted to take. Even if they aren't always around, they always took care of me. Sure, they may not be the best parents but…

Knowing the causality might take them too was enough to make me lose my appetite.

Is it alright for someone like me to just enjoy a peaceful dinner? I can have at least that little, right?

Thinking that it might have been the last dinner we ever share again makes me wanna puke. I didn't realize how much I had missed them in the BETA world. And now that I've recovered my memories it only hurts more to know that they could die any minute now. We might not have the best parents-son relationship but…

Dad is just like I used to be. Arrogant, kind of jerk and prone to use violence. But he always seems to know when I need a kick in the butt, even if he isn't the most tactful parent alive. He's always making lame jokes, just like me.

Mom is more nosy than me, she's always nagging me about something. But she always works as hard as she can. Always making breakfast for us, always making dinner alone even when she comes back as late as Dad.

Death is always lurking, waiting for its time. But now it's not waiting, it's inching closer with every passing second. Like a dark cloud that slowly, but surely, covers the moonlight, my parent's death is getting closer.

I feel that my nightmares will return with full force tonight, taking away from me the safety of sleep. As I change into my pajamas and turn off the lights, I feel a pair of cold hands on my shoulders.

What caused this shiver I just felt? Was this darkness always here, by my side, without me noticing it?

The night has come, and I know what awaits beyond the dusk. Despite my struggles and tears, sleep took me to the wasteland within myself. No amount of wailing could stop the atrocities from repeating themselves before me.

The memories flowing back, one by one. Slowly, cruelly, softly drilling my sanity away. People that wanted to protect their home, their families, their freedom, or just their own future. All of them, without difference, killed by the BETA or by the G-Bombs.

Their hands stretch out towards me, begging for my help. I move away, but I can't seem to be able to shake them off, just like a shadow they follow me everywhere.

Running and running, in the middle of this wasteland, I can't lose all those cold hands that reach out for my shoulders.

No, leave me alone! I can't save you, I'm no hero!

*"Coward."*

"Huh?… Kasumi?" Floating above the madness, Kasumi got closer to me. Scowling as if smelling a corpse, she gave me a side glance.

*"You abandoned them. You forgot about us. Traitor."*

"T-That's not true! I didn't want to forget. You all mean the world to me!"

*"Then, why did you let us die, Takeru?"*

"Meiya? And everyone?" All my squadmates were before me now, but all deformed and wounded. Shards of steel encrusted into their limbs, deep cuts on their faces.

*"Because of your weakness, I was eaten alive."* Marimo-chan, I never wanted to-

*"Because you fucked up Operation 21st, we all had to die."* The Valkyries said, biting their lips so hard a stream of blood came out from them.

"I wasn't… I don't know why that happened! It wasn't my fault!"

*"Because of you, we had to sacrifice ourselves."* The girls say, peeling off the burnt skin off their elbows.

"I didn't… I tried… I-I just couldn't…"

" *And do not forget, Takeru."* Meiya scowled at me too. *"Because of your hesitation, I died. You killed me. You killed all of us, Takeru."*

"That's wrong! The XG wasn't working! I… I never wanted to kill you!"

*"But didn't you cause their deaths all over again, Shirogane?"*

"Sensei?" Kicking the wailing corpses, that world's Sensei skipped towards me with a smile.

" *Yeah, you knew what could happen and did nothing. You ruined your world all over again."*

"B-But I shouldn't be a Conductor anymore! You said… You said…"

*"Didn't I tell you this before? You're like the BETA, a harbinger of death for millions. You are our doom, Shirogane."*

"That's… It's a lie. This should have ended already! This isn't my fault!"

*"So… you want to run? You can't do that, Takeru-chan."*

"Sumika? What…" She was… deformed. Like when I saw her at the basketball court that day.

*"How can you be so cruel, to want to forget again? You can't do that, Takeru-chan. It's all your fault…*"

Then, the ground under me began to crack. As a fissure opened up, I tried to move away. But everyone surrounded me, and extending their hands they pushed me towards the hole.

Their faces were brimming with hatred, showing no remorse at all in their widening smirk. As I fell and the coldness covered me, I found myself inside a hive. And there, once more, I was made a spectator to everyone's deaths.

Unable to move, I can feel the scar that lies within my heart aching with regret, hatred, powerlessness, sorrow, and guilt. For I've lost my peace once, only to then lose my loved one, to keep fighting beyond death, only to then fail once more. After our battle, when everything was supposed to be over… Ruin followed me, and yet again took my peace and close ones away from me.

And it all comes together in one gargantuan, horrible nightmare. Where all is twisted into an abominable carnage. A wasteland within the hive made out of corpses and debris, yelling non stop, as the monsters devour them, as the explosions dismember them, as I stand there, unable to do anything.

Their faces, stained with blood and tears, their voices broken and pained, scream to me. Making me drown in fear, sinking beyond the sea of death in this wasteland.

They're all… gone… I'll never… see them again.

It's all my fault…

I shouldn't… have returned…

…

So… So then…

"I have to get out of here! I gotta reset this world again!"

I don't want more innocent blood on my hands! Even if I was out of time and options in the other world, I can't let this stand. I have to do something for my world! I can't let them disappear so easily!

*I have to stand my ground, to protect our world. Until I find an answer… Until you find an answer, Yuuko.*

Letting out a roar, I try to struggle against the current, I try to reach out to them. Time and again, time and again, and the more I try, the more scattered pieces of my lives I see.

Losing my squadmates.

Following a dead plan.

Killing the wrong guy.

Breaking the fuck down.

Getting the shards back up.

Letting the venom flow in.

Watching my base get blown out.

I'm teared apart. Devoured by Soldiers and Tanks. Erased by a G-Bomb. Someone shoots me in the head. All at once. And all the while, the corpses of my squadmates piled up and up. Until the last one showed up, the 00 Unit.

Something prevented me from getting closer to them, as if I were restrained to a pillar. Or as if I was the pillar itself. Struggling again, as the evening call anchored me to the wasteland, a lunar fragrance surrounding me as the skies turned violet and the soil crimson, something… or someone came into my sight again.

*"Sumika-san is dead. Your fight is already over."* Again standing above everything, Kasumi's specter remained with the cold, almost sick scowl at me.

"Not yet… This won't be the end."

*I don't care how impossible it seems… I can't just give up now, after all we've gone through. No matter how long it takes, there has to be a different solution!*

The specter smiled and clicked its fingers. I then found myself standing in front of it, with all colors turning bright all of a sudden, my ears ringing as if I had taken a deep dive into the sea.

*"Then, what will you do to mend your mistakes?"*

"I… I'm not a sure, I don't know why this happened. But I have to… No, I will save my world from whatever this is!"

*"So, you choose to forget about your squadmates?"*

"T-There's nothing I can-"

*"Do you not love them, then? Liar."*

"It's impossible. Even if I fix this world… The squad, the Instructor, the Valkyries…"

*"I see, you're giving up. Coward."*

"Shut up! You're… You're not Kasumi! She didn't die!" Then, the specter smiled once more.

*"But you left me all alone. You abandoned me."*

"That's… not true, I had no choice but to return."

*"You still ran away. After you failed to protect everyone, too."*

"I didn't… That was not a victory for me. But I could do nothing about it, and now… It's too late for regrets. But that doesn't mean… I'll let this shit go on. Yes, I screwed up and got the Instructor killed. I ran away and ruined my world once before. I caused Sumika to become unstable and ruined the mission. That costed the Valkyries' lives, with the explosion of the XG and the defense of the base. I couldn't save anyone on the Kashgar Raid. But this time… I don't know what is going on, but I'll put an end to it! There has to be a way to fix this mess, regardless of whether I'm still a Conductor or not."

*"Then, struggle and prove you're not lying."*

In the blink of an eye, I found myself inside a cockpit. Where is this? Looking around, I'm back at the wasteland. The deformed monsters surround and approach me, what remained of my squadmates was by my TSF's feet. Fight, you say? If that's all it takes… then I'll gladly take this role once more!

Raising a blade towards the towering monstrosities of steel, flesh and rock, I boosted at them. It wasn't until I did that I realized an unearthly light was shining all around the wasteland, now made out

of my squadmates faces. Again smirking with madness, fused with the rest of the carnage, the specters cackled at me. And, under the vigilance of the specter that resembled Kasumi, I began to fight.

…

"Haa… Haa… Sigh…" Blinking a few times, I gulp and sit down on my bed.

I'm completely drenched in cold sweat, shivering and crying. Clawing at my chest as if my heart was about to explode, I gasp for air. As I slowly look around, I see it's still dark outside. 5:26 AM?

I can't possibly go back to sleep. I don't want to. I don't want to see that again.

Getting out of bed, I end up looking at the trophy we won with Mikoto. The sound of the electric discharge comes back.

For a split second I thought my hands were tainted with blood, but turning the lights on I could see that it was just a shadow. Gazing outside the window I'm met with ruins. How many times did we talk right here, Sumika? We never thought things could get so out of control back then. How many times did you come to wake me up, Meiya? Heh, you were literally one door away from me. Just at arms reach.

Tears again slowly flow down my face. I grab a tissue to clean them, I can't break down. I can't turn their memories into poison, no matter how much it hurts me. Yeah, I couldn't save them. But I am just one, there is… no point in lamenting that. This is my cross to bear, but I can't… I won't let the bad erase the good.

We did what we had to, even if I can't see that as a victory. It was better than letting Alt. V happen. If I could pull the trigger then… I should be able to brave through this shitstorm. I have to fight back.

I took a shower, and after that I ate a light breakfast.

The more I stay here, the more I feel like I'll go insane. I need to get over there now and start fixing this yesterday.

Ok, deep breaths. Let's think this through, focus on what you can do, man. I need both Yuuko-sensei's help, the one here to get back to the BETA world and the one there to fix whatever is going on here.

The first one might think I'm mad, and she might be right considering my current emotional state. She also might not be able to help me. I remember she had received some papers with vital info to complete the little machine she used to send me back. This time we don't have those, so if she didn't figure things out in these two years there's nothing I could do, short of killing myself and hoping to loop back once more.

The second one probably won't care about my plea if I don't give her something good in return. She might not even be willing to talk to me now that she has completed Alternative IV, so I have to take something that can help her.

I inhale sharply and hit the table hard. I'm going back there, Conductor or not. Because… if stuff is coming here, then stuff should be able to go there too. So I should be able to teleport myself to that world. Sensei better have an explanation ready for me, because if it turns out this is her fault…

Then, what? She did say people would forget about me. I can't just walk up to her and demand her help for a wrong she doesn't remember to have committed.

I should do some research online about weapons, science and stuff, maybe something will pique her interest. Otherwise I'll just have to convince her of my piloting skills and hope she's willing to accept my services as a form of payment, so to speak.

I'll try to go meet with this world's Sensei when school opens again. In the mean time I think I'll go jogging, I need to clear my head.

If I don't make it to the other world I might as well join the military to do something about the impending doom that will befall Japan. Right now, until whatever day it is that I can leave this place, I'll train the skills I need while polishing my weaknesses. I might go to a shooting range to improve my sniping after I do my research for useful intel.

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*August 30th. 3 PM.*

*(Cyber Cafe.)*

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In the end Sensei agreed to meet with me on a later day. It seems she has a lot on her plate, so forcing her to hear me out right on the spot would have been a bad call. As much as I'd like to do things fast, haste makes waste.

Not like any kind of positive thinking will stop the nightmares I have at night.

I've been reading some books on engineering and space discoveries but I frankly don't think this will help, since they have better technology on the other world. I wonder what can I… Huh?

As I was looking through an online encyclopedia about weapons and military tech, I found an article with a name that caught my attention. F-22A Raptor.

You're telling me we have TSFs here now?! When and how did this happen?! Wait, what? A jet fighter?

It has the same unfair stealth capabilities of the other Raptor, that's for sure. I wonder if there are any other TSFs that are actually jets here.

And as it turns out most of them are, in fact, fighter jets here. Will any of this be of use? I mean, I can try to dig up intel on how stealth works from here and some enthusiast forums…

Let's check the weaponry too. Maybe I could check the jets of nations that got wiped out before they could make the TSFs version on the other side? Now, let's see what else I can find here. May God bless the internet, this is without a doubt the most important invention in human history. After Sensei's teleporter, of course.

…

… Sigh.

Printing all of this was truly madness. If I hadn't shown the money beforehand I think the owner would have kicked me out of the place. Carrying this many papers is kinda unpractical, I should have brought a bigger bag.

As I was getting closer to my house I spotted a car parked on the door. Who could have come to visit? Did something… happen to my parents while I was…

I start running towards home, and as I get closer I could tell the car was an expensive one. Who could have come in this thing?

Entering the house, an unexpected guest was waiting for me sitting by the table.

"Good afternoon, Shirogane-sama" Standing up, she gives me a bow.

"Maya-san? What are you doing here? Where are my parents?!"

"Hm? I asked them to wait in a hotel until I finished my business with you. Is something the matter? You look pale."

Siiigh… They're alright, they're fine. Calming down a bit, I leave the stack of papers on the table as I sit down.

"So Maya-san, what do you need from me?" With Meiya being dead I cannot fathom what she might want from me.

"I've come under orders of Raiden-sama to deliver a certain item to you."

"A certain item?"

"Surely you already know… of Meiya-sama's death, do you?" I nod while grimacing. "I cannot express the feelings of Raiden-sama through words. He felt truly remorseful after the whole scandal, for allowing some tradition to endanger his granddaughter's life. It also filled him with sorrow seeing Meiya-sama's day to day life since then. However, after your talk the other day, Meiya-sama recovered her smile. She was most positively joyful. Raiden-sama thought that she could finally make up for all the time you two had spent away from each other. To have her die shortly after this, the shock he received has made his health take a turn for the worse."

So Meiya was happy during her last days? It's not much of a consolation, but at least… if she was smiling to the very end…

"That is why he ordered me to give you this. He believes that instead of staying in a wall in an office, it would be more fitting for it to be in your possession. And I think so too, myself." She takes a big wooden box from under the table and gives it to me.

This is pretty heavy. What is this even? I open it and find inside of the box a long blue… Wait, is this…

"Maya-san, this is… the Minaru Kamui, isn't it?"

"Yes. Surely you understand the meaning behind this, Shirogane-sama? Meiya-sama would have most assuredly wished you to hold onto it, being the only man she loved."

You can't do this to me. Not now of all times. Don't go telling me that she loved me, don't go giving me this, like when she gave me the handguard in the other world. It's my fault she's dead… I don't deserve this.

"Is this what he truly wants? To give something so precious to a mere commoner?"

"You may be of common birth, but the bond you shared with Meiya-sama was one of the most precious things she had in her life. Raiden-sama simply wishes to honor her feelings, and to give you something to remember her. In this way she will always stand by your side." She was keeping her cool, but it's clear that talking about Meiya is hard as hell for her.

Having her by my side… I inhale deeply, gripping the sword and remembering its past owner.

"… I accept this gift. I'll treasure it all my life, I swear."

"Thanks, Shirogane-sama. Well then, I'll shall be taking my leave. Please do stay safe." With her business here finished, she stands up and gives me a bow.

As she went to the door ready to leave, an idea pops up in my mind.

"Maya-san wait, I have a favor to ask of you."

"A favor? I don't know if I can do much for you."

"Just wait a minute please." I walk up the stairs and rush into my room, opening the first drawer of my desk. Where the ring that Meiya left me was.

As I came back into the living room to a puzzled Maya-san, I showed her the ring as her eyes widened.

"I don't know if this ring has any power over you anymore, but I'd like to ask you to train me in the art of the sword Maya-san."

"Where and how did you acquire this ring?!"

"Meiya gave it to me after she left the school. I didn't want to use it unless a serious situation presented itself."

"Why didn't you use this during the incident in the school?"

"I didn't have it on me, and Meiya was already doing a lot for the city. I saw the broadcast where she announced all the donations the Mitsurugi Group was going to do, I'm sure that was more of an order from her than a decision taken by all members of the Group."

"I see. In that case… please excuse me for a moment, I'll contact Raiden-sama to see if he'd allow it." She goes to the door to make a call.

Whether I stay or go to the other world I will have to fight. I need to improve on every single thing I can. Last time, I tried to carry the squad but I didn't improve myself until I joined the Valkyries. Well, that's not gonna happen twice. I'll train myself to death if it improves my chances of surviving just a little more. And it helps to not think about all the stuff that happened. Maybe if I exhaust myself I won't have nightmares.

"Shirogane-sama, Raiden-sama has allowed me to train you. Would you tell me what it is you wish me to teach you?"

"The Mugen Kidou." She's shocked. Can't blame her. Imagine a peasant telling an exalted paladin he wants to learn how to use advanced light magic out of the blue.

"Shirogane-sama, do forgive my rudeness, but there's no way an amateur could learn such a thing."

"Then you could test me, to see how much you can teach me about it. At the very least I want to improve my skill with a blade, and I can't think of a better teacher than you."

"Improve? You have experience using a sword?" CRAP! I spoke without thinking, what do I… I know!

"Tsukuyomi-san taught me a little bit of swordplay while she lived here with me." Thanks brain, you just saved us.

"Oh, so that's what it was. Allow me to tell you that I'm not as kind as my cousin was, do you wish for me to teach you?" She said 'was', didn't she? Well, I knew Tsukuyomi-san was there during the explosion but hearing it is…

"Yes, please. Do not hold back on me."

"Alright, I'll leave you my number so that you can contact me when you decide on a schedule. Do not worry, Raiden-sama will arrange things to have me available when you wish to train." She adjusts her glasses as she writes her number on a paper and gives it to me.

"Thanks, Maya-san. I truly appreciate this." I try to bow but she stops me.

"There is no need for your gratitude. I'm simply following orders. Well then Shirogane-sama, I'll be awaiting your call. Until then." She bows and leaves.

I was totally not expecting this to happen, but I'm glad I had the guts to ask her to train me. If I get better with the sword I can pass those skills to the TSFs when I get back, or to CQC if I have to stay here.

The sword that was on the table, the Minaru Kamui. What am I gonna do with this? Well, I should take it to my room. Huh? There's a paper inside the box, what's this?

'Permission to hold weaponry'. Signed by the Prime Minister. This is like the paper Meiya had when she first came here. So I'm authorized to take the katana with me anywhere? Heh, that is hilarious. Raiden-san must be just as extreme as Meiya. I guess the apple never falls far from the tree.

Alright, let's take this to my room with all the papers and start sorting things out. I should go buy a big travel bag to take all the stuff to the other side.

The meeting with Sensei couldn't come any faster, once I get to talk to her I should give her time for some of the things I think will happen to actually occur. That will also give me time to learn under Maya-san all I can.

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*September 3rd. 0 6:31 PM.*

*(Sky Temple Restaurant.)*

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"And that's the whole story. I won't blame you if you think I'm mad. But it's the truth. You're the only one who I can ask for help."

"Even if you say that, you do know how crazy what you just told me sounds, right?" Yuuko-sensei's brows were arched as she had a finger on her forehead, she's obviously having a hard time believing what I just told her.

"I understand that better than anyone. That's why I just asked you to hear me out today. You don't have to believe me just yet". She furrows her brows, trying to understand what I just told her.

"When you suddenly called me here I thought you wanted someone to talk to about all these disasters. Then you suddenly started talking about the theory I haven't shown anybody, about a parallel world, about how all this causal information will leak here and send this world to ruin." She stops to drink and clears her throat. "You shouldn't know anything about that. Nobody should, since I haven't talked about it with anyone. And after you dropped this bomb on me, you say I don't have to believe you?" It feels as if she's accusing me of something.

"I never said you don't have to believe it. Just that I understand that I have no proof to make you believe me. I want you to, but I know that would be asking too much of you as of now. That's why we are going to wait." I try to speak softly to reassure her I'm not lying and to calm

the ripples in my knees. The last thing I want is to upset her or lose my cool.

"Wait? For what, exactly?"

"Did you see the news today, Sensei? About the conflicts in Europe? And the rebellions in China?"

"What has that to do with this?"

"I think that those incidents are being caused by the causality leak. If I'm right, this will cause the death of millions. Starting on Kashgar, continuing to the Middle East, destroying Europe and affecting Russia and the Far East. There's also going to be an accident in Canada. Half of it is going to become a literal hell."

"You do realize you sound like a doomsayer right now, Shirogane?"

"If I'm just delusional you just have to ignore me. Nothing of what I just said would happen. But if something like this happens…"

"You want me to help you? With what exactly? I'm just a physics teacher, you know." And a genius.

"Did you bring a cat to this world to test your theory, by any chance?"

It's weird to see Yuuko-sensei with a shocked expression for more than a few seconds. This must have really surprised her.

"You're not saying that you want to use that device, right?"

"The little microwave looking thing? Yeah, I want to use it."

"It's not a microwave! This is a terribly advanced miniature of my project!" I think she also got mad when I called it a microwave the first time I saw the thing.

"Sorry, but, would you let me use it?"

"And how do you know that it will work?"

"Because we already used it once to send me back. We snuck into the U's nuclear reactor room and used it to power the thing."

"We did what?! Oho, now that's something interesting." She's smirking from ear to ear. She will always be a mischievous devil.

"But I don't think we'll be as lucky to have the thing prepared for us now. So that's why I said we should wait too. Until all the pieces get in formation."

"For someone who is trying to save two worlds from destruction you're awfully calm. Who would have thought you could be so cold, Shirogane."

"I learned in the worst way possible how my emotions can get in the way of my goals. And right now, I need to get back there. People will get hurt, even if I can't see or hear them. I'm willing to wait until you can trust my words." I say as calmly as possible, while looking at her in the eye. I won't falter this time, I cannot falter.

"You've become quite the fine man, Shirogane. Alright, I suppose I can consider it. If you are telling the truth, then I will help you in any way I can. After all, you would be the only one who could fix this crisis. But let me ask you something first."

"What is it?"

"What did you use the Causal Balance theory for in that other world? You've only told me about my parallel processing theory, but nothing on the other one. So, what kind of experiments did the other me do?"

"The what now?" I have no idea what she means by that. A second theory? Was Sensei working on another theory at the time?

"You don't know about it? That's weird. I started to work on it before you all finished school, too."

I try to remember how things went when I returned to my world for the first time. It wasn't the end of the year yet. Sensei had just finished the processing theory that allowed us to complete the 00 Unit. And when I came back everything went to hell.

After collecting my thoughts, I tell Sensei what I remembered.

"So I never started to work on it in the other worlds? Huh, so that means I'm the first to do it? Hehehe, aren't I a genius?!" She starts laughing as she takes a sip from her cup. Seems really happy for some reason.

"Sensei, what's this theory about?"

"There was a flaw in my first theory. About how information was handled by the brain. I thought that the human brain was a single, self-contained system that could only access information from other parallel worlds in the form of dreams and what we call the sixth sense."

"Oh yeah, I remember you mentioning that. Something about fortune tellers being able to receive the information from the possible futures, right?"

"Yes, exactly. However I had thought that only a machine that had the same processing power of the human brain could actually receive information reliably. One day I was just reviewing my theory when I realized something. All the human brains can become adept at receiving this information, just that it manifests in different ways."

"What does that mean, exactly?"

"The more you do something, the better you get at it. The more you think about something, the better you get at predicting what could happen the next time you do it. And sometimes, people can predict things that have yet to happen. It's not weird for a programmer to develop a fix for a system just before there's a massive problem in a company, or for a prosecutor to pursue a specific subject during a

trial. We call that intuition, hunches. But in reality that's just another case of someone tapping into the information that can leak from time to time between all the worlds."

"Okay, I think I get what you're saying. But what does that have to do with the balance you named the theory after?" I'm actually not sure if I got all that right in my head, but I don't see how it could be something so important that could create a whole new theory.

"You see Shirogane, I think this theory can explain you recovering your memories despite you no longer being a conductor."

"What?! For real?!"

"Shh! Don't raise your voice!"

"S-Sorry, I just… no, please continue."

"Okay, so I realized anyone could access the leaked information so long as they were somehow connected to it. The stronger the connection, the more accurate the hunch becomes. These things we call gut feelings are in direct opposition to a logical way of thinking. There's usually no solid proof to back up a hunch, other than emotional arguments. Even if they are right, and even when they're born out of suspicion or doubt, hunches usually are hard to prove before they happen. So, what's the common denominator here, Shirogane?"

"Huh? The common? You mean the link between how a hunch is developed and how the leak happens? How should I know that?" She sighs, shakes her head, and taps her forehead with two fingers.

"And here I thought you'd get it after I dumbed down the explanation. Basically, what I'm trying to say is the stronger your feelings towards something are, the more chances you have to access the leaking. This, however, proves a problem to my theory since I thought that only a machine could do it, due to how unstable human's emotions can be. The brain is easily influenced by our emotions, so this would

cause the reception of information to be unstable if the person in question was in a rough emotional state."

She takes a pause to drink some more water.

"But then, I figured something out. Marimo was always thinking negatively when she was dating someone, even when she was trying her best to make the relationship work. And there's people out there that, no matter what life throws at them, are always trying to smile and not let the sadness bring them down. That's when it hit me, different people can access different leakings. Those who are more affected by negative emotions will receive the information from the futures in which they are unhappy, and those who are affected by positive emotions would instead receive it from the futures in which they're happy."

"So basically, everything is in the way you think? If you focus on the bad things you'll attract them?"

"Yes. That's why I think stalkers or people that commit passional crimes are actually really susceptible to causal leaks, and they're always receiving information from the futures in which they end up alone. Those voices they hear, the never ending stream of negative thoughts. I believe that's nothing more than a very strong flow of information being thrown at them due to their strong emotions and focus on them."

She takes a pause and closes her eyes.

"That's why I think that the fact that you kept playing that game triggered a leak in you. You didn't want to stop fighting, you wanted to keep piloting those things you said you used, and through the game you could keep doing it, and the more you played the more those repressed memories resurfaced. Perhaps the fact that you kept talking to everyone from your class also affected you. Wanting to be with them again, just having fun and living in peace. If what happened to all of you there was as hard as you made it sound, then I'm not surprised those feelings resonated with your old memories."

"But I've been fine until now! The dreams weren't that clear, it wasn't until I saw the BETA that I clearly remembered."

"Did you had any vivid dreams while awake?"

I recall that time during the final, where I remembered my last mission with Hayase. That was totally a vivid dream, I even heard her voice clearly. Also when Mikoto got defeated and the word killed appeared on the screen I started to have flashes of my memories too. That had never happened until now.

"Your face tells me you have. That's enough for me. Your feelings made your brain focus on a specific train of thought, and since you were a conductor in the past I assume it's even easier for you to access the leaking. All it took was a trigger strong enough to bring forth a similar emotion to what you felt on the other world. After that, the link was formed and the information started to leak into you, making your memories return. And if we assume you're right, then once your memories of that other world fully returned to you through the leak there's the possibility that other information was leaked too. However that information shouldn't be 'active', to say something."

"But wait a second! Everything came back clearly to me when I saw the BETA in the game, until then it was all just blurry. How did the creators even do that? They weren't similar, they were exactly the same! I had never met them before, so how did they knew what the BETA looked like? Was it just a coincidence?"

"And that's the flaw of my theory." Folding her arms real tight, she frowns.

"What?"

"I thought that only the conductor could link to specific futures and link itself to the information. And that only through it could normal people receive information from the leaks. But as I told you before everyone can do it, the conductor only strengthens the process. The fact that you had been sent back here possibly caused some

information to come with you. If the developers were constantly brainstorming for a new setting for their game, and the information of the BETA was lingering in this world, it's not so hard to think that they could access it in their dreams or as sudden inspiration. How were they? You did meet them, right?"

"Yeah, they were really passionate about it. We spent at least half an hour talking after we got out of the simulator. However they didn't knew everything. When I told them about the hives they were really surprised."

"See? They had a very strong feeling to make a new game, they probably thought of aliens and after spending enough time building up that desire they were able to connect to a part of the data. It would be impossible for regular people to access such a big amount of information by themselves, but a sliver of it? That's certainly possible, especially if they were obsessed with the idea."

Maybe that's why they changed Valgern-On's gameplay so much too. With all the new updates it's almost like a TSF simulator for the XM3. They got bits of that data and applied it to the game.

"This would also prove you're no longer a conductor, because if you were the source of the leak not only you would have to have met them to affect them, but the effects would have happened much, much earlier."

"What do you mean?"

"Take Marimo's death as an example. You said a while ago that she died because of the causality of her death coming over here, but if you were what caused the leak she would have either died shortly after you returned, meaning after October 22nd of 2001, or shortly after you recovered your memories."

"Sensei, she died literally hours after I regained them. That's proof enough."

"Yes, but when was her death decided?"

"Huh? Decided?" What is she talking about?

"You know that Marimo had broken up with the murderer, right? Well, the man in question had posted online about how he wanted to get revenge on his ex. His first post was on July 23th, the last one was on the night of August 4th. So, the leak had brought Marimo's death and solidified it during those dates."

"B-But… What about all the others? Everybody else also-"

"Shirogane, you're either a conductor since you arrive or you're not. You can't become a conductor without some serious output of energy strong enough to bend the laws of physics, so unless you jumped into an exploding nuclear reactor and lived to tell the tale you're not a conductor right now."

"Then, why is this happening?" She does have an answer to that, right? She better not be speaking in hypotheticals now. I need that answer.

"I have an idea, but I'd like to test some stuff before I can say it for sure. There's also the possibility that you're nuts." She smiles, poking one her cheeks with a finger.

"Okay, I won't ask you about it now. But what about the balance? You said the theory was called Causal Balance, right?"

"Yes. As I was saying before, the more we think and feel strongly about a certain topic, the more chances we have of triggering a leak. There's no guarantee that it actually happens, but the important part is that the stronger the feeling, the more the brain will focus on it. That's why depression, love and greed are what they are. Once you become obsessed with something it takes a great effort to make you stop thinking about it. To break the link to the data leak. However this state of mind is a dangerous one, since you can only focus on one type of future and the risk of being blinded by your emotions is really

big. At that point you'll be constantly receiving information but you wouldn't be able to focus on reality. You'll become detached from the present and would live constantly affected by your visions, hunches or intuition. Which is why people that begin to grow paranoid have a high risk of becoming completely insane."

She takes a break to drink a bit before continuing.

"So I searched for a way to make it possible to balance the emotions, to have a way to choose which data is leaked to us. If my parallel processing theory was indeed correct our brains should have that ability. And they do, in fact. Shirogane, what do you think of meditation?"

"Huh? What's this about?" Her question catched me off guard. "I… think therapy and meditation are good for those times when reality hits you like a truck. But depending on how it's done…" Remembering the time when they gave me too much stimulants and hypnotic therapy and I went berserk, looking down and biting my lips. That was definitely not a nice way to balance my feelings.

"You're right. Every person has its own way to calm down. Music, jogging, painting, cooking. The idea that I was pursuing was that, after you access the leak, you immediately started to try to calm down, to reach a serene state of mind, to stop it once you accessed the data you need. Of course, if we could become conscious of this we would become gods. However, this feat is not impossible to achieve if it's a computer the one doing it, since it's easier to… regulate? Tune? Control?" Sensei makes a troubled face as she struggles to find the correct word to express herself. "Whatever, the point is that if you could be aware of your feelings but also managed to keep them in check without suppressing them you could theoretically be able to draw information from all the futures, and you could choose which information holds more worth to you, even if we would do it unconsciously. With a computer is easier since you can use certain programs and algorithms to replicate the effects meditation has on the human brain by just pushing a button and get the thing running."

"That's the balance you were talking about? A balanced system that could pull information from all futures, pinpointing which one is the better of all of them?"

"No, it isn't just that. It could also track methods and ideas from a less favorable future that would improve the currently better future. Since the brain has the ability to process multiple things at the same time it should theoretically be able to recognize patterns between multiple futures instead of being locked to choosing just one option. I also figured a way to regulate what information you leak to the other worlds, so long as the stability is not broken. You could then have a system that finds the best possible solution to a given problem from all the possible options in all the parallel worlds, and then it shares it to those worlds. Or at least that's what I think. I'm nowhere near to test this thing out."

"Wait so, did you complete the theory?"

"Yes. I talked to a lot of psychiatrists, to people that meditated to cure a certain trauma and to doctors that treated them and other emotionally unstable patients, as well as some scientists that were researching the nervous system. There's still much we don't know about the brain, so I'm surprised that I didn't take into account the effect our emotions have on our thoughts when developing my first theory. Even if a machine with the same capacity as a human could be created, it would be useless if it couldn't control which information it receives and shares through the leaks. A machine, not matter how powerful, thinks differently from us. But even if we made it think like us, without the extra boost that emotion gives to our brain it may not be enough make it truly like a human. So, to create such a machine…" Her voice trails off, she looks away losing her smile, brows and eyes narrowing.

"You would have to put a human inside of it?"

She, literally, froze up. To surprise her a second time in the same conversation, I'm on a roll today. She must have kept that info close to herself, if she's this surprised. I mean, I just did explain to her that

I knew what the theory was about, maybe she didn't think we'll go through with it.

"Did… Did it work?" She asks, with clear expectation.

"Yes. I don't know the specifics, but the… digitalization of the brain, was it? It worked. The subject had to be tuned before it showed emotions once more, but after that it became the same as a human."

A smirk spreads in Sensei's face like wildfire as she chuckles, a hand on her chin as she nods a few times.

"I see. I am a genius, after all. Well, let's leave it at that for today. Shirogane, just in case, let me remind you that you're no longer a conductor, so stop blaming yourself for this. I'll start doing some preparations, just in case. I'll call you if any of your predictions become true. Also it seems I'll do you good to read some of the stuff the doctors told me during my investigation, I'll swing by your house later to give you some papers so be sure to answer the door."

"Okay, do you have a plan on how to send me back?"

"You told me awhile ago. We're going to use the reactor." She has got to be kidding.

"But how do you know it's going to be working? I remember you saying that we were lucky it was active the first time."

"Yes, and that's because I know when it's going to be active. The engineering classes should be doing some hands on studying on how reactors work, so we'll just use that." She says it so nonchalantly, we're talking about sneaking into the U and using a nuclear reactor here.

"You're going to get sent to jail, you know?"

"Not if we use the opportunity to our advantage." She says with her usual devilish smile.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"No spoilers! You get ready for the time when we have to send you back. You said you took my theory with you once, right? So, if there's anything you want to take to the other world, go and get it now. If anything happens I'll call you to inform you of my plan."

"Alright. Thanks Sensei, for hearing me out so earnestly."

"Oh, please. There's no way I'd sit idly by when I can do something to revert this mess. If you're telling the truth, then you have the power to mend this disaster. I'm only doing my part to save Marimo, my students and my city. That's all."

"Yeah, I know. One last thing, could you prepare your theories for me to take them there?"

"The theories? Why?"

"Well, I might end up needing the first one to prove to the other you that I'm telling the truth about coming from another world. And the second sounds like it could help me to finally be free of the random leaks, if I find a way to become a stable being again."

"I see. Okay, I'll see what I can do. But I'll give them to you moments before I start the device, and if it doesn't work I'll have them back."

"Of course, sounds good to me."

"Well then, later. Don't beat yourself up too much, okay?" I give her a nod and with a smile she gets up and leaves. I slowly finish my order.

I guess Sensei will always be like that. She'll never cease to amaze me. To use the reactor again, what is she even thinking?

Thank God this went well, I don't know what I would have done if she refused to help me.

During the last days I finished writing my memories of the other world, to remember clearly all that happened. Thanks to that I could prepare a short version of what happened to me for Sensei.

Today, the day she agreed to meet with me, was also they day everything started going to hell in this world.

A rebellion in China filled the news. A terrorist group threatened with blowing up Kashgar as a sign to the government. I don't really know a thing about the politics of China, but the fact that Kashgar was the place where they'd start was a bad omen for me.

The next thing that was on the news was that some extremists from the Middle East attacked the frontiers of Europe, and there were attacks in many cities in Turkey. I recalled that after Kashgar, the BETA moved towards Europe instead of going east.

But the worst part was the announcement of a new type of nuclear reactor developed in a joint project by the US and Canada. I am sure this is going to be the equivalent of the nuking of the second hive in Athabasca.

When I saw the news I felt my blood turn to ice. Luckily Sensei agreed to help me, even if she may not believe me yet. I always end up depending on her, no matter what world I'm in.

I now know that the leak is definitely happening, and at a fast pace. Whether my memories triggered it or not was not important anymore, what matters now is that I have to go to the only place where I can fix this.

Here, I'm just a college student. And even if I joined the army and my skills with a TSF somehow transferred to a fighter jet, I doubt I'd be able to change much here.

That's why I'm going back to the BETA world, where I already know how much I can help, how valuable I can be. I can still fight and I can take stuff with me to use as bargaining tools too.

Alright! Let's go make my preparations!

After paying, I went shopping. I got another Santa Rabbit to take with me, to not forget the burdens I carry, to not falter when I eventually stumble.

I also went looking for some boots and military clothes to use there and I found some nice stuff on an enthusiast shop. The guy immediately noticed I had some military knowledge by the questions I made and my posture, so he recommended me his best goods.

They were really expensive, but this will make me look like an actual soldier when I get there since my old Hakuryo uniform will surely make them suspicious of me, and I also don't fit in it anymore. According to Sensei, after I left that world everyone should have forgotten about me, so it's back to square one. I doubt my service as a pilot will be enough to convince Sensei to help me this time.

Thinking on that, I went again to the library and an internet cafe to gather more information I thought could be useful. Engineering books, the latest breakthroughs in many scientific fields or info on the current state of the military weapons we have.

What else could I bring there? Food? Medicine?

"But I want it! Please Mom!"

A child's shout catches my attention. He was trying to get his mother to buy him a Play Stallion 2. The mother wanted to get him a Game Guy Advance.

Man, I remember when I was like that and my parents outright refused to buy me any videogames. If it weren't for Uncle Koetsu gifting me old consoles I wouldn't have known the wonder that is gaming. I had to save up on my own to get a Dreamcost so many years later, too. But, boy, was it worth it to play Valgern-On in my house. Ah, those were the days…

… Wait a sec. What if I brought a home console to the other side? I mean, they were blown away by the Game Guy and it wasn't even the Color version. I could even get Valgern-On Oratory Tango and say that it's a TFS simulator program. Then I could show it to Sensei, to make the XM3 even better then how it was last time I was there! I'M A GENIUS! This will definitely catch her interest.

I mean, I already have it on the Dreamcost even if it's the original version, but the second game truly is very similar to our TSF simulators.

How would I like to get my hands on it. Alright, let's see how much it is. I still have some leftover from the tournament's prize money.

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*September 17th. 8 PM.*

*(Takeru's House.)*

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The phone rang loudly. I wobbled down the stairs to pick up the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Shirogane! How's everything?" A cheerful voice sounded on the other side.

"Sensei? What happened?"

"You're not watching the news?"

"The news?" I turn the TV on and switch to a news channel. "So, what's up with the news?"

"They should start talking about it any minute now, don't be so impatient."

Talking? Did something happened related to the leak? They're just showing the usual stuff.

"And now, let's talk about the terrorist attack in China. The starting location was in the city of Kashgar, where multiple buildings were attacked by an independent terrorist group."

A map is displayed, where they show all the places that were attacked. The attack was on Kashgar. Apparently, a terrorist group that opposes the Chinese government used toxic bombs on at least half the city, while also sending guerrillas to destroy important buildings and roads. So, it has begun.

"Shirogane, looks like you weren't delusional after all."

"Heh, it would have been better if I were. So, what now?"

"I'll have you help me in the practices of an engineering class." Huh? She wants my help for a class? "A professor I know asked me to help him with his class, I was going to refuse obviously. But then you came to me with all these revelations, so I thought I'd use that favor to our advantage."

"And how am I helping?"

"You'll be my assistant. He wants to show his students something that isn't the usual operations, to prepare them in case something goes wrong. So we're going to use the reactor to power my machine and send you back to the other world. I'm sure everybody will be really thrilled with this exercise!"

"So I'll go for support, but actually that's an excuse for me to be there without raising suspicion."

"Exactly. We just need an excuse to get you in there. We'll do this on October 1st at 4 PM, be ready by then." And she hangs up.

Yes! Finally, the most important thing has fallen into place! With this I'll be able to go back and fix this causal leaking.

Though I wonder how will the other Yuuko-sensei react to me. I mean, it may be more of a bother to her now that she doesn't need me to tune the 00 Unit. I just have to hope she agrees. And anyways, our agreement was that each of us had to benefit from the collaboration. This is definitely not what I'd call a satisfactory result, so I have a right to ask her what went wrong last time.

Enough moping around, let's prepare everything I need! I don't want to end up forgetting something just because I didn't take my time to prepare properly.

This time I'll fix everything, no more accidents, no more sacrifices.

For my sake.

For our sake.

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*September 30th. 5 PM.*

*(Dojo.)*

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"Hiya!" I dodge to the left, rising my blade upwards.

"Sei!" Maya-san parred my strike, quickly pressuring me with more agile slashes.

I put force into my feet as I stand deflecting her attacks, then take one swift step forward when an opening presented itself.

She still blocks it, but now I'm the one pressuring through multiple attacks.

Then, she takes a step back and in one fluid motion delivers a rising slash to my hand, knocking my wooden sword away.

I'm still not good enough. Not like I was going to become a master in less than a month. I sigh, raising my hands in defeat.

"Will this be all for today, Shirogane-sama?"

"Yes, Maya-sensei!" She sighs as she adjust her glasses.

"Shirogane-sama, I've told you many times that you do not need to address me in that way. I'm following your orders here."

"You still deserve my respect and gratitude. That's all I can do to show how much this means for me."

Maya-san agreed to train with me four days a week from 10 AM to around 6 PM. We have our breaks in between but most of the time we spent it clashing our blades.

"You said that from tomorrow on you'll take a rest, did you not? Whenever you wish to continue your training all you have to do is call me. I'll arrange my schedule as soon as I'm able."

"Thanks." I told her that since I don't know if I'll be gone tomorrow.

"That said, I didn't expect you to be so adept with a sword. Mana must have taught you well, and you must have kept practicing by yourself."

"Please don't praise me so much, I'm still not good enough."

"Nonsense! You lack experience with Iaido but your form with Kendo isn't bad at all. You've improved your stance and your slashes now follow a nice pattern. While you haven't yet mastered it, you're certainly a capable Mugen Kidou user now Shirogane-sama. You are a quick learner, that's for sure."

I can't really find the words to thank her. Thanks to this training and the papers Sensei gave me I managed to stop being so depressed. I still have nightmares everyday, but there's nothing I could do about

that. I also managed to get a bit better with a gun, since I rarely practiced that.

"Thanks for all you've done for me, Maya-sensei! I'll keep honing my technique by myself in the meanwhile." Maya-san looks troubled to hear me still call her sensei, but she closes her eyes and returns to her usual expression.

"I accept your thanks, Shirogane-sama. May your training be fruitful. Well then, I'll tidy up the dojo. You can leave now."

"Thanks, Maya-sensei. See you later." I give her a bow that she returns before going to pick up the sword she sent flying towards a wall.

I take my leave from the dojo she had reserved for our training sessions and headed straight home. I haven't really talked much with my parents lately, since I told them I was going to take a break from college they've kept their distance. I also don't know what will happen to this body if I go to the other world. Will it go alongside me? Or will it remain here?

Taking a shower as soon as I got back, afterwards I just relaxed while checking the news. After dinner I went straight to bed.

…

After I woke up, took a shower, and had breakfast, I went back to my room to make sure I wasn't forgetting anything.

The Stallion 2, the Game Guy, all the Game Guy cartridges, Valgern-On 2, CryRing Saga, Steel Gear Viper Eater, the engineering books, the medicine books, the stack of research info, the boots, the uniform, the Santa Rabbit, some food for when I wake up there. That's all, right? I rechecked everything in my bag before closing it. Alright, all done!

As I put away some books the trophy and the Minaru Kamui came into view. That was the last time we could all hang around together, right?

I grab the little box with the medal and the special GR card and stuff into the travel bag. I want to take something unique to this world with me, in case I can never return to it. To remember all that happened here, the good and the bad.

Now, whatever should I do with the sword? If I take it with me it might cause trouble since it also was Meiya's sword in the other world. But I also don't want to leave it here, this is my… No, our sword now. I ended up attaching Sumika's ribbon to its handle since I thought I would never use it and to have those two together at my side whenever I took the blade with me.

Whatever happens, happens! I'm taking it with me, I just have to hide it and be careful with it!

I should be on my way, can't afford to be late. After grabbing my bag, I rush towards the door without speaking with my parents. I don't know if I'll disappear or if my body will remain, but I won't risk myself to say something unnecessary.

"Takeru? You're going out already?" Mom catches me just as I'm about to leave.

"Yeah, see you later Mom."

"And where are you going with that bag?"

"I'm just… going to meet with someone."

"You're going to do something dangerous, aren't you?" How could she tell? Her face is torn between worry and anger.

"It's not anything dangerous, really."

"You're not deceiving your mother, Takeru. You've been such a mess since the earthquake. What is it you're trying to do?"

"I'm just trying to help someone, that's all there is to it really."

"Sigh… I suppose I won't be able to change your mind. Just be careful and come back home safe, yes?"

"Yes. I'll… be back." If I'm back it's because I failed.

"Takeru." Mom comes closer and hugs me. "I don't know what it is you're going to do, but please cheer up. Don't force yourself to do things out of a false sense of responsibility. Nothing of what happened was your fault. Whatever path you choose to walk from now on, know that me and your father will always support you."

"I'm not so sure if Dad agrees with you."

"Your father is merely worried about you, he just doesn't know how to express it. We were overjoyed to see you do so well in college that when all of this happened we didn't knew what to tell you. You never really gave us much trouble, outside of your pranks. It's the first time we see you depressed about something, I think he… is frustrated about never talking to you about more serious things when he had the time."

"It's not like I don't know how much you cared for me, just…" It feels like it's been so long since I've talked with both of you. And at the same time my memories of these years with both of you helping me study and prepare my entrance exams, all you did so that I could just focus on my studies, all of that is still fresh in me.

"Just be careful, and be back before it gets dark. Next year you can continue your studies or start another path, the world isn't over Takeru."

"Yes, I'll be going now."

I tightened the hug a bit before breaking it, going out towards the street. A swirl of clouds was on the sky, the days are getting less warm already. As if in synchrony with my heart, that was also slowly freezing over.

I might never see my parents ever again. Those two idiots were always so annoying, we never talked much to begin with. And yet, I always knew they were there ready to scold me and try to set me in the right path.

Dad was a serious pain when I was little, he was constantly saying how important studying was. Mom never let me play any videogames before I finished my homework and was super strict with what shows I watched on TV. All of this is going to disappear. I take one last look at my house, I can't help but see the extra room that connected to the mansion Meiya had built when she moved here.

Mom, Dad, thanks for everything. I'll make sure to make a world that's unaffected by this crisis.

Even if I'm just chasing a gentle lie, I want to believe that someday we'll be able to live together in peace. Perhaps someday I'll be able to cry remembering you, perhaps then I'll truly know how much you meant for me. But until I get rid of this cold shadow in my heart, all I can do is keep struggling to find the world where we are not forced to choose between death and war.

Goodbye, my home. May I return to you someday.

It took me less time than usual to make it to college today, I made my way to the room Sensei had told me to go.

"Oh, Shirogane. You're early? What a surprise!" Yuuko-sensei greets me as I entered the room.

"Hello, Sensei. Is everything ready?"

"Yes, let me start explaining what we are going to do."

The plan was to 'teach' the students what to do in case the reactor went haywire. For that reason Sensei was going to safely push the reactor's energy output to power a device, while the other teacher was going to explain what should be done in such a situation and what the readings meant, when they should know to do what and a lot of other technicalities.

The thing is, we are just taking advantage of this to power the little microwave to full power without doing anything illegal. This way we can get all the power we need to send me to the other world, I just hope my link to it is still strong enough. Otherwise…

No! No dark thoughts! I'm making it there, and I'm getting Sensei to help me fix whatever went wrong when I came to this world.

I'm just going to stand there, push some buttons, pull some levers and open some images in a PC. Just an assistant, that's what I was supposed to be.

"Sensei, did you bring the theories?"

"Yes, right here. Put them wherever you want, but if this little experiment doesn't work-"

"I'll give them back, I know."

"So long as we are clear on that. Now, there's something I wanted to tell you before we start."

"What is it?"

"My hypothesis of why this is happening. You see Shirogane, from what you've told me this world was affected by the other worlds many times, right?"

"Yes, I came here many times until I could get the theory."

"I wasn't referring just to that, though. Even if you were unaware of it you, as a conductor, were constantly sending information from this

world to that one, whether it was a memory or a habit. And this world probably tried to compensate for the loss of its Shirogane and all the data it had lost. And let's not forget about all the possible loops you had to take. Who knows how many times the exchange was forced to happen, with the you in that world forcing data here over there."

"But shouldn't that have fixed itself once I stopped being a conductor?" That's what she said would happen when I came back after the Instructor's death.

"Yes, it did. That's why you lived the last two years in peace. But those effects always have a ripple. In this case, I believe our worlds are now too close, and this makes it easy for the information to slip between the worlds, so to say."

"So you're saying that all this would still have happened even if I didn't recover my memories?" Then, is it even something that can be fixed?

"I'd say that it's thanks to your memories that we got so lucky, actually." She scratches her head, closing one of her eyes.

"What do you mean?"

"You were a conductor in the past, so it is possible that you've developed an affinity for sensing causal information. So, since there was a receptor in this world with a strong connection to certain data, it took priority over the rest of the data that was being brought over. Since your repressed memories were exerting pressure to become clear once again thanks to the similar feelings you have, they arrived first so to speak. But since assimilating such kind of information is not an easy thing to do for the brain, even less when they're traumatic memories, it took a long time for them to completely flow into you. Your memories were like a safety net that was stopping most of the other heavy information, like all the deaths and what not."

"Is that why everything is going to hell since I recovered my memories?"

"I assume so." If she's so sure about this then I have not much reason to doubt her.

"But why would my memories be more important? Wouldn't the deaths of millions be way more heavy?"

"I think that's because you've… transformed into a different kind of anomaly."

"W-What do you mean?" Anomaly? You better not be trying to scare me.

"Let's see… I'll call it Causality Nucleus. If the conductor is the one that makes information flow into others, then the nucleus is the one that pulls said information towards him."

"Sensei, I thought the conductor made the data flow through him. Doesn't the conductor pull the information towards him from the other worlds?" She's really confusing me right now.

"Yes, you're right. But you said it yourself, the conductor brings information. To himself, to the world or to those around him. The conductor is the pipeline that allows the exchange of data between worlds at a much higher rate than normal. The nucleus instead pulls information towards him, it doesn't connect to other worlds and it doesn't affect others. The nucleus is basically a causality magnet, if there is a connection between two worlds the nucleus will either draw whatever information it has a connection with to himself or be drawn itself towards the leak. This is why your memories sort of delayed the effects of the leak, since they had priority in the transfer. Obviously, other data was leaked along your memories like the BETAs that appeared on that game or Marimo's death."

"Okay, so it's like my memories occupied a big part of the highway to this world until they reached me. And when that part freed up, a lot of

data finished leaking into this world?" I hope I got that right.

"Correcto! This is why everything started happening so fast after you got your memory back. You did say that something similar happened when you returned for the first time, right?"

"Yes, Sumika's and Marimo-chan's deaths were almost immediate after interacting with me."

"So there you have it. Who knows why you turned into this. Maybe it's what happens to all physical manifestations of a causality conductor after they cease to be one?" She then furrows her brows and stares pensively at nowhere in particular.

"You said the nucleus could be drawn to the leak. What did you mean?"

"Oh? It means that, like a magnet to a metal, if there's a strong connection to it the nucleus will gravitate naturally towards the leak. To give you an example, you. Shirogane you could have lead a different life, you could have developed different feelings, and yet you resonated with the repressed memories within you. You naturally turned into someone who could remember them, someone who could have an emotional state similar to the one you had when you made those memories. That way you could fully assimilate them, otherwise the memories would just have been weird, intelligible dreams to you."

"So when I started having the vivid nightmares, I had become someone who could assimilate the memories?"

"Basically. But since you didn't have any trauma similar to what you described to me in your life here, your feelings were overloaded and that's why you felt so guilty when you got them back, I think." So that's why I was such a mess during the first days, despite being rather fine in the other world before coming back.

"Okay. One last question, when I get to the other world, will I be pulling information towards me?"

"Yes, of course. If you end up in a world in which the source of you becoming a conductor still exists, you'll naturally become a conductor once again. Then you'll be both at the same time, the one who brings and the one who receives."

"What about data about me that was there from before?"

"From before? Hmm, I guess that would be pulled towards you too. Why do you ask?"

"Because… the Takeru Shirogane of that world is dead. Could the data of his death be pulled towards me and get me killed?"

"Hmm, I think not. When someone crosses to another plane everything about the previous version of that someone is treated as if it were a different entity altogether. Now, since you're similar beings existing on the same plane you may share some memories or traumas unconsciously now that you're a nucleus, don't be shocked if you're suddenly scared of cats or you can't eat something out of nowhere."

"Wait, sudden traumas?" Why does that sound familiar?

"Yes, inexplicable traumas or fears. If both of you were alive there would be no sharing since you'd be treated as different people or you would end up overwriting his existence I think, but if the other you is dead then some of his heavier data might flow into you."

"What if that has already happened to me in the past?" I need to know if my hunch is correct on this one.

"What are you saying? The conductor cannot link itself to other versions of himself. It can replace them I guess, but since it can never receive data from the world it's currently in, there's no way for you to gain any kind of memory from other Shiroganes that existed in

that same world, unless you managed to merge yourself with an alive parallel version of you. And you definitely cannot have received the data from a parallel version of yourself, you could only receive the memories of parallel worlds you yourself have lived through."

"But it happened. During my first loop, I had a breakdown when the BETA attacked for the first time even though I had no reason to fear them so much, to the point of fainting. Later, in another loop, I learned that the other me was brutally murdered by the BETA. At the time, I didn't make the connection but I definitely 'inherited' the fear of the BETA the other me had."

"But then… that would mean that you already were a nucleus by then. Or were you always one?" She starts looking at me with the burning look she has when she gets fired up about her research.

"Uuh, Sensei?"

"Is that why you became a conductor? Is that why this phenomenon was able to occur? Were you pulled towards that world due to some natural affinity to causal effects when Kagami tried to 'look' for you as the rift in space-time was teared open? And that could explain you retaining your memories since, unlike a conductor, a nucleus has a strong hold on its own causal information, as weak as its pull might be. It cannot be leaked so easily. Yes, then the resulting trauma from dying repeatedly repressed certain memories, but over time you grew resilient to it and started to carry over your information with you every time you returned, then eventually you had gained enough 'pull' to hold onto it that you could retain your physical state and part of your memory. And now that you've grown mentally, you can access a larger amount of data unconsciously. Yes, then by extension once your link to that world got weaker you were almost instantly brought back to your original world through the sharing of information, regardless of your will to stay there. Then that makes-"

Sensei got lost on her own world, speaking so fast that I couldn't understand a thing she was saying.

"Sensei? Did you figure anything out?"

"You… may have been born as a Causality Nucleus, just that there never was a leak strong enough to change you drastically until you were sent to the other world." Sensei says after returning to reality.

"How do you know I was never affected by a leak?"

"You never had dreams about events that happened in the future or about a different you before you were taken to the other world, right?"

"Well, no." Not that I remember ever having a dream about the future during my life here before all of this. I could have passed my tests without studying or defeat Mikoto in Valgern-On if I had such dreams.

"Then that's it. Don't worry, this changes nothing in our plan. It only makes it more possible for you to link yourself to that world. And it would also mean that you don't have to worry about receiving the death data while you're there."

"If you say so. How are all the preparations by the way?"

"Fine. We still need to go and set up everything, you got any other questions?"

"No, I'm good. Let's go start the preparations."

We went to the reactor room and started preparing everything. This time there were definitely more cables around the microwave.

After we connected a PC to a device and we confirmed that the readings were showing fine, we started to focus on the place where I was going to stand.

We set a small area aside, in a place blocked by some large machines. This way nobody could see me while I was transferring.

The other teacher came to greet us while we were finishing setting up everything, and lent us a hand in organizing all the cables. I let Sensei speak to him while I unassumingly played my role.

Soon, in less than half an hour, I'll be back there. I'm starting to get nervous, I feel my hands are all sweaty.

"Shirogane, here." Yuuko-sensei hands me a chocolate. "Eat it, it'll do you good."

"Thanks. So, how do you think is the set up?"

"Perfect. We should get a lot of power from this baby, so after I give you the signal go to your position and focus on the image of that world."

"Okay, I've got this."

"Don't worry too much, okay?" She smiles as she gives me a pat on the shoulder.

"Yes, thanks."

As I finished eating the chocolate, the class entered the room. These are guys that are just about to graduate. I wonder if I'll ever be able to do that.

Does becoming commissioned count? Because if it does, I 'graduated' faster than anyone here ever could. Take that one, college.

All right, it's the hour of truth. Whatever happens, happens. I make it back and get another chance to fix this, or I fail and carry this cross for the rest of my life.

After both teachers finished their explanation, as per Sensei's instruction, I start the microwave. First showing the images on the PC, which then are shown on another monitor closer to the class, the minutes pass.

Everything is similar to how it happened last time. The reactor is building up energy, the readings on the screen are rising steadily.

Soon. In just a few minutes…

"Shirogane, it's time."

"… Alright."

"Hey, Shirogane. Can I ask you something before you go?"

"What is it?" She has a serious expression on her face. I wonder what she's gonna ask.

"You've never told me what is your final objective for going back."

"I guess I haven't. I think… I want to regain my peaceful life. Not just for me, but for as many people I can. For both worlds. I know I might not be able to save everybody, and that going back will yet again bring chaos to the worlds. But I have to try to fix this world without ruining what I achieved in the other one."

"So, basically, you want to reverse the effects of causality in this world, while not affecting the other? If that's all you want, you could simply ask the other me to stabilize you once you're there. If you do that, this world will revert to before all the information got into it. But to stabilize you she'll have to sever your link to this world, so you'll be stuck there forever."

"For real?! We can do that?"

"Yes, but if you wanted to come back here without putting this world at risk you would have to sever your connection to all the parallel branches of that world. Meaning, erasing whatever made you a causality conductor in the first place from them."

That means… killing Sumika. But without her, humanity has no chance whatsoever against the BETA.

"But how could I do that? I would have to jump through every single-"

"That's what my second theory is for. I never thought the research I did because I was bored would become something so important."

"Oh right, you did say something about that. About controlling what info we leak to other worlds."

"Exactly. At the very least, the machine you called the 00 Unit should be capable of such a feat, and in the worst case you can still stabilize yourself to stop all the sharing of information. Though, that would mean you would have to stay there forever, and you would probably not be able to do any more loops."

"I see. Thanks Sensei, I'll do my best to put a definitive stop to this."

"That's the spirit! Never forget how you're feeling right now, Shirogane. It is crucial for the transfer to succeed, and for what will come after it."

"Yeah, I won't let this chance go to waste."

"No, I wasn't solely speaking of your goals just now."

"Then, what did you mean?"

"I said it before, didn't I? The transfer might take some time to finish now that there isn't a pipeline uniting both worlds, right?" Ah, that's right. She moves her bangs out of her eyes, looking at the microwave. "Even if I polished my device, it isn't magical. The transfer of your data will take time, so chances are you will not appear immediately. And that is why you must hold your wishes tightly on your heart." She looks back, sizing me up for a second. "That determination you showed just now is the key to completing the transfer successfully. Otherwise, your data might get scattered."

"So… I'd disappear if that happens?"

"… Yes, that is a possibility. This world would get reset again and your scattered memories would once more try to return to you, and this time we might not be so lucky to get two years of grace. Your desires are not only what will carry you forward when everything collapses on top of you, but what effectively makes you who you currently are. There is much I don't understand about how the Nucleus works, but you can bet this world won't like to have its Shirogane gone yet again and will surely try to hold you in. So if you don't manage to form a link, as weak as it might be, the Nucleus' pull won't be able to initiate the transfer."

"So I gotta remember why I do this, to keep my oath ever present in my heart so that the causality can take me away, right?" Briefly nodding, she smiles.

"Indeed, so long as you can rekindle those feelings you had for those who lived in that other world I believe the transfer will be a success. Otherwise, you risk being stuck in a living hell if you ever lose your memories, whichever world you stay in. I assume you're ready?"

"Yes, don't worry Sensei. I've got this." Again smiling, she nods and goes to the other professor's side to talk about the class he was giving. After a few moments, she gives me the signal. I get my bag and move to the place we had arranged.

I stand in the circle we had prepared, hidden behind all the tall machines and servers and what not. Closing my eyes, licking my lips, leaning my head back, and inhaling slowly from my nose, I began to remember all I could about that other world, about those who I held dear there, about all the hardships we faced side by side.

My first loop, failing to run ten clicks, getting bitten by a snake, the HSST incident, the old lady we saved, the Christmas party, the confessions. The following years.… And Iceberg.

The time I had my memories, the better CCSE, the coup, the Shogun, my different bonds with the squad, the Valkyries, the

Instructor's death, Sumika, and our battle against the BETA.

All that they meant for me, all they've taught me, is what allows me to still be standing right now. I'll make sure to honor all of it.

No more unnecessary deaths or sacrifices, this time I'll cut the link through and through. No more leaks. No more loops. No more pointless deaths.

And I'll stay there for as long as I can! If I have to stay there forever to protect this world I will!

I had that resolve in my past loops, I'll wipe the BETA from the face of the Earth if that's what it takes to regain my- no, our peace!

This time no harm will come to any of you, here or there! I won't allow it! You all gave me so much of your lives, of your efforts, of your hopes… Now it's my time to do the same for you all, as the last survivor of our squad! This is the only thing I can do to truly carry on, to cut all my lingering regrets and honor all you've taught me, to put an end to what we started and forge the best possible future I can be part of. Not seeking only power, not leaving everything to others, not hesitating when it's time to bloody my own hands, to be a beacon for my allies just as Sensei, Marimo-chan and Meiya always were for me… I don't know what I can do or how I'll do it, but I'll sure as hell struggle with all my might to make a positive change and stop all this shit!

A light starts shining around me, I remember this feeling. It's working!

"This time, for sure, I'm saving all of you. No matter what happens to me, no matter what price I gotta pay… I'm gonna give all of your futures a smile!"

The light shines brighter than before, I feel a sensation that I haven't felt in a long while. A jolt of electricity shocks me, freezing me in place as all my senses are overloaded.

As if I were gazing at the sun, tasting the spiciest curry one could eat, hearing the loudest explosion on loop, and were buried under the coldest dry ice in the world.

No longer being able to tell whether I'm standing, sitting, or floating, unable to talk or move, I simply drift as the assault continues, all the while repeating my oath, remembering my times in the other world.

And as everything around me is warped by the light, I can't tell what's up or down anymore. At some point, the light recedes and it feels as if I were gazing at the sky right before dawn, but littered with odd shapes in different colors. Some abstract and others with clear geometrical shapes, the mixture continues to swirl in my view.

… Feeling as if I were being stretched, one of the smaller shapes seems to 'open' and begins to shine like the light of the experiment seems to do. While the others remain feeling distant in their floaty drifting, the shining one seems… edging closer, or at least trying to.

As soon as I thought about reaching out to it, as if I were tied to a car as it speeds up, I felt as if I was shot right towards that small shape, going into the swirling light that enveloped me again, as it did whenever I teleported myself.

And yet… Twisted patches of dark appear in my vision, as if someone had thrown ink on a glass full of water. Two of those odd, black stains swirl around as if they were galaxies, surrounded by… abstract lines and circles of different colors in pairs. One gets too close to the black stains and gets absorbed, the other shoots away into the distance when that happens. In between the black stains, a small whirlpool of those remnants forms, and it feels like it's getting closer.

The whirlpool gets bigger and bigger, almost covering my whole 'vision'. The two black stains slowly disappear, all the little dots of colors begin to again shoot away from within them. Like foam of a wave that hits the shore, then is pulled back into the sea. The colors do this around the whirlpool time and again, as what little sensation I

retain of my body loses weight and becomes numb, as I begin to feel faint, as everything slowly begins to fade away.

As everything pulled back into the center of the whirlpool, the black stains reappeared again and also got sucked into the thing. The mess of colors became more and more bigger… or am I getting closer to it?

I feel a strong pain where I think my ears should be, my whole vision turns into a monochrome as the shapes and swirls continue to move and mix. The patterns become a rhythm, repeating over and over. Looking at them, as everything simply solidifies into a gray abstract thing, I began to slowly lose my senses.

As the waves rock in, filling the shore with the reddening foam…

As the blazes sprung out, grilling the odd branches of some shapes that remind me of cherry blossoms and their petals swirl in the air, ashes scattering about…

As the whirlpool seems to grow angrier, showering a rain of dark ink all around…

And again… And again…

… Until my consciousness slowly faded away, bathed by the contracting colors and shapes, by the exploding mess of the black ink, by the rush of the whirlpool's shaking.

---

…

Ugh… My head hurts… Where am I? Hmm… I can feel my hands and feet. I'm lying on something soft… I move my hands around, it feels cushy… Like a bed…

I open my eyes, once I adjust to the low light in the room I recognize a familiar ceiling. I'm in my room? I sit on the bed, and see that it's

indeed my room. The trophy is still there on a shelf, too. Did… Did I fail?

As I try to get up, feeling my shoulders being super stiff, I notice that the travel bag I had with me was at the feet of the bed. I open it and everything I had put in there was where I left it. Even Sensei's theories. Which means…

I take a long, deep breath…

"I MADE IT BACK, BABY!" I shout as I jump out of the bed. "I did it! Now I can get started on fixing the leaks, once and for all!"

Let's see… It's dark outside. I still have the lab coat Sensei made me wear during the class. Looks like the transfer went well enough. Flickering the light on, I grab the rice balls I had prepared, sat on the bed, and ate them.

Now that my stomach is filled, let's review the plan. I go up to the base, and hopefully if Sensei is still here I can bait her with the improved theories.

If she isn't and I end up detained, I can say that I came under classified orders to deliver some really important documents, under the assumption that she was stationed there.

I wonder if anyone will react to hearing my name? I mean, even if everybody forgot about me, there may have been some records left. Sensei may just have deleted them, though.

Whatever. This was a risky gamble from the start, so at the least if I can prove my skill piloting a TSF and get accepted into the army again I can look for Sensei later. After all, I still don't know how much 'time' the transfer took.… Imagine if I appeared ten years or so later. Hopefully that isn't the case.

I change to the military clothes I had bought, grabbed the travel bag, took one last glance at the trophy, and went down the stairs.

Resisting the urge to look around, to take anything else with me, or to even gaze at my parents' room, I rush to the door.

Now that I think about it, I never stayed for long inside my house when I arrive at this world. What would happen if I never got out of it? Would I eventually go back to my world; or would the house revert to its ruined state before my eyes?

"Sadly, science will never know the answer to these questions."

I grab the doorknob, close my eyes as I sigh, feel a shiver on my head as the temptation to look back appears on me. I do so, taking one last glance at the kitchen, at the stairs, remembering those last two years and my time with the guys when we could fool around…

"… See you later." I smile, turning back to the door. Tightly grabbing the knob, I turn it around. Closing my eyes, I open the door. Feeling the breeze, I step outside.

…

The sight that receives me is the same as the one I remembered. Even the Gekishin that's collapsed in Sumika's house.

The sky starts to clear up, dawn is upon us. I never got to see the sunrise in this world from here. It looks so pretty… And also cold. I had forgotten this world was far colder due to the mess the war made. I guess the environmental damage won't be fixed in only a few years, huh.

"All right, enough screwing around! Let's get this show on the road!" I made a beeline towards Yokohama Base, rubbing my arms due to the cold. Dammit, this world is way colder than I remembered… Should have brought a sweater.

Though, I guess it means it's either winter or close to it. I guess I'll find out what day is today soon enough anyways. That being said… What do I do if Sensei isn't in the base anymore? With Alt. IV

finished, maybe for many years already, she might have been transferred somewhere else. If I recall correctly, the 207th Training School was disbanded too. And considering what we did during Ouka to the American teams…

What do I do if I get sent to the detention barracks and they take my stuff? I mean… A complete stranger comes up to the base with knowledge about a secret plan, some secret documents only a few individuals should know about, and he just so happens to be a good pilot. They may end up thinking I'm a spy.

Okay, so… What do I do? I stop in my tracks, feeling a tense grip on my stomach. Think, what can I do?

Okay, how about I hide some stuff until they believe me? I could negotiate to speak with Sensei, and maybe I could bluff and 'prove' to them I was in the UN before with the knowledge I still have. I was a member of the Valkyries, so it's not like I'm lying. Alright, this is going to be a dangerous long shot, but I gotta roll that dice. That being said, I can't hide the theories here. I know the civilian area is rarely used for tests, but in the off chance that they get destroyed during one of those runs I'm toast. Where could I… Oh! I know where!

I make my way to that tree atop the hill. Moving very slowly, to make sure nobody else is here, I approach the place. The base looks as it always did. Good to see it got repaired well. Now, I know Kei used to come here every now and then, so other people also might be coming here from time to time. Let's go down the other way, no one should have a reason to go to the other side of the hill. Let's count… The fifth tree to the right after the big tree at the top… Yeah, it's far away enough. I had the theories wrapped by Sensei in a bag and placed in a small leather cover, so I can bury them without worries. After digging a bit, satisfied with the hole, I place the theories in after taking out the first pages of each of them. Though I will have to be careful in how I hand them over, I can keep this as my last ace in the hole. Assuming they don't just drug the information out of me, that is. Well, no getting depressed!

After cleaning my hands with the tissues I brought from my world along the rice balls, I go down the hill and reach the railway again. Walking along the road with the sakura trees as the base looms in the horizon, can't help but to slow down to take in the view, to deeply breathe in the air, to see for myself this actually isn't just a dream.

"I know! Let's go pay my respects to the Instructor and everyone else!" That is the best way to start this new journey.

Now, the tree with the memento should be… right about… here? Where is it? I look around, taking some steps forward, but the memento is nowhere to be found.

Did they remove it? I mean, if the base changed its CO and XO they wouldn't know about its meaning. Damn, now I can't even greet my squadmates. What a nice way to start the journey.

"Sigh… Whatever. Let's get on with this."

Alright, I can see the base from here. There it is, the radar, the giant antenna. Now that I came from home I can say that it definitely looks ridiculous atop the school. Seriously, they should have made the base a bit less like Hakuryo, you know. How did Sensei manage to convince people to build it this way?

Let's announce myself, the sooner I get this done the better. Here's hoping I don't end up in the detention barracks again, or drugged by the doctors.

As I got closer to the entrance of the base I could see that there were two MP standing guard. Wait a second… that's the leader of the volunteer crew! Didn't he die during the BETA attack?!

The ruins are the same, Marimo's memento is gone, the MP are alive… Could this mean…

I could feel my heartbeat on the base of my neck as the MP approached me, both smiling.

"Hey! What are you doing over there?"

"Been out for a walk? What a weird kid. There's nothing but rubble out there."

The same words, the same people. Did I… go back to that 22nd?

"… Wait, what's up with his clothes?" The leader says, leaning a bit closer to his comrade.

"You're right… Haven't seen this kind in our base." They stare at me suspiciously as the grip on their machineguns tightens. I better introduce myself before they point them at me.

"Excuse me. My name is Takeru Shirogane, I've come to deliver a certain object to Professor Kouzuki." I said as I slowly raised my hands behind my head.

"… What was that? You've got some business with the Professor?" The leader asked, suspicious of me.

… He didn't say that he doesn't know who I'm talking about. The tension in his face, brows and cheeks resembles the one I saw last loop when I made a ruckus to enter the base. He is on guard, not trying to poke for intel. His posture also seems… on edge, readying for a counter. So Sensei should be here in this base… Now, all that's left is seeing what year this is.

"Yes. I'm under strict orders to not divulge any kind of information to anyone, except the Professor. She shouldn't be expecting my visit, and she probably doesn't know who I am. But please inform her that… I have with me valuable information regarding her research." If my hunch is right and today is October 22nd, I should try to do this without raising any alarms. I have no idea why I'm back to the start point, but if I am… that means…

I gulp, inhaling through my nose. Heartbeats drumming on my neck as their faces return to my mind, making my knees tremble a bit. If

I'm not wrong then… everyone is alive.

"Which army are you with? Who sent you? Show us your ID, and we might believe you!" He shouts, they point their guns at me. Damn, last time as soon as I spoke about Sensei they called for her.

But this means she is here, and that he wasn't fishing for intel. If Sensei wasn't here, they would have asked me why I came to ask about someone that wasn't here. Also, they don't look like they're trying to deceive me. Those narrowed eyes and tight posture are legit aggressive, defensive. Sigh… Sensei is here, at least. One worry less.

"… That information is classified. However, I can tell you that I'm a Cadet. To avoid being traced and stop certain eyes from noticing I didn't bring my ID, I also traveled on land on civilian clothing. I changed back into this uniform just a few hours ago. I have no proof to make you believe me, without first speaking with the Professor."

They exchange some glances, whispering while covering their mouths with a hand. Looking my way again, without releasing me from the barrels' aim, the leader takes a step closer after they reached their conclusion.

"Alright, I'll go call the Professor. You stay quiet, one wrong move-"

"Don't worry, I've no intention of resisting. Please tell the Professor that I have come to help her fix the zero."

"Fix the zero? Is that what you want me to tell her?"

"Fix, tune, debug. I was told to use one of those words. I wasn't told what that meant, and that only the Professor would understand." Hopefully they buy my excuse. And it also works to see if my hunch is right.

"Alright, I'll go now. You stay quiet."

The leader goes to the guard post by the entrance and grabs the phone. I sigh, blinking a few times as I stare at the base. Is everyone… alive in there?

"Excuse me, could I ask you something?" I address the other guard, that was still pointing his gun at me.

"Quiet! We are still suspicious of you!"

"I just wanted to know what day it is, I've been walking so much I lost track of time."

"What a weird guy. Today is October 22nd, that all?" I nod, and a tense silence comes back to the air.

So I ended up coming back to this date, huh. If my hunch is right, I couldn't possibly describe how happy I am, but that leaves a question open. Why? Did Sensei use too much power during the transfer? No, we needed to use almost all of it just to start the transfer, no way in hell we had enough power to send me back in time two years. Her device should have been improved in those two years I stayed in my world, not to mention the fixes of her new theory, but would that be enough? Maybe, were my feelings what brought me here? My regret of not saving them, of wanting to do more? Whatever, this is good. Now, I have some cards I can use to make Yuuko-sensei agree to help me. And everyone is alive. This is a godsend.

"Shirogane." And he's here. Please tell me I'm not going to the prison. "The Professor has agreed to meet with you. We will have to search you for any possible weapons you may have, please do not resist."

"I won't. Oh, but you can't inspect this bag. Only the Professor is allowed to view its contents."

"Only the Professor, you say?" He throws a dubious look at me, eyes beginning to narrow.

"I guess you can inspect it, but no opening it. Unless you want the Professor to kill us both."

"Kill us?!"

"That's what I was told she would do to me if I let what's inside the bag to be seen by anyone. I don't even know what's in there." Learning to lie with a straight face is definitely the best thing I've learned from you, Sensei.

"Roger. We will inspect it with utmost care. Now, stay quiet."

They searched me for weapons, but they obviously didn't find anything. They passed some tube around the bag, moved it around slowly and put their ears close to it. Then they decided it was safe to let me inside the base.

Taking in the view of a base that was still in good shape, biting my lips to not smile, I followed their lead as a few curious gazes fell on me as we walked. Going by the turns we're taking, I guessed right as to where they were taking me. Back at the medical bay. Again with the tests, huh?

They stand by the door, making me enter first. As I do and they follow, a green haired woman with frog hairclips dressed in the usual duty suit of the UN with the medical armband on one arm looked at me, she was talking through the comms. Taking a second to finish her call while covering her mouth with a hand and lowering her tone so that I couldn't hear, she gave me salute I returned as she smiled once the call was over.

"Hello, please relax. Once we finish doing some simple tests, you'll be able to meet with the Professor." I nodded, following her outstretched hand towards a gurney.

…

Luckily for me, this time the tests were just some simple check-ups for real. They must have wanted to have a simple idea of my physical state. And, finally, I was taken to the first briefing room. The place was surrounded by MP, all armed to the teeth, all giving me a death stare. Of course they wouldn't let me talk with Sensei without security being near.

Lt. Pyatkh greets me with a bow that I return, then opens the door for me and gestures as if to invite me to go inside. As I enter, she closes the door behind me.

The room looking as it always did, like an old classroom from high school with the white paint on the wall and the wooden desks for the 'soldiers'. And there she was, her cold gaze, the lab coat. Sitting by the desk at the blackboard, resting an elbow onto it and her chin onto that hand. A piercing, unwavering glare meets my gaze as she signaled me to stop in my tracks a few meters from her.

She gazed at me, top to bottom, as if sizing me up. Simply holding my gaze in silence, two lone fingers massaged her chin. When she had enough, she straightened up, crossing her arms without letting go of my gaze.

"… Hello, I don't think we've met? You said you were Takeru Shirogane, right?"

"Yes, that is my name. It's nice to see you… again, Sensei." She raises her eyebrows in confusion. So she doesn't recognize me. Did she forget about me after I left? Or, is this truly the 22nd of October of 2001?

"Sensei? I do not remember having any students. And what do you mean by 'again'?" She was scanning my face for any possible reaction, brows lowering as did her tone. Heh, you're still the same.

"Is this place safe to talk about confidential matters?"

"Safe enough for you to give me a summary of what you have come here to do. I'll decide whether you're useful or not based on that." Yep, that dismissive tone can only be done by the one and only Yuuko-sensei. Her bored and uncaring face is the same too. So… I really am back in time, or is this the 22nd of another year? Let's see how this goes.

"Fair enough. I'm here to hand you a certain piece of intel related to Alternative IV." Her eyes twitched after hearing me. Again grasping her chin, she gazed at me for a second with a neutral expression.

"… How and where did you learn of the project?" She said in a slow, deep tone while narrowing her eyes.

These things are the biggest of all top secret matters, but her reaction isn't the one of someone in the defensive. I know that gaze, that hungry glare that resembles an avalanche, the one she did during last loop when I first arrived here. I did travel back in time. So now I gotta get her interested in my services, otherwise it's off to the detention barracks again. Or worse.

"Someone important told me a bit about it." That someone being you, Sensei. "I've come with valuable information regarding your research, and other useful tidbits of data, that will make Alternative IV come to fruition."

"Could you tell me who sent you first?"

"I think I can't say that here. It's a delicate matter. But it's someone you can trust." Because you yourself sent me here this time.

"That's awfully vague, isn't it. Alright, where did you come from? Can you tell me to which army you're affiliated?"

"I was sent here by a… Japanese organization. And currently I'm not affiliated to any army." Technically not a lie, the Hakuryo U is a Japanese organization.

"So you lied about being a Cadet. And you're from a Japanese… Did the Shogunate sent you?" She narrows her eyes at me, sending a chill down my spine.

"No." Why would she think that? Well, the Shogunate is one of the most important Japanese organizations in this world.

"Then who? If you don't tell me that I'm not sure I could trust you."

"Hmm… It's not like you'll believe me." I don't know what to say here, I'm sure this isn't the place to say I'm from another world.

"Then how about I call the MP, get you arrested, and we torture the information out of you?" She says with her playful tone and a smirk, poking her cheek with a finger. Problem is, I know she is not kidding.

"What are you going to do? Reduce me to a brain and put me in a tube?" I rebuked in a cocky tone, returning the smirk.

Her expression changed instantly. Now she had a poker face, staring into me intensely while grasping her chin.

"Perhaps I don't really want to know. Maybe getting rid of you would be better. You know too much to be just a simple errand boy."

"If that's what you want to do, fine by me." Folding my arms, I smile her way. "Good luck fitting billions of semi-conductors in the palm of your hand before next Christmas." She frowned, but immediately after her face turned bitter again as her lips twisted inwards and her eyes drove bloody murder into me, barely restrained rage in one of those coiled hands. So she is having problems with her theory. That's proof enough for me.

"… Before Christmas? What does that mean?" And she took the bait. Nice.

"I believe a certain fleet is being prepared as we speak, right?" Sensei remains silent, but I can tell she knows what I'm talking

about. "It seems that you only have until next Christmas to produce results before the next phase gets started."

"Is that a threat?"

"A warning, from a friend. Whether you believe me or not, is up to you."

"And who might that friend be? Is there no way you can tell me? Surely you don't expect me to simply let you in on my research without a good reason."

"Can I write it in a paper or something?"

"You're so secretive about it, huh. Fine, here." She hands me a paper and a pen.

'You sent me here, from the year 2003, to prevent Alternative V to be enacted', I write that in the paper. It's not entirely true but it's the push I need to get Sensei to call me to her office, where I can safely tell her everything.

Her eyes twitched as she read it. Taking my chance, I look for one of the papers from the research that I did in my world about scientific discoveries to deal the finishing blow. A groan reached my ears, her shoulders growing a bit smaller and leaning back into the chair, another narrowed gaze met my own as I fiddled with my bag, but Sensei ended up raising a brow when she saw me taking out a lone paper.

"What would that be, Shirogane?"

"Proof."

She takes the small paper from my hands slowly without breaking eye contact, seeing her being so doubtful hurts a bit to be honest. I picked a page from an article that talked about Japan's role on the space race, and she begins to read it. With some images and details

about the latest projects, it also mentioned the Prime Minister's speech during some launch of a satellite. Obviously, no mention of the Shogun or the BETA.

"I have more of those articles, if you want to see them."

"This is… from the world in two years?" She was apalled after reading the lone page. Trying too hard to keep her cool, but a slight quiver in the hand that grasped the paper gave her away.

"In one of many… parallel possibilities, it happens." Squinting her eyes when our gazes met, she seems to have understood the message.

Closing her eyes for a sec, taking a deep breath, she then reads the page I gave her again. A serious, emotion lacking face when she again looked at me, she stands up and begins to walk to the door, the paper I gave her still in her hand.

"I suppose we should continue this conversation in another place. Shirogane, I'll have you take some more tests. Once you're done with them, I'll send someone to take you to my personal office. You can keep your bag with you, if you so like. Is that alright?"

"Yes, that's fine."

"I see. Then let's go."

She briskly leaded the way out, gave some orders to 2nd Lt. Pyatkh, and went her way. And now, time for the rest of the tests. Hopefully this doesn't take forever. But I managed to pick her interest, and with this I'll surely get to stay here.

Step one: Complete!

# Unexpected Aid

### 1st Arc: Gemini Road

### Chapter 6: Unexpected Aid

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*October 22nd, 2001. Around 1 PM.*

*(Yokohama Base. Yuuko's Office.)*

**[Yuuko]**

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This cannot be real. If I hadn't developed my theory I'd have assumed that. However, I cannot deny the facts that lay before me.

All his tests' results were normal. He's not a cyborg, but he has an extraordinary physique even if he is full of scars. He must be around eighteen years old, going by his looks. There's no way such a young boy would know what he knows, even less someone who should be dead.

Takeru Shirogane. One of the many victims the BETA claimed when they attacked Yokohama. He should be dead, yet he's here in this base taking some tests. If what he wrote on that paper wasn't a lie, then he traveled through time from two years in the future. But that may be a lie, since he lied about being a Cadet.

However, how do I explain this paper? A report about a satellite that was sent to Mars by the Japanese government. There's no mention of the BETA whatsoever, so this isn't from this world, unless Alternative V wiped all the BETA from the Earth, the Moon and now were trying to do it on Mars. In just two years? Impossible. The images on the report also suggest that this isn't a military report either. One of many parallel possibilities, he said.

Shirogane, who on earth are you? Are you an ally or a foe?

This is way too convenient. Just when I'm being pressured to get results a mysterious boy appears saying he's going to help me.

The deal for the XG fell down, I'm stuck in my research and Japan and the UN are starting to second guess each other. Things couldn't be worse.

Then, as if it were the most normal thing in the world, this Shirogane walks up to base and declares that he has vital information to aid me in my research. Awfully convenient. He also knows about Alternative IV and V, things only a few should know. He said he was here to 'fix the zero'.

That was a nice way to say much in a vague way. He knows about the 00 Unit, about the brain, and about my problem in my research. If he is indeed a time traveler then it would make sense for him to know that, I suppose.

But the point is, is he really? Is he truly here to help me? Or is he trying to sabotage me from within?

The fax starts printing something. The results from his brain tests are here. Nothing weird with his brainwaves, all patterns are normal. There's no drug residue in his blood, and his cognitive abilities seem normal.

If he is indeed a time traveler, why did I choose to send him, a mere child, instead of a capable soldier? Why did I tell him to lie about his name; or is he truly Takeru Shirogane? No, how on Earth did he time travel in the first place? That is too ridiculous to be used as a lie, no sane spy would try to do that. However, maybe he's here to assassinate me and only needed some… privacy to also kill himself after the deed was done.

I check the gun in my drawer, it's loaded. If he thinks he can kill me now that we're alone, he's going to be surprised.

But if he is here to help… I can only imagine what kind of things he could have brought from the future. My completed research, data on the BETA, a new weapon's diagrams. I'll have to be careful to not be deceived, though.

I contact Yashiro, to make sure she is prepared.

"Yashiro, is everything ready?"

"Yes."

"If you notice a lie or anything suspicious, notify me immediately."

"Understood." Now, let's bring this Shirogane here.

"2nd Lt. Pyatkh, as soon as he gets out of the last test bring him directly to my office."

"Understood, Ma'am."

"How was him? Did he do anything out of the ordinary?"

"No, he's been very obedient. However, he moves around the base as if he already knew where he is going."

"Alright, thanks. I'll be waiting."

So he doesn't need a guide, huh. Was he told about the layout before coming here; or did another me tell him?

The following minutes I reread both the tests' results and the page he handed me to see if I could find anything that I might have missed, but there was nothing.

As I was absorbed rereading the paper of the satellite while spinning on my chair, there was a knock on the door.

"Come in." I unlock it and he comes in.

He seems to be rather annoyed. With the inner part of his brows almost coming together, ruffling his hair and letting out a long sigh he comes closer, I signal him to stop and he stands there looking at me.

"So how did the tests go, Shirogane?" I smile, which seems to make him even more annoyed, going by that frown.

"Six hours! That's two more hours than last time! What do you need so much blood for?!" He is really loud, annoyingly so. He did say 'last time'.

"So last time I didn't make you take the tests?"

"Sure you did, but they only took three syringes of blood. Today not only they took seven, but they started making all kinds of tests on me and the places where they took the blood. Also, the brainwave test is a new one."

"Huh, really? Well, that's that. Now that we're here, can you tell me the truth? Who are you?"

"I'm Takeru Shirogane. I come from a parallel world. As I said in the paper I come from the year 2003 in my original world."

"Your original world? You didn't come from the future of this world?" Already found a lie, huh. But now he says he comes from another world… Another lie, perhaps?

"Yes, but that's before I went back. See, I was sent here from my world due to some cause and when I got here you allowed me to stay as long as I helped you. After a certain mission, my link with this world grew weaker and I vanished. This was on the next New Year."

"Then you don't really have much information for me. I don't care at all about what you did in your 'original' world, assuming you're not lying." I told him bluntly and coldly, hoping to get a reaction out of him. He's a child after all, his emotions must be so hard to control.

But he did something I didn't expect him to do. He smiled at me and laughed.

"That's so you, Sensei. But I do have a lot of info that's worth gold for you."

"Really? Then, by all means, go and say it. Don't be shy!"

"I can't." He crosses his arms and returns my stare.

"Why? You think this place isn't safe?"

"No, you once told me that I shouldn't tell you of events that happen in the distant future, because we don't know what ripple effects that would have on history."

That does seem like something I would say, if someone was trying to dump on me a lot of sensitive information about future events.

"Then, I'll ask you some questions and you answer what you think is safe." He nods, now then. "Do I complete the 00 Unit in time?"

"Yes."

"Does it work as intended?"

"Yes, but actually no." Is he making fun of me?

"Explain."

"It works as it should, with the XG-70 and everything, but it has one fatal flaw." He knows about the XG, too? Just who are you? Why did I trust in a child so much?

"This fatal flaw… Can you tell me what it is? Can it be fixed?"

"I don't know if it can be fixed, but I brought some intel that may help you with that. And, when the time comes, I'll tell you about it." Another secret, huh?

"Alright. Then, why did you came back in time?"

"I don't know." He says with not a hint of hesitation. Is he a good liar or is this the truth?

"What do you mean, you don't know?"

"Remember I said my link with this world grew weaker after a certain mission? Well, after that I returned to my world. But…" His faces changes to one of anguish as he looks down, tightly wringing his hands. "Everything went wrong. Something that shouldn't have happened, happened. So, I ended up coming to the past but I was aiming to go back to the same point in time I had left in this world, to make you keep your end of the bargain."

"We had a deal or something?"

"I help you complete and protect the 00 Unit, you helped me go back to my world safely. That was the deal. The safely part was not fulfilled, so I came to request Customer Support." His speech mannerisms are really weird. Customer Support?

"What do you think I am? I'm a genius, you know! There's no way I would have made a mistake on such an important matter. And anyways, return to your world? You've been saying that you came and went from your world to this, can you explain me how? What are you supposed to be?"

"A Causality Conductor."

…

… W-What did he just say? Did I heard him right?

He said it so casually, as if it were a given. A living proof of my theory, that I've been looking for so long, just thrown out there as if I was asking him about today's weather.

"You… Are you serious? You're a causality conductor?"

"Yeah, for real." He then started explaining with his dumbed down terminology, and some odd words mixed in his speech, what the conductor was, how it worked, and the effects it has on the world.

He's serious, this is no rehearsed speech and he isn't hesitating at all. No one but me should know this information. Did my research get leaked?! No, that's… just not possible. But then, he truly is one?

"So you were trapped in multiple loops where you first came here, died and returned to square one, until one day you managed to keep your memories for some reason and used them to aid me in my research?"

"I think? I don't really understand it very well myself, to be honest. But wait, there's more!" He declares with glee, raising one finger. What else could there be?

"More? What else are you? A bio-engineered super soldier or something?"

"No, I'm also a Causality Nucleus."

"A what now?" Causality Nucleus? What is that even supposed to be?

"You figured it out after you finished a certain investigation. All proof leads me to believe that I am indeed one, or at least something similar to it."

"Wait a second, what *is* a Causality Nucleus? Is that something I told you?"

"The you in my world did. So, I don't know how much I should tell you, but it's basically a causal information magnet. Once we can trust each other, I'll give you the papers that explain it in detail. For now, just know that there's more to your research than what you can think about right now."

"… And you have that information with you? Let me guess, in exchange for it you want me to make a fail-proof method to return you to your world?"

"I already know what I have to do. I want your cooperation with it." He says while locking his eyes onto me, with a dead serious face.

"Seems like you had it rough. But first, you said I had until Christmas to produce results. Why is that?"

"Because that's when Alternative V is enacted, at least as far as I know. If we change history it won't happen, or it may happen even earlier."

"Can you tell me what you know of the Alternative Project?"

"Which one?"

"All you know."

He takes a breath and starts telling me about Alternative V, about the space fleet, the following years and the important mission. Operation Babylon, he called it. Not even I knew the name of the plan, this will be a nice way to check whether he's lying or not.

He then starts describing Alternative IV in great detail, even mentioning the fact that I have a group of soldiers as backup in case we need to make another 00 Unit. The role of the XG, how the 00 Unit isn't made of any carbon-based material to allow it to communicate with the BETA with its ESP capabilities, how it possesses great hacking and processing abilities as if they were normal. About the Rutherford field, the Particle Cannon, and about how important it is for it to have emotions. Then he briefly tells me of Alternative III, of how they tried to use espers to communicate with the BETA.

There's no doubt. He isn't insane, so he's telling the truth or he is a spy. Yashiro still hasn't contacted me.

"And that's about it, I think? Sorry if I left some details rather vague."

"No, that's alright. You've proved to me how much you know."

"I see." He relaxes on a bit. Let's give him a little push.

"But that doesn't mean I believe you yet, I'm just-"

"Giving me the benefit of the doubt, for the sake of conversation? I don't expect you to believe me when I have no proof, Sensei." He didn't let me finish. He doesn't even seem fazed that I was doubting him.

"So, do you have proof? Or, was that lone paper all you had?" I smile and speak in a mocking tone to get something out of him. But he smiles again.

"Hehehe, do I now?! Here's where things get nice, Sensei!"

He takes out of his bag a big stack of papers and places them in my desk. Here's the rest of the report on that satellite. What's this? Sedna? Another planet?! A new radioactive element discovered by the… JINR? A joint project between America and Russia?! Not the USSR, but Russia?! And what's this? OLED? What is this screen even?

"I have to admit, if this isn't a fabricated lie then…"

"That's just the research I did personally. I have these engineering books and some about medicine too." He puts five books on my table. What's this?

"New Paradigms of the Technology?"

"They have a lot of info for civilians that go to college about the latest discoveries in some fields. And there's a book about first aid and some new vaccines and medicinal inventions, too. I would have gotten some more bulky encyclopedia, but anything new isn't on the street available to common people. So I settled for this."

"Your spacecraft looks really old compared to ours." I'm not really surprised by what I'm reading. This isn't so useful.

I drop the books and go back to the stack of papers. Now let's see… What's this? Some forum discussion?… Wait, F-22A Raptor?!

"Shirogane, this says right here that you have F-22A Raptors in your world, is that true?"

"Yeah, with their overpowered stealth and everything!" He says it so nonchalantly, making a small fist.

We're talking about the Raptor here! How could a mere civilian get this intel? Maybe he's a soldier back there?… Or maybe he's an American spy. Let's see what I can glean about 'his world', the lies are bound to fall apart eventually.

"How is the war against the BETA in your world? From these reports, it looks as if it wasn't going as badly as it's here."

"There's no BETA in my world."

…

There's no BETA… He said it so earnestly. No doubt anywhere in him. It took a while for what he said to sink in.

"What do you mean? You already eradicated them?!"

"No, they never existed in the first place. I was super shocked the first time I came here and you told me about them, it seemed so surreal." He nods slowly with a hint of a smile in his face.

"Wait, so if there's no BETA in your world, what do they use the TSFs for?"

"We also don't have real TSFs there."

"Shirogane, you know lying about that is pointless? Here says that you have Raptors in your world. You yourself said that just now. Are you dumb?"

He picks some papers from the stack and hands them to me. There are many images of jets in it. Wait, is this…

"Instead of TSFs, you developed advanced fighter jets? Of course, without the BETA air superiority would be the key to warfare." It makes complete sense.

"I was surprised when I learned our jets shared names and characteristics with some TSF from here." Still making small nods, he continues to smile for some reason.

"You said just now that you didn't have 'real TSFs' over there. What did that mean?" All of this is truly surprising, the information he brought about the stealth technology of his world is truly something else.

Anti-radar paint? Who would have thought about it? I would have guessed it had to be something in its hardware or an active jamming signal, but paint? Also, using only infrared signals for communication to avoid detection? That's truly interesting. Blinding oneself to blind the enemy, what an interesting idea.

A spy would never come to me with so much juicy intel. He must be then telling the truth. Unless… all of this is forged.

He's taking a box out of his bag now. What is that thing? Play… Stallion? Is that how it's pronounced, perhaps?

"Whatever is that supposed to be, Shirogane?"

"This, Sensei, is what allowed you to complete your theory." He has a giant grin plastered on his face as he gives little pats to the box in question.

"What?! That weird black thing?"

"Yes, one program in this thing gave my world's you the idea."

"How so? That doesn't look like a normal computer, it can't be too powerful given its size."

"Do we have televisions in the base?"

"Yes, but I don't have one here." Televisions, and not monitors? "Can you tell me what that thing does? Why is it called Play Stallion 2? Where's number one?"

"This thing is a game console. We play games with it."

"Are you serious? This hardware is… for recreation? How expensive is it?"

"It's not as expensive as it was a few years ago. It's rather affordable, not as much as this one though." He takes a small brick-like object from the bag. Game Guy, it says.

"This looks like a Pleiades. This is also a game console thing?"

"Yeah, it's the old version of the Game Guy. Now we have a Color version and an Advanced version with a bigger screen and colors instead of just black and white. Here, push the power button." He hands me the brick, I take a moment to examine it. Since it doesn't look dangerous, I slightly tap the power button.

The screen lights up as a sound plays. This looks sharper than anything I've seen before. What the… Are those TSFs? They're shooting lasers?!

"Shirogane, you have laser weapons in your world?!"

"Of course we don't! That's just a sci-fi game, Valgern-On. It's like a TSF simulator. Here, push the start button, you play with the A and B buttons while moving with the D-Pad."

A small TSF moves in the screen, shooting at other TSFs. Why did they make a simulator for Anti-TSF combat? W-What is this thing? Why are they shooting so many bullets at me, and why am I the only one fighting them? This moves too fast, how am I even-

**BOOM!**

[SHIELDS DEPLETED - PLAYER 1 KILLED]

"Ah, you died. You're not very good at this." He's mocking me, isn't he?

"I can't believe America would make a game out of this kind of thing." Really, those Americans are the same even in other parallel worlds.

"Um, Sensei? This was made in Japan."

"What?!"

"Look at the back of it, it says 'Made In Japan', right?" He's right. So this is a Japanese invention? "The game was also made in Japan, by the way." What kind of country is your Japan anyways? They're disguising combat simulators as games?

"But why is it made to fight against other TSFs?"

"It's the setting of the first game. If you want to fight the BETA…" He takes out a small box from the bag. "I have this version for you. Valgern-On Oratory Tango! This version is just like the TSFs simulators you should have on the base."

There was an image on the box, it read the name of the game and there were some TSFs on the cover. Wait, is that a Takemikazuchi? What a coincidence, something that doesn't exist over there is on this image. And it just so happens to be the exclusive TSF of the Royal Guard, huh.

"You said to fight the BETA… So, do they exist in your world or not?"

"As sci-fi monsters. There's a reason for that, I'll explain it in due time." More of this. I don't like all the things he's hiding from me.

"And with a monitor to connect it to, you can show me this second simulator?"

"I don't know how good the resolution of the TVs here is, but we should at least be able to get the thing running." Again, televisions and not monitors. Hmm…

"This is… just too surreal. Is the second one made in Japan too?"

"Yeah, of course. I also have two more games here, a stealth one and an army simulator one." He takes out two more boxes from the box, one with colorful knights and the other with a soldier holding a rifle.

"Why did you even bring those things here in the first place?"

"First as proof of me being someone from another world. Last time I didn't have any, so you didn't really believe me until something I told you would happen eventually happened. The second is because I was hoping to use them to aid future Cadets. On one occasion I ended up showing my Game Guy to my squadmates here, and while it was kind of a problem I think it did have its merits as a training method when I thought about it."

"Merits? For example?"

"For example, making them think about the sacrifices in war like sending someone to a certain death to allow a company to escape. Or methods to fight without being noticed, and stealth tactics as a whole." These things sound less like games and more like military software to me. And you tell me this is sold to civilians?! "And, most importantly, it can turn anyone into an exceptional surface pilot."

"Anyone? What do you mean? Why would they make such a program if they do not have TSFs?" This is making less sense every

second. It's truly interesting, that's for sure.

"When I came to this world for the first time I was just a normal person. Despite that, I had the highest aptitude not only from the members of my squad but from all Cadets that had graduated here." He sticks out his chest, arms folded as he smiles. "And that's all thanks to the first version of Valgern-On, I was really good at it. Just with that, I managed to become an above average pilot even if my fighting style is very… weird."

"And you say you learned by playing this game?"

"Yes, the controls weren't exactly the same but once I got used to them I could replicate the game's moves with any TSF."

"And the second version is any better?" He smirks at me.

"It's literally like a TSF simulator. The controls are still not exactly the same, but the principles should be even better."

"So you brought this here, hoping to use this as a bargaining tool to get me to help you?"

"Yes, but that's not all." He's saying he still has more things up his sleeve? "I want you to make a new OS for our TSFs."

"A new OS? Why would I?"

"Because we will get at least a 30% boost in mobility, lessen our casualties, and you can use it to get the XG."

"This is something you did in the past here?"

He starts explaining me about what he wants me to change, about how I used a certain something from the Alternative IV project as a test while developing the OS, and the results it gave us.

"Are you sure of this? What about changing history?" I ask, sizing him up. He nods my way without losing the smile he had been

wearing for a while now.

"We won't be changing history, we will just gather data for a longer period of time. We can reveal the OS to the rest of the world when the time is right. Until then, we keep it under wraps." He seems to know his stuff, but can I really trust him?

"This is nice and all, with all the information you've given me. But you still haven't told me how you're going to help me with my research. Do you have the complete theory with you or a hint about what I'm doing wrong?"

"I have shown you a lot of info to prove who I am, so I'd like to ask you to complete the OS before that."

You have some nerve, Shirogane. Bossing me around, telling me what to do. Alternative IV is more important than some new OS. You think you can demand such things when you're hiding so much from me?

"What was that? My research is more important than-"

"What if I told you I have not one, but two theories you developed?" What did he just say? He takes out two pages from his bag. Just how many things does he have there?

"These are the first pages of both of those theories. I think this will be proof enough. Make the new OS for me and let me actively help you, and I'll give you the rest."

He sure is full of himself. Just who does he think he is, talking to me like that? He better not be a spy because-

…?

"So… What do you think? Are you willing to at least give me the benefit of the doubt?"

"… Um, Sensei?"

What is this?! White matter resonance simulation? Emotional linkage?

"… Sensei? Sensei! Earth to Yuuko-sensei!"

These refutations to my current approach… these diagrams… it's just the beginning but, surely, this is what I've been trying to reach! No, the second page goes beyond what I thought was possible.

"… Shirogane, I suppose you don't plan on handing over the rest of the theories, do you?"

"No, I'd like you to agree to the deal I proposed you." He replies, folding his arms again and giving me a serious gaze back.

As much as I'd like to get my hands on them right now, I shouldn't strain my relationship with him from the start. Yashiro hasn't sent anything, so he's telling the truth or at least he's not a threat to me. And anyways, I can get my hands on the papers once he's busy. He can't keep that bag by his side all day long.

"Alright. You have a deal. But I expect you to honor your part of it. If you are lying about this, I swear to you that no death will be worse than the fate I'll put you through."

"I wouldn't dream of it." He shrugs as he closes his bag and sits on a sofa after I signal to it. I sit too and, after letting a sigh out, I gather my thoughts on what should be done next.

"… Let's get this business started then. I can make you a 1st Lieutenant at most, and assign you under my direct command as part of the Alternative IV Research Team. Is that alright with you?"

"What?! No, can we just go with the usual route?" Did I surprise him with my proposition?

"The usual route? What did I have you do in the other worlds?"

"You made me part of the 207th Cadet Squad, to disguise me from prying eyes."

"That's nice, if I say so myself. So you want to be a Cadet, despite already having experience piloting a TSF?" I wonder why… Maybe you have an ulterior motive?

"I believe Squad 207 to be of importance to our future, if they become commissioned then our firepower will greatly improve. That's without taking into account using the Stallion to train them before the CCSE, or applying the concepts of Valgern-On onto the TSF's OS."

"… I see. However, you do know they're a complicated team, right? Their circumstances…"

"I know them well. And even then I think that's where I can help you the most now. Otherwise, I'd have to stay locked up in the lower floors all the time."

"Personally, I don't think that's a bad idea. With all the knowledge you say you have I wouldn't want anyone laying their eyes on you." I smile at him while chuckling, he just scratches his head.

But I can see what he means. Squad 207B is a very capable team, if they pass the CCSE and are trained well they might become good reinforcements for the Valkyries. If only they could get commissioned, that is. Yashiro hasn't contacted me so I suppose he isn't lying here either.

"I also would like to ask you to clean my records throughly." He adds some seconds later, leaning forward.

"Why is that? Are you doubting me?"

"All the times I've come here the Shogunate realized that something was wrong with me, since you couldn't modify their databases. It

never became much of a problem but… better safe than sorry, right?"

"I see. Yes, you're right. I shouldn't underestimate the Shogunate. All right, we have a deal. I'll add you to Squad 207, I'll also give you a security pass with almost the same rank as me, but restricted access to secret documents. Is that alright with you?"

"Yes, it's what we usually did."

"Let's get started with all the paperwork then. I have a lot of questions to ask you later, and I want to see this Stallion thing running."

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*Same day. Around 8 PM.*

*(Barracks. Takeru's room.)*

**[Takeru]**

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And here should be fine, doubt anyone would go looking behind this in my closet. With this nobody will find the Minaru Kamui I brought.

I guess with this I finished ordering my room. I left most of the things I brought with Sensei so there's not much to order anyways.

I put my UN uniforms in the closet, and put my box with the medal and the GR card on the desk's drawer. Sensei asked me to keep the Stallion and the Game Guy until she arranged a room for their testing, so I'm keeping them under the bed.

I forgot about the Santa Rabbit. I should have gone to give it to Sumika after I left the office. Oh well, I'll go tomorrow.

… Man, it feels like home. I sit on the bed as I look at my room, a grin spreads through my face. I'm really lucky to have come back to

the start, this way I can make sure things end up differently this time. I'm saving both worlds, hell yeah!

But Sensei seemed weird. She looked as… She looked like the day she broke down drowning herself in alcohol. I wonder if things are not going so good. Maybe I never noticed since I was so full of myself, maybe my change in attitude allowed me to see a bit of her true feelings?

Well, she said that tomorrow Marimo-chan will come pick me up before roll call to take me to the gym to make the oath. We did do all the paperwork today and she asked me about my experiences, the XM3 and my abilities with a TSF. Then we tested the Stallion and she was super shocked with it. Luckily, the resolution was good enough to appreciate the graphics. I think she was more surprised with CryRing Saga than Valgern-On. But after playing all games on the Stallion and the Game Guy for awhile, she agreed that they hold some merit for training Cadets.

I requested her to make more of these if it were possible, but in the meantime I have to hold onto both consoles. It would be pointless to try to train my squad with just one of each.

All right, what do I do now? I already ate with Sensei while she was testing the Stallion.

Maybe going for a run in the field? Yeah, it'll hammer home the feeling of being back, running there again. I also need to think on whether I want to hold back or go with everything from the start. Last time I held back, but I didn't improve much. Let's try being serious this time, and if they ask me I'll tell them that I can aid them reach my level. That way I'll be both a teacher and a rival to them.

Sensei made up a story about me being some leftover Cadet from a special unit from abroad, that was sent here in a hurry after an accident. She blocked most of my information behind an S5 security lock, which means only her, the CO and just a few others can see it.

Should I go jogging with the uniform or with my clothes? Sensei told me it was alright to remain with these clothes since she would inform people that I was her 'special protegee'.

Oh, whatever! If someone asks I'll just introduce myself and deal with it! It's not the end of the world.

Walking through these halls again makes me feel really nostalgic. The last time I was here, everything was in such bad shape. Don't worry Yokohama Base! This time no BETA will harm you!

Reaching the usual door, I go into the track field. Alright, how much do I run? Ten minutes? Fifteen? Let's go for fifteen at a moderate pace. But before that, stretching.

After that, I start jogging lightly. Man, remember when I couldn't run even two klicks? I even fell down when I did a full gear march for the first time. I surely didn't expect all that followed.

Who would I be right now if I hadn't come to this world? Would I have turned into a jerk like my Dad? I mean, I was already kind of dick back in school. I thought that coming here was a curse, at first. But maybe this was a blessing, in a way. I have to take things more seriously this time and be sure to help Sensei for real, instead of just complaining about everything.

All right! Let's speed up a bit! I'll sing along the opening of that anime I was watching during summer break, it's just perfect for jogging sessions.

"Going! Going! Towards the Light! Yo, Going! Going! Believing in it! Let's turn those hidden feelings into a source of strength! Do it!" Yep, even if it's at night this feels like going back to the old kindergarten or Pee Park. Shirogane is back baby! "Going! Going! To the future! Yo, Going! Going! To-"

"Excuse me!" Someone shouts, startling me and making me trip with myself.

I end up kissing the ground. Look Earth, you're a wonderful planet and I don't know what I would do without you, but I don't think this kind of relationship would work between us.

That hurt, dammit. Who thought that calling out to me so loudly would be a good idea?!

"I'm sorry, are you alright? I did not meant to startle you so." That voice…

I shivered for a sec on the ground. I gulped as I slowly rose up, taking a brief glance towards the voice's owner.

Meiya.

Of course, her independent training. I always forget about it. Thank God I'm lying on the floor, if I saw her without warning I might have teared up. After dusting my clothes, sighing heavily and taking a deep breath, I stand up.

"I'm alright, you just surprised me shouting out of the blue." Yep, she's Meiya. The hair, face and voice. Well, duh, of course she is here at this point in time. Sigh… Hold that giddy feeling in your neck. Don't lose your cool.

"I see. Forgive for me surprising you. Now, may I ask who you are and what are you doing here?" Her voice changed to a cold, severe tone as she gave me a side glance.

Right, an unknown face in unknown clothes is running in the track field when she came to train, of course she would be suspicious of me. I give a salute before speaking up.

"I'm Takeru Shirogane. I was assigned to this base today, and I was jogging a bit before going to bed. Who would you be?" She stands upright and returns the salute.

"I'm Cadet Meiya Mitsurugi of the 207th Cadet Squad. You said you were assigned here today? You seem to be around my age, what is your rank?"

"I'm also a Cadet, though I wasn't informed about which surface pilot training squad I'll be joining." That's a lie, Sensei told me to keep our arrangement a secret and act around the Instructor as if I didn't knew to which squad I was assigned to.

"Is that so? That means you'll join our squad, since there aren't other Cadet squads training to become pilots here right now as far as I know. Forgive me for interrupting you, Shirogane. Do you have some militar experience?"

"Why do you ask?" Why this question out of nowhere? Of all the possible questions…

"You seem to have good stamina, and your posture is… well, it doesn't look like you're a greenhorn." Oh, so that's what that was.

"Yes, I do have some experience. I was trained before coming here, but I didn't get to take a CCSE yet." Otherwise I can't explain why I'm still a Cadet.

"Oh? I thought you would have already done one, at least."

"Huh? Why would you said that?"

"Your posture, your physique. Also, you were running quite fast when I approached you. Truth be told, I was slightly surprised when I first saw your silhouette in the distance. I mistaked you for one of my squadmates at first, but then you started to run even faster."

She was surprised by my light jogging? I wasn't even trying to get speed, I was just warming up.

"By the way, may I ask you what were you saying while you were running? It seemed as if you were mixing English and Japanese…"

She gives me a side glance as she waits for my answer.

"Oh, that's… a song the guys at my old squad sang to hype themselves up."

"Hype?" Oh shit, not this again!

"It means to motivate oneself to the edge. We sang that whenever training got difficult."

"I see, so it was to raise morale. A song to unite a squad, that's a very nice idea. They must be very good people."

"Yes, they… were…"

"Did I… say something I shouldn't have?" Always so considerate, Meiya.

"No, just… Don't worry about it."

"If you say so. Shirogane, would you like to jog along with me? I was about to do some independent training."

"Sure, but I already warmed up so I'll keep jogging seriously."

"Seriously? You mean… you'll keep running as fast as when I called out to you? You will not be able to keep it up for long." She folds her arms and looks at me like my Mom when I used to tell her I didn't do my homework. What's up with her?

"I can keep that speed without problems." It was just my usual jogging speed, it's not like I'm seriously running either. I might be in good shape but I'm no marathoner.

"Oho? Don't know if you're boasting, but I'd like to see that. By the way, before we start, may I ask why is your uniform different?"

"This is just a generic uniform I was given until I got here. I haven't changed into the UN's one yet."

"A generic one? This looks to be made out of good materials, however. Even the boots are nicer than any I've seen. Ah, forgive me! I wasn't trying to pry."

"Don't worry, it's not like I didn't expect to be asked questions about it. Well, shall we start?"

She nods with a small smile and we started jogging.

Or at least I did, because Meiya is just… kinda jogging really slow. She looks surprised, but is smiling for some reason. Her smile slowly faded as I kept going and going. I slow down at a turn when I got close to her.

"What's up? You look troubled."

"It's just… You were not jesting regarding your stamina. Are you certain you will not be inconvenienced tomorrow?"

"No? Why would I?"

"Our training is truly harsh, I'll have you know. If you don't properly manage your energy you won't be able to complete even the morning run."

"What are you doing? Thirty klicks on full gear?" Now that would be a nice challenge!

"Of course not, we're doing fifteen. One half without gear and the other with half gear. And after that some combat training. However, were you to exhaust all your stamina right now, tomorrow you shall assuredly have difficulties to complete the training."

"Thanks for the warning, but I'm used to being drilled to the ground. Besides, fifteen klicks without full gear is nothing." After my training with Maya-san this will be child's play. I also started jogging more seriously during the mornings, so no problems with my stamina!

I speed up again, leaving Meiya behind. At some point, however, she started running to try to catch up to me. Wasn't she the one who said we should conserve our stamina?

"Why are you running so hard?"

"No reason!" She's lying. Is her pride telling her to not lose to me?

She couldn't keep it up for longer than a lap before she had to slow down. Sweating badly, looks like she has trouble regaining her breath. She went an exhausted herself, always doing extreme things. Haha, glad to see you're still you.

… Glad to see can begin again, Meiya. And don't worry, this time… I'll do my share.

"Who was the one who said we should conserve our stamina again?" I stopped jogging and approached her. She's bending forward holding her knees, to think the day I got so far ahead from this Meiya would come.

"I… I wanted to see… *wheeze*… how much I could run at that speed. You must have had a very strict training, Shirogane." Yes, Maya-san was truly strict with me. She is the best teacher ever, sorry Tsukuyomi-san.

"I had a very good Instructor, that's all. But are you alright, Meiya?" She looks at me with her mouth slightly open. Oh, right. "Sorry, I have a bad habit of calling people by their names."

"You're aware of it and haven't fixed it? Well, anyways…" She returns herself upright, running a hand over her hair and closing her eyes for a second. "Sigh… Shirogane, I'm glad you'll be joining our squad. With such a capable member we're sure to improve much during our training. Don't think you'll have the advantage just because of your superior stamina." She smirks while laughing.

Oh girl, just wait until I show you what I learned from Maya-sensei! I am looking forward to sparring with her now that I know a bit of the Mugen Kidou. Here's hoping we can both improve much in this way.

"I'll try my best not to fall behind. By the way, could you tell me a little bit about the squad? Things I should look out for, questions I shouldn't ask, things like that." Let's try to break the ice nicely this time around.

"Hmm, yes. You should always try to be serious around our Squad Leader, she's very hardworking so if she sees you not taking the training seriously you'll be made to hear a lecture from her." Yes, that's our Chizuru alright. "Then, I suggest you don't pry too much into our personal business. We are very… reserved about that." Yes, the whole 'non-interference' policy. "And lastly, don't ever be late for roll call. Our Instructor is truly fearsome whenever she becomes upset. You also should always pay attention during lectures, unless you want to spend the whole afternoon doing squats."

"I see, thanks for the tips Meiya." She sighs as she looks at me with a troubled expression, putting her hands on her waist.

"Shirogane you should also try to correct that habit of yours. I personally do not mind much, but others might not be so lenient with you."

"Alright, got it. I'll try to be more conscious of it. But manners are not my thing, so chances are I'll end up doing it anyways." Especially because you all will act like you did in my past loops, and you can't expect me to just forget about our relationships just like that.

"So long as you try I think you'll be fine. But it is truly surprising, are you not tired after running at such speed?"

"Not really, this was like my daily morning routine before coming here." Surprise floods her face. Is it really that weird?

"Running in such manner was your morning exercise?"

"Yeah, pretty much. Though of course, I didn't always have the luck to run in an open, even field." While running on the street is not bad, I sometimes went to a park to run. The difference between having to climb stairs and dodge roots is gigantic.

"You didn't run in a field? Where did you run then?" I don't think I can say 'park' and not make her suspicious.

"We got some obstacles in the way, to make us jump, sidestep and do other movements while we ran." Kinda like what we did in PE, I think?

"I see, that must have been hard. But the results are amazing, you truly have more stamina than us. I can't wait to see how you perform tomorrow."

"Same here. Well, I'll be going back to my room."

"Then, let's go together. I don't think I can keep jogging like this." She wipes the sweat off her face. Will she be alright tomorrow? "Where is your room, Shirogane?"

"It's the second room to the right after you arrive to the barracks."

"So it's to the other side of our rooms."

"For real?"

"Yes, our rooms are all down the left corridor. Maybe it's because you're male?" Right, everybody else is female. So it's obvious why they put me away from them.

"So all the other members are women?" Not like I didn't already knew it, but not asking would be kinda suspicious, I guess.

"Yes, it is weird to see a male recruit in this day and age at this point in the year."

"Huh, neat."

"Um, may I ask why do you employ such odds words? What is 'neat' supposed to mean?" She folds her arms, giving me one of her firm gazes.

"Oh, it's just the slang of where I was before coming here. Neat is, like, something cool or nice."

"… I see." Going by those lowered brows, I think she didn't get it. I forgot how cute she looks when she's lost. "Oh, right. Do you know your way around the base?" Nice to see you're still considerate to a fault, too.

"Yes, I already got the tour. Tomorrow morning I think I'll have to take the oath before joining you guys."

"Then that will make things easier. We eat at the third PX, the one that's on the right wing of the Base. We'll take you there after our morning routine, in case you don't know where it is."

"Don't worry, I probably can manage."

We did some small talk about my exercises and how were the people of the squad. She didn't give me any names, but I could recognize who she was talking about. It seems everything is the same as before. Now, starting tomorrow, I'll do my best to drive all of you to your top potential. This time I won't let all of you die!

So let's take a shower and go to sleep early, since I have to take the oath again. I've done that so many times that I remember it perfectly. Let's hope I can start our relationships with the right foot.

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*Same Day. 10:11 PM.*

*(Floor B26. Engineers' Office.)*

**[Yuuko]**

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"These are the details on the Anti-Radar Paint I informed you about, along with the data on the specs and functions the new radar and engine should have. Here's the schematics for the other projects we've discussed." I hand the folders to the Lead Engineer, whose current expression resembles Yashiro's when I ask her to fix the compilers, eyes wide and sorta wavering at the amount of work suddenly placed on the timeline. "That is all. I want all of this built, tested and working as soon as possible."

"Yes, Professor. But might I ask when did you develop these plans? Had you notified us beforehand-" I raise a hand to stop him.

"It matters not. You could say I had a… sudden revelation. I do apologize if this is too much work for you." Trying to sound cheery, but with a hint of annoyance, I took a glance sideways to the man, who seems to have understood the message.

"We will pour all of our might into these projects. We'll make results appear as fast as we can." He tries to give me a salute, but I stop him. He then goes into the main engineering room of the floor.

Now that's taken care of let's return to the office. I want to reread those two pages Shirogane gave me, just in case I missed anything.

We spent two hours doing all the paperwork. He knew all the questions I threw at him, and he already knew where to sign and what he was signing.

After that, I asked him to tell me all he could about his condition and what he went through in the past. He remembers many different events from his 'first' time in this world, even when he knows that it would be impossible that some things happened at the same time. He says that what happened after the operations of Alternative V is still kinda blurry to him, but he knows he kept fighting after his squad got wiped out and that he fought in a new team with American and French troops.

Then we tried these 'game consoles' things, and I'm convinced that they must have been some sort of military software to scout possible recruits. Why else would they make such a war simulator? Permanent death of your soldiers, limited funds and weaponry, complex and diverse missions, and a story about how political influence and old grudges breaks a nation from the inside, it's hard to believe anyone thinks of this as a game.

Well, Shirogane looks like he's kinda mad so maybe all people over there are also insane.

However, the most impressive of all was the TSF simulator. Similar to the ones we have here, but even better. It had more TSFs, weapons, and missions than ours, and four different modes to execute them, Shirogane called them 'difficulty settings'. The maneuvers of the TSFs on the screen were unbelievable, to think we could do the same in reality is just too good to be true. But if we succeeded, then like Shirogane said the new OS would become a very important tool for me. He said that the BETA appearing in the 'game' were caused by what went wrong in his world, and that he'll give me the full explanation once I can fully trust him.

Also, Yashiro didn't contact me during our talks and she reported he didn't lie nor had ill intentions in him.

I don't like how he is in control right now, but all he said seemed to be true. He also seems to have a good head on his shoulders, so I suppose treating him like an equal is not such a big compromise. Even if all of this is nothing but lies, the ideas he gave me will definitely yield good results. Of course, if he isn't lying and has two completed theories I've developed in the future of his world, then I'll be able to reverse this situation. I should start thinking on which unit I'll base the testings of the stealth tech and the OS, maybe I should ask him what he recommends.

However, it's surprising he's so chipper. He said he was happy to be back, to have another shot at this. Does he know what he's getting into? If he is a conductor then I suppose he should, but to be so

openly joyful? What happened during that critical mission he spoke of? Did his team infiltrate Sadogashima and all the rest died?

Well, regardless of what happened in that future, I have a task to fulfill now. Developing this new OS shouldn't pose too much trouble, but I still should ask him to be the test pilot. I doubt Marimo or Isumi could pull the moves from that game, even if they were serious. It will be a nice test to see if his piloting skills are as good as he claims. It should also be a nice test for what I have developed so far, and a way to kill time and stop focusing so much on how stuck I am now. And when he goes to train with the cadets tomorrow, I'll 'borrow' the theories for a bit, just to quell my curiosity. It's not like I can't deal with both the OS and the research at the same time.

As I enter my office I see a pair of bunny ears waiting inside.

"Yashiro? What is it? You already sent your report. Did something else happen?" I can't tell what goes on her head most of the time, but if she came personally to see me it must be something serious.

"Sumika-san reacted to this boy. She seems to remember him but… All I could feel was an overflowing amount of sadness." Yashiro looked dejected, it's strange for her to show any kind of emotions.

"So she reacted to him, huh. Did you tell her who he was or did you show her images of him?" She hands me a paper, let's see what the readings say.

"I told her about who he was and how he looked. She went into shock immediately. What should I do?" She is fearful, this is news to me too.

We never got any reading as strong as this from the test subject, going by this paper she just handed me. Shirogane, you just got more interesting. Guess that part about fixing the zero wasn't a lie. Now I really want to know what's in that bag you brought.

"Nothing. I believe he is our ally. Do be careful around him, if you sense anything dangerous notify me as soon as you're able, without him noticing."

"Understood." She then turns around and tries to leave.

"Wait Yashiro. I need your help with something." The bunny ears move as she faces me again.

"What do you need?"

"Some programming and debugging." Her bunny ears dropped as did her eyelids, it looked as if she were bracing for another long night going by how her hands tightly grasped her dress for but a second. "But first, try this out. It'll be easier than explaining all of this in detail."

I hand her one of the joystick things and power up the device, she sits down on a sofa in front of the TV I ordered to be delivered.

I spent the next half an hour holding my laughter as Yashiro made impressed, terrified and sad faces as her cute yelps echoed in my office. She was even worse than me at this Valgern-On game. But it seems she understood what I'm asking of her.

To use my research for improving TSFs, Shirogane this better yield the results you promised or you'll pay for trying to fool me. I should double check his cover, let's wipe the profiles and reports of this world's Shirogane. I may need to use an important favor for this, but it will be worthy if he is indeed on my side.

And it will work as a final test to make sure he isn't a spy.

# Beginning of his Strife

## Chapter 7: Beginning of His Strife

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*(Sadogashima.)*

**[Takeru]**

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The sun was starting to retreat, the afterglow beginning to appear on the winter skies. As the shadows of our machines fell onto the bloodied soil, as we continued to tear them down, the mobs of BETA kept coming, one after the other.

"Lupine 3, did you finish resupplying? I can't deal with all the Grapplers myself!" I ask Mikoto as I do a forward dash, follow it with a boost jump, and slash one in half as I slid past its pincers.

"Almost done!" She was hurrying with it, but we couldn't lose any second right now.

Tama shoots a canister shell, crippling four of them and dealing with the smaller strains as well. It looks like Ayamine and Class Rep finished dealing with the Tanks that swarmed us from the left.

I do a double boost jump and deplete all my remaining 36mm ammo on the Grapplers standing nearby. Drawing out my sword before they can regain their footing, I slice the closer ones in half. Doing a short hop to return to my element, firing the last 120mm round I had to stop a straggler Grappler that got too close after I landed, I mow down the last two that were near me as Tama snipes the rest safely from a distance.

As I took a second to rest and clean the sweat on my forehead, a message appears on my sight. A mission update?

"Lupine 1 to all units! Another herd is coming this way, ETA three minutes. Finish resupplying ASAP! We still have to hold out for half an hour, according to HQ!" I inform the squad of the situation with the intel I received through my data link. This is harsher than I thought it would be, just how many BETA are here?!

"Lupine 3, all done! Squad Leader, it's your turn." Mikoto's Gekishin jumps away from the crate, taking its position near a cliff.

Damn, my hands are all sweaty. We've been fighting for over two hours already, and the mission has been going on for around four since the initial bombardment started. HQ said the objective is to draw out most of the BETA to make sure the latter Hive infiltration can be performed without any losses after they drop the G-Bombs. I quickly change my swords and recharge my guns. This is the last supply crate we have, we gotta make it last until the end of the mission!

"One to all, I'm all done! Who's next for resupplying?"

"Lupine 4 here, I'm on the way." Ayamine's Gekishin is jumping towards the crate.

"Two, take your position by Three's side. The BETA will arrive soon enough." I said, connecting to Class Rep's mech.

"Yes, on the way." She sounds extremely tense, not allowing her face to display any emotion despite the noticeable delay in between words.

We all knew this was a suicide mission, but living through it is giving us all an unexpected shock. We all thought we could die if it were for our mission, to save someone's life down the line. But in this situation all I can feel is an overwhelming sense of despair, as if everything was crumbling apart.

No, it's more… deep than despair. How was the word? Futile? Pointless? No matter how many of them we kill, more pop up like in

those wack-a-mole games I played when I was little. But our friendlies keep dying and we're getting almost no support. All the newbies on the squad died already, as if this wasn't hard enough on us.

HQ said this would be a different world by night, that today will mark the start of our counter-offensive against the BETA. Yet, I can't see how we could win in such a situation.

The radar beeps, approximately three hundred Destroyers were coming our way, behind them at the least five hundred Grapplers and Tanks. This is the last stand, if we make it out of here then we survived this mission.

"One to all units! Enemy has been sighted, prepare to engage! Guys, one last push before going home. Let's give them hell!" I shout to motivate them, we can't lose now. We won't lose now!

"Roger!" All girls shout in unison. C'mon Lupine Squad, let's survive!

We spread before the Destroyers arrive, boost jumping over them. Tama and Class Rep fire the canister shells on top of them while the rest of us boost jump in position.

I land and start shooting again from the sidelines. Shooting at the first Destroyer's legs, we manage to slow them down enough for the ones behind to crash into them, and, like in a car crash on a highway, the herd rams into itself as we rain fire on them.

Uranium shells pierce through the BETA, painting the wasteland in their blood. Some stray ones survived the onslaught.

"Kill the stray ones before the rest of the herd arrives! Charge!"

"Four to Leader, what formation should be use?"

"Four, you're with me on the vanguard, Two and Three remain behind us to cover us, Five same as before. We stay between this

cliffs, to reduce the enemy's range. The Grapplers won't be able to surround us so easily this way. Be careful with the Tanks at all times!"

"Understood!" All of them say in unison as the wrinkles also spawn in their faces.

The BETA become visible on the horizon. They advance forward without hesitation, trampling all over their fellows' corpses. It almost feels as if they were not alive.

On my mark, me and Ayamine dashed towards the BETA. I boost jump, and sick my guns on them from the air, land on the dying corpse of a Grappler and jump off it towards another one. Switching to my sword I slash downwards, ripping the head-like thing from its body. Upon landing, I quickly switch to my guns and open fire as I pull back, dismembering who knows how many Tanks in a few seconds.

As we pull back, hell rains on the BETA. The others start firing on the herd, shaving their numbers. But the bastards don't stop coming at us.

"Four, on me!"

"Roger!"

We charge again, I circle around some Grapplers and slash at them. I forward dash and slice two more, then I open fire against the Tanks that were coming towards me.

Then, a scream reaches my ears. A Grappler damaged Ayamine's thrusters as it jumped into it. Her Gekishin, now grounded, is being surrounded by Tanks.

"Two, cover Four!"

"Don't! I'm already out of ammo, this is the end for me." Ayamine retorts not a second later.

"Shut up! I'm the squad leader, don't give me this bullshit!" I dash towards her, slashing and kicking all the BETA in front of me. Get out of the way, damn you! I'm not letting anyone else die!

Then, Ayamine's Gekishin starts dashing deeper into the herd as more and more Tanks jump onto it.

"Ayamine, retreat this instant! What do you think you're doing?!"

"The only thing… a dying soldier can do."

And as she said those words, a bright flash followed by a loud explosion filled the battlefield. She used her S-11, right in the middle of the herd.

DAMN IT! Ayamine, why didn't you… Why do you still refuse to retreat?! You didn't have to die today, we were right here besides you! You idiot!

Releasing my frustration upon the few that remained near me, soon enough there's no BETA standing in sight.

Haa… Haa… Goddammit, Ayamine… You didn't have to do that… I was right there…

Then, a beep on my radar catches my attention. Another herd is coming our way?! These readings…

"One to all units! Another herd is approaching, I read at least two Fort Class in it."

"What?! Fort Class?!" Mikoto sounded terrified. We can't deal with many of those tall bastards while fighting the rest.

Soon enough, the rumbling made itself apparent on the floor and just a few seconds later their outstretched shadows fell upon us as they

rushed in like mindless beasts. Two Destroyers that were ahead of the rest came towards me, I jump backwards to avoid them.

"Squad, move to the side and shoot their legs!"

"Roger!"

I keep dashing away while crippling all BETA that get close with what little ammo I have left. The rest cover me and manage to hold out near the cliffs we were stationed at. Damn, we really should have more ammo. I don't think they don't make enough of it, it's more like there's more BETA than all the ammo in the world could take care of.

What should I… What orders would get us out of here alive? What can I do for my squad?!

More Destroyers got close, we had to sick all remaining canister shells on them. It still wasn't enough to stop them all.

"Everyone listen up, I'll charge ahead while you give me some cover. I'll leave my guns here, make each shot count!"

"Shirogane, that's reckless! You can't fight those numbers with only one sword!" Class Rep, I thought that orders were absolute for you?

"We don't have enough ammo as it is, we need to hold out until HQ gives the signal to retreat! It's an order from the Squad Leader, so you can't refute it! Over and Out!" I charge towards the aliens despite the squad's shouts asking me to stop.

I slash at a Grappler after dodging its claw. Forward dash, boost jump to the right and I spin as I swing my sword, tearing apart all the Tanks that were trying to get on top of me. Sorry BETAs, but there's only one person that's allowed to do that.

I sidestep to get better footing and slash at a Destroyer that tried to charge me despite its damaged legs preventing it from gaining any speed. My radar shows two Grapplers behind me, I do a boost

backflip and drive my sword through the head of one of them from above. Then I slash at the other's legs before it can turn around.

I start to pull back, slashing at the BETA that get on the way. The synchronized shots from the squad tear down the stray ones that I didn't get and finish the beetles that still were alive. The Forts are getting closer, this is the turning point in the fight.

"One to all units! Give me a report!"

"Two here, we have each around 300 36mm ammo left. Me and Three gave our rifles that still had 120mm to Five. She only has four shells left of it." This is bad. Very bad, if there's more than two Forts we won't be able to hold out.

"Three here, I got a reading on the Forts!"

Let's see… One, two, four? Wait… Holy shit, there's eight of them.

"Squad, we stick together from now on! Cover each other's blind spots from Tanks while staying clear of the Forts." I bark my order, but I hear no answer. Can't blame them. Our survival odds look as bleak as they could ever get.

The BETA rush at us, we deal with the Grapplers and Tanks somewhat without suffering much damage. But then the Forts appeared, all of them at the same time. I can barely dodge their stingers in the Gekishin while being in between these cliffs, I can't even get close to attack them.

Left with no choice, I move forward to distract them while the rest deals with the middle strains. We have to pull back to the end of the cliffs to make a bottleneck and stop the Forts dead in their tracks. If we tumble them down here, then we can retreat so long as we kill all the Tanks and Grapplers.

Relaying my orders, we take our positions and I boost forward as a few Grapplers are sniped to give me space to dodge a coming sting.

Hopping and being mindful of the space between me and the tall monsters, I dance around the stingers while slashing at a few Tanks, slicing and kicking, tearing and bashing, continuing to perform carnage's dance right besides the Forts.

Then, while I was busy dodging a stinger, a Grappler got past me, rushing through the corpses of the Tanks. Coming at it from its blind spot, it toppled Mikoto's Gekishin before I could warn her of the danger as I was busy with the dodging. We all could only see as the Grappler began to tear the machine down with its claws in a matter of seconds, hitting the engine and making it explode.

Huh?

Mikoto… Mikoto is… The explosion dies down and nothing is left of the Gekishin or the aliens that were close to it. Nothing is left…

"God… GODDAMMIT!" I dodge a stinger, slashing it apart.

Landing on top of a Tank in my rage, crushing its head with the heels of the Gekishin, I take out a dagger and begin to retaliate, but the numbers are too much to deal with. I have to keep taking more and more steps back now that we lost Mikoto's covering fire.

"Anyone, help! The Tanks… My Gekishin won't accept any command I input! I can't even trigger the S-11!" Tama's Gekishin was on the ground surrounded by Tanks, they were tearing it apart. When did they get so close?!

"Leader, I'll help her! We have to retreat, there's nothing else we can do here!"

"Class Rep, wait! Don't jump! They'll-" And before I could finish, the stinger of a Fort flew towards Class Rep's TSF.

She barely managed to dodge it, but it teared part of its front off, splashing acid onto it. And since the cockpit had been teared apart, the acid… fell right onto Class Rep.

"T-Takeru-san! Somebody! Help! I can't move!" Tama's scream on my left ear.

"Aaaugh! It burns! It buuuurns! Uuugaaahh! Make it stop! Hyaaauugghh!" Class Rep's on my right.

I slash at the Grapplers that are around me and get below the closest Fort. I jump as I prepare my slash, tearing its stinger and part of its lower body.

I grab Class Rep's machinegun and shoot at the Tanks that were surrounding Tama, I couldn't kill them all. Shit! Out of ammo!

"Shi-Shirogane… Augh! Please, kill me! I can't… Hyaagh… Please, let this end. Kill… me… Uuugraaaghhh!" Class Rep, what are you-

"Aaahh! They're tearing my cockpit apart! No, I don't wanna be eaten! No! NOOOO!" Tama! I have… I have to do something! I have-

A Grappler crashes onto me, I manage to block its pincers with my blade but my Gekishin got sent flying towards the cliff.

And for the next few seconds, all I could hear were the sound of the Tanks devouring Tama and the shrieks of Class Rep as the Fort's acid took her life.

… This has got to be a joke.

Is everyone really dead?

There's no allied signals on my radar. My hands start shaking, my eyes can't stop crying. Everyone…

BETA, you sons of an eldritch bitch. Screw the mission, screw my duty, screw everything! There's another sword near me, who is it from? Matters not.

How dare you kill them! How dare you monsters, I'm gonna… I'm gonna…

"KILL EVERY SINGLE ONE OF YOU!"

I charge with one sword in each hand towards the BETA. I should be hearing the sounds of their bodies being torn apart, but all I can hear are the last words of my friends. Tama was devoured, Class Rep probably melted from inside, and Ayamine and Mikoto got blown up. What kind of mission is this? What did they sacrifice themselves for?

*"That's the nature of the military."* The words of the CO of Yokohama Base return to me.

Fuck the UN, the Royal Guards, all of this world. I reject this reality! I reject all of it! I won't accept an ending like this!

"Give me back my world!" I rush towards the sea of true red, splashing gore into the skies.

…

How long have I been fighting? How many have I killed? I'm in the middle of the wasteland surrounded by BETA corpses and TSF remains. There's still some BETA around chasing some soldiers that got scattered.

If there's still BETA around, I have to kill them. That's… all I can do. My eyes feel heavy, I can't… fall here… I must…

…

…?

I open my eyes and find myself in my room. It's really cold for some reason.

After blinking a few times I realize I was having another nightmare as usual. I'm again drenched in sweat, and I'm shivering all over.

That was when I first came to this world, our first real operation under Alternative V. Operation Iceberg, the offensive of

Sadogashima.

So even after coming back I'm still being haunted by these. Dammit… I rub my eyes strongly as I exhale, leaving my mouth open. After a short while, I managed to stop the tears and calm my breath, even though I'm still shivering like a bird caught under the rain.

I get up and wash my face on the sink, I need to get ready before the Instructor comes to pick me up. I can't meet her being this messed up. After all, everyone is alive here. Yes, no depressing myself. That won't happen again.

I showered, got changed and waited for awhile. I noticed that my body feels different as I stretched a bit. When I looked in the mirror I saw that I was a bit… younger? It's like I returned to my body of two years ago. However, I still have some scars from the terrorist attack on the school. How does this even work?

I did got up earlier than expected, should I eat something? I still got some rice balls from the other side…

Just as I finished eating, there's a knock on my door.

"Cadet Shirogane, open the door!" I stand up and go to answer. Marimo-chan is in her formal UN dress, arms folded waiting for me.

"Good morning, Instructor!" I salute her as I opened the door. She return the gesture before speaking.

"Good morning, Cadet. Allow me to introduce myself, I'm Sergeant Marimo Jinguuji. I'm going to be your Instructor during your stay here, but I suppose you already knew that." She starts looking at me, sizing me up. Something in her eyes is… sharper than before. Though, that may seem like that to me because I came from my home world this time. "I gotta say, it's surprising to have a male recruit now of all times but even more to be recommended by the Professor herself. I can see that she wasn't lying when she said you

came from a very strict unit." Right, she came up with that to explain my knowledge and aptitude. "Regardless, I'll have you know we expect great things from you! Now, are you ready to take your vow? Or would you prefer to have some breakfast before?" As kindhearted as always, Marimo-chan.

"Do not worry, I already ate a light breakfast. I'm ready to take the vow."

"You already ate? But the PX doesn't open until a few minutes."

"I had some light food prepared yesterday, to not waste time."

"… I see. Then let us be on our way."

She takes me to the gym, where the usual ceremony happened again. How many times did I do this already?

"… I swear never to shy away from danger, to risk my life in accomplishing my duty, and to fulfill my responsibility to humanity!"

"We of Yokohama Base bid you welcome, and congratulate you."

I then salute the officers, who return the gesture. Then, they give me the run down on which squad I was joining, confirming what I signed yesterday with Sensei. Marimo-chan comes up to me once that is done and places my Cadet badge on my uniform, giving me a handshake.

Alright, that was done faster than before. I'm already with the squad on the 23rd instead of the 25th. That's two more days, it might not seem like much but every second counts here. I follow the Instructor out of the gym after the ceremony is over and done, we return inside the base.

"Shirogane, do you know your way around the base?"

"Yes, Instructor. Professor Kouzuki already showed me around."

"I see. Breakfast time is almost over, so go back to your room and change into your fatigues. Wait for me to pick you up, I'll introduce you to your squad just before the morning exercises."

I do as I was told. Now's the time when things start for real, I'm not holding back this time so I should try to be less of a bother than usual. I'll stop calling Chizuru Class Rep for one, and when Mikoto comes back I'll treat her normally. I should be careful in how I give them advice, though. Don't want them to take it the wrong way and think I'm a jerk.

Get ready Squad 207, because Shirogane is gonna rock you like a hu-… I mean, like a tornado! Phew… Dodged that copyright strike, close one.

There's a knock on my door. The Instructor is here, this time in fatigues. We make our way to the courtyard, walking into the ground floor where a lot of sun came pouring in, a chilly wind entering through the windows. I had forgotten this world was a tad bit colder than my home world.

"Shirogane, today you'll be running on the track field and then doing some combat with your squad. Then, after lunch, you have lectures. I was told by the Professor that there was no need to adapt the curriculum for you, but will you be alright?" Marimo-chan, you're always such a good teacher. Even if you're more scary here than back home, except for that one time she got drunk on the hot springs.

"Yes, I'll be fine. I also had a very rigorous training in my last unit."

"I see. Then let me tell you about your squad." Then she goes about how they're all women, how they're supposed to be a very good team, to not underestimate them, yada yada yada.

"I'll take your advice to heart, Instructor."

"Good answer. We're here, wait by the door until I call for you." She opens the door, goes into the field, and blows her whistle. "SQUAD! ASSEMBLE!"

I can hear the girls approaching. I clench my hands, that were already sweaty. Deep breaths, feel the air coming in and then slowly let it out. Fresh start, no one dies here. I inhale slowly again, trying to calm myself down, only to flinch and feel a void in my chest as a voice reached my ears.

"Salute! Squad 207 is ready for today's training!" Chizuru's voice.

She sounds so alive, so strong. Nothing like… back then. That's not happening again, hell no. And she's not detonating her S-11 either. No one will!

I sigh, stopping to clench my jaw, grit my teeth, and lick over my lips. Leaning on the wall for a sec, I take in a deep breath, listening in the conversation.

"Good. Today I have an announcement to make." Marimo-chan speaks in a super serious tone. I think I heard the girls gasping, what could be going on in their heads now? "Today a new recruit will be joining your squad."

"Eh?! A new recruit? At this time of the year?!" Chizuru sounds just like me when Meiya came to school for the first time.

Man, what an ordeal that day was. To think she'd call all those chefs just for lunch, I can't help but grin remembering those crazy noisy days.

"Yes, and that's not the only surprising thing here. Shirogane! Come over here!" I go towards them walking not too fast, so that I could see their faces.

Tama's eyes opened wide as she tilted her head, Chizuru raised both brows as her mouth remained half open, and Kei… is being Kei,

just silently gazing at me with a hand on her chin, unassumingly returning my gaze. Meiya is the only one who isn't surprised, obviously.

For a second, I felt my heart shrink. They're here, right there. Alive and well, breathing and unharmed. I slowly released my breath through my nose, almost unable to meet their gazes.

I gulp, stopping right behind the Instructor, giving them all a good look. And finally, I managed to smile. Because they're right there, and this is no dream.

"He's a special recruit, recommended by Professor Kouzuki herself. He was trained on a special squad, but due to an accident he couldn't finish his training. The Professor scouted him herself, so his skills are supposed to be top notch." She gives me a nod to introduce myself.

"I'm Cadet Takeru Shirogane, it's a pleasure to be here!" Standing in attention, I give them a salute.

"Likewise. I'm the Leader of this squad, Chizuru Sakaki." Chizuru salutes me with a serious look, as expected. I return a nod with a slight smile.

"I'm Miki Tamase. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Shirogane-san." I forgot they speak so formally here. Gonna have to change that, at least for you Tama.

"Kei Ayamine." Kei, dear, could you at least look at me when you speak? I know you don't mince many words but-

"Ayamine! You're being rude to Shirogane. Why don't you do a proper introduction?" Already fighting?! Chizuru don't do it, the Instructor is right-

"I did." Kei! Stop that, Marimo-chan will-

"No, you didn't." Chizuru narrows her brows, Meiya sighs and shakes her head.

"I said my name, should be enough." Kei shrugs, Tama's lips quiver as she switches gazes from her to Chizuru.

"That's not the point. What impression of our squad are you even trying to give him?"

"So noisy from the get go today, huh."

"What was that?!"

"All right, that's enough you two!" Marimo-chan yells at them, making them look to the ground. "What am I gonna do with you today? Perhaps I should make you run double the distance? Hmm, how would you like that?"

"I apologize for my behavior, Instructor." Chizuru bows deeply, Kei soon follows.

"Sorry, Instructor. It won't happen again."

"Oh, really? I've lost count of how many times you've said that. Shirogane, if you see these two fighting, call for me immediately."

"Yes, Ma'am." Marimo-chan's glare is scarier this time around, what did you guys do to anger her this much?

"Mitsurugi, you're the last one."

"I'm Meiya Mitsurugi. It'll be a pleasure to train alongside you, Shirogane." I give her a nod, which she answers with a confident smile.

"Now that we got the introductions out of the way, go stretching so that we can start with the exercises."

She gives the orders, taking some distance from us, and we go to stretch.

"Shirogane, can I ask you some questions?" Chizuru comes to my side as I lean down, trying to reach for my boots.

"Sure, ask away." She also does the same and steals a glance at me while we remain in position.

"How much training did you have in your previous squad?"

"You could say they drilled me to the ground, but due to some… problems I couldn't take the CCSE with my squad." I return myself upwards after counting to ten.

"I see." Chizuru also straightens herself, tapping her glasses as she looks at me. "And from then on, you trained by yourself I suppose."

"I had some people helping me in my daily routines. But it obviously wasn't the same as formal training." It was even worse. Maya-sensei truly did not hold back on me. She slashed me in half more times than I could keep count of.

"Is that so? Allow me to be blunt, can we expect much from you? Will your skills be a good addition to the squad?"

"That depends on how much difference there's between us. But I'm not planning to be dead weight. You can expect me to do my best at all times, Sakaki." She smiles upon hearing my answer, and my heart suffered some lag there for a sec.

"That's good. It's nice to know we have another serious person on the team. By the way, the squad has another member. Her name is Mikoto Yoroi, but she injured herself and won't be training with us for awhile."

"Oh, was it serious?" I know it's not, but gotta play my part here.

"No, but it'll take some time for her to join us again. A week perhaps."

"I see. How is she? As a person, I mean."

"She's… quirky." Look at those arching brows. We both kept stretching, with Chizuru pondering for a second what to say. "Yoroi's survival skills are top notch, and her medical knowledge is also very good. She does tend to… have a short attention span, however." No changes there. Mikoto is still Mikoto.

"Shirogane-san, might I ask what is your strong point?" Tama gets closer as she joins in the warm up. Though, I have to make her stop calling me that. It's making me sad.

"I'm kind of an all rounder type. I can do pretty much anything with the same ease. I do prefer close combat, though."

"I see, that's really impressive. If you can do many things, you must be very skilled." You're making me blush internally, Tama. Your sincere praises are really endearing.

"Or he just sucks at everything." I can't help but smile upon hearing Kei's teasing, seeing her smirk grow as she throws a side glance at me. I'm so glad to be back, to once more be able to hear them alive and well.

"Ayamine, you're being rude towards Shirogane again. Why don't you apologize?" Oh God, here we go again.

"About what?"

"You just insulted him."

"Did I?"

"I didn't feel particularly insulted, I think she was just teasing me. It's alright, really." I try to calm things down, but… Here thar be dragons.

"No, Shirogane. Ayamine is always doing what she pleases without any consideration towards the team." Maybe I should do something before they start again.

"Um, Sakaki? If you fight again and the Instructor hears you…" I left the sentence hanging in the air on purpose, trying to copy the tone Sensei uses when she speaks seriously with me. Chizuru closes her eyes, then shoots a glare towards Kei.

"You're right, I shouldn't be doing this." She then looks away and continues to stretch.

Kei simply looks away and takes some distance from us. Tama doesn't know what to say, she seems really nervous as she takes glances towards both of them.

"That was good, Shirogane. You stopped them before they even began." Meiya gives me a small smile as she came over to us.

"I don't think I'd say that. They were already at each other's throats."

"No, you stopped them before they raised their voices. You even interjected before warning them about the Instructor. I always find it difficult to stop them before."

"That's just because Ayamine is always in her own world. I never know what she'll say to me, and I end up losing my temper." Chizuru says, sounding like a deflated balloon and sighing what little air she had in her away.

"Um, I don't… think it's so bad. Her words mean Ayamine-san is expecting something from you Shirogane-san."

"Expecting something?"

"You did say you prefer close combat, so she might be interested in that. I, too, am quite curious of your skill in CQC." Meiya tells me with a smile. Right, these two also prefer CQC.

"Well, I don't resent her or anything. I just hope we can get along." The girls smile upon my answer.

Alright, let's hope you can keep up with me. From this point forward… I'll forge and temper you into the best Valkyries I can. I won't twiddle my thumbs here.

"Alright, Squad! Take your positions on the track field!" Marimo-chan barks the order, and we all take one line of the track field.

I do some short hops, moving my shoulders up and down. I let the air enter into me as I gaze at the clouds, remembering that last walk towards the U's Reactor. Everything starts from this point forward. My first objective, to unite the girls to pass the CCSE and make them better than they were last loop. Let's take the first step towards that flag.

"You'll be doing ten klicks today, then you'll do five with half gear." Marimo-chan informs us as she stands to a side near the starting line. "Now, ready… set… GO!" She blows her whistle and the training starts.

Or so I'd say if I could take this seriously. I just started jogging lightly to warm up, but I'm still going along the rest just fine. They seem to be putting some effort in their stride, so they're not taking this lightly like me.

Chizuru is on the lead, followed closely by Ayamine. Then me and Meiya are around the same place, with Tama a bit behind us. They started sweating a bit after the first lap, so no doubt they're doing this seriously. The gap… is larger than I thought. I know stamina isn't that much of a concern when riding TSFs, hell, Tama's CQC wasn't nothing to laugh at when she was in a cockpit and she held out during the Kashgar Raid really well despite not being able to run as much as the rest. But, if I want them to take me seriously despite my relaxed way of being, I have to push forward and be a beacon for them.

"What's the matter, Shirogane? Is that all you have today?" Meiya taunts me, being a bit ahead of me.

"Says the one who couldn't even finish her training yesterday." Oh, that hit a nerve. She narrowed her brows for a second, but then she returned a grin towards me.

"Oho, I wonder about that. All I can see is that I've been in front of you for two laps already."

"Heh, okay. I'll start taking this seriously if you want me to, Meiya."

"You're still referring to me in that way?"

"That way? Oh, sorry."

"How did you manage to keep that habit during your training? Surely you're not going to try to call the Instructor by her name as well, do you?"

"I might." I don't know if I see shock, fear, awe or all of them in her face.

Well, enough screwing around. We're at almost half the first part, so let's start to take this seriously. If I want to be a lighthouse for them, I need to do my best. I already know how holding back went after all. And hitting the ground hard with my heels, I speed up.

I learned that placing your heels first while you run allows you to conserve stamina and give you a little boost forward when you do it. It took a while to get used to consciously take each step with the back of my feet, but now that I can I know how much of a difference it makes. I start properly running, and pass both Kei and Chizuru in a flash.

One lap, two laps, three laps. I finished the remaining five klicks, while everybody still has two laps left to take. I wipe the little sweat that had formed as I moved away from the track. I see Marimo-chan

plucking her lips at me while she has her arms crossed, tapping one with a finger. Once I got closer, she took her usual pose and rose her chin while furrowing her brows.

"Shirogane! I don't know why you chose to show off like that, but if you can't finish the exercise-"

"I'm used to this. This training is too light for me." I think someone almost tripped after hearing me.

"Oh? It's too light? Then, what would you like to do?"

"Can I do a full gear march?"

"Full gear? Fine, take the backpack and the rifle with you too. Let's see how you handle those five klicks."

"Um, I was thinking of running until everyone else finished. These short distances are no problem for-" She raises an eyebrow. Oh. My. God. What have I done?!

"SHIROGANE! Don't you get cocky on me! You think that just because you're 'special' you can be so arrogant?! Huh?!" It's just like when she got drunk! Help! "What's the matter, boy? Cat got your tongue or something?! Speak up!"

"Um, Instructor… P-Professor Kouzuki ordered me to not hold back in the training. To give you an accurate idea of my current skills." Sorry, Sensei. But I feel like she'll kill me if I don't use your name here.

"The Professor did? Gosh, what am I gonna do with her?! Fine, do your thing. But if you cannot keep running until everyone finishes, I'll have you do a hundred squats after the afternoon lectures. Now, go already!" She waves a hand towards where the gear is, slicing the air in half with much violence. What has got her this angry? Sensei, what did you do this time?

I get in gear and return to the track. But this is still fine, I don't feel tired or anything. I did went jogging for, like, almost two hours during the last month. Eventually, everyone got in half gear and started running along. They all seemed to be putting some more effort in their stride compared to what little I remember of our past trainings. In time, Tama was the last one to finish. How many klicks did I end up running?

"Alright, that's enough! Take off your gear, I'll bring some weapons for the following exercise. You can refresh yourself with the nearby water taps."

Boy, that was nice. Not as nice as running with some chill wind in a park, but still not as bad as I expected. I really improved my stamina from last time.

"Shirogane-san, that was amazing! What kind of training did you used to do?" Tama's eyes reflect the sunshine at me, impressed with my performance.

"Something like this? Minus the full gear, I used to run for almost two hours every morning."

"Every morning? You didn't get a day to rest?" Chizuru looks dumbfounded as she raises one brow.

"Yes, I did. But I still went to run, it didn't feel right to start the day without jogging."

"By the way, you and Mitsurugi-san were talking before you started sprinting, what did she ask you?" Tama was right behind us so she must have seen our little exchange.

"She taunted me, to see if I could do better. I don't know whether I met her expectations or not."

"You fool, there was no need to go as far as to confront the Instructor! If you cannot complete the following exercise, it's your

own fault." Meiya sounds somewhat disappointed. "But even so, you surpassed all my expectations. To keep running at such speed until all of us finished, your stamina is on a different level than ours."

"Shirogane, you're not tired right? Think you can do the combat exercise?"

"Don't worry, Sakaki. I'm still full of energy. So, are we doing hand-to-hand combat or sword practice?"

"Both." Meiya answers as she interlocks her fingers and raises both hands upwards. "We usually do short fights against each other, two fights in hand-to-hand and two fights with either knives or swords." This is definitely different from before, why is Marimo-chan giving you this training?

"Shirogane, you said close combat is your strong point. What weapon do you prefer?"

"The sword, with the knives as a close second. I'm not bad at hand-to-hand combat but it's definitely not my strong point."

"Oho? Iiiiinteresting." Kei remarks from afar. I know what you're thinking girl, you wanna send me to another planet with an STA, don't you?

"So the sword is your favorite. Just like me, I hope we get to spar today." Meiya's eyes have little purple flares coming out of them.

Last time I totally dominated her due to the difference in stamina, I wonder how things will go now that I learned the Mugen Kidou.

"Squad! Here are the weapons." Marimo-chan returns with a box, laying it nearby. "I'll announce the pairings, Tamase and Sakaki on HTH, Ayamine and Mitsurugi with weapons of your choice. Shirogane, you're out for the first round."

What the hell?! I mean, we are an uneven number right now. Oh, well. I take my distance as the others prepare to spar. This will be a nice chance to see how good they are as of now, though.

"Shirogane, might I have a word with you?" Marimo-chan gets closer and speaks in a calm tone, but one of her hands is coiled real tight. Off to the detention barracks, perhaps? "You… Are you not tired?"

"Huh? No, I'm holding up fine."

"I see. So, I suppose you're used to a harsher training regime. Could you tell me what to expect from you? I tried asking the Professor just now, but she didn't exactly reveal much." I see, so that's why she's pissed.

I tell her what I said to my squad, with a bit more detail on my skills, while keeping an eye on the bouts of the girls.

"… And, while I'm confident in my current level, I wouldn't call myself a decent sniper yet."

"So you got trained in all types of combat? I know that pilots are supposed to adapt to any position on the field, but… I'm afraid your skills have suffered from being trained as a generalist. While your stamina is definitely better, I don't know if it'll be enough to compensate the gap in skill that dedicated training brings out."

"Then I'll just have to pick a style and perfect it along the way, I guess."

"That's true. Well, it seems they're finishing their duels. Let's see…" The girls return from their battles, awaiting the next set of orders. "Sakaki and Shirogane with weapons of your choice, Tamase and Ayamine in HTH."

"Shirogane, would you mind if we used combat knives?" She asks as I got closer to the crate.

"No, that's fine by me."

We both grab a wooden knife and go further into the courtyard, feeling the wind briskly ruffling around us. Chizuru takes a standard stance, while I put my left leg forward while grabbing he handle and pointing the blade behind me with my right hand. We stay in position, just sizing the other for some time.

Chizuru takes a step forward, swinging her knife to my right. Shifting my weight backwards, I dodge to my left with ease. I parry her next strike and throw a punch at her with my left. She takes a step back just in time to dodge it.

I start pressuring her with a flow of strikes. First a downward strike, then I try to hit her left side. Changing the place where I attack to force her to move faster, she can't counter me. Her footwork is very nice, she's keeping her defense against me very nicely even if she can only parry or try to keep some distance.

Those brows still and firm, her gaze has a certain determination behind it. She's planning something. As I rush at her with a frontal strike, she quickly moves aside and in a single motion tries to strike at my hands. Nice plan, if I say so myself. Sadly for you Chizuru, my reflexes are on whole 'nother level.

As if I were trying to fit on a tight train, I coil to my right barely dodging her attack. She was going for a serious attack, and now that she's lost her balance I have a clear hit waiting for me. I put some weight into my swing as I hit her back, sending her to give a nice smooch to the ground.

"Whew, looks like this is my win." I give her a hand as she stands up.

"That was truly amazing. Shirogane, I expect you to share the secrets of how you reached this level of dexterity." She shakes my hand before we went towards the group.

Everyone else seemed to have been watching us, they seemed impressed.

"Shirogane-san, that was awesome! Especially that fast dodge at the end!"

"Thanks, but that was really luck on my side."

"Good job flooring the Leader." Kei, why must you? She's even smirking at Chizuru.

"Alright! Next pairings will be Tamase and Mitsurugi with weapons and Ayamine with Shirogane in HTH."

We go back into the field. No words were said, Kei looked as inexpressive as she usually did. Only that since I've been with her for who knows how long I can tell the small signs she makes. Her eyes are slightly veering left, she now knows I'm right handed so she's probably thinking of going for my left side. However, by her stance, she'll do a feint and try to land a hit on me before she goes for a throw.

I go at her with a right punch, she takes a step back and dodges it. I continue to throw some punches, and she keeps dodging. If there's one thing I never managed to do, is to best Kei in this type of combat.

She sends a kick, I dodge to my right and block a punch she threw at me. And here it comes, she grabs my arm and tries to make a lock, but I throw myself onto her and grab her other arm before she can throw me.

Then I put my left leg forward and tense up my back with my heels firmly in place. Now you can't throw me, but neither can I throw you. We struggle to make the other lose balance, we move our legs to try to trip each other off but neither gives an inch.

She's doing this will all her might, her eyes are oozing a fiery intensity upon me. Wait, eyes? Ohoho, so I had that card left…

I slightly pull myself backwards, Kei thinks I'm trying to throw her and starts resisting my pull by getting closer to keep me quiet. And then, I throw a headbutt at her. After hitting her face clearly her grip on me loosens, and I seize my chance to grab her shoulder and waist. I throw her to the floor and restrain her. She starts kicking about, trying to break free.

"This is my win, too. Hey Ayamine, stop struggling! The match is-"

"Never."

"Don't be so stubborn, you're already-"

"Never!" Her thrashing intensifies.

"Fine, if you want to play that game." I bend her arm a bit more behind her back, and start exerting more force upon her shoulder with my palm.

"Ugh! Never…"

"The match is over! Shirogane, you win. Ayamine, you need to know when to give up." Marimo-chan admonishes us from afar. I let Kei go but she remains on the floor, unmoving.

"Ayamine, you okay?"

"Fine."

"Then, why don't you get up?"

"My problem."

"Fine, suit yourself. Nice fight, by the way. It's the first time I have to restrain someone to win at close combat." Man, I just beat Kei for the

first time ever. I mean, she is still inexperienced compared to her full potential but a win's a win.

"AYAMINE! Get your ass here this instant, unless you wanna do squats until dinner!" Marimo-chan is really strict this time around. It's like she has an aura around her, as if she were on a leash. The Mad Dog is out for some reason.

Kei slowly gets up and comes over the group. She looks absolutely livid even if she has her usual poker face, going by how her mouth is nothing but a small, tense line and how she's looking straight at the ground.

"Next pairings are Ayamine with Sakaki, and Mitsurugi with Shirogane with weapons." So it's up against Meiya now.

"Shirogane, what say you of using swords? Do you feel in proper form for a spar?" She folds her arms, giving me a small smile.

Look at you, taunting me. You may have gave me multiple bumps in the head and slashed me in half during my first loop, but last time I totally dominated you, and today I'm gonna do with you whatever I want!

That… came out wrong, dammit. But now that I had intensive training with Maya-sensei, you'll be the one being slashed in half!

"Fine by me, just hope you don't regret it."

"It's one thing to be confident, but another entirely to be arrogant. Shirogane, I am hoping to show you the difference between them in our bout."

"Sorry, but I can't lose in a sword fight. My Sensei would kill me if I lost." Not even kidding right now, Maya-sensei taught me under the motto that using the Mugen Kidou was to become invincible. I think she went too far, but I'll let the results speak for themselves.

"You must be proud of your teacher to say so. But the same goes for me, the sword is my specialty. You already dispatched two of us without breaking a sweat, and apparently the sword is your strength. I can only shiver in anticipation of our duel, but I'm not going to fall to you!"

She takes her stance. It's not the Mugen Kidou, it's a more generic one simply holding the sword forward with both hands. Going easy on her I think I could still beat her due to my stamina, but I want to be serious against her. She's the only other Mugen Kidou user I can fight with, so I need to know how good I'm with it now. In this world of war, Tsukuyomi-san must have taught you a more deadly technique than what I learned in my world, so let's see how I hold up. If you don't want to use the Mugen Kidou, I'll force you to use it!

I take the stance Maya-sensei taught me with a slightly arched back, sword in both hands pointing downwards just above my shoulders, knees just a bit behind the end my feet. I'm ready to pounce at her any second. She seems to recognize my pose as her wide eyes gaze upon me. Her eyes stop wavering and turn fierce, I can only wonder what she thinks of this.

She starts the fight with a fast opening from my right, I parry easily and follow with a downwards slash towards her face. She blocks just in time, I step left and try to strike her stomach but she manages to block me again.

I speed up and go for relentless attacks. Maya-sensei taught me that Iaido and Kendo can be further combined by treating every slash like both a first attack that must be dealt swiftly and a follow up to another movement. This forms a fast flow of attacks that can throw most opponents off balance. The key point is the step back one must take after some time, to recover balance and occasionally throw off the enemy. She called it the 'Unending Waterfall' style, that differed from Mana's style in that this one was much more aggressive, as opposed to keep a more slow pace to attack separating the Iaido and Kendo 'phases' to call them something.

So, instead of only using Iaido's fast approach when unsheathing the blade and then proceeding to use Kendo, you do both things at the same time from the start. It's really complicated, but once I learned the correct stance and pace it came naturally to keep the flow of attacks going, especially once I got used to taking that crucial step back.

Meiya can't counter me, I can tell she's also being serious as she tries to force an opening but my attacks keep her from getting too close. I bend my knees and go for an upwards slash aimed at her left shoulder, she moves to the right and tries to strike me but I manage to parry. While our swords were still clashing, I take a step back. This makes Meiya fall forward, since she was putting force into her sword. I aim at her hands but missed by a hair, she ducked away nimbly before falling over.

I keep up the pressure. She could only barely stand up again as I was once more attacking. I take my chance and quickly move to a side to strike a blind spot, but she dodges and tries to imitate me.

She's now fighting with everything she has, but she's not fast enough. Maya-sensei told me that it wasn't necessary to put much force into my swing, since the blade will deal lethal damage when aimed at a blind spot, but I start to push harder with each swing I take at her. This catches Meiya off guard, since she was used to the strength I was displaying moments ago. I force her to go completely into a defensive stance as I keep my fast strikes coming at her. A little dash to the left, I slash downwards towards her leg. Blocked, I quickly bring my sword up and go for a frontal slash putting more force into it. Our swords get locked in a struggle. Meiya is doing all she can to avoid being overpowered, she stands stiff while locking her eyes onto me.

I take a step back and return to my initial stance as I breath a sigh. Meiya does the same, sweat pouring all over her.

"To think… you'd be this good. I haven't been pushed to my limits by no one other than my teacher."

"What's up with that defeatist tone? You wanna give up on me?" Ohoho, how nice you look when you're angry, my dear Meiya.

"Never! Surrendering is not an option, I yield to no one!" She lashes out, this time taking her Mugen Kidou stance.

I slightly alter my stance preparing for what is to come, Meiya's true strength lies in her quickness to draw her blade. It was obvious I would win against her in a Kendo style fight, but when it comes to Iaido I don't think I'll ever get as fast as her. Sure, now I can do it all the time with my current style, but even then I'm not as fast as Meiya got during the last loop. She's not there yet, but I shouldn't underestimate her. I don't want more bumps on my head, and I rather not get slashed in half again.

"You look as if you could predict my every move, Shirogane."

"You're just too straightforward, Meiya. It's too easy to bait and take advantage of your style."

"Mmgh! Don't get cocky just because I haven't landed a hit yet! I'm going to take you seriously from now on!"

"Weren't you fighting seriously until now? Then, why are you sweating like a fountain?"

Learning to be calm in the face of teasing is a skill you need to learn, Meiya. This is coming from someone who couldn't help to react at the first poke he received. However, it looks like she has totally lost it.

"Shirogane! Prepare yourself!" And, as an imaginary red bandanna wrapped itself around Meiya's forehead, she charged at me.

Barely parrying her strike, she moves to my left and tries to outspeed me. You should know that my Jolly nature will always allow me to outspeed you, Adamant samurai. I keep parrying her attacks despite their speed, and over time I start putting more strength into each

parry. Eventually the roles shifted as I started to push her again with many consecutive attacks.

Towards her shoulder, then I shift to strike at her stomach. I take a step back and attack her right shoulder again but it's only a feint to attack her left side. She almost falls for it, barely moving out of the way. Her footing got unstable, I dash after Meiya catching her by surprise. I lower my sword and slash upwards aiming at her hands, sending her sword flying just like Maya-sensei did to me every time that I lost my balance.

Meiya laid on the ground after the impact made her fall backwards. She looked up at me as her eyes widened, unblinking and focused.

"Nice duel, Meiya." I offer a hand for her to stand up, but she just keeps looking at me as if in a daze. "… Meiya? Are you hurt?"

"Eh?"

"You alright? You've been sitting on the ground for awhile, totally silent. Did I harm you?" I didn't go overboard, right? If I ended up hurting her our relationship may take an awful turn.

"No, I'm fine. It's just…" She slowly stands up by herself, not meeting my eye. "No one has ever bested me so soundly, not even my teacher. This is the first time I… thought I was facing someone I couldn't defeat."

"I see. But it's not like I had it easy, you made me get serious halfway."

"That's not true. You were holding back, weren't you?" Back up straight, she gives me a gaze right in the eye, her face completely sobered up. "Your attacks became stronger and faster at the end, and you didn't try to hit my stomach or face, instead you went for my sword. I can't even muster any semblance of anger after being so throughly defeated." Her shoulders drop as does her gaze and brows, her lips' edges twisting inwards.

"Everyone faces this kind of defeat sometimes, you know? Don't be so down, Meiya. There was a time when I got my head handed to me by someone much better in a similar way." That was you, and you were just beating the shit out of me to raise your 'warrior spirit' or something. "Just use today's defeat as a motivator to drive you to new heights. People can accomplish great things when they have a driving purpose, after all."

"You were defeated in this manner? I can't even begin to imagine what savage opponent you must have faced." A certain blue haired samurai girl with an apparently unending list of philosophical quotes in her head. "But you're right, so long as people have an purpose that motivates them, they can achieve any objective they set for themselves. Wise words indeed, it seems you're skilled outside of the battlefield as well." She regains a small smile, nodding slowly as she again folds her arms.

"Don't praise me too much or I'll grow arrogant."

"There's no need to be humble. I can already see what makes you special, Shirogane. I only ask of you to not hold back on me when we get to spar. Besting you is now another objective I have set for myself."

"Sure thing Meiya, if you want me to beat you to a pulp I'm happy to oblige." I say in a cocky tone, smirking. Teasing her is too much fun.

"Ugh, next time will be different! And, you still insist on calling me by my name."

"If it bothers you I'll try to stop." Last thing I want is to burn my bridges with any of you.

"I do not mind, it is merely surprising to see such a skilled cadet being so relaxed. Didn't your Instructors do something about it?"

"Old habits die hard, I guess."

"Haha, that is true. That's why they're habits in the first place. However…" Her tone changes to one of worry.

"What is it?"

"Those two are still going at it. I hope nothing happens this time." I follow Meiya's worried gaze to the other pair.

Chizuru and Kei were still fighting, keeping each other at a safe distance while trying to hit the other with kicks. They're being much more fierce than in my past loops.

"Are they always like that?"

"Sadly, yes. It isn't odd for one to end up in the medical bay with serious scratches or a bruise. I think that you defeating them has done nothing but invigorate the flames in their hearts. Both are very dedicated to the trainings, so they don't take losing very well."

That isn't unlike them, but it still seems odd. Well, I did steamroll everyone this time. They surely didn't like being shown up by the newbie.

They kept fighting for three more minutes, until Marimo-chan interrupted them. My last fight was against Tama in HTH, I tried going easy on her but even that was too much. Seeing her get real down, I decided to give her some pointers based on my experiences when we got together in my first loops. Maybe she'll be able to at least begin to put up a fight against Chizuru and Kei without taking this so hard.

Now it's time for lunch, and I can expect a lot of questions coming from them. Chizuru is gazing at me sharply, who knows what questions she has for me. And Meiya too, she hasn't let me out of her sight since our duel.

Well, let's make the most out of this. Let's try to get them to speak a little less formally with me, too. The battle to make us into a real

squad starts right now!

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*Same day. A few minutes later.*

*(Mana's room.)*

**[Mana]**

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Sitting in the small desk in the officer quarters I've been sleeping in this year during my stay on this base, I review the reports from the mechanics working on our Takemikazuchis.

Today's maintenance shouldn't take much time. There was nothing of importance to report yesterday, even though some people around the base were a bit too suspicious. Something happened yesterday, and many people were rather alarmed by it.

However, so long as it doesn't concern Meiya-sama's wellbeing it is no problem of mine. The UN's affairs are of no interest to me. I open the drawer and grab what was inside. I reread the papers of Meiya-sama's activities, to arrange our afternoon vigilance.

As I was close to finishing, two knocks on my door in an odd rhythm sounded. It's their signal.

"Enter." Upon hearing my command, my three subordinates entered my personal room.

"Mana-sama, we have an urgent report for you!"

"What is it, Kamiyo? Were we contacted by HQ?" All three of them look most positively alarmed, what has happened?

"No, Ma'am. It's about Meiya-sama, a new recruit has been added to her squad this morning."

"What did you say?! I have heard nothing of this!"

"Neither did we, Mana-sama. We were surprised as well during our morning vigilance."

"Who's this new recruit?" Tomoe steps up and bows before speaking.

"We don't know his name, but he seems to be a young boy. Perhaps nineteen at most, he's both agile and strong. His stamina was truly impressing, and he held his ground against his squadmates during the morning fights, defeating them without much problems." She proceeds to give me a summary of what they saw in detail.

I forgot they don't have authorization to access the UN's databases, so they wouldn't know his name. However, a male recruit? On this day and age, at this point in the year? On this base, placed on the 207th Squad no less? Could this be what caused yesterday's fuss?

"That's not all, however." Ebisu added as Tomoe finishes, but her expression grew tense as her gaze lost itself into the floor.

"What is it? What else did you see?"

"He… He defeated Meiya-sama in a duel with swords, with rather ease if I might add. It looked as if he were holding back the entire fight."

"What?! But that's…" I frown, making them tense up. I close my eyes and run a hand over my hair, slowly breathing in.

I trained Meiya-sama personally since I was assigned as her retainer. Her skills with the sword can still improve much, but she's by no means an easy adversary. Who is this person? There's no way a cadet could be so skilled, more so than Meiya-sama.

"And… Um… There's one more thing we…" Kamiyo's voice trails off, she's also very stiff.

"Now, what is it?"

"We heard he was someone special, that he got scouted by the Vice Commander herself."

"So that's how it is. I suppose he's a star cadet from a foreign unit that got recruited for the frontlines."

It's not surprising, there are quite a few foreigners in this base. More than I would like. But for the UN to have made such a move without warning… Who is this man? What business does he have here to be placed on Meiya-sama's squad so suddenly?

"Mana-sama, the man in question… is Japanese." She continues, arms tightly clasped onto her sides.

"Japanese? Could he be the son of one of those bastards that ran away when China fell?" A nikkei bastard, whose blood and soul got tainted by foreign culture. We can't call them Japanese, they believe in completely different values than us. "I suppose they should be having lunch now. Let's go see this new recruit for ourselves."

"Should we ready ourselves to take action?"

"No, that would only put Meiya-sama in a difficult position. We will just watch, until we can confirm whether he is a threat or not. I'll check his personal information later." The UN should know better, this is a most strange turn of events.

Is this man an infiltrator? Is the UN working with him? To be placed on the 207th Squad so suddenly and without warning despite who its members are, who is this man supposed to be?

We make our way to the third PX, where Meiya-sama's squad takes its meals. As always at this hour it is bustling with sounds of chatter and cluttering of trays. I stand barely outside, watching from the door towards the usual table. Light pouring into the large room, I easily locate the azure shape of Meiya-sama's hair. She seems unhurt, eating without a hint of apprehension. That's a relief, now where is he seated? Is that…

W-What is this? Are my eyes playing tricks on me?!

I rub my eyes and take a moment of pause before looking again, but the sight does not change. The chestnut colored hair, that well defined physique, that face. Someone who's better with a blade than Meiya-sama, despite being so young. Why is he here? No, was he still alive? I thought for sure he was dead.

No, being a shinobi, if he was thought to be dead it would only make his missions easier on him. But then, why is he here? Perhaps I'm overstepping my boundaries right now. No, how do I know it is him? He should be dead, after all.

"Mana-sama? What should we-" I cut Tomoe's question without looking away from the boy.

"You will keep watching over Meiya-sama as you have been doing so far. Report everything he does to me, take any measures you need to take in order to ensure you don't miss a movement he makes. However, do not approach him unless it's absolutely necessary."

"Yes, Mana-sama!" All three of them answer in unison.

"I'll go check the databases and try to ask around with the higher ups. That's all."

They salute me and take their positions watching over Meiya-sama.

I go towards the computers on the library. The place is usually deserted at this hour, only the attendant was here. Rows of shelves full of books, the scent of lingering dust, and pale gray desks with the computers were all one could see. The basic chair wasn't exactly comfortable, however it shall suffice.

Taking a moment to bring the machine out of hibernation, I quickly input my rank and ID, in the screen the message of permission to

search appears. I only have S2 level of clearance here and my permission to see documents is limited to what surrounds Meiya-sama's activities, but it should be enough. Now, Cadet Squad 207…

Six members, huh? Last update was yesterday night. So he was the cause of yesterday's fuss. Now, let's see what name are you registered as.

Heh, I knew it. There's no way I would forget you. However, a spy might be borrowing his identity. Now, let's see what your report says, Shirogane.

A sound notifying an error played in the small speakers, a gray box with a large message filled the CRT screen.

[ACCESS DENIED - S5 LEVEL OF CLEARANCE REQUIRED]

"Ahaha… Ahahaha… So it is you!" I hold my mouth shut, crossing a leg over the other as I lean forward.

Nobody else could get this kind of security lock while passing to be a mere Cadet! This would only raise suspicions, especially since you were put in Meiya-sama's squad. That fox wouldn't make such an obvious miss, not with us watching over her. The UN wouldn't put a spy near the members of the 207th Squad with this level of security knowing who would inquire about the matter.

"… So you were alive, after all."

I relax onto the seat despite its square shape not being entirely pleasant, pondering what this means for a moment, running a hand over my hair as I stare at the message on the screen. I cannot help but to smile at this turn of events.

Why were you sent here? Someone of your skill, passing as a cadet… Perhaps it's because of your skillset that you are required here. Did you deceive the UN? No, no one could deceive that fox of a Vice Commander. Then, was there some sort of accord made with

her? I should ask around to see what I can glean, any kind of reaction will be enough to give me an idea of your standing in this place. The last thing I want is to obstruct your mission in any way.

"Regardless of the circumstances that brought you here, it is a blessing to know you're still alive." I would have liked our meeting to be in a proper place with the honors you deserve as a member of the Royal Guard, but just knowing you're safe and sound is enough for me. I should not tell the others of your origins, they might slip up when around you.

However, if she sent you of all people, despite we all assuming you were dead… then something unexpected might have happened. I should contact HQ for an update, just in case.

# The Remnants He Left Behind

## Chapter 8: The Remnants He Left Behind

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*October 23rd. 7:03 PM.*

*(Hallway near the PX.)*

**[Takeru]**

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During lunch today the girls asked me about how I got so strong. Meiya was particularly insistent on knowing from where I learned my skills with a sword. Kei looked annoyed to no end, but still said she wanted a rematch. Tama was just in awe at my physical prowess, and Chizuru gave me another talk about teamwork before asking me about tips on how to train and what kind of self training I did. On another note, I'm amazed I managed to keep myself in check even if I can't wipe this silly grin from my face. This time… This time I won't let any of you die.

The lecture wasn't so bad, I'm surprised I remembered all of it. I could answer quickly, and most importantly correctly, all the questions Marimo-chan threw at me. Which were a lot more than I remembered during my previous loops.

It's too early to say, but I think something is different this time. Maybe the girls just annoyed Marimo-chan and that's all there is to it, but I think I'll just ask Sensei some questions today about the things that happened a while ago and about the state of the world right now. I don't really know much about it, but I'm sure I'll notice a change if there is one.

"Shirogane? Hey, Shirogane!" Chizuru was calling out to me.

"Sorry, I was lost in thought. What were you saying?"

"Don't go spacing out like that, you almost went into a different hallway. The PX is this way."

I was so focused I didn't notice. We just got out of the lecture and we were going to have dinner. We waited for our turn and eventually made our way to our usual table. Meiya, Tama and Chizuru sat in front of me, while Kei sat to my right.

"Well, what did you think of your first day here, Shirogane?" Chizuru opens the talks.

"It was fine, I guess. How to say it? The Instructor was more fierce than what I expected."

"… Ahaha, she truly has a strong presence." Her laughter was as forced as mine in front of Dad when I failed many tests in a row.

Though, I was referring to the fact that she's getting too angry at things she usually didn't. And you guys… seem to think that's the norm here, going by that answer and those exhausted faces you're all making. Huh, a difference to the list.

"You also went and bragged in front of her. You did end up proving your point, but I fear that she might have developed a grudge towards you." Meiya gives me a worried look. Is Marimo-chan so vengeful in this loop?

"You're so dead. It was good knowing you." Kei gives me a pat in the shoulder while nodding solemnly, but with a grin on her face.

"What?! What is she gonna do to me?"

"Ayamine, don't scare him like that." Chizuru scolds her, but in a low tone as if to not provoke a fight.

"It's the truth." Kei smirks at me. I think I might have gotten on Marimo-chan's bad side without meaning to.

"Well, too late for regrets now. Whatever happens, happens." Can't really do much about how I act.

I picked at my food, while the others talked about today's lectures. It seems they're having trouble keeping up with the materials this time.

"Anyways, we're almost at the end of October." Chizuru takes a serious tone as she rests her chopsticks onto the table, and the girls look at her in attention. "There's less than a month before the next CCSE. Shirogane, after today's displays I'm sure you can manage just fine. But I'll ask you anyway, do you feel ready to take the test?"

"Of course, more than ready to ace it." An instant and confident reply. This kind of thing doesn't scare me anymore. Nothing could go and ruin the CCSE.

"What about the rest of you?" Tapping her glasses, she looks at 'em.

Kei and Tama give a small, but determined nod. Meiya just smirks while folding her arms.

"A pointless question, huh? Well, thanks to Shirogane we have been reminded of how much we can still improve ourselves. With your help I'm sure we'll be ready to take on anything the test may throw at us. Once Yoroi comes back, we'll catch her up in no time to make sure everyone is on the same level. We'll clear it this time, without fail!"

We all give a nod, Chizuru seems more passionate about leading this time. Another little change to the list.

"By the way… there's just one more question I want to ask you." Her eyes dripping resolve shift into ones with a taint of nervousness as she spoke, a hand went to one of her ponytails.

"What's up?" She closes her eyes, as if she were looking for the right words to say. Where did all her assertiveness from a moment ago went to?

"You don't have to answer if you don't want to, but I'd like to know what prevented you from taking the CCSE with your previous squad. I know it may be a personal matter, so don't feel pressured to answer."

She says that, but all of them are staring intently at me. What reason could have the new recruit, who beat them all with ease, to not have taken the CCSE? I guess I'll just give them more half truths.

"Our training was going fine, everything looked most positive. But I… screwed up, big time."

"You screwed up?" She taps her glasses, arching one brow. "What happened? Did you fail some test? Or did you got into a fight with someone?"

"… I got someone killed." Multiple people, multiple times.

"What?" Her voice turned to just a whisper. All their eyes lost some shades of color as the words sank in.

I take a deep breath, the memories start wringing within me. I choose my words before continuing to speak.

"It was my fears and ineptitude that caused things to end up like that. Had I been more brave I would have acted before stuff got out of control." I look down at my plate, unable to hold their gazes.

I would have killed the Superior before Meiya had to sacrifice herself for me. No, I would have protected my Shiranui better during the defense of the base, and I would have been able to fight in Kashgar instead of just being a spectator. Or I could have got my shit together in Sadogashima, which wouldn't have made Sumika overload, which then would have given me enough time to properly master the XG to do more than just spam missiles and tell Sumika to activate the field.

… I know it's pointless to regret this kind of things, but it doesn't change the fact that it makes me feel like shit. And that's why… after

what happened to my world… that I have to make sure that reality doesn't come to pass a second time. It's the least I can do, after fucking up things so badly so many times.

"Shirogane, I…" Taking a sec to caress her air intake-like hills, she spoke slowly. "… don't know what it is that happened but, I do not believe it was your fault. Accidents happen all the time in this environment, and you were just a Cadet at the time."

Meiya trying to cheer me up when I'm getting depressed about her death must be a new level of universal middle fingering. But I promised myself I wouldn't doubt. Not when they're still alive. Taking a sec to inhale, I look up and continue.

"The thing is, my squad was… dissolved. And since I wasn't allowed to get into a TSF I couldn't continue my training alone." Last thing I need is them assuming I was conscripted before.

"And then the Professor reached out to you, to bring you here?" Chizuru asks as she brings a finger to her lips in a pensive gesture.

"Pretty much. So I won't hold it against you if you cannot trust me." Must be pretty hard on them to be training so hard just to be surpassed by a random guy that fell from the sky. I can't expect them to treat me nicely from the get go.

"Don't say that Shirogane-san! You showed us today how much better we can get. Surely you've reached such level of aptitude because… you've been training yourself for this chance, right?" Despite how she almost stuttered and couldn't hold my gaze much, Tama gave me a smile.

"Exactly. While I apologize to have brought unpleasant memories back to you, I assure you that wasn't my intention." She again tapped her glasses, giving me a small bow. Man, they really are super formal over here. "However, Tamase is right. You proved yourself more capable than us, that strength will surely be of great benefit not only to the squad, but for our nation. As a fellow

Japanese soldier, I can only praise your dedication to keep honing yourself after such an incident." Determination stared out from Chizuru's gaze, she also acknowledged me as part of the squad.

I scratch my head, I'm not used to being praised so much and being with them like this again is giving my heart a twister of conflicting emotions.

"No, really. It wasn't anything so noble what drove me forward." Just the feeble hope of fixing all the mess I myself made.

"Shirogane, regardless of your motives, your skills speak for themselves." Meiya said, arms folded as usual. "You bested all of us today, and while I don't plan to keep losing to you, I surely am looking forward to our sparring sessions. I believe you should be more proud of your strength, especially after what you had to go through." Always setting me back to the right path with your thoughtful words. Whatever would I do without you, Meiya.

"I just try to stay with my feet on the ground. I know I'm good, but there's someone out there who is better than me, so I can't relax." Not when I know what awaits in the future.

"So serious." Kei rolled her eyes, resting her chin on a hand that had its elbow resting on the table.

"Ayamine, if you're just going to throw one liners then-" Chizuru couldn't finish her sentence, Kei started rapidly talking again.

"That's not bad. But don't push yourself too much, Special-kun." She looked right into my eyes, her brows betraying her poker face and lowering their inner side. "Not when you gave us a new objective to surpass. You just may be the edge we need to pass the CCSE, so don't go depressing yourself. Or I'll beat some sense into you."

The table fell silent. It's really rare for Kei to express herself in this way, even when we dated she didn't speak up like this frequently. While she still had her usual poker face, it was obvious that she was

both amazed and perhaps a slight bit bothered by my abilities going by the unblinking intensity of her stare and how quickly she said her words.

"Thanks Ayamine. I'll try not to bring you all down."

"It's the other way around, Special-kun. You gotta bring us up. So NO holding back during training." Her eyes look almost scary, she's very motivated to beat me apparently. I give her a nod while smiling, she looks away as if bored.

"Ahem, as Ayamine said, we could use your help in our training efforts. We'll be counting on you Shirogane." Chizuru says while giving me a smile.

"Yes, let's do our best together Shirogane-san." Tama also smiles at me.

I'm doing the same thing I did after the tournament. I shouldn't let my feelings bring me down so easily, even when it's hard to look at them and not feel guilty. I take a second to clear my mind, and then I return their smiles.

"Yeah, let's do our best. I'll do what I can to help you in your training, as long as it's something I can help with don't hesitate to ask me then."

The rest of dinner was spent on them comparing how much time they lasted against me, and who finished second in the morning jog. It seems I made a good enough first impression, that's one problem less to worry about.

I'm back. I'm truly back, and this time things will go different. They do seem a bit changed to how I remember them, but that just may be because of the years I spent on my world.

Once dinner was over, we all split up. Meiya was going to do some independent training again, Chizuru went to the library, while Kei and

Tama decided to play with some beanbags. I told them I had some stuff to sort out and went to the barracks.

Walking on the hallways, I couldn't help but to grin. Feeling as if I had a gust of wind on my back, I breathed in as I picked up speed. Sigh… This went well, after all.

"Cadet Shirogane, wait!" I heard the Instructor calling out to me, so I stopped and looked back.

"Oh, what is it Marimo-chan?" I smiled, since I am in a good mood. And yet, her face twists itself in a second, revealing such an evil scowl.

"… Shirogane, what did you call me just now?"

"Sorry! I have a bad habit of calling people by their first names."

"Okay, but why did you add a -chan to it? Are you making fun of me?!"

No, it's because you're really cute. The way you used to teach us, and how funny your faces were whenever something unexpected happened. Of course, that's nowhere to be found in the you in front of me right now.

"It's just a bad habit I have. I'll try to not do it again, Ma'am." I stand upright, giving her a bow.

"You better not say that again. Now, the Professor is calling for you. You are to go meet with her right now, to the 'habitual place' it seems. Repeat your orders!"

"I'll go meet with the Professor right away!"

"Perfect. That is all." We salute each other and I go my way to the office.

Midway to it, once I was in the elevator, I remembered I left the santa rabbit in my room. I'll bring it tomorrow for sure, I don't wanna risk getting yelled at by Marimo-chan again.

I knock the door as I reached the office, Yuuko-sensei's voice beckons me to enter after she unlocks it. I wonder why she does this, all the other times she had the thing always unlocked.

"Good evening Sensei, what can I do for you?"

"Hey Shirogane, there's something I wanted to show you. Here, look at these papers." She left some pages on top of her desk as she went to the coffee machine.

I go look at the things, there's information about me in them. I suppose this is about this world's me. Lived in a lot of places, no info on his studies or work, no medical records. His death was two years ago, but other than that there's no data on it. Sensei must have erased all the data she could, and is probably asking my opinion on the matter. Does this mean she'll try to make me a different entry in the system? Could she even do-

**Click**

A sound I recognize very well. A gun is being pointed at me from behind.

"So, 'Shirogane', are you willing to talk now? Or would you be willing to exchange the 'theories' for your life?"

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**[Yuuko]**

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He doesn't move. He must have heard me clearly, is he playing dumb? No, I mustn't let my guard down yet, not until Yashiro confirms or denies my suspicions, even if some of the Valkyries are standing on guard nearby. As dangerous as this is, I can't let other

people hear of what he supposedly knows, not even if I could disguise it as a lie…. And he still isn't moving one bit.

"If you give me the silent treatment I'll kill you. It doesn't have to be this way, you know? So, what's it gonna be?" I press my gun to his head.

"What is the meaning of this, Sensei?" All his joyfulness has vanished from his voice, now nothing more than a dry whisper.

"Oh please, stop with the Sensei. We can have a mature talk about this. I'm sure that after all you had to do to get here, you can't just let it end so easily, right?" He takes a deep breath, yet remains unmoving giving me no signs. "What's your answer, 'Shirogane'? Are you willing to talk?"

I press my gun again and he moves his head slightly to a side, making eye contact with me. His cold, sharpened eyes bore into me, and I respond in kind with my own stare. He doesn't flinch and remains standing there.

"So, care to tell me what's going on here, Sensei?" I don't like your tone, you should be scared now.

Someone doesn't know his place here. He tries to turn around, but I push the gun to his cheek.

"Face towards the desk! I am more than willing to kill you if you do not comply."

"Huh, neat. Be my guest, kill me. I'll just loop back, probably." He sounds composed. Did he expect me to aim for his life? Yashiro still hasn't sent anything over the fax.

"Do you have a death wish? Talk back to me one more time, and I'll grant it in the most nightmarish way possible, I assure you."

"Do it."

"… Huh?"

"C'mon, shoot. Go ahead and kill the only person that can help you complete the 00 Unit." The nerve… He hasn't lost his composure, as if he didn't care, then he faces forward again. Maybe he thinks I'll kill him and spare him the questioning? Damn dog of the Shogunate.

"Really? Are you sure? Won't your employer get mad at you?" He's facing towards the desk now, but remains perfectly quiet, his breathing is regular. He should react somehow to this, he isn't a cyborg.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Huh, really? Tell me, what do you think about those papers on the table?"

"I suppose they're about this world's me."

"Not about you?"

"No, I told you I came from another world." As much as I would like to believe that… You don't have the theories, and your records speak against that claim.

"You're lying. Bad boy, Shirogane."

"It's not a lie."

"You almost got me to believe you, feeding my pride like that. Telling me something I wanted to hear, hitting me while I'm weak. Well, let's get down to business. Shirogane, who asked you to make the new OS?"

"No one." An instant reply. Nothing from Yashiro's end yet. Is he telling the truth then? Let's press him some more.

"So you wanted that for yourself?"

"You could say that."

"What for? Money? Fame?"

"To help save lives."

"Please stop lying. I'm willing to let you stay here if you tell me the truth."

"What are you talking about?" This time, a hint of annoyance lured in his question.

"Oh, come on now. I already know you're a spy. Drop the pretending already."

"I'm not a spy!" He looks at me again, this time in his eyes were narrowed and his upper face full of wrinkles. You're really getting on my nerves now, boy. I press the gun against his face again.

"Shirogane, who's in charge right now?" He then does something I did not expect. He turned around slowly and faced me, staring at me and the gun's barrel with a solid and sharp stare.

"I don't care about that. I don't know what got into you, but I'm no spy and I'm not your enemy."

"… Really now? Then please answer the question, why did you want the new OS? Who sent you here?"

"I already told you."

Yashiro hasn't sent anything. He stares at me intently, I see no shadow of doubt in him. Is he saying he's truly a Causality Conductor? No, that…

I gulp, not letting go of his gaze. He's enduring the silence quite well. Yet… He claims to have told me the truth.

"Fine, next question. Why did you want to join Squad 207?" If he is a member of the Royal Guard, it would explain why he was so nice to Mitsurugi yesterday and today.

"You already know. I told you-"

"Can you stop with the bullshit, please? I said I'm willing to let you stay if you tell me everything. You must have a reason to be here, and I think we both can profit from the other's help. So Shirogane, unless you want me to leash out against your boss, start speaking. Why are you here?" React, flinch, show me something. You damn dog of the Shogunate, you almost made me delete all your data, had I done that I would have never realized your trap.

No one that lived for sixteen years could have so few pages on their personal profile, you literally had just one page worth of information. Only after digging in the public databases I found more data about you, more precise data about your death to be exact. Then after some hacking and prodding about, I found out you're a member of the Royal Guard. The only question that remains is, why did you come here, 1st Lt. Takeru Shirogane?

If he's here to monitor Mitsurugi, I can let him stay. If these bits of data are from the Shogunate asking for my help in their developments, I can let him stay. So long as he also bows to me and is willing to obey my orders. I can always use more pawns, and the things he brought with him were amazing to say the least.

There is, however, a problem. If he's here to harm me or my research, then I can't keep him alive. So, I have to make sure you aren't an enemy. He didn't have the theories on him after all. That talk about him being from another world was probably false. Maybe it was made up with the leftover data back in the Imperial Research Institute where I was before earning my place here.

… As if something like that could actually happen. The conductor is nothing but a pipeline. I got carried away when in front of a potential

ally. My eyelids almost closing, I return his stare. His lips shake slightly.

"I'm not lying. It's the truth!" He sounds really pissed off as he scowls at me.

"Stop wasting our time. For the last time, if you talk now I'll let you stay, under a different deal of course. Who sent you and why?" Was a direct order of the Shogun or from another Regent House? Are you here to keep tabs on me or to kill me? Perhaps to use me to make all these things you brought with you, and later take them to the Empire to claim them as Imperial inventions.

"I already told you. I'm not a spy, Sensei. I came here from another world. Why won't you believe me?"

We stand there, gazing at each other. I would like to believe it, all of it. But the theories weren't in his room. On the off chance that he is an incredibly skilled liar, that can convince himself of his own lies to fool Yashiro, and indeed a Royal Guard my life could be in danger.

You are everything I wanted and more, you gave me solutions to all my problems.

The nationalistic pricks badmouth me? I'll give them a national stealth system.

The UN pressures me? I'll complete the 00 Unit, and give them these training consoles to use in all their bases.

America doesn't want to hand over the XG? I'll show off the new OS, and make them beg for it.

Isn't it odd? That you had all the solutions to my problems? You are too good to be true, Shirogane. When I saw how empty your report was I couldn't believe it. Why would a civilian have so little intel available?

The Royal Guard stationed here came asking about you quite persistently today. That's really suspicious considering that they don't really care about either foreigners or the affairs of the UN. I said you were a foreigner on purpose to have an excuse for the Royal Guard regarding your locked profile here, saying some of your data from abroad was classified. But they asked quite a lot of questions regarding your situation 'here' and not what made you 'special', if it weren't for that I wouldn't have thought to look in their databases about you. 1st Lieutenant Shirogane, KIA in the Invasion of Hiiragi two years ago. An officer of the Guard, despite being so young… Who are you? Why are you here?

So the main question here is, are you a Royal Guard; or a spy passing as him?

There is one thing that is true. You lied too much to me. And you continue to refuse to speak. Did you think I truly am so stupid, you damn saboteur?

"… Let me be frank with you, Shirogane. I went and inspected your room."

"Huh?! Why would… The theories." He said as she narrowed his eyes at me.

"Exactly. You don't have them." I smirk his way, then I return his sharp gaze with my own. "I know that talk about being from another world was all a lie. So, you have one last chance. This is my last offer. Tell me who sent you here and why, and I might consider cooperating with you. Tell me to which organization you answer, where you got these Stallion 2 and Game Guy machines, if the data of the stealth tech is real or not, and I'll forgive your lies until now. So, what will it be? Will you talk, spy?"

There are some Alt. IV supporters back in America, the same ones who pushed for the Shiranui Second to be a reality. If you come from them, but are afraid of revealing your trails, I can help you. If you come from a tech company trying to send me support without the

CIA noticing, I can help you. But if you refuse to talk, after all I've said to you, it means you're nothing but a Hidenbug. And I won't allow you to blue screen me.

"I told you… I'm not a spy. I'm truly a conductor." Brows tensing downwards, lips plucked, he returned my gaze squarely.

"Huh, really now? Then, where are the theories?" He tensed up, shivering a bit for a second.

"I… can't give them to you right now."

"Huh… And why would that be? You said we only have until Christmas to produce results, if my memory isn't wrong."

"Because if I hand them over now, you might rush things and make the same mistakes again. And I also want to be more involved this time." Sigh… More lies, perhaps? Yashiro… hasn't sent anything yet. There is a problem, however.

This is too convenient. I am in dire need of help, and in you come with so much aid. Someone who served the Royal Guard, with software that has data of their prized Takemikazuchi. Someone who should be dead, bringing stealth technology of the USA's best craft, the Raptor.

This is too good to be true. But, if he is indeed a time traveler… then I suppose he must have dealt with this in one of those 'loops' he said he took in this world.

"… So, can you explain to me what's up with those papers?" I give him a side glance, staring into his eyes.

"They're from this world's me." Not a second of delay in the answer, huh.

"You do know that you have no proof other than some forged papers, right?"

"I… I mean… I know it's hard to believe but… I'm not a spy. I really come from another world. You of all people should know I'm telling the truth." His words clear, he locks his gaze with mine as he stands without as much tension as he should have.

"Let's say I buy that, for now. If that is the case, I want you to hand over the theories, right now."

"I refuse. If I do, you're gonna rush things and-"

**BANG!**

Bringing my gun right besides his ear, I shot. A hole burned into the blue flag of the UN in the wall, Shirogane held his ear in pain as he supported himself on the desk.

"If you really have them, you'll hand over the theories right this instant. If you're a spy, you'll talk about your mission here right away. Of course, unless you're a saboteur sent to mess with me." I gave you plenty of chances to speak, I'm putting myself in unnecessary risk here.

Slowly calming his breath, rubbing his ear, he rises from the desk.

"… L-Listen, I can't give you the theories. If you don't fix the flaw in the 00 Unit, the BETA will-"

**BANG!**

Again, I shot right besides his ear. Again, he yells in pain. Again, I frown at his refusal to speak.

"This is your last chance, speak now or-"

In a split second, he moves quickly and knocks the gun out of my hand. I stumble back, going towards my blackboard, looking for something to defend myself with. But when I turn around, he hadn't moved an inch, he remained quietly looking at me. With tears coming out of his eyes.

"What the fuck is wrong with you, Sensei?!"

"Still calling me Sensei, huh? You really are an-" I stop suddenly as he hit my desk quite hard, sending piles of papers to the floor.

"We don't have the time for this shit, goddammit! I'm not a spy for fuck's sake! I can't hand you the theories, and I can't tell you why because the ripple might screw us over!" His eyes squinted, gritting his teeth, he glared at me. He isn't lying, I don't need Yashiro to know that.

"… Are you telling me you're truly a Conductor?"

"I've been telling you that since the start! You should know that better than anyone else!"

"And where is your proof? If you're not a spy, why do you not want to give me the theories? Humanity's survival is at stake here!" I lash out, not understanding what 'reason' he might have for withholding that intel from me.

Insinuating that I would make a mistake, as if I didn't knew what was at stake… I grit my teeth, feeling anger well up as it hasn't in a long time. If you truly are a conductor, if I shared such intel with you… Are you insinuating I'm not worth your trust?! After all I've done… After all these years… I'll make a mistake? I'll fail? I complete the 00 Unit and… and still fail?! I refuse to believe that is true!

He frowns and hits the desk again, but as he opened his mouth his eyes went down. Closing it tightly, he took a deep breath. Then, he again looked at me, the tension and wrinkles gone from his face.

"Sigh… Look, I know you're in a tight spot, I know what Alt. V means for humanity, but you can't have the theories yet. Not until you can trust in my words, and you also shouldn't kill me because I'll just loop back in time and this timeline might be screwed to failure."

"… And, again, why should I trust in you? How do I know you're not deceiving me?"

He frowns yet again, his hands wringing in anger. However, then he looked down. His shoulders easing up as his breathing returned to normal, he took some seconds to retort.

"… Do you want to know?"

"Huh? So, you're going to talk now, spy?" I smile at him, raising my chin as I spoke to goad him into reacting again, but then his expression changes, shadows make their way to his squinting eyes while he rubs his forehead.

"I guess… I can show you a bit of it if it'll make you believe me, but I'll only show you that and nothing more. Otherwise, the ripple could really screw us up."

"You insist you're a Conductor, then?"

"That's what I am, whether you believe me or not." He shrugs, then sighs as he shakes his head slowly.

A sound startles me, the fax is printing something. It's from Yashiro, so she finally has an answer. Without losing sight of him, I move towards the fax.

A single line was on the paper: 'He's telling the truth'.

… What?

… Huh?

Then… that intel was truly about this world's version of him? He truly is… a living proof of my theory? An ally?

So… I wasn't wrong? My theory was indeed correct? And, he isn't lying? All he brought was indeed true? He's… on my side?

I stared at the paper, mouth half open. Leaning my head back to look up, I bit my lower lip to stop the grin that was forming on me.

An ally… and my completed theories… It wasn't a lie?

But then… then I'll truly make a mistake? My theories are… flawed? After all these years… after being so close… What… But… How…

…

Why?

What does this even… How could I…

"So Sensei," His voice brings me down back to Earth. "Do you really want to see? It's not going to be nice." I turn back to him, he hasn't moved an inch.

"… I suppose." I leave the paper atop the fax, I ruffle my hair while staring at him as I take one very good deep breath. "What exactly are you going to show me to prove that you're not a spy?" He sighs as he folds his arms.

"My memories. With Kasumi's help, I'll show you bits of some important stuff. I don't know what got into you, but I suppose it has to do with you wanting the theories right now. So I'll show you why I don't want to give them to you at the time. I hope that with this you can regain your usual composure."

"So you're saying that… I'll truly make a mistake?"

"Not if you hear me out." He raises his hands slowly, like Yoroi does. "If you listen, you can avoid that outcome. We can't start fighting each other, Sensei. So please don't try to pick up your gun, I'm not your enemy." He seems totally calm, and he even knows of Yashiro's ESPer capabilities.

But I got him to talk about the theories. Let me see if you truly aren't lying. And anyways, there is no justification for withholding that intel

from me. If you truly knew a parallel version of myself… you should know I am more than capable of dealing with a mere OS and the theories, even if… there is a flaw in them.

"So you say you have a reason to not give me the theories? Even if we could activate Alt. IV way before the deadline? You do realize that humanity is on the brink of extinction, right? And anyways, where are the theories?" He did say he vanished before a certain mission. Maybe he didn't get to fight much, and after going back to his original BETA-less world he thinks we have time to screw around here.

"Yes, I do have a good reason. But we can't rush it, we need all the firepower we can get if we ever hope to truly end this war." He folds his arms, looking down. "And I do have the theories, but you really should wait a while. We can't screw this up or everything will go to hell again. I'm not willing to repeat that suicide, thank you very much." Huh? He, for just a second, really flared up in disgust. He closes his eyes and exhales through his nose, calming down.

"What do you mean? Do you have a plan to deal with the BETA?" If he indeed does… Why is he keeping quiet?… Does he not trust me? Why?

"It's not much of a plan. It's just a more efficient way of fighting them. I think I did told you that I didn't plan on coming back to this point in time, right?" I nod. Let's hear him out, for the sake of conversation. "So, honestly, I was kinda nervous during our talk. I decided on the spot what to do, to avoid another failure. That's when a simple idea came up. And to make it a reality, we need the XM3 earlier, or at least better. I will give you the theories earlier than before, so we should be clear on that front. Don't worry, I'm on your side." He says, again rising his hands like Yoroi does.

"… So, why can't you give me the theories? I can work on both things without much trouble. I can ask Yashiro to handle the OS, I suppose you already know about her skills, correct?" He nods.

"I do. But that's not why. I want to make sure you're on my side, Sensei."

"… What are you implying?" I couldn't help but frown.

"I won't be your pawn this time. I have my own set of goals right now, I think I told you last time everything went wrong on my end, right? Well, I want to make sure you are willing to help me once everything is said and done." What does that even mean? Why would I not repay him for his services?… What happened between you and that parallel me? "I also want to be more involved and help out with stuff. And I guess I need a good explanation for your actions right now."

"… So you want power? I can give you that without much issues, if you prove yourself useful." He narrows his eyes ever so slightly. "However, what's that about not being my pawn? Are you saying you won't obey my orders?" He raises both of his hands, waving them slowly from side to side.

"I will. But I also want to do more stuff than just follow you around, even if most of the time I'll have to do just that." He seems sincere, and doesn't show a hint of hostility despite what I did.

"So… Can you tell me what your goals are? Because it seems like they're in the way of humanity's victory to me right now. And if we are to work together, I need to know you are on my side." If he's putting his own salvation above the greater good, I'll just lock him up and force him to cooperate. We do have potent drugs on the base, after all.

"Hmm… I'm fighting to someday be able to live how I want to live after we deal with the BETA." So he is putting himself above the planet's fate. But he said after we deal with the BETA. What is he thinking about, behind that relaxed face?

"How do you mean? You want to get rich or to scale the ranks? Do you just want to run back to your world as fast as possible?" I smirk at him, waving a hand up.

He crosses his arms and purses his lips a bit. His eyes became sharp as mine do in the reflection of a monitor whenever my tests crash, and frankly I thought for a second that he was going to pounce at me, however he takes a breath through his nose and calms down.

"I won't run away. And if I have to climb the military's ladder I will. But that's not my goal. You might think I'm crazy, but I want to live in peace. And I want to give a taste of that peace to as many people as I can."

"… So you desire to end the war and bring about an era of peace?" That's silly. Only a kid would believe in that.

"I would like to have a sliver of it, if it's possible. I know that sometimes that happiness is not allowed to exist, but precisely because of that I want to regain it and share it. We probably will always have small conflicts and we will have to make many sacrifices along the way, but I want to end any and all large scale wars on this world. No point in saving humanity from the BETA if we can't later save humanity from itself."

"… Saving humanity from itself, huh?" So he's thinking on the aftermath already. Did we get sabotaged by another army in his previous experience?

"That's my end goal. I want to restore peace to my world, and see if I can leave this one alive after seeing with my own eyes that all our sacrifices weren't in vain. And for that, I need to be sure we are on the same team." He takes some steps towards me, looking straight into my eyes.

I see no kid in him. Only the fire of someone who went through hell, only to have to come back to it. I must contain myself and not smile, because I am so happy to confirm he really is my ally. Even if his goal sounds terrible impossible to achieve, and even if this does confirm my theories are in need of a revision.

"So, are you willing to listen now; or are you going to blow my head off when I turn around?"

"… I guess I can give you the benefit of the doubt for now. Well then, I'll call Yashiro." I send a fax to her, I suppose she won't take long. "Now, can you tell me what are you going to show me?" The activation of the 00 Unit? The launch of the XG? What will it be?

"The reasons why I don't want to hand over the theories to you right now and why I want to be more involved in everything." He must like this, having me at the edge of my seat. "Can you tell me why you pointed a gun at me? And why you thought I was a spy?"

"I showed you the papers already. I got suspicious, is all. You're too good to be true, you brought me much more support than I've received in these last few months."

"You're telling me that all I brought made you suspicious?"

"Yes, you knew too much about the Alternative Projects, and carried never before seen tech with you. Maybe you're from the CIA…" I try to probe, just in case. But he frowns as he crosses his arms.

"I'm not an American, and I'm not a spy. I know you need to be on your guard, but I'm not your enemy. I'd like it if you never ever pointed a gun at me again."

He doesn't seem to be lying, Yashiro also said he was telling the truth. Can I… believe it? Is he really here to help me? Well, no need to be impatient. Yashiro should… Oh, there she is. Entering slowly, she comes up to us looking as expressionless as always.

"Yashiro, this is Takeru Shirogane. I believe I explained what he wants of you." She nods slowly.

"Yes, leave it to me."

"Hello, Kasumi. You don't have to force yourself much if you can't, it's just a few moments I want to show Sensei." She gave him a good look, taking a single step back. "Let's get along from now on, yes?" He approached her so calmly and offered a handshake quite earnestly, showing no hesitation at all. She took his hand after a second, he shook it softly with a smile.

So he doesn't fear Yashiro for being an ESPer? She seems to be interested in him, considering how she's staring right now. She also hasn't reacted badly, so I suppose he truly isn't our enemy.

"Well, let's get this done. Yashiro, it's all yours." She comes by my side, still holding Shirogane's hand, and then grabs my own. I recall her saying that physical contact made it easier to send images to other people.

"Both of you, please close your eyes. Shirogane-san, please focus on what you want to show her. Professor, you just remain calm." Easy enough.

"Kasumi, you don't have to be so formal with me. Takeru is fine." He seems to not like it when people address him so formally, but if he's friendly to Yashiro I won't object. Maybe if they become friends I'll rely on him to help her as well.

"… Very well. Then, please close your eyes."

Closing my eyes, the darkness envelops me. Then a faint light appears, distant, like a small star in the evening sky. In a sudden flash, I see shapes taking form, sounds slowly becoming clear. A tingly feeling spreads in the back of my head for some moments.

Then, in a sudden burst of colors, I begin to see the inside of a cockpit, orders and shouts blooming on my ears. Once everything came into focus, I couldn't help but to hold my breath at what I was seeing.

Yokohama Base was being overrun by BETA, that were on the Reactor. Someone got killed in the control panel just now. Shirogane seems to want to attack the BETA but someone, that I believe is Hayase, stops him from doing so.

BETA in the control panel… all over the Reactor… if this is true then, what about the rest of…

This can't be… The base couldn't… How did… I can't form words for a moment.

"… For how long were we fighting during this incident?" I manage to ask.

"One night." Shirogane's voice echoes nearby. One night? A single night did this to my base?! "This is a cause of the flaw I told you about. Of course, that's not all that went wrong last time." His voice bitter, I could feel the needle aimed at me.

Everything gets distorted into a different image slowly taking shape. Now what? A wrecked TSF? Why is he looking at the ground in this way? Hmm… He failed a mission, perhaps? What does this… Wait, is that Marimo's voice?

I could hear parts of something Marimo was telling him. Sounding encouraging, almost motherly, she tried to get him back up. Nothing like how she's being these days. Sigh… If he made her so proud, then I suppose he must have done something right. Perhaps, is this the aftermath of that incident?

But then, he turned around.

And I saw everything going red. And Yashiro let go of my hand.

But I saw it clearly.

An eyeball rolling on the ground.

A bunch of teeth splattered on the soil.

Flesh bombarded and teared apart.

And a BETA. A Soldier-Class had… eaten Marimo.

… Huh? What the hell was that?

Marimo was… eaten? In my base? Under my watch? You're telling me… You're telling me… No, why would… Ugh… This is… This is impossible! How could this happen in my base?! I would never let this happen! Feeling myself about to shout, I bite my lips as I open my eyes, looking at him while grinding my teeth onto one another.

"What was that about, Shirogane? Was that… real?"

"Yes, it is. That was your fault, Sensei." His bitterness was now obvious, he remained with his eyes closed.

Yashiro had taken many steps away from us, she was looking down. Her lips slightly shaking, she hugged her sides.

"What does that mean?" That makes no sense. Why would I risk Marimo's life like that? She's… Marimo is… "This better not be a joke, Shirogane." He, however, doesn't change his expression nor does he look away once he opens his eyes.

"You released the BETA upon the base. Because you said we needed to be more serious about the war."

"I… released the BETA? What are you talking about?"

"You have some… I dunno, research thing in the underground, right?"

"… So, you're saying that did happen?" He nods, his brows narrowing.

"Yes, it did. Do you want to see more?"

"… Yashiro, can you?" She flinches as I asked it, but she quickly grabs our hands again, eyes closed and still hanging her head.

After I close my eyes and feel that same intrusive, piercing, tingly feeling on my head, another flash of light appears in my view, and then I see our training grounds during the afternoon. Littered with explosions and screams.

Lasers burn the sky, Grapplers and Destroyers run rampant through the training grounds killing many soldiers in a matter of seconds, the operators ordering them to hold their ground despite the fact that such orders are clear suicide.

I did this, you say? Why? I released the BETA? This is… This can't be! I would never risk my crew's lives so easily!

"… Why would I do such a thing, Shirogane?" And how does this relate to the theories?

"You told me you wanted to show us the reality of the frontlines." Clearly disgusted, he spoke slowly. "That the base was too relaxed despite what was at stake. And that those who died were worthless anyways. It did bring the result you wanted and you were right, I guess. I still don't agree to it.".

I see. If it got me the result I wanted, then I'm not surprised I did that. Yes, I would do anything to get… Anything… Even… if Marimo had to die for it.

I can't help but claw at my palms. Is this how it is? I have to sacrifice everything to get what I want? I can't even keep my only friend alive? Is… this what must be done? If it is, then I would… do it. I would, no, I have to. Otherwise… everything else would have been for nothing. Inhaling sharply through my nose, I ask my doubt away.

"But what does this has to do with the theories? I suppose we did gain something other than a new attitude from this. Why did I do this?"

"It allowed you to… tune the 00 Unit." His voice cracked. "I'd like to avoid this, if possible. We can't expect different results if we do the same things again, right?"

"Well… But how does this-"

"Now, now. Don't get impatient. There's a few more things left. Are you still fine, Kasumi?"

"… Yes."

"I see…" So he does worry about Yashiro, huh. "Then, let's see…" He groans, the images in my vision fade, I'm back to seeing a distant star.

After a moment where Shirogane keeps groaning to himself, the light again becomes stronger, a vortex twists the visage. Another flash of colors, I see…

An image of me in a weird outfit drinking alcohol appears.

What is this?! That's not me! I would never… What did she say? It's over? No, that… Alternative IV is cancelled? 'I wasn't cut to be the Holy Mother', huh. If I used that symbolism… then…

"That's from my first loop. When I was only a Cadet and couldn't help you complete Alt. IV. That's what happened when you failed."

"I see… What happened afterwards?"

"We were told Alt. IV was scrapped, the 207th Training School was disbanded, Marimo-chan was transferred to another base. A lot changed in this base, but me and my squad remained here and weren't sent to the frontlines." His tone relaxes and slows down as the drunken me vanishes from my sight. I sigh in relief, feeling my hands shaking despite my attempts to calm them down.

"So… How does this relates to the theories?" I open my eyes and look at him, who also returned my gaze this time.

"Well, this should show you I truly do come from another world."

"… Or that you have some messed up fantasies about me."

"Guh…" Hm? Why did he… What an odd reaction. Huh… I didn't expect to hit the mark with a joke, of all things. "Well, *anyways*, I know how hard this is on your shoulders. And in case you're still doubting my resolve towards our goal of saving humanity, I can show you a bit of what came with Alt. V."

"Hmm… I suppose." Not many have seen what an actual G-Bomb explosion looks like. Let's see if he's truly not a liar. "Yashiro, are you still able to do it?" She nods, truly slowly, as she again grabs our hands, looking pale this time.

"Now, I don't remember much from it, so things may look a bit… distorted." His voice shivered as if he had received a jolt. What happened to him in that parallel world? "You're still fine, right Kasumi?"

"… Yes."

"For real?" She nods, he curves his lips for a moment before closing his eyes.

I close my eyes as well, yet another distant star, yet another flash of colors. A wasteland appears before me, again from inside a cockpit, as a thousand screams bloom on my ears. Ugh… It hurts just to listen. I can feel my eyes squinting as if I wasn't wearing protective googles while on our manufacturing aisle.

What is this madness? The radar on the cockpit shows an impossible amount of BETA nearby. There are many channels open, people asking for help and others being devoured. Softly biting my lips, I slow down my breathing as the madness continues. Then, the vision halts as he looks back. A black fire engulfs BETA and TSFs alike. A G-Bomb, a real one.… No, not just one. The sight was enough to make me retch.

"… What is this?"

"Operation Iceberg, the prelude to Alt. V. I don't really remember much from that, but let me tell you that the world was screwed."

"How so? What happened? A war over natural resources?" If all of Europe became inhabitable…

"I don't know for sure, but I think all of Eurasia ended up underwater. Of course, the Empire also ended up submerged, I think."

"What? All of… Underwater?!"

I do know how dangerous the G-Bombs are, I saw the readings of Ground Zero and made some equations to determine the long lasting damage they could cause after been stationed here all these months, but all of Eurasia… This is far more dangerous than I thought.

"I can't exactly recall all of Iceberg, but as you can see… it was a massacre. We were used as meat shields to facilitate the massive bombing of the hives."

"Is that so? And what else do you recall?"

"Well, that the day after that, Operation Babylon was executed, dropping more G-Bombs than what I showed you onto all hives in the world. As I said before, I don't really remember that very well, but that mess caused everything to go to hell, real fast."

"… I can see what you mean." Such recklessness… It is no wonder such collateral damage was inflicted to the planet.

"… Do you want to see now why I want us to take our time and not rush things?"

"Of course!"

After another flash of light, I see the inside of a cockpit. He's between some cliffs, Destroyers rushing by his side. What could this… Hm? The TSFs near him are… those of the Valkyries. No other UN force has Shiranuis in the Empire, after all. Is this the Sadogashima mission of that 'last time' of his?

Then, suddenly, the XG comes into view as it charges its cannon. Lasers try to take it down, but the Rutherford Field deflects them, and then it fires. The loud explosion shakes his view, and almost all the BETA in the radar vanished in the light. The beam toppled the monument of the Hive… It worked?! The XG is destroying the Sadogashima Hive! It takes a second shot perfectly. Look at that beam, all my efforts… are not in vain.

Is this the mission where Shirogane's squad dies? What's the problem with this? What about that mistake he spoke of before? If the XG destroys the Hive, then there should be no-

The XG suddenly crashes. And then, from a different location, I see it as it explodes.

Just like that, gone in a matter of seconds in a giant black orb.

Then, the light fades and I return to my office. Yashiro was petting Shirogane, who was rubbing his forehead as he groaned while supporting himself onto my desk. She was also looking pale, her breathing rugged as if she had been running delivering reports.

"Is that good enough for you, Sen-"

"What happened?! What caused it to fall?! Tell me!" I grab him by the collar and start shaking him, he puts his hands over mine softly, trying to stop me.

"I can't tell you yet. But you should be able to fix the flaw now that you will know about it. My plan will get us better results than all what you saw."

"Really? How are you so sure your plan will work?" He looks right back at me, tensing his brows.

"I can show you something else, but only one more. And no more questions, we can't risk a ripple to ruin our efforts."

"I know that! But to see it fall so easily…" Of course I don't know what exactly happened and why the me of that world let the XG explode, but it's still frustrating. "Then do it already. Show me whatever it is now." He closes his eyes as Yashiro grabs our hands again.

After the flash of light, I see myself presenting another XG to Shirogane. So we did get both XGs that time. I suppose he was… telling me the truth since the start. Then, I see all the people lying in the hallways of Yokohama Base, some dying, some gravely hurt, as he and the members of the 207th Squad aid Kyozuka-san deliver food to the wounded.

… My base got destroyed. When did this happen? Is this when I released the BETA? No, this has to be the aftermath of what he first showed me. When the BETA got to the Reactor.

Was there… nothing I could do? If so then, what is this flaw in the 00 Unit? What could… cause such a thing?

A flash of light after, I see Shirogane and Yashiro boarding the second XG. So we did manage to modify its cockpit, huh. Where are they going, though?

Yet again, the scenery changes. The monitors in front of him display images of an overload. Wait, what happened? Why is he showing me so little about this mission?!

Shirogane is crying, his eyes are full of tears. The radar was empty, his squad got wiped out. He was forced to overload the Particle Cannon before escaping, it seems. But what was his mission? Where?

"Shirogane, why are you not showing me as many details this time?"

"… The important part comes now." He said, his tone lacking any emotions.

Is that the 00 Unit there? So I did complete it. Left in a pod, the 00 Unit was also in the control cockpit along those two. Why is it not moving? What happened? And what's that thing in her hands?

*"Sumika-san is dead. Your fight is already over."* Yashiro said to him then. The sight seemed to vanish for a moment, she must not have taken that well. He then hugged the 00 Unit and broke down in a never ending stream of tears, screaming a name.

Sumika… The name of the brain. The 00 Unit… broke down? His fight is over? Shirogane didn't have to keep fighting? What happened to his world then? No, wait, this means that…

… We lost everything? All the Valkyries, both XGs, the 00 Unit… And then everything went wrong on his end. But, how did things turn out?

Again I'm back to the office. He lets out a long sigh as he goes to sit in the sofa, covering his face as he futilely tries to stop his tears. Yashiro seems exhausted too as she gasps for air, shaking all over, probably because of what she heard just now.

"See? That's what's gonna happen if we rush things again." He says as he holds his face, hunched over. "You don't want… both XGs exploding and the 00 Unit breaking down, do you?"

Of course I don't. I didn't sacrifice so much to have it end like that. But I'm lacking context. I suppose that mission went well, with how much we sacrificed then, and that he's here due to… whatever happened in his home. Now I know he truly came from another world and that he fought to the bitter end for us, but, can I trust in him? Will he keep his resolve? I don't know exactly what happened, but if he's faced with certain death or a cruel choice, what will he-

"I can show you… that I will be on your side, even if it means marching to hell. So that you don't go pointing guns at me again." He's looking at me, again standing up and coming closer.

"What do you mean?"

"Do you want to see? Do you want definitive proof that I'm your ally?" After holding his gaze for some seconds I nod. Yashiro again holds our hands, this time with some hesitation. "Don't worry, Kasumi. I won't show you nothing bad this time." He forces a smile, she nods, after a while.

After closing my eyes once more, my vision again is assaulted by light. I slowly start discerning patterns on the walls, some shelves and an old desk.

*"Because I want you to live, Sensei."* What? Where is this? It's… my old lab back at Sendai? What is Shirogane doing here?

*"That's the most stupid reason you could have to give me this. You do know how valuable this is, right?"* I'm holding some sort of passport, giving him a bored look. What is this?

*"I think you should go in the shuttle, humanity needs your genius to survive."* Shuttle? Is this about Alternative V? The me in the image looks down as she sighs, shoulders dropping slowly, defeat imprinted in her eyes.

*"Shirogane, it's over. I couldn't find the solution to-"*

*"To Alternative IV. You can still look for another solution."* He says so confidently, with much more energy than he has now.

*"Another? What do you mean?"*

*"The BETA might one day reach the new planet, and since we know there's hostile life out there the possibility of another alien race attacking us is very real. Your fight is not over yet!"* Shirogane said

with a conviction strong enough to move mountains. Why did he believe in me so much?

*"Are you sure you're not just being selfish?"*

*"Of course I am being selfish. Because I want you to live, above anyone else. I know you'll eventually find a solution, and when you do I can only imagine what kind of crazy stuff you'll do to get the Earth back."* I see his wide smile in a reflection of a glass. He has such blind faith in me, but why? No, how did this happen? Why is he giving that passport?

He did react when I threw a jab at him before. Did he… No, even if he saw me in such a way, why would he give me his seat? What could I have done for him to receive this gesture?

… Why would he care? I lost in that world… What could he stand to gain from this?

*"What about me, though? Have you stopped to think how I felt?" I ask, leaning my cheek onto a palm.*

*"You always took care of me since I arrived in this world. C an you let me take care of you, just this once?"* Shirogane… Why did you… give me your seat? Why did he care so much?

Wasn't he disappointed, disgusted to see me breaking down in alcohol? If I failed… Why take my side? If I was in Sendai, it means the UN made me collaborate with Alt. V after I lost my project. They wouldn't let me simply walk away, and they wouldn't let me die either. Knowing how they do things… I don't doubt I would have shouldered the burden instead of acting tough, risking any retaliation towards Yashiro, Marimo, or my sisters. But then… He still supported my ideas after that?

*"Hehe, seems like the little kid became a man. And this is not the first time you 'take care' of me."* The me in my vision smirks as she gets up, getting closer to him.

What does that mean? Why is he blushing like that? He broke eye contact and seems to be scratching his head.

*"You were just… stressed that day. It doesn't count."*

*"Huh, well, it's not like I can just reject this when you put so much faith in me. And considering all the 'invitations' to Hawaii I've received…"*

*"Hawaii? What's up with it?"*

*"Don't worry about it, you just spared me from that. Shirogane?"*

*"Yes?"*

*"I swear to you now, I'll find a way to eradicate the BETA even if it takes me my whole life to do so. So don't you go dying out there until I come back."*

He gave me his place in the shuttle, so that I could keep doing my research safely? Then, that's why he had to take part in that operation? He could have ran to safety, and yet… He chose to let me live. He gave me a pass, so that I had my freedom to say no to the UN's demands?

… When he could have saved himself, he went as far as come to Sendai just to give this to me?

*"I suppose I can't, now that you've ordered me not to, ahaha."*

*"Haha, you truly are an idiot." The me in his vision got even closer, filling his sight. I smiled, regaining some semblance of light in my eyes. "… An interesting idiot."*

My vision abruptly returns to my office. What was that? Why was he… so confident in me? To give me his place in the Migrant Fleet, to go look for my old lab…

If that happened after Alt. IV was canned, he would have had to look for me on his own, despite having no contacts whatsoever in this world. He would have to gain the authorization to meet with me again, despite the fact that I was surely put on lockdown until I collaborated with Alt. V. Maybe Mitsurugi, Yoroi, or some of my supporters helped him somehow? But, even so, he still put me above his own safety. To give me one last chance.

"Was that… enough for you, Professor?" Yashiro looked exhausted. Sending images is very taxing on her, I can't imagine how hard it must be to link memories to others.

There's also the matter of what she had to see. Considering what happened to Marimo and the breakdown of the 00 Unit, I should have her rest for tonight.

Shirogane's eyes squinted as tightly as mine did all these past days when I stayed up until dawn as I couldn't find a solution, he was again rubbing his head. I know that face, I don't want him suffering from a migraine, so let's fix them up.

"Yes, that will be enough. Let's take you both to the medical bay."

After doing some check ups, both of them got better after taking a protein shake and eating something sweet. We made our way back to the office without speaking, while I gathered my thoughts of all I just saw.

He and Yashiro each sit in a sofa as I returned to my chair behind my desk.

"Shirogane I'm going to ask you some questions, can you answer them?"

"Yeah, sure." His voice is but a sliver of his normal tone. He must not be used to the toll of an ESPer.

"You won't hesitate if you have to take a cruel choice?"

"No."

"Even if that means that you won't be able to save everyone?"

"… I know that the perfect timeline doesn't exist. I'm here to try and save them, but I also know how hard that actually is. I won't doubt when the time comes for me to bloody my own hands, Sensei." I like the shine in his eyes, how he could speak without stuttering under my gaze.

"Then, why did you want to join Squad 207? If you wanted to help me, you could have accepted my offer to join the Alt. IV team."

"I already told you. We need all the firepower we can get, and I want to help them be as strong as they can be for the future."

"Even if you'll end up going back to your world?" Why bother about what's left here if you'll end up leaving anyways? I can see why you would like to help after all you've gone through, but this isn't your world.

"I may not be able to ever go back." His gaze drops to the floor, again shadows cover his face.

"What? Why?"

"Because… Due to my status as a Causality Nucleus, and thanks to all the loops I've taken, my world isn't free from the causal effects. So, my world's you told me that… I might have to sever my connection to my original world and stabilize myself here, becoming part of this world forever. That's one of the ways to reach my goal. So, I might end up here for the rest of my life." Hunched over, he lets his arms rest on his legs as he sighs.

Huh… The more I hear, the more I want those theories. But I can't strain my relationship with him any further. He must be offended I did this to him and is merely minding his temper to not ruin our partnership. I also can't risk the BETA swarming the base now. We

don't have the XG and, like he said, I rather it not explode on its first mission.

Plus… I look up, a hand on my chin. If he managed to have a parallel me trust in him to the point of letting him pilot an XG, I suppose he did become an invaluable asset to her. It's in my best interests to keep him safe and sound then. For the good of Alt. IV, of course.

"Alright. I get it, so that's what you want me to help you with." He nods twice as he crosses his arms. "Well then, do you know what's up with the records of the other you in this world?"

"No, you never told me anything about him. You only told me he was dead, but I don't know anything about his life."

I see. So that's why he didn't knew he was a Royal Guard and why the Shogunate came after him in the other worlds. If he was merely a normal boy or a desperate child trying to change the future, I may have realized he wasn't a spy. Being so calm and bringing so much help almost played against him.

"Why did the XG crash at Sadogashima? Can you at least tell me something about that?" I need to know, what is this fatal flaw? And, how can I fix it? Do I need something from overseas? A specific type of G-Element?

"I'll tell you just a bit, to quench your curiosity. You got everything done, but you missed something in the 00 Unit and that caused the BETA to outsmart us. I also made Sumika unstable by remembering something, and that almost ruined our mission." He closes his eyes, clawing at his forearms, grimacing again.

"… What? The BETA… outsmarted us? What do you mean?" He strokes his chin as he leans back in the sofa.

"They started to use our tactics, that's how they almost destroyed the base." What the… But how did that happen?

Even with the tried and tested hypothesis of the nineteen days delay where they develop countermeasures to our tactics that was proved through Alt. III, there is no way the BETA could have adapted our methodologies to use them against us in a mere two months. We can't even communicate with…

A flaw in the 00 Unit. The BETA using our tactics right after I complete it… Two-way communication, perhaps?

"… And what about making Sumika unstable?"

"She got jealous of a memory and ended up overheating. That's why… we had to explode the first XG." He sighs, again hunching over.

So we couldn't use the second XG to defend the base, huh? Model D shouldn't be complete yet, if my intel isn't wrong. Considering what we know of the subject's mental state, I do see it happening. It also means he managed to make the 00 Unit human enough to have it feel jealousy despite the trauma the subject went through.

And, if all our efforts were ruined by this flaw in my theory, then that caused the base to be overrun. Maybe that last mission… He said suicide before. Considering how that extremist faction has been lobbying as of late…

"So, that's why you wanted me to take my time? To not rush things and deal with these problems throughly?"

"I thought that if I gave you the theories right away, you'd rush things like before to get results out faster. And someone didn't want to listen today." I ignore his sarcastic remark as I lean back into my seat. Because he's right. I would have tried to get results out as soon as possible.

"I see. We'll keep our deal then. I won't rush things this time, I'll reevaluate my whole theory throughly before activating the 00 Unit.

And don't worry, we'll make Sadogashima go right this time." He nods, finally smiling again.

"Okay. Can I ask you some questions now?" He leans forward, entwining his fingers together.

"That's fair, I guess. What is it?"

"Why did you do it?" His gaze bore into me. His brows furrowed, as if multiple EM waves fused and were melting everything within his eyes.

"Let me start by explaining why I chose to threaten you. I was overjoyed after hearing the morning reports from my engineering teams, all the data you brought is definitely going to yield spectacular results. So I thought I'd deal with your records as you asked me."

"Does that mean you weren't planning on stealing the theories?"

"No, I still wanted to take a look at them." He groans, crossing his arms. "Not only I would have reached my so desired answer, but I also would confirm you were on my side. You don't know how reassuring it is to know you're my ally. Right now I don't really have many on my side."

"What do you mean? Aren't you a super important person here?" He seems puzzled at my words. What does he think I am? He should know how things went in that other world… Or maybe I left him in the dark since he wasn't of much help?

"I am important, yes, but I've lost much support due to those stupid politicians. The UN and the Empire's relations are really tense right now, and me being originally an Imperial researcher puts me in the eye of many detractors." I fold my arms and sigh, my tongue lashing within as I remember all those insufferable meetings. "Imperial people say that I sold myself to America, that I betrayed Japan. Some in the UN say I might go maverick and give my research's results to the Empire. Everything took a turn for the worse after the

last joint operation on the Korean peninsula. Didn't I tell you this last time?" Maybe I didn't trust him that much before? Or was he focused solely on completing Alt. IV?

"Huh? I don't remember anything about an operation there. Or about you being in problems because of politics."

"You don't? Maybe it turned out differently last time?"

"Can you tell me about this?"

"Do I have to? It has little to do with the matter at hand." He groans a bit.

"Yes, please do." Sigh…

"That mission was supposed to be a distraction upon the 20th Hive, part of a culling operation to help the forces in the Sakhalin front. But the Japanese soldiers got overconfident and insisted on continuing to attack the Hive. The American troops, that were the lifeline in the operation with their covering fire, retreated after the mission was declared finished. The Royal Guard's and the IJA's pilots ended up alone surrounded by BETA, after both the UN and American armies retreated, despite being warned to pull back."

"This sounds like the perfect nightmare. Why didn't they retreat?"

"The commander of the Imperial Forces was a young man from one of the Regent Houses. He inspired the troops with a speech about how they could change the course of the war that day. Of course he was wrong, they didn't have enough supplies. All of them died, and the nationalistic faction in the Empire used this accident to 'prove' that the UN and USA don't care about Japan. Since then, many members of the Parliament and the Regent Houses have started to voice their opposition about the way in which the UN and US treat the Empire, some VIPs included in that group. Thanks to this, many bilateral projects have been halted. The deal for the XG, the production of the Shiranui Second, the delivery of spare parts for

many TSFs. That also got in the way of my negotiations for support. The few allies I still have can do nothing either because they're in a difficult political position or because they can be branded as 'traitors to the Empire'. Is that enough for you?" He nods as he looks to the ceiling.

"This is totally different from what happened last time, I never heard this kind of thing from you before."

"I see. Back to the point then. When I read your report and saw that there was so little information, I couldn't help to doubt you. You were too good to be true, you ticked all the boxes. You gave me an answer to all of my problems, you gave me proof of my theory being right, you offered your services to me. Really, you're a godsend to me right now. You suddenly appear before me and solve everything, just like that. Then I saw your records, and I started doubting you."

"You mean you thought I was a spy because of that?"

"Yes, I was sure you were trying to take advantage of me using my problems as bait to later sabotage me from within. Of course, I don't believe that anymore after seeing those… incidents."

"So, that means you'll let me help you from now on? No gunshots involved?" Again his eyes narrow and stare right at me.

"Depends. What do you mean by that? If it's just following my orders, that's what I was planning for you from the start."

"No, I mean, that you let me voice my opinion and share my plans and ideas with you. I know last time I didn't really help with anything, but this time I do want to try to make a difference. I don't want you to just pretend we are equals, I want you to see me as one, if you deem me worthy."

"So you want me to give you authorization to do 'stuff' if it's profitable for Alt. IV somehow?"

"Yes. Of course, some things, like the consoles, might not be exactly related to Alt. IV, but I want you to hear me out when I come to you for aid or with a serious idea." That's not something you should ask, I welcome all the help you can give, so long as it works in my favor. If two other versions of myself trusted in you, I suppose it is in my best interests to have you close.

"Yes, so long as we have the time and resources for whatever it is you want to do. So long as you work with me, humanity's survival will always be your first priority. Understood?"

"Of course. Next, can I trust you to not go doing things behind my back if they involve me or my squad?"

"Didn't you say before that you're willing to bloody your own hands?" His gaze turns stern, and I see him clenching his fists.

"I want none of that bullshit, Sensei. I know results come first, but I want you to at least inform me of your plans. If you back-stab me, I won't cooperate with you anymore. Especially after this little incident."

I hold his gaze but he doesn't flinch. He leans back moving his face slightly to one side, and continues talking more calmly than before.

"Once you finish the XM3 and I can tell you everything, I want no secrets between us. I won't hesitate to do what's necessary to fulfill my mission, but if I can't trust you, I won't follow your orders. Even if humanity's salvation comes first, I have my own goals as well."

He thinks he can demand such things from me? Why should I report what I do to him? Even if he knows much… He smiles a bit as he rests his chin on his palm.

"Give and take, right? If I see you're not taking me into account, I'll take that as a sign that our partnership came to an end. I'll say it once more, I am not your pawn. I am your partner in this."

He then remains silent, waiting for my answer. I leave the silence hanging, to see if he'll back down, but he doesn't say a thing.

"I guess I can make you my bodyguard officially, and if you prove useful I can treat you like my right hand. But that goes both ways, if you do something against Alt. IV I'll do everything in my power to end your life. Was I clear?" He gazes at me with half closed eyes and then shakes his head.

"You seem to forget that I can loop back in time, Sensei."

"Believe me, I can make you go through a fate worse than death." I'm sure not even he knows of-

"You mean erasing my existence, perhaps?"

"… How much do you know of that?"

He then tells me that, due to the conductor's influence, erasing someone means that people will slowly forget who said person was, losing all their memories of them starting with the 'lighter' and more recent memories. Of course, if he was involved with the 00 Unit I may have mentioned it to him. Since he had to take care of the subject, I must have told him of how this 'Sumika Kagami' was erased as a collateral effect of the G-Bombs. I suppose I truly did trust in him much, to have told him this much.

… However, why is he grimacing? What caused his voice to drop down so suddenly? Could he… have experienced it first hand? Did I… erase him in one of his prior experiences? Is that why he has been so reluctant to trust in me? If so, then…

"… I suppose everything has been clarified now." I nod his way, he leaves the grim expression behind. "Both of us need the other, so I guess I can give you that reassurance. I won't hide things from you, so long as they concern you or your squadmates. Or the Alt. Program. And I also won't harm you, as long as we're on the same team. Is that good enough for you?"

"Yes, that'll do." He nods, losing the tension on his shoulders. "Ok, last thing. I want you to let me handle the 00 Unit after it's started."

"What do you mean?" His gaze doesn't waver, but the fire within did. What did I do when we activated the 00 Unit that caused this in him?

"I want you to let me tune it. That was my role after I gave you the theories last time, and it's something I want to do my way this time. I'm sure I can do it, now that we have the second theory and I already experienced it."

"… You do know you're talking about humanity's hope, right?"

"Yes. But I still want to do it my way. Now that I'm a more powerful Nucleus I might have an easier time, but anyways, I want you to promise me that." If it will put him at ease, I guess I can wait and see where this goes.

Not like I have a choice, going by her reactions to his name yesterday. And, after seeing those memories, I suppose he did a fine job before. Then, that means he should fare better this time, perhaps he even has a clue on how to hasten the process.

"Alright. I'll let you take care of the 00 Unit. So, are you on my side, Shirogane?" He gives me a side glance, narrowing his brows for a moment.

"Of course. You need me to protect and tune the 00 Unit, I need you to fix the problems of my world and get power to reach my peace. Our interests are in alignment again, even if I still don't agree with some of your methods." He folds his arms, sighing. "But you're the only one who'll believe me, the only one I can talk to freely about these things. I came here for you Sensei, I need your help. I'm willing to let this little incident go if you can finally believe my words and you promise to aid me." Looking into his eyes, I see no hesitation.

"Fair enough. I promise you I'll do everything I can to prevent whatever it is that will happen. I won't ask for the theories, and I'll

take my time to fix the flaw of the 00 Unit. I assure you of that."

"Glad to hear that, Sensei. You can let me take care of the 00 Unit, I'll get it to be like a human in no time." Good to see he's all motivated for that. But now that he reminded me…

"By the by Shirogane, during one of those memories… you mentioned something about 'taking care' of another me. What was that about?" His brows furrows as he tilted his head slightly.

"Taking care of you? What does that-… Ah." His face gets all red as he breaks eye contact. Yashiro flinched, to make her react to it…

… So the joke was truly spot on? With him, a kid? He didn't even sound as he is now on that memory.

"Shirogane, why are you blushing?"

"I just… remembered something embarrassing."

"Oh, and you wouldn't mind to share what that something is?"

"Please no, you were just… stressed and drunk. I was just worried that if I left you alone you'd do something crazy." He avoids my gaze, so he doesn't want to tell me? Fine, let's not press the subject.… But he did seem honest right now. Worried about me, huh.

"Alright, let's leave it at that then. You should go to your room, if anyone asks what were you doing, tell them you were aiding me in a special mission. I'll contact someone to deal with your records, it's going to be a tough call. But don't worry, I'll get it done. Bring the consoles here tomorrow, I'll start working on making more of those. That shall be all for now."

"Fine by me. By the way, the contact you mentioned… wouldn't happen to be Sakon Yoroi-san, right?"

"You know about him too?" He's not the only one I'll call but he is someone very important. Why would I have allowed him to meet

you? If you're as important to the 00 Unit as it sounds, I see no reason to let him get close to you.

"Yeah. Isn't he on the Ministry of Information? You sure it's safe to let him in this kinda thing?" I know why would you say that but don't worry, my relation with him isn't so bad for you to doubt him.

"I'll tell him you're listed as 'dead' here despite you being fine, since you were enlisted in the UN as a Cadet after you left the Empire, since I got that bit prepared and done already, and then I'll ask him to help me with the fixes here. I'll give him a hint about the stealth intel you brought in exchange, that should turn the Empire's heads towards us. They will surely ask for it, and I'll use that to regain my influence in the local scene and to cover your back." I'm sure they won't be able to contain themselves, I'll recover my support before the end of the year with these new toys. Not even the Shogun could refuse these gifts.

"Alright, just be careful. I think you already know, but he can reach the Shogun. If you give-"

"The Shogun?! How do you know that?!" Did he meet her before or did I mention it to him? No, if he was solely focused on the project, why does he know of Yoroi's reach in the Shogunate? Why did I let him in on that intel?… Just what the hell happened in those other worlds?

"I'll tell you another time, but be careful with what you tell him." He says as he ruffles his hair, letting some air out softly. "I know you can deal with him just fine, but better safe than sorry."

Now I want to know how you met him and how much you know of the Shogun. You're one big, thick bag of surprises Shirogane. Though, if word gets out that a 'dead' Royal Guard is working for me…

"You're right, especially with how some people in the Shogunate see me now. Hehe, I'm glad to have you on my side." And again, he

scratches his head as he looks away.

"If that's all, I'll be going." He slowly gets up, rubbing his knees.

"Shirogane, one last thing."

"What it is?"

"Nothing will happen to this base in this world. You just focus on helping Squad 207 as much as you can for now. Leave the rest to me. Alright?"

"Yeah, I get it. I don't think I can help you much outside of that as of now, anyways." He shrugs, going towards the door. "Good night you two. Oh, and thanks for the help Kasumi. Sorry to have shown you that. I'll make it up to you soon, okay?" He smiles at her, she tilts her head. Shirogane chuckles as he waves at us, and then leaves.

I stand up and make myself some coffee and some cocoa for Yashiro. I sigh and process all that he told me just now. I look at the little shape of the bunny in the room as I pass her the mug.

"So Yashiro, he didn't lie about anything?" She shakes her head slowly.

"No, he believes everything he said is the truth, and he was on edge the whole time."

"Was that bit about tuning the 00 Unit true as well?"

"Yes. It seemed like his heart was in pain when he remembered that."

I see… Sipping some coffee, I look up as I sit on my chair, spinning a bit. If it made him resent me, I better let him handle it. I want no more things between us now that I know he's on my side. So, if he can deal with the 00 Unit, then I'll leave it to him. Of course, if he fails, I'll probably resort to the same method my other me used.

"And… he truly is on our side?"

"Yes. He does hold you in high regards, despite some conflict in his heart. He also…"

"What is it?" It's odd to see her stop so suddenly. She looks down, bringing her mug close, drinking a bit, then slowly letting it rest on her lap, her eyes exploring the unending rim of the cup.

"… He seems to be fond of me."

"Is that so? Do you dislike his emotions?"

"… I don't know. He seems… kind. I don't understand. He isn't afraid or suspicious of me…"

"But you think we can rely on him?" She closes her eyes, taking her time to answer. When she opens her eyes, she merely gives a nod before drinking some more. "Well… If you say so." I drink slowly, closing my eyes. "Do you still feel fine after what you saw? You can rest for the night, if you're not in top form."

"… I'm fine." Furrowing her brows just a tiny bit, she nods.

I sigh, shrugging. So Yashiro thinks he's our ally. That's way more than what many have gotten in their first evaluation. Finishing my cup, I rest it on my desk as I began to spin with some more force, eyes glued to the ceiling.

Huh… Is this real? A causality conductor that brought me my theories from another world, someone who holds me in high regards and is fond of Yashiro despite her being an ESPer and a foreigner, someone who came with such much knowledge… to help me. It feels surreal.

Regardless, I'm glad my suspicions were wrong. With all he showed me, with whatever plan he has, I'm sure I'll bring Alt. IV to life, and now I have a guardian that will do all he can to achieve that, and

even more than that if he decides to remain here and try to make this world more 'peaceful'.

However, there's still the matter of this world's Shirogane. He was a Royal Guard, so I'll have to deal with it carefully. 1st Lt. Tsukuyomi wasted no time in poking her nose into the matter. And he did say that the Shogunate always realized something was wrong with him, and thought it serious enough to warn me about Yoroi.

I have no time to lose, I do need to regain his trust. And I rather not have the Guard come after him now that I know he's on my side.

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*The Next Day. Near 9 AM.*

*(Mana's room.)*

**[Mana]**

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I sigh as I sort the reports from the trio about the squad's activities yesterday, placing them in my drawer.

I stand up and raise my hands, hearing my shoulders crack. I open my PDA but no mails came to my inbox, so I suppose it is time to wait.

I didn't get many answers when I inquired about his standing here. They said he was a leftover Cadet from a foreign unit, that was scouted after an accident prevented him from taking the CCSE after he couldn't do it with his previous squad. The XO refused to divulge more information and the Instructor didn't knew much more than that as well.

They're hiding you well. But I suppose that's obvious. You returned to your room quite late last night, I can only wonder what kind of mission you're doing here. I called HQ for any updates but there was nothing, and I received no intel whatsoever as of now.

Should I mention him in my reports? No, I should only talk about him personally with Her Highness.

There's two knocks on my door in an odd rhythm.

"Enter." Tomoe enters the room and gives me a bow.

"Mana-sama, I have a report for you."

"Let's hear it."

"The suspect is again training with the squad. They shared breakfast and he seemed to be fitting in fine. He was also calling Meiya-sama by her name." He did? Well, he never cared much for formalities.

"Does she seem bothered by him?"

"No, she hasn't corrected him and doesn't seem to mind. According to Ebisu, he's currently running faster than all the members of his squad at the moment."

Of course he is, this wouldn't be a problem for him. So he calls Meiya-sama by her name and they're getting along, huh? Maybe that is your mission, perhaps? I'm glad to have you watching over her. Though I cannot show my emotions to them, they cannot know of you.

"Surprising, isn't it? Keep me updated on his movements. We have received no new intel from HQ, so there's no change in our plans."

"Yes, Mana-sama!" She salutes and then leaves.

He obviously hasn't received a special TSF, I think he isn't in contact with HQ. So he should have been ordered to work for the XO in exchange for her to allow him to protect Meiya-sama. I can't say that I'm not curious and I wouldn't like to have a talk with you, but right now I cannot allow my feelings to get in the way. Even if Maya would be overjoyed to learn you're still alive. But then, I guess she would

know about this, since she's Her Highness' retainer and your teacher.

Maybe I could go and watch your training myself. I'm curious to see how much of your technique you still have. There's so many questions left unanswered. Perhaps I could approach you when no one is watching?

As I reached for the door's handle my communicator starts beeping. A call from HQ-01? I bring the speaker to my mouth, pressing the button.

"This is Tsukuyomi."

"Mana, it's Maya. What happened that you requested a mission update yesterday? HQ went into panic thinking that something had happened to Meiya-sama!" Maya's tone rarely is this fast or loud, showing signs of anger. It's so rare to see you out of your ice cage.

"Are you certain this line is safe from recordings?"

"Do you think I would make such a mistake? Your doubt is insulting." Pointless worrying, as always.

"I happened to meet a fellow here in the base. Since I didn't receive word of his arrival, I thought I would ask for directions on how to approach him."

"A fellow? Are you speaking of a member of the Royal Guard? No one has been sent to Yokohama after your group. Are you certain you're not mistaken?"

"Shadows cannot be traced so easily."

"Shadows? What do you mean? Can you tell me clearly who it is that you met?" Her voice lashed quietly by the end. I thought she would know, being his teacher.

"It's just as you heard me, the shadow has come to watch over the night." I believe you'll understand. I would like to avoid using his name.

"The shadow… Look Mana, enough with the riddles. Who's been sent to watch over Meiya-sama? Are you certain you're not mistaking this person for someone else? This is a very serious matter."

"Your star pupil came two days ago and joined Meiya-sama's squad, I've been preparing a report but since I didn't knew how to address him I still haven't sent it."

"If you're talking about Onimura, he's still in my unit. So, you got confused. Didn't you check the person's records until now?" I groan, tightening a fist. Of course I did, who do you think I am?

"Maya, it is not like you to be so oblivious of such important matters." Now she's the one groaning. Serves you right. "I'll say it clearly then, 1st Lt. Shirogane has joined Meiya-sama's squad." I heard a loud gasp. Did she truly not know?

"What… did you… Mana, I don't know what came over you, but lying in such manner can and *will* be considered an act of treason." A quiet tone, yet a predator lurked behind her words. She didn't knew of this.

"It is no lie. It's him, no doubt about it."

"That can't be! He died two years ago defending the Hiiragi district from the BETA!"

"That's what I thought, too. But his face, physique, hair, all is the same. He bested Meiya-sama in a duel, so I suppose his skill with a blade hasn't waned over the years."

"This is… This is impossible. He should be dead. Are you absolutely certain it's him?"

"Yes, I was going to see the day's training to ascertain whether or not it's him. But he even has a very high security lock on his personal data, despite how suspicious that would be for a Cadet. A spy wouldn't make such a careless move, and I doubt anyone could access his profile of the Guard. Considering his role, I wouldn't doubt it is easier for him to move around as a dead man." I had to wait a few moments until Maya replied.

"… Refrain from sending your report for a few days. I'll go there personally, with the delivery of your spare parts. I'll see whether this man is truly him."

"If he is indeed him, what do you plan to do? We cannot interfere with his mission, whatever it is."

"I'll retreat, and ask Yuuhi-sama for further instructions. She may have trusted you'll knew what to do, but I can't blame you for doubting. Of course, if he isn't who we think, we may have to take extreme measures to deal with this new recruit."

"Understood. I'll lay low for awhile, continuing to observe him. You'll arrive in a few days, I suppose?"

"I'll make arrangements to arrive in two days. The faster we resolve this, the better. How has Meiya-sama been until now?"

"Fine. However, the training they're giving her is much harder than what I expected. I can't say that I'm not grateful for it." As much as Meiya-sama might want to fight, it pains me to no end to see her train in this place. She should be a member of the Royal Guard, not a dog of America.

"I see. I'll report that to Her Highness. Stay safe, Mana."

"Same to you, Maya."

# Ace Recruit

## Chapter 9: Ace Recruit

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*October 26th. 0 7:15 AM.*

*(Track field.)*

**[Takeru]**

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I finish stretching just before the Instructor calls for us. These days I've been keeping my pace to not overwhelm the girls and they seem to be progressing just fine. Luckily, we're all getting along. Save for, you know, Chizuru and Kei.

Sensei already started the plans to make more consoles to train them, so that won't take much more time hopefully. For now, I'll keep up my guard around her, just in case she gets all paranoid again. That being said, I have a bad feeling about what she told me the other day. Did she not tell me all that stuff last loop because it had nothing to do with me? I think there may be something else to it. While this would explain why she aimed her gun at me last loop, something feels off now.

Marimo-chan blows her whistle and we get in line in front of her, ready to receive our training.

"Squad, today we'll be doing a more intense training. You'll do five klicks normally, and then you'll do fifteen on full gear with backpack and rifle."

"Huh?! We've never ran so much until now, Instructor." Chizuru voices her worry, but is met with a smile.

"There's a first time for everything. Now, get on the track already!" A loud bark sent us to the field.

The girls walk with heavy steps to their lines, their faces tense as mine in front of a history test back in school. I now know that adding distances like this can be very taxing when you're regulating your stamina. I read online about a marathon in London in which they moved the finishing line a bit so that it passed over a gate and through an open space, so that the people could cheer the runners when they were near the end. That little change made the ones that were on the vanguard collapse just before reaching the goal.

This can be a similar situation. The girls have not ran more than fifteen klicks total, and never more than seven in full gear. They may just faint in the middle of it. I suppose I gotta have faith in them and keep my eyes peeled just in case, especially for Tama.

The whistle is blown and we start the training. As usual I start lightly, but everyone else seems to be reserving their stamina as well. They're going slower than usual, barely putting speed into their pace. The first five klicks passed without much problems. Now, the real deal starts. We all get in the full gear, backpack and rifle included, and return to the field.

I manage to keep a steady rhythm, but the girls start falling behind after running eight klicks total. As I slow down a bit on a curve, I see how Tama falls on her face just behind the start line.

"TAMASE! Get up and keep running unless you want all the team to have to run more laps!" Marimo-chan's shout makes all of us shiver. Seeing her from here, she's frowning for real. What the hell is wrong with her?

Tama gets up in a hurry and continues to run, but it's clear she's exerting herself. The rest are more or less alright, but I already have a two laps lead on them.

I end up finishing while the girls still have five klicks left to run. They look exhausted, I don't think they'll be able to do today's battles.

"Well done, Shirogane!" Marimo-chan comes closer, smiling from ear to ear. "That was a very nice show of endurance. You may rest until the rest finish."

"Instructor, may I ask what brought this sudden change? Usually, it's recommended to slowly increase the distances and the weight one carries."

"Yes, but you adapted just fine. They were trained under this program for a longer time, so they shouldn't have problems with it. They already failed one CCSE so they don't have any excuse to not perform on par with this kind of training." She says without a hint of hesitation, and then she returns her attention to the runners.

Something is definitely wrong this time around. All of them are just barely jogging now, they can't even finish the distance running. I mean, the same happened to me the first time around but this is just overkill, and that's coming from me.

"Alright. With Tamase now all of you have finished. I'll bring the weapons, you may go refresh yourselves." She doesn't spare a gaze towards them or a compliment. She just… drones on with the training.

They're completely beat. I don't think this is a good idea. They're just being overwhelmed at this point.

"Shirogane-san… What did you eat in your other unit?" Tama's question catches me off guard. What's this about food?

"What did I eat? Normal stuff, I guess?"

"Fool… It was a rhetorical question." Meiya looks like she just got out of the sea. "I simply cannot believe that you could keep up with today's course. We already knew you had good stamina, but this is

just…" She simply stares at me as if I were a weird fish in an aquarium.

"Special-kun, way to go." Kei says with her usual deadpan face.

"Squad! Here's the weaponry, the first pairings will be as follows: Shirogane and Mitsurugi with weapons, Tamase and Sakaki on HTH." Marimo-chan shining for her absence, the Instructor took some distance to watch the trainings.

"So Meiya, what do you want to use today?" She's standing by the box, simply staring at the weapons. "Meiya?"

"Could we use knives today? I'm not feeling in proper form for a duel with swords." Weird. Well, last loop she did challenge me to a knife fight when we first fought. Yeah, she's tired today. That's gotta be it.

"Sure thing, knives it is."

We take our position in the field and I start the attack, but Meiya can barely dodge my strikes. Her eyes are unfocused, her breathing is irregular.

"Meiya, are you okay? You look-"

"I am fine. Shirogane, there's no need for you to hold back. Come at me with all you've got!" She charges at me, but…

I move aside and trip her, she falls to the ground and I kick her knife away while pointing mine to her neck.

"You sure you're okay? I've never seen you do such a mistake when attacking." Shame is painted in her face as she avoids my eyes.

"… This was your plan all along, wasn't it?" Huh? What's this now? "You baited me into attacking, knowing I'm tired. Mmgh, to be so easily defeated again."

"You got that wrong, it wasn't a plan or anything. You just rushed blindly at me."

"So you're saying it's my fault?" Why are you pouting?! Can't you take some criticism?

"Yes, you acted rashly. Haste makes waste, after all. You're too straightforward, Meiya."

"Grr… I can't even find the words to rebuke you. You are most certainly right, however. Completely defeated again." She gets up, breathing a heavy sigh. She looks most positively depressed.

"Don't get so down, today you were exhausted after the training."

"You did it as well, and you're as nimble as usual." A taint spread on her otherwise clear eyes, and that poisoned gaze drove into me through Meiya's stare. I don't like it when she's sad, even less after that last talk we had back home.

"You'll get to this level eventually, so long as you keep training. Your efforts will never betray you, Meiya." I return her a supporting gaze, just like she used to do with me when I completely failed at everything the first time around. She recovers a faint smile and nods at me.

The rest of the fights went more or less the same. The girls were totally spent by the end of the training, to the point that they just threw themselves to the ground.

I ended up stashing the weapons myself while I let them go to the PX first. I wonder what was Marimo-chan thinking today, maybe she wanted to show the girls our difference in a clear way? Who knows? Let's go eat, we still have the lectures today. I close the place where we keep the practice gear and then go back into the base. Luckily, today is mackerel day. That's gonna hit the spot after all this-

"Wait right there, Cadet!"

As I was making my way to the PX, a voice I recognize well calls out to me. As I turned around a woman in a red dress with turquoise hair and a pair of glasses met my gaze. I froze up for a sec when I recognized the eyes that returned my gaze.

Eyes piercing like those of a hawk, a poker face undaunted and at the same time menacing. The light coming into the hallway fell on her features, and despite not having those two hairbuns she always had, her hair still looks as pristine and shiny as a well polished medal. Those eyes of her came right at me, stopping nowhere else. Focused as an arrow shot by Tama, slowly she approached me until we were just a few feet away from each other.

Maya-san is here, right before me. But why? I never saw her in this world. Another difference to the list, now what do I do? The Royal Guards don't really like me, and now Meiya is nowhere around to stop her. If it comes to violence… Can I attack her? No, I don't think I could bring myself to do that even if she isn't my Maya-sensei. Then, what do I do?

"Good afternoon to you, Cadet." She greets me formally, it's very different from the rather cold but still friendly Maya-san I know.

"Good afternoon. Who might you be?" Very slightly, one of her brows twitched and she then adjusts her glasses. I'm in danger, aren't I?

"Allow me to introduce myself. I'm 1st Lt. Maya Tsukuyomi, may I take a bit of your time? There's some questions I'd like to ask you."

"Alright. What did you need from me?" Reacting aggressively will only put me in a worse position. I gotta keep my cool.

"Well then, you are part of the 207th Cadet Squad, are you not?"

"Yes, that's right."

"When did you join this squad? I thought there were only women in it."

"On the 23rd of this month, Ma'am."

"I see. Could you tell me from where you joined?" Her gaze narrows, readying its blade. Not like I didn't expect this, but for it to happen so earlier it's a surprise for sure.

"That's confidential. My personal information can only be accessed by the UN, if you wish to know please refer to my Instructor." She narrows her brows now, her face unwavering. I can never tell what she is thinking.

"Of course. Then allow me to change the question, were you ever trained by the Royal Guards?"

"Huh? Of course not." What kind of question is that? Why is she asking me that? I never even got to pilot a real Takemikazuchi!

"Oho, an instant answer. Then, were you instructed by the MDF?"

"My personal information is confidential, 1st Lieutenant. Please refer to my Instructor for such details." She's scouting for my origins, she's testing me. She must know I'm a 'walking corpse', but she's slowly trimming the list of the places I could have come from.

"I see. Can I ask you one last question?" Here comes that one, I'm sure.

"Of course, Ma'am."

"Why is a dead man walking here?" I F-ing called it.

"A dead man? Is that some sort of riddle?"

"I'll ask once more, why is a dead man walking?" She takes a step forward not losing eye contact with me, tapping her glasses and slightly frowning. What should I answer? I gulp, trying to think of something.

… I mean, I can just say the truth anyways.

"I dunno, because he has someone to protect?" Not a lie. Don't think she'll buy it.

"Someone to protect?" Her gaze relaxes a bit as she stares into my eyes. She has that same piercing gaze as my Maya-sensei, shame I will probably never see her again.

"Yes, I'm here to protect someone, something that's very dear for me." I hold her gaze, that diamond-hard gaze she always had.

She's… just there, staring at me. Like at the start of all of our bouts. I can't read her at all.

"Could you tell me what this 'something' is, Cadet?"

"That's personal, so no."

"Huh… Why would you not wish to divulge that, I wonder?" She narrows her eyes at me, her voice slow and just a tiny bit pissed off like when I didn't get her lessons.

"Think whatever you want, I won't speak of my personal matters. Though, if you're suspecting me of something, let me say that I have nothing against the Royal Guard or anything. I'm here to help."

"Oh, truly?" And again, she remained quietly holding my gaze. Just… looking at me, as calmly as usual.

…

So… She's not going to attack me?

"Is that all you wanted to ask? I kinda need to go get my lunch, they're going to run out of mackerel and natto rolls if I don't hurry." Let's get the F out of here before this gets worse or the other Tsukuyomi arrives.

"… Yes, sorry to keep you for so long Cadet. Thanks for your time." I turn around to go towards the PX, Maya-san follows closely behind

me.

Is she planning to attack me from behind? No, a samurai wouldn't do that. But I am a hazard in their eyes. What's the deal with her?

As we reach the split in the hallway, I felt a light tap on my shoulder before I went my way.

"It's good to see you again, Takeru." Maya-san said in a barely audible whisper, making me twitch as the words sank in after a second of shock.

What the… Did I hear that wrong?

Maya-san goes her way without looking back. I definitely heard her say my name as she patted my shoulder. What is the meaning of this? Is she… the Maya-san from my world? No, she called me Shirogane-sama instead of Takeru. Then what the hell was that? Did this world's me have some sort of relationship to the Royal Guards? No, Sumika spoke of him as if he were a normal guy last loop.

"What the hell does this mean?" I'll go ask Sensei tonight, can't ignore this kind of thing.

But… Something that's different than in the other world… And it's not the only thing that's different. Hmm… But, why would things be different? Could it be that she's just testing me?

… I have no idea what to think.

Thankfully, I managed to arrive in time to the PX. There was no more mackerel but I'm not dying for not eating it during lunch. I did get my rolls, though.

"Shirogane, what kept you for so long?" Chizuru asks me as I sit.

"A female Royal Guard stopped me on the way to ask me some questions."

"Eh?! A Royal Guard, you say?" Meiya immediately jolted up, shock on both eyes and voice.

"Hmm? What's with that reaction, Meiya?"

"Eh? Ah, no, nothing. I was just surprised, that's all." She looks preoccupied, I bet she thinks it was her Tsukuyomi the one who stopped me. "Anyways, are you alright? You were not threatened, I assume?"

"No, she asked me who I was and why I was in the squad. No idea what was her deal, she seemed to already know my name so I don't know why she bothered to come ask me in person." I mean, I thought they were suspicious of me but… This is faster than before. And different.

"That's a relief."

"Why? Are the Royal Guards hostile to us or something?" Let's pretend I don't know why she talked to me.

"Eh? Not really, but…"

"It's because we are UN soldiers." Chizuru says with a shade of disgust in her voice. "Despite being Japanese, we are been trained under the UN's flag instead of our nation's. It's obvious why they would be suspicious of us."

I don't get it. What the hell is wrong in this loop? Why are the Empire and the UN at odds with each other? I can understand them being paranoid about Americans, but the UN too? Another difference to the list, I guess.

"Um, Shirogane-san, what did you think of today's running exercise?" Tama looks at me from my left, raising her voice from her usual tone. Right, her Dad is the Undersecretary of the UN. She must feel bad when someone talks badly about the organization.

"It was a bit overkill for my taste."

"Overkill?" Meiya makes a complicated face as she tries to understand what I said.

"To go really overboard with something."

"Then, why don't you just say overboard?" Meiya, one does not think so much about words, you just talk how you feel is right.

"It fits more situations, I guess." She groans, still not understanding.

"Special-kun is right. Today's training was too hard." Kei nods in agreement, so does Chizuru.

"I'll have to agree. None of us could have finished this kind of training while running like it's intended to be done." She sighs while adjusting her glasses. "Maybe the Instructor was trying to show us the gap between ours and Shirogane's stamina?"

"I agree." Caressing the top of her air-intake shaped hair, she nodded. "We already knew he had more endurance than us, but today showed me that the difference was more grand than I had thought. I couldn't even last two minutes during our sparring today." You sound so bothered by that, Meiya.

"Special-kun, any tips for the squad?"

"Hmm… There's not much we can do about your stamina. You'll just have to slowly get used to run more. But maybe you could try imitating my running style."

"Style? How do you mean?" Tama was not the only one who didn't understand.

"What I do is take each step with my heels, with some force behind it. This makes my body move forward instinctively, with each step I take I gain more momentum and thanks to that I spend less energy in my stride."

"So that was your secret! Such an ingenious idea indeed, I'll try to perform it during my training tonight." Don't praise me too much Meiya, I just read about it online.

"Special-kun, you smartypants."

"An interesting approach indeed. Guys, why don't we all go jogging at night? It'll be easier for Shirogane to teach us this way." Chizuru suggest as she finishes eating.

"There's nothing to teach here, you just gotta get used to use your heels first."

"No, it's still a different way of running. And you also know how to keep your pace steady while doing it. Are you busy with another mission from the Professor today?"

"No, I don't have anything for today as far as I know." But I wanted to talk with Yuuko-sensei about some stuff today. I suppose I can leave it for tomorrow.

"Then it's decided! I'll be counting on you, Shirogane."

"No problem, Chizuru." I smiled at her while giving a thumbs up, but she first opened her eyes wide only to then furrow those large brows of her. Oh crap…

"Shirogane, I already told you to not call me by my name."

"Sorry, I'll try to keep it to a minimum."

"Just because Mitsurugi let's you do it doesn't mean the rest of us will."

"I don't mind you calling me Tama, though. It's kinda cute!" Thank you Tama, you're always such a sweetheart.

These days I ended up calling them all by their names. Tama didn't mind, but Chizuru made a ruckus about it and Kei almost choked me

to death.

Today's lecture was brutal as well. The Instructor rushed through the modules we were supposed to be seeing and went straight to combat scenarios. I could keep up since I've seen them all who knows how many times, but the rest got some answers wrong and suffered the wrath of Marimo-chan.

In the past a Soldier-Class ended up devouring you, but I feel that in this loop you'll be the one eating them, Marimo-chan. Wait, are BETAs edible? Like, can we make hamburgers and stuff out of them? What do we even do with all the BETA remains after all the battles?

…

I might not want to find out.

After a rather fast dinner, we made our way to the track field and I showed the girls how I ran. Under the clear and star-filled sky and the company of a chill wind they started to try to imitate me, but…

"Meiya, you're putting too much force into your steps. You don't have to kick the ground so hard! Tama, you look like you're skipping."

Chizuru and Kei are doing rather fine, they still can't run while doing it all the time but they got their pace figured out. The other two, however…

"Shirogane, how do you not lose your balance while running like this?! It is most troubling to not fall forward and to keep a steady pace. I find myself running faster than I want to, but if I slow down I cannot do as you showed me." Always going overboard. You really need to find your middle ground.

"It's not like this is the best running method, it's just what I find more comfortable. You can try to find your own style, Meiya."

"No, I would like to dominate this method. If this is how you became so nimble then I cannot back down. Even if it's not compatible with me, I must overcome this hurdle. Something so simple cannot bring me down!" More purple flares appear on her eyes. It's rare to see her so determined to do something, especially something so simple as this.

"S-Shirogane-san… My feet hurt."

"Sorry about that, Tama. Maybe you should stop for today, you all did run a lot this morning."

"Uuh… I'm the only one who can't do it."

"Hey, all of us have some bad points. What is your strong point?"

"My strong point? I guess it's shooting. Sniping is what I do best, but I'm really not that good." BS, you're awesome. You took down an HSST and protected me in Kashgar until the end, even when you probably where out of ballistic ammo.

"Then you should work on your reflexes and nimbleness more than your stamina. Maybe doing yoga would help?"

"Yoga? What's that?"

"You don't know? That thing you do where you move slow, use this giant ball to arch your back, and there's these poses that help you meditate or whatever." Maya-sensei explained it to me, to hone my mind to bring the full extent of my skill when I used the Mugen Kidou. But I can't really say I understood all of it. I still remember the exercises, though.

"I never heard of anything like that. Um… Is that something you… learned abroad?" Tapping her fingers together, she dodged my gaze.

"Yeah, kinda. Here, let me show you a simple pose." I take the low lunge pose and slowly transition to high lunge, to warrior I, and finally

warrior II. Then I return to low lunge slowly. And then I do the tree for a while.

"Amazing! You have very good balance, Shirogane-san!"

"These were just the most basic ones. I only know some others that are more advanced, I'm not an expert or anything. Hopefully, this will be more useful to you than pushing you to run harder."

"Yes, I'll try my best. Should I move from one pose to the other like you did?"

"No, try to stay for awhile in each of them. I did it fast to show you how it's done, the real deal is to do it slowly to gain more balance." Then when you start moving fast, you'll get so much more precise it's scary. I still remember how happy I was the first time I landed a hit on Sensei. Then I got cocky and she beat me soundly in a few seconds. My stomach hurts remembering those blows and how she slashed me in half that day.

Tama starts to do the low lunge, her lips twisting as she groaned as cutely as she always did when trying something new. She looks at me, brows arched and looking for approval.

"Awawa… I-Is this right?"

"Extend your leg a bit more, you don't have to bend your knee." I smile, giving her a thumbs up.

"O-Okay!" She's doing it perfectly outside of that. She really should be a bit more proud about herself.

"Hmm? Shirogane, what is Tamase doing?" Tapping her glasses, she slows down to a stop near me.

"Can't you tell? Training."

"Huh… But what is she doing?" Chizuru I know your eyesight is bad, but this is just stupid.

"She's doing Yoga. I think that improving her nimbleness and reflexes is better than making her run."

"Yoga? Is that something you learned abroad?" Chizuru narrowed her eyes at me, crossing her arms. I give her a short explanation. In the middle of it Meiya and Ayamine came to watch as Tama had made it to Warrior I.

"Shirogane, are those… movements really helpful?" She sounded doubtful as she watched Tama.

"I know they don't look like it, but they are really good for your fitness."

"Should we try them out too?"

"I guess? If you want to." The other three reluctantly took a spot and tried to do the same movements.

It's completely different from what they have been taught, to make fast and precise movements. To be told to move slowly and do these weird poses must be a shock to them. At least they're trying out new stuff.

"Takeru-san." An unexpected voice calls out to me.

"Kasumi? What are you doing here?"

"The Professor is calling for you. Let's go." She comes towards me, grabbing my arm.

"Hey, don't pull me!" I'm in the middle of something here!

"Yashiro? What business do you have with Shirogane?" Meiya comes up to me as I'm struggling with Kasumi.

"She's here to tell me that the Prof-"

"None of your business." Kasumi?! When did you learn to talk back like that?!

"Shirogane, what's the meaning of this?" She raises one of her brows and folds her arms.

"As I was saying, the Professor is-"

"That has nothing to do with you, Cadet. Return to your training. Takeru-san is coming with me." Let me finish my sentences! What's wrong with you this time? What the hell is wrong with this world?!

"Oho, I suppose you have your reasons. But Shirogane is training with us, so unless you explain to us why you-"

"You don't have to know why. Takeru-san, let us go already." Stop! Pulling! Meiya looks really mad at her.

I can feel the bloodlust in the air. Seriously Kasumi, what the hell?! Don't move your bunny ears like that to look cute, you just dropped an F-ing G-Bomb on me!

"Kasumi, let me at least tell them why I'm leaving. I promised to help them today, you know."

"But… She's going to be upset if you take too long."

"If you let me explain we won't have to keep repeating this all the times you come to pick me up."

"They should just mind their own business." I didn't knew you could pout like that. You're much more talkative this time around too.

"Well, guys. Professor Kouzuki is calling for me. Kasumi is tasked to look for me whenever that happens. Sorry to bail out on you like this." I bow slightly.

"At this time? Well, I guess… it can't be helped." Meiya said, folding her arms and looking away from Kasumi.

"Don't apologize Shirogane-san! You already showed us a lot of new things today!" Thanks for clearing the air Tama. Always such a sweetheart.

"Tamase is right. We can continue to train on our own, and it's already late. This yoga thing wasn't so helpful. Squad, let's leave it for tonight." Chizuru's order is met with nods in answer.

"Well, I'll be going. Good night, guys."

"Night, Shirogane." Chizuru gives me her goodbyes, as Kei yawns and Tama waves at me.

"Night, Meiya. Sorry about Kasumi."

"Yes, see you tomorrow. Good night." Meiya answered in a low tone, looking away.

She looked kinda down. Is it because of the training? I don't think that little fight with Kasumi could have put her in such a bad mood, she's not the type to get hung up on stuff like that. Those eyes of her looked really bothered though, maybe she's angry at me for not keeping my word?

We went back into the base and made our way to the lower floors, I shivered as I got used to the heat within the base.

"Hey Kasumi, did Sumika like the santa rabbit?"

"Yes, I sensed a great amount of happiness from her when I showed her the rabbit."

Kasumi told me that it's not like she can directly talk with her, it's more like she sees images and colors and uses that to interpret her emotions. Only sometimes she can actually hear her voice with enough clarity to have a conversation.

"That's good. So, what does Yuuko-sensei have in store for me today?"

"I don't know. She told me you would like it much."

"What are we doing? Eating matsutake?"

"Matsu… What is that?" She tilts her head while looking straight at me as her bunny ears move a bit.

"A delicacy of my world. Ah, just thinking about it makes my mouth water." I remember that when I got into college I went to Sky Temple with the whole gang and we all ate their famous matsutake.

That's one of the few things I miss from that world. I would kill to have that food here! Imagine what the girls here would do if I showed them some ice cream, or chocolate, hamburgers, pizza, ramen, alfajores, parfaits, BBQs, spicy tofu, roasted king crabs or…

"Takeru-san… please stop…" Kasumi's face was red and she was almost drooling.

"Why are you making that face?!" This is a PG story! Don't go doing suggestive things Kasumi!

"I wondered why you went silent and tried to see what were you thinking… All those foods, the memories of its taste… I'm hungry now." She looks at me with a slightly angry face as she moves her bunny ears.

"Same. Remembering that was probably not a good idea."

"Uuh… Were they that tasty?"

"Of course they were! Even some simple fried eggs and 'tates would destroy all the synthetic menu we have here!" Now I want some fried food, dammit! Stop thinking about eating already! Ah, what wouldn't I do for some fried chicken with rice…

We eventually reached the elevator and arrived at Sensei's office, and after she unlocks the door we enter. She was sitting by her desk, looking up towards us with the usual bored expression.

"Oh, Shirogane. Took you long enough."

"Good evening, Sensei. What's on the menu today?" Maybe she really does have matsutake here?

"Today we start the testings of the OS you asked me to make."

"FOR REAL?!" This is way earlier than I expected!

"Don't raise your voice so much! I think I have a solid foundation for the new OS, but I still need actual data to properly configure it. I know you told me the Gekishin wasn't the best model to base the tests on, but I can't get anything else without getting unwanted attention." She ruffles her hair and sighs.

I did ask her to use at least an F-15 for the test, but apparently since there's more spare parts that need refurbishing for the Gekishin it's easier to get them, and thanks to their simpler design they are easier to modify for our tests.

"Alright. Then I guess it's back to the simulators for now."

"No, you're riding a TSF. Weren't you listening the last time we spoke?"

"Wait… We can get away with that?! Won't people get suspicious?" Pretty sure some people will ask why a Cadet is authorized to pilot before passing the CCSE.

"I'm testing some new modifications to the equipment we have, as far as High Command is concerned. I'm the one on the command post so don't worry about being spied. Let me tell you that the engineers modified the Jump Unit's engines, thrusters and radar a bit and we're using a prototype of the Anti-Radar paint we made with the intel you brought us. You'll have to use only infrared communication, except for the data link that will monitor the TSF's performance. You will have to do some movement tests and some

simple fights against other Gekishins in slave mode. That's the gist of it. You ready?"

"Sure, let's get cracking!" Back to the field baby! Time to show off the skill of the champion!

I make my way to the changing room and grab a suit that was left in the locker that is, apparently, going to be mine for the coming tests Sensei might need. Heh, guess I'm back in black once more. It's almost an irony, like this was foreshadowing since the first time I came here that I would end up being an experienced pilot from the get go, as if the universe knew I would end up looping back time and again. I do wonder if other suits feel different to use.

Man, it feels like forever since I've been in a cockpit. The last time was… in the tournament. Man, now that I think about it, I stormed through the Campaign Mode with just a Kaiser. Had I used a Takemikazuchi how would things have turned out? Imagine if I cleared the whole thing in a single sitting…

Wait… That's right, I was using a purple Takemikazuchi in the game for some time. Why did I… Regret, perhaps? Yeah… After all, the purple Takemikazuchi was the last TSF I saw back then. Sigh… No getting depressed, you idiot. Come on… Get in the suit, Takeru.

After I put the suit on, I made my way to the hangar following Kasumi. There's not a soul in it.

"So, where is my TSF?"

"Over here." Kasumi goes to the far end of the hangar, me following behind.

A black Gekishin with the UN logo, with more pointy shoulder pads and chest. Its armor looks different, that's for sure. The thrusters… look kinda weird. Well, I guess I'm in your care, buddy.

"Okay, I'll be getting in. Wish me good luck, Kasumi."

"… Good luck." In her usual monotone, as expected.

I wave at her as I get on the railway and open the cockpit. Hesitating for a sec, she waves back before I enter the TSF.

I bolt myself to the seat and start the engine. It lights up as usual, once the data link starts up I'm connected to its visor, the view of the hangar reaching my eyes alongside the rest of the details of the machine.

"Shirogane, are you ready?" Sensei's face appears in my sight.

"Checking the connections right now. All green."

"I'll open the hangar. Treat this as a test run for a new model, and be careful. You'll operate under the callsign Shadow 1."

"Roger." Man, it's been so long. This feeling of peace… This is where I belong. Let's go for a walk, Gekishin!

My Gekishin is released from its hold, and the rotary gears do their work and position it along the railway towards the launch pad. Once I reached ground level, I started heating up the Jump Units. When the temperature was right and I got the okay from the crew, I move the lever and take off. This is faster than what I remembered, I was practically glued to the seat as I boosted. The Gekishin wasn't this fast before.

A shower of stars greets me as I fly off, distant fireflies above illuminating the deserted training grounds. I go towards the marked spot on my radar. Let's see what's in store for me.

"Shadow 1, your objective is to reach the northern end of the ruins." Sensei's voice reached me over the common channel. "There's many sensors spread throughout the ruins, if you're detected several turrets will open fire. Get to the objective while receiving as little damage as possible, you have five minutes. Start!"

Just five minutes? In a Gekishin? Heh, I like a challenge like this!

If it's to avoid detection then…

Slowly moving the control lever while preparing a boost jump, I lower my altitude gradually. The Gekishin is still heavier than most TSFs, but if you use the weight properly it becomes a plus!

Just like I do with my running, I move the Gekishin in a way that its heels make contact with the ground when it lands. Then I adjust the thrusters to boost as I fall forward, which ends up generating more momentum!

I don't fall over like one normally would with such a heavy TSF, and I use less fuel this way. I'm generating less heat too, since I'm not using the thrusters as much. And by hovering as Mikoto did with his Xao-Myun due to the impulse of the jump I make less noise as well, so any sonar sensors will also take longer to detect me. Limiting my stay in the ground to be only when I land to again jump, I'll manage just fine.

Collapsed buildings everywhere, the streets left broken amidst the darkness, I turn on the map and the infrared to see well. But the decayed landscape means I have plenty of places to rebound off for my acrobatics!

I made it halfway through the ruins when the first turrets open fire on me. Dashing to the right, I make it behind a building. Only this time more turrets start firing at me.

Boost jump to the right. Forward dash, boost jumps in zigzag, cancel and a dash out of harm's way. Let's check for damage… just some scratches in the legs and shoulders. I can do this!

I return to my pace, and I'm met with more turrets ahead. I boost jump over the bridge, do a crouch cancel and dash to my left to avoid must turrets. If I could attack them this would be too easy.

I still have two minutes and I'm close to the finishing point. The real fight starts now, knowing Sensei.

I drop the careful pace and go for consecutive boost jumps. A bullet rain is upon me.

Ooh, now this is nice! It's like a fire downpour! A zig, and a zag, and I'm outta here~! I fly through some fallen buildings.

Man, it's like a burning chase! Boost Jump, a cancel, a sidestep, and away I go~! Jumping over houses while doing a barrel roll.

To the left, to the right, a cancel and a backflip! Behind a building you can't hit me~! Using only the left thruster to spin and do an air dodge, I continue onwards.

I like speed and I like dodging, but I never thought I'd be dodge-tanking like this in a motherfricking *GEKISHIN*, of all things. And with just a prototype of the XM3, no less. There is some delay in the inputs I try to do, and when I try to do some of my complicated dodges it just won't register the commands, but it's as it was during the testing last loop. Combos are still a long ways away, but the cancels seem to work most of the time despite the lack of data.

I feel like I'm back on my turf. Get ready parallel world, because I'm gonna break you like a chocolate bar. I made it to the designated point with one minute left.

"Shadow 1, I arrived at the target."

"CP, roger that. Shadow 1 remain in place. We will send a supply crate with some training weapons. Two Gekishin in slave mode will be deployed as well. When we give the signal, you are to engage them within the ruins. The turrets will not be disabled. That is all."

Wow, totally not overkill. Fighting two on one, huh. This brings back that fight with the Elef, shame I don't have those machineguns…

Wait a sec… Can I equip some guns to my waist? Can I? I never really tried before… Well, I don't have mount pylons on my chest or on the waist, so I don't think a Gekishin can do it. We should have more pylons on our TSFs.

The supply crate arrives, it has two swords and three rifles. Hmm? What's that? An attachable mount pylon? We had those? Ohohohohoho!

I get the two swords in my hands, and attached the pylons to the side of my waist. Or is it the chest? Whatever, they fit so no problem! With the rifles linked through infrared, I can shoot both of them from a key instead of having to do it manually for each. And the last rifle goes in the pylon in the back.

"Shadow 1, report your equipment load."

"I equipped all the weapons provided." Sensei's eyes turn into fried eggs. Stop thinking about food, brain!

"All of them?! You won't even be able to take off with all the added weight! How did you even get all of them on you?"

"Using the pylons in my waist to get the guns in place, last rifle in the back and swords on my hands."

"You're crazy. The pylons are to be used on the shoulders or the legs! And you just use one if you carry two weapons already!"

"Don't worry, might as well test whether this is possible or not while I'm at it. Should I start the exercise?" Sensei sighs while rubbing her temple.

"Yes, start the exercise."

Let's go! Forward dash ahead!

I already have them in my radar, despite them being so far away. Alright champion, let's show off!

I start boost jumping in zigzag again, while doing some air dodges every once in a while to avoid the turrets' fire. With this pace I'm not making much heat, and I can get closer to them safely. Now that I know how many turrets there are here I know when to boost and when I should just run and dash on the ground.

I'm close to them, but they haven't detected me yet. Weird, let's go for a hit and run. I wonder if I can pull my stunts with the Takemikazuchi in the game here as well.

Walking slowly, I approach their position. Checking the map to see which streets are the better option to run after the attack, I wait until the Gekishins put some distance between each other. I suddenly go into a full dash upon one of them, opening fire with the machineguns and with my swords at the ready. It tries to counter with some fire but I jump and do a cancel immediately after, it gets stuck while trying to aim up. Heh, just like the Frei did that time. Two strong blows to the cockpit with the swords and down you go. You couldn't dodge thanks to the damage my machineguns inflicted upon your legs.

Easier than I expected, but I can do it. I can bring my hyper offensive style to TSF piloting, and with the balance I learned through the Mugen Kidou I'm stronger than ever!

I retreat into the ruins to avoid the turrets. I couldn't dodge them while I was charging at the Gekishin so I took some damage. Nothing to worry about.

The other one is trying to get close to here, but it doesn't seem to know my precise location. I slowly move on foot, getting closer to its position while trying to make as little noise as possible. I don't even need to get closer to attack you, let's see if my skill with the TR carries over here too.

I take my sniping position close to the fallen tunnel, you're almost on my range. Just get a bit closer to the left…

…

It took awhile until it came into my range, damn AI. I aim carefully, this time I don't have to wait ten seconds to shoot. Can I get a core-shot from here? Cockpit or jump units? Well, let's see how this goes.

It's just a little dot on my view, it's probably a bad idea to shoot from here. But I wanna try this out. This is just a practice after all. One, two and…

I shoot, I hit its arm. Damn, just when I went to shoot it moved a bit. Now I'll never know if I was going to hit it or not.

It takes cover behind some buildings, starting to get closer. You don't know where I am, so get ready to get sniped. Now, I'll aim carefully and-

**Beep!**

**Huh?**

**BAM!**

A 120mm missed me by a hair, an explosion of paint showered into a building right behind me.

What the hell?! Another Gekishin?! But I took the other down! I'm sure I-

The radar reveals nine enemy signals in total now. Sensei, you devil, this was your idea from the start, wasn't it? Since this one was close by, it detected the heat signature from my shot.

"Well, no point in hiding anymore. Blitzkrieg time, baby!"

I get up and look around, the Gekishin was hiding right behind a building some odd meters away. Heh, don't think you can stay away from me!

I rush at the enemy, guns blazing to seal its escape routes. It begins to shoot at me, but I don't even need to cancel to dodge. Jumping

onto the buildings and doing Kulbits, all the while shooting at the TSFs feet, I shave the distance between us. Heh, you can't hit me with those amateur moves! Reaching a park, I dash at it. Zig, zag, cancel, and dash. Slashing at its hands upwards, it lost its way to attack me. In a follow up, I do a downwards slash aimed to its cockpit. Down it goes, take that!

The rest of them are moving towards me, looks like I won't get to hide anymore. What to do? Do I hide anyway? Do I rush 'em?

I drop the rifle and charge at them, some bunch of AIs can't beat me. My radar beeps, some are approaching me. Two of them fly into the open space of the park, coming at me with swords. These must be the Storm Vanguards.

I wonder if I can perform it with a TSF? Picturing it in my head, then trying to move the controls in the right way, I try to make my Mugen stance with the Gekishin and boost dash towards the enemy.

I attack the one on my left, but its just a feint to jump over it while sicking my waist guns from above after a cancel. You lost a leg, I land while timing a boost and charge at it from behind. One hit from both swords to the engine and down it goes! Backflipping out of the other's range as it starts shooting at me, canceling the jump to avoid the rest of the incoming fire. This one's moves aren't half bad, however!

I parry its first slash, but my follow-up gets blocked. Triggering my machineguns, it flies away and opens fire on me as well. You're gonna make me get my A game out, huh. Repositioning myself, I place my sword above our shoulder and rush at the AI, that also comes to meet my aggro.

I crouch dash and squeeze myself under its slash, making it tumble forward which activates the shock protection. Quickly canceling my past move, and lagging for a single second, I dash towards it before it can turn and counter. I do an upwards slash, hitting its hand. Being disabled, it drops its sword.

"Hehehe, eat some bullets!"

I press the trigger and fire my guns at point blank towards its cockpit. Another Gekishin kissed the ground! This one had better data, but still, it's just an AI.

I dash backwards as hell rains upon me, fleeing into the ruined streets once more. If I got hit by all that paint I would probably have to wait hours to get out of my cockpit. That's without counting all the turrets that are also gunning at me right now. It's kinda unfair that the turrets only aim at me.

Well, I'm starting to get low on fuel and I'm hungry from that talk before. Let's finish this thing. I close my eyes, feeling a shiver on my back as those turquoise eyes return to my sight, and then I chant within myself.

*Like a petal that dances upon the winds, your attacks must be.*

*Graceful, precise, but deadly as well.*

*Unpredictable as the changing form of a cloud…*

*With the serenity of a leaf moving along a river…*

*And the violence of the rapids as they charge downstream…*

*Swiftly. Firmly. Fiercely. Calmly.*

*Let your strikes flow upon your enemy, like an unending waterfall!*

Remembering the words of Maya-sensei, I advance upon my enemies within the crumbling training grounds, under these starry skies.

They are keeping their distance. Boost jumping won't cut it. So, I'll better save my fuel and prepare to dodge. Counting to ten, I leave the cover of a tall building and approach a street where the TSFs

seemed to be taking cover in. Soon after that, they begin shooting at me.

Zig, zag, zig, cancel, dash behind a building, triple boost jump over it. More attacks over me, another jump but it's a feint, cancel it and do a barrel roll, boost dash in midair. I land nearby two of them. Barely no damage sustained.

Their guns roar as I approach them, right dash, crouch cancel and forward dash while holding my blade above my shoulder. I swing my blade, breaking concrete as I did and managing to hit one's left side. I take a step back and boost dash through the collapsing building, finishing it before it could retaliate. As I dashed into the street after the slash finished, another one was ready to blow me up at point blank, but I had already planned to take a step back so I wasted not a second in doing so, effectively avoiding the paint.

In real life I can't run immediately after taking the step back to regain my tempo, but TSF don't have that limitation! Immediately boosting forward, I raise my sword again. I hack at it, sending its rifle flying away, I crouch dash and do a rising slash to prevent the Gekishin from taking out its daggers. As it tries to backboost to escape, I throw my sword back as I chase after it. My slash paints a crescent moon towards its cockpit, knocking it out.

I sigh, wiping some sweat off my face. I move my neck and hear it crack, but soon my alarm starts beeping again.

The others are already upon me, I have no more ammo, and I'm surrounded by turrets. And it's really dark here to make matters worse. Eh, I'm sure this two won't mind if I take their guns. Hoho, this one has 120mm! Eat this!

I send my heat upon the recklessly charging Gekishins as I do a backwards jump, one of them rushing towards me and was too close for comfort, it got hit right in the face. Now that you can't see, I'll just shoot you down! Two more shoots and down it goes.

It was in midair, so it crashed kinda badly after it got turned off. I only hope that doesn't get me in trouble.

Well, let's scatter. The other four are shooting at me more than I can dodge safely, and I'm not confident enough to take them head on here, with all these turrets around.

I move into the urban part of the city and hide between the streets and tall buildings. Honestly, for being AIs they're pretty good. I know they're based on data from actual pilots, but still…

We could probably leave the rear to these things, shooting ballistic shells and providing tactical support while in control of an operator in case of emergency. That is not a bad idea.

One spotted me while I was lost in thought and opened fire from my right, I try to retreat but another appears to my left. The other two are behind me, and thanks to their fire the turrets activated. Did these AI do a lock on me?!

Nice one, science! I retreat ahead, towards the only open road I can take, paint rains behind me. This is not good, I'm going to get shot down. They're right behind me, chasing me while boost dashing.

Well, whatever. Let's see how fast these new thrusters can be! I do a full boost jump, and move towards a building. Slightly lower my speed, use the weight to impulse myself forward, bend those damn knees, and boost!

I fly off the building towards another ahead, and like I did in the final I use my right thrusters to spin myself, and then the left one to change my orientation, now I'm gonna crash backwards against the building. I move the levers to put the legs in position and move the torso slightly up, and now give me all the accel you have Gekishin!

I crash into the building and rebound off it towards my chasers! Hehehe, so I can still do Albrights just fine!

I draw out my swords and activate one thruster. I rush through their line, spinning around myself, letting the kinetic force do the damage while I slash.

Two of them down, one lost a hand, the other got away. I'm low on fuel, and here that means shields out too.

The one that's still in one piece shoots at me, I try to jump but it hit my leg. Damn! They sick their guns upon me, I try to retaliate with mine. I land hard on the ground, now without a leg to support me.

"Dammit, all or nothing!" I release all of my ammo at them, the alarm tells me they're doing the same.

**BAM!**

I ended up getting hit on the engine. By a turret. Damn it. Well, for being my first time in two years I did pretty nicely, if I say so myself. Man, this rocks! I forgot how much I truly enjoyed riding a TSF.

"Shadow 1. Exercise finished. Good work, return to the hangar."

"Shadow 1, roger that." Let's go back, I hope I can get something to eat because I'm famished right now.

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*(Command Post.)*

**[Yuuko]**

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"So, what do you think?" I look back, her crimson eyes were sharpened at the screen. Her brows low and her arms tightly folded, Isumi sighed and shook her head.

"I can't believe a greenhorn took down so many of the Valkyries. Even if they were riding Gekishins and he used whatever prototype OS you're testing along those new parts, his skill is simply

outstanding." Isumi is not someone who gives praise lightly. Seems like you made a nice impression, Shirogane. "However, I have to ask something. Why did you tell him he was fighting against AI enemies?"

"Just because. If I told him he was fighting against soldiers he may have panicked, right?"

"Yes, that's understandable. So is this Shirogane going to join the Valkyries?"

"Not yet, he's in Squad 207 as of now." She slightly lowers her chin towards her neck, taking a step forward.

"May I inquire why? He already knows how to pilot, and with such skill! Wouldn't it be better for him to train under us? I have never seen someone do those movements."

"I have my reasons to have him there." She nods, taking a step back and looking at the screens again. "I just wanted to see how far he could go. But this is just too interesting. He defeated Hayase in CQC, took down Munakata with that Albright, and defeated all the members of the 207A team. If it weren't for Kazama's precise shot disabling his leg, he would have taken all of them out."

"The stealth protocol helped him as well. When he was running away, his signal got lost a few times. They couldn't use neither the tracking or auto-lock, so they wasted many shots, and with his eccentric evasive maneuvers they could just barely keep him in their sights." Wow, you're not done with the praise? How odd. "Is this new technology something that we will use in the future?"

"Yes, the basics have given me better results than what I expected, and that's without looking at the compiled data. Hopefully, I'll be able to get the approval of the high brass to implement this with your Shiranuis as well. There's also a little surprise or two in stock for you all. Do look forward to my next assignment, that will be all for tonight.

Go greet your squad, and take them to eat something. Kyouzuka-san should be done with the food I asked her to make."

"Yes, XO! However, what should I tell them about their opponent?"

"Hmm… Tell them they fought against my new bodyguard. If anyone presses the matter, send them to me." I smirk, she chuckles.

She salutes me and leaves towards the hangar. Shirogane is already out of his machine, Pyatkh is bringing him here. You did splendid today, more than what I expected of you.

As I wait, I replay certain parts of his fight in the screens. I cannot believe he moves in such a way. The strain it puts on the joints is severe, but one cannot deny the effectiveness of his style. To take so many of the Valkyries down… I was just testing him, to poke fun at how 'awesome' he said he was when we tested that Valgern-On thing. I certainly didn't expect you to drive them into a corner in such a way, even with the OS and the new modifications.

He gets here, and he doesn't try to salute me. I'm so thankful there's someone who understands that I don't want to waste time with the formalities.

"So, what do you think? Did the stealth work as intended?" Smiling and folding his arms, he comes up to me.

"No, it was even better. The base's radar lost track of you a few times, and the Gekishins couldn't keep a lock onto you." He was right about how much our pilots rely on the auto-lock, remove it and they start missing most of their shots. Add your crazy movements and they could just barely see you, it's like they were fighting a mirage.

"Can't believe you created this with just the notes I brought. The engineers here must be damn good."

"You bet they are! And your notes had enough intel for me to figure out the math, after that it was just testing until getting the numbers right. Now that I know that it works, I can develop a system for all the other TSFs, and a protocol for stealth tactics. Your moves today were most impressive as well, the new OS will turn out quite nicely."

"Glad things are going well. Though those AI Gekishins weren't half bad, they moved quite well and even tried to lock me down." So he didn't notice.

That was another reason to cut your comms, to let you fight with all you had. Otherwise, you would have heard the panicked screams of the Valkyries as you tore them apart. Seeing those proud surface pilots struck by fear was a wonderful sight, indeed.

"You surpassed all my expectations today, well done Shirogane. How did it feel to pilot again?"

"It was *awesome* ! I was surprised by how fast the Gekishin felt, it was still quite stiff but it moved much faster than what I can remember." Your honest reactions are really fun to see. This means I made a good enough work for you to be comfortable with it.

"That's probably due to the modifications we did to its engine and thrusters. Those jet diagrams you brought gave me an idea to make a new Jump Unit I couldn't really get out of my head, so I was testing that today too."

"So that's what that was. Well, I could do all the things I used to do in Valgern-On today, so I'm now sure that I'm back at full capability!" That reminds me…

"Shirogane, can you explain to me what were you trying to do with those pylons? It was really risky, you could have crashed yourself into the ground." I honestly have no idea what were you thinking. It produced good results, yes, but it was completely stupid.

"I was just trying to make the Gekishin fight like the Takemikazuchi."

"Huh? What has that to do with the pylons?"

"Everything! I can't attack with swords in both hands and shoot the machineguns at the same time if I need to keep stuff in the pylons on the back."

"Again, what has that to do with the pylons you put in the waist? As far as I know, the Type-00 can't do that either."

"What do you mean? It has the machineguns built into its waist, so you can use swords in each hand while you shoot the guns, even if you have stuff in the back too. That's what I was trying to do." Machineguns in its waist?

"Shirogane, here. Take a look at the Takemikazuchi." I show him some images of the Type-00 and its variants, and he grabs his chin as he gets lost in thought.

"So… you're telling me the Takemikazuchi doesn't have machineguns?"

"It never had. Where did you get the idea?"

"Valgern-On. I used to pilot a Takemikazuchi in the game, and there it has this machineguns in its waist. I seem to have gotten the real one with the game one mixed up. I'll show it to you later."

"Still, as reckless as it was, it delivered good results. I don't think others could easily do it, but I should gather more data about your style. You did take on an entire group by yourself and almost came out on top."

"Where will we gather data? In the sims or in a real TSF?"

"We'll use the sims from now on. I wanted to get one good look at your skills, and today was more than enough. Get changed and come to my office, let's eat something before you go to bed. I have some questions regarding some moves you pulled on the field."

"Alright. I'll be there in awhile. I do have some things to tell you that felt kinda wrong during the test." He smiles and nods. Then, after waving my way, he went out the room following Yashiro again.

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*October 27th. 0 8:30 AM.*

*(Track field.)*

**[Takeru]**

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I finish stretching, waiting for Marimo-chan to use the whistle. The rest are still stretching, preparing for the morning run.

But man, I feel awesome today! Piloting is the best thing ever! Imagine what I will be able to do with the new XM3 and those new Jump Units! I'll become one with the winds!

"You look most certainly joyful today, Shirogane. Did something good happen last night?" Meiya addresses me rather coldly, with a grave tone and a side glance. But I can't hide my happiness!

"Yes, it did! It was truly awesome. Shame I can't tell you guys about the mission, but it was honestly a mind numbing experience. I could practically feel the wind in my veins!"

"… Oh, is that so."

"What's up with that answer? You look down today, Meiya."

"Nothing's wrong. It's none of my business what you do with Yashiro."

"I said nothing about Kasumi, though." She makes an 'Oh Shit!' face before folding her arms and looking away. So she was angry at Kasumi yesterday…

"I assumed you would be doing this task with her. Am I wrong?"

"Yeah, I always do my missions alone."

"Eh? You always… You do them all alone?" She now looks like a goldfish.

"I mean, Sensei always asks me to do random stuff for her. I have no idea what she'll come up with next." I'm still in shock that the stealth protocol that I used yesterday was born from the forum posts I brought.

When Sensei showed me the data it was truly amazing, I was almost invisible to the other TSFs. And when I wasn't boosting the base's radars couldn't lock onto my position or IFF.

"Sensei? Who are you talking about?"

"Oh, right. I refer to Professor Kouzuki in that way, since she's always teaching me stuff from all the missions she gives me."

"She's… teaching you?" She tilts her head, raising a brow. "Well, you were scouted by her personally. So, I assume yesterday's task was a success?"

"Oh, hell yes! I wrecked all the obstacles, axed all them benchmarks, and had a blast during it!"

"Axed?" I think Meiya's mental state could be described by a number: 404.

"Uuh… It means I passed it with flying colors."

"Oh, I see. Your choice of words is most odd at times, are they supposed to be some sort of secret code?"

"No, it's just the slang I used before coming here."

"Right, you were living abroad." Meiya then remains silently staring at me for a sec. "Oh, that reminds me. Shirogane… Can I ask you a

personal question?" She stood stiff, got all serious now. What is she gonna ask me?

"Sure, ask away." And very timidly, which is weird for this Meiya, she spoke.

"Are… Are you Japanese?"

"… Are you seriously asking me that?"

"Yes."

"Well, actually, I was born on the Moon."

"WHAT?!"

"But my Dad comes from Sedna, so…"

"Sedna? What's that?"

"The planet that's behind Pluto." Or not, some people online said it was not a planet.

"What?! Another planet? But how do you even…"

"And my Mom is a unicorn."

"Shirogane… were you… making fun of me?" She closes her eyes, fists shaking.

"Nooo, of course not. I would never do something like that to you, Meiya-kun."

"Grr… You were making fun of me! I was asking you a serious question, and this is your answer?" You asked a stupid question, I gave you a stupid answer.

"Can't you tell that I'm Japanese from looking at my face? Or by my name?"

"I was referring to… whether you were born in Japan, or if you were a Nikkei."

"I was born in Japan, yes. But what does it matter? Nikkeis are also Japanese."

"Huh? Of course they're not! They weren't raised here, they know nothing of our culture."

"You're being overzealous. If their parents raised them with the same values they would still be the same in their hearts."

"I don't know about that." What's wrong with this world? I never saw this kind of discrimination in my past loops. And coming from Meiya, of all people.

"Alright, let me give you an example. Let's say you were raised away from your family, Meiya." I know you will understand with this approach.

"Eh? Away from my family?"

"Yes, but let's say you also had a good teacher that passed onto you the customs and knowledge of your ancestors. Like how to make a certain food, or a traditional dance. Would you still be part of your family? Are the values you were taught since being a child so weak that they're broken by distance?"

She closes her eyes, folds her arms, and starts groaning. She's taking her time to answer, for sure. Then, a whistle reaches my ears.

"SQUAD! ASSEMBLE!" Marimo-chan is calling for us.

"Let's go, the Instructor is calling."

"Ah, wait! I still haven't-"

I made my way with the rest of the group. Meiya jogs behind me to catch up. We all salute as we await today's training.

"Squad, today you'll go to the firing range instead of running." Huh?! The rest also seem as shocked as me. "The guns are already there, I'll announce the teams." Teams? Didn't we used to go firing individually? "Sakaki and Tamase against Mitsurugi, Ayamine and Shirogane." Against?! We're fighting each other?!

She dismisses us, saying she'll be there in a minute. As we made our way to the range and put on the gear, I asked the girls my doubts.

"So, she said against… Exactly what are we doing today?"

"You never did firing competitions in your past training unit?" Chizuru raises both brows, slightly taken aback for some reason.

"No? We just went and shot at targets individually."

"Well, this is more or less the same, but we instead get valued as teams." Tapping her glasses, she points to the left end of the practice range. "There's also an exercise in which some targets will pop up and we have to shoot them down, but the targets get farther away with every time they appear."

"This is more complicated than I expected."

"Are you not confident in your shooting skill, Shirogane-san?" Tama asked with a rather shocked tone.

"I'm not bad, but I never had this kind of training." First Chizuru, now Tama. I did say I was better at CQC, no idea why they're so surprised.

"Time to beat Special-kun."

"You're right, Shirogane-san this time we'll come out on top!" Tama got motivated by Kei's words, and now even Chizuru has a determined expression on her face, and Meiya is… looking at the ground?

"Is the dirt talking to you or something?"

"Eh? Ah, no, I was just lost in thought." She again looks away, her voice barely audible. Maybe I shouldn't have mentioned her family. Let's get her mind off it.

"So, how good is your shooting?"

"Not bad, I suppose. Nothing like Tamase's or Sakaki's."

"Mine is also average." Kei admits while holding her chin.

"How are your shooting skills, Shirogane? Can we count on you to give us another surprise?" She must think I'm bad at shooting, going by her tone and that small smile.

"Heh, if you want a surprise, I got you fam."

"Fam?" I should stop doing this, but her confused face is too cute.

"It's a way to say… like, dude, friend or something like that."

"Special-kun you're too weird." I don't want you telling me that, dear Kei.

"Well, let's do our best." I raise a fist as I go get my gun.

We grab our rifles and take our positions. Marimo-chan comes just as we finished getting ready, and after giving us a once over to make sure we were ready she folds her arms and takes her binoculars out.

"Alright squad, first we'll start from regular shooting and we'll work our way up to sniping as you already know." Another difference to the list, we always had these trainings separated before. "We'll go from the targets that are at the 200M mark until the ones on the 1500M mark, switching to sniping rifles midway." Ouch, that's a long distance. How far can I shot precisely now? Last time 850M was my limit.

"Eh?! But… we were just practicing with the farthest targets at 850M as the last distance some days ago!" Meiya raises her head from her position, Kei also seems to be bothered by this since she also looked up.

"It was decided that we could give you a harsher training, since this is the second time you take this course." Marimo-chan is nowhere to be found, though. "Everyone, in position!"

Meiya and Chizuru exchange a worried glance, Kei just sighs very heavily, while Tama gulps with her eyes closed before going back into position. This is par for the course by now, but it's still weird. I go prone and aim at the target, awaiting the order.

"FIRE!"

Not a second after the Instructor's shout, the loud sound of shells being shot echoes about. I grab my binoculars and check my target, dead center.

"Reload and aim at the next!"

We kept shooting through the next three distances. Meiya and Ayamine missed at the 600M one when we had to switch to the sniping rifle.

"Mitsurugi and Ayamine, out! Reload and aim at the next target!"

We now aim at the 850M target. There's a bit of wind, so let's aim slightly to the left… I take a breath just before Marimo-chan gives the order. After the shots are taken I look through my binoculars, dead center. Hell yeah! All that training at the shooting range and my practice with the TR are bearing fruit! All that training I did with Tama in my first loops is finally finished, now that I'm able to get the bullseye of this distance.

"Sakaki, out! Aim at the next target!"

Now, the next one is at the 1100M mark. Looking at the small circle in the distance, I couldn't help but feel my heartbeat and the small sweat running down my face. This is… like when I was under the cliff. Freaking missiles got in the way, but now there's no such thing happening. Unless a meteor rain of chickens falls on the base right now or something.

Remember the feeling, remember Tama's advice, locking at the core, slightly to the left because of the wind, aiming a bit lower due to the distance, holding it steady…

"Fire!" I pull the trigger.

I take my time before looking at the target, gulping hard as I finally did. Not dead center, but it's in the innermost circle! Yeah, baby!

"Reload and aim at the final target!"

"EH?! Shirogane… You hit the target?!" Chizuru couldn't believe it. She sounds just as she did back home when I told her I could cook.

Well, to be fair, I am trying my best right now. I think this is as good as I'll ever get, unlike Tama who can take down a falling shuttle at cruiser speed. And I wouldn't have gotten to this level if not for her tutoring.

I go prone again, but I took a glance towards Tama. Her hands are shaking, brows arched. The small delay as she got in position, the way she's licking her lips… It feels as if she had seen a basilisk. She's holding her breath real tight, so… Her anxiety issues are back at it again, huh.

Sigh… Nothing I can do now. If she needs a hand, I'll be there. But for now, I'll just focus. Target locked, aiming… This should do it. Probably. I think. Perhaps. Maybe.

"Fire!"

Our rifles shoot for the last time. Me and Tama stay on the ground, not wanting to look ourselves through the binoculars. I slowly leave my position, getting up and clearing my forehead of sweat. Tama, however, was still petrified, looking at the ground as her thumbs didn't knew whether to hide under the other fingers or remains outside. Sigh… She failed the shot, didn't she?

"Well, well, well. Color me surprised." Marimo-chan smirks as she lowers the binoculars, chuckling a bit. "Tamase, you're out! Shirogane's team wins this round. Sakaki, Tamase! Five laps in the track field!"

"Yes, Instructor!" Chizuru goes immediately to run the laps, but Tama takes a moment before following behind her. She's looking at the ground with a her mouth barely open, her arms glued to her sides.

I look at both targets, mine is near the outer rim of the outermost circle but Tama missed entirely, she didn't even hit the outermost circle of the target. So she got nervous and screwed up, if she had been calm I'm sure she could have gotten a better shot than me. I'm sure she could have gotten the bullseye of that one no problem, if she were calm.

A small sound of clapping snaps me out of the target right before I feel a strong pat on the shoulder.

"Shirogane, what was that about not being confident in your sniping? You're better than Tamase! And she's a pretty good sniper, I'm sure you know." Marimo-chan showers me with praise while smirking.

"No, this is as good as I'll get. I don't think I could improve much more."

"You say that as if your level was bad. What's left for Mitsurugi and Ayamine who couldn't even hit the 600M target?" Both girls look to the ground, shame and frustration pouring from their eyes.

"They just need more training. And maybe they should improve their habits?"

"Habits? What do you mean?"

I tell her what I noticed during last loop about their firing habits, under the guise that my old Instructor told me about it and I used that to get to my current level.

"I see. That's a fine piece of advice. I'll take it into consideration for your training." She nods with a smile, thank God she agreed to this. "Mitsurugi, Ayamine, you both heard him so try to put his advice to use. Maybe then you'll be able to hit stuff with your guns outside of close range." Ouch. Marimo-chan is full of venom this time around. What the hell is making her this upset?

She walks away, going to oversee the other two's laps. Chizuru was managing just fine but, as expected, Tama was not into it. That only got her another shout from the Instructor, who ordered her to 'properly run' instead of lazing about. Her eyes squinted as she nodded, unable to pronounce a reply. Tama… It's a matter of time. When the CCSE comes, she'll see her sniping is gonna save us from the gun batteries and I'm sure that'll be a great boost for her confidence. Until then, let's support her however I can.

"That was… splendid Shirogane." Meiya looks as dejected as me after failing a test. After such scolding, I would be too. "You can do anything, it seems."

"I just trained a lot. You all can get to my level with time." Her eyes veer away, she places her hands on her waist as she also looks to the track field.

"You can snipe, your CQC is also very good, you have ample knowledge of tactics, and you're always calm and collected. Would you happen to also be proficient at mid-range as well?"

"I guess? Well, yes. I'm better at mid-range than at sniping, that's for sure."

"Better than… That is just…" Meiya falls silent, gaze on the floor.

"Special-kun, what are you bad at?"

"Manners." I can't be bothered most of the time, luckily I learned to shut up and show the proper respect when it's needed. Except when I'm hungry, tired, or both.

"I'm being serious. What are you supposed to be? A super duper soldier?" She says it with cute words, but her eyes are oozing chainsaws. And they're aiming at me, menacingly.

"I mean… Really, I just had a very harsh training. If you all had been trained like this from the start you would also be much better by now, right?"

"No, every person has limits. And things they're bad at. You don't." She holds my gaze with an accusing glare, even her voice seemed incredulous now. Which is odd, Kei never confronts someone openly with the exception of Chizuru.

"Hey, you make it sound like I'm not normal. I just trained a lot, that's it."

"Special-kun… Were you conscripted before?" Ah shit, here we go again.

"No? Why would I be here if I had experience in the field?"

"Hmm, really? Then, where did you learn to handle a gun like that?"

"I mean… My skill comes from training, there's no secret to it." Kei stares at me, unblinking and without looking away..

"So you come from a place where this kind of training is normal, huh?" Slowly bringing a hand to her chin, one of her eyes seemed to

squint. What is she trying to say? What's wrong with all of you today?

"Ayamine, stop." Meiya folds her arms, letting a huge sigh out. "Looking for excuses will only drag us down. Regardless of where he learned, Shirogane is doing his best in the trainings. Let us use his knowledge to hone ourselves, even if we can't get to his level at the moment."

"… Fine." Kei shrugs, then comes closer to me. "Special-kun, drop the secret right now." Before I could react, she grabs my shoulders and gets her face really close to mine. This… is really embarrassing.

"… Huh?"

"How do you get better with a gun? Is that about waiting a bit all there is to it?"

"Well…" I know she isn't doing it with those intentions… But having her so close is really uncomfortable. I look up, away from her eyes, as I scratch my head while trying to find the right words. "When you're firing at mid range, yes. For sniping, I guess you should…"

I give them some pointers based on what I read online, what I was told at the firing range I went to, and my limited experience through the loops. I'd like to tell them what Tama taught me, but it's better if she herself is the one who teaches them since that'll do wonders for her self-esteem.

Kei seemed to ponder my suggestions, still looking doubtful towards me. Meiya seemed to be willing to give this a try, though she still looked bothered to no end.

During the following exercise I had no trouble hitting the targets, compared to doing this in a TSF it's much easier. I ended up being the winner again, hitting most targets. Marimo-chan made all the girls run five laps, on the grounds that I 'carried' them on the trainings today.

It's almost like the roles completely reversed. When I first arrived I was the one dragging the team down, but now the rest are seen as the slackers. They all look shaken, especially Tama. Kei and Chizuru were sending some strong blazes at me when they got near where I was waiting. What's their problem?

"Shirogane, you're already finished for the morning drills. You can go to the PX."

"I'd like to go with my squad, Instructor. I'll wait until they finish."

"Hmm, aren't you a team player? Regardless, the Professor was right. You truly are a star model."

"Huh? The Professor?" What did Sensei do this time?

"She mentioned to me how she thought you were a cut above the rest of the common soldiers, and recommended me to use you to drive the squad to their limits."

I see, so Sensei tried to help me by giving us a harder training and forcing the girls to improve. I can't say that I don't agree, but this is still overkill. It's like trying to kill a cockroach with a shotgun, this is too much for them to handle.

"Still, the sudden change was a bit too much in my opinion. But they'll get used to it eventually."

"I sure hope, I have prepared a harsher training regime for November."

"A harder one?!" The girls turned their heads towards us as they heard me raising my voice. Marimo-chan looked at me, smiling in a way that seemed to amplify the wind's coldness.

"Exactly. Starting next Monday, I'll give you all the best training course I've ever crafted. Maybe I'll get to see you taking the trainings seriously from now on."

I don't like her smile, this is bad. They're struggling with this training, I don't wanna know what will happen when they take this new one.

They finished their laps and we made our way to the PX, but not a single word was said. All of them were silent, and I didn't feel like forcing a conversation. The afternoon classes were about assembling a rifle, and I'll say they were rather annoyed when I finished it so fast.

After that we got a lecture on both guerrilla tactics and infiltrations, and how to fight a TSF on foot. I never had to use either of these lessons on the field, but my experience is limited to Sadogashima and Kashgar since during the coup I was spamming the 'Run Away' option like mad, and I don't really remember clearly what happened after Operation Babylon on my first loops. I still could answer swiftly the questions that Marimo-chan sent my way.

I can't say the same about the rest. They're being overwhelmed, the pace of the lectures is much faster and the 'easy' questions have been removed. They got even more assignments to do for the next class.

"That's all for today. Girls, I recommend you to study more seriously. Starting next week, you'll have an even harder training regime in preparation for the CCSE. Do be sure to make the most out of your time until then. That's all for today. Dismissed!"

We salute the Instructor, who then leaves, and as she did the girls storm out of the classroom. I tried to reach out to them as they left but they didn't stop, even if Tama did look back with conflicting waves in her eyes.

I ended up eating alone in the PX. This is just the worst. I can only hope Mikoto is able to catch up to us when she gets back. At this rate, she might not be able to get up to par.

… Maybe training with everything I had was not a good idea.

# Entangled Threads

## Chapter 10: Entangled Threads

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*October 28th. Some minutes before 8 AM.*

*(Yokohama Base. Barracks. Meiya's Room. )*

**[Meiya]**

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This week has been the craziest week of the year, without a shred of doubt. Since Shirogane arrived to our squad all has been turned upside down.

From our meeting on the night of the 22nd I knew he was different. He addressed me so casually, going as far as to call me by my name, he showed a particular way of speaking, but most importantly he demonstrated a phenomenal physical aptitude.

Then, during all the following days, he surpassed all the expectations I set on him. He bested me time and again, displayed far superior agility and endurance than all of us, and showed to possess an enviable knowledge of tactics and warfare, never answering a single question wrong.

He truly is special, and despite that he is not arrogant in the least and always displays such friendliness towards all of us. An impeccable example of what a soldier should be, I can see why the Vice Commander scouted you personally, Shirogane. I am glad to have met you, to have the privilege to train alongside you. And yet, your words have driven a sting into my heart.

My gaze wanders to the Minaru Kamui that lies atop a small table. Recalling his words I cannot help but to bite my lips, feel an

oppression tantamount to a cold drill on my chest. Will I ever be able to fulfill the role you gave me, Your Highness?

I never pondered such things. I always thought of myself as a Kagemusha, a double of the Shogun. Someone whose only meaning of existence is to serve the Empire and its people, nothing more than a blade to strike down our enemies and a shield to protect our rulers. I always felt grateful for this, for being the one who is tasked to eventually protect the Shogun from harm. That is my purpose, what drives me forward. I always cherished her as the most important thing in my life.

Changing into my jacket, a tinge of pain on my arm. A bruise he inflicted on me as I tried to corner him reminds me of my failures. His usually shining face turned darkest when he realized that he had hurt me, he apologized much despite me having been the one at fault due to my lack of skill. Closing my eyes, I slowly do my ponytail. Yet, even within the darkness I can hear it, the reverberating sounds of his strikes, his piercing gaze square on me. My lips tense up a bit, recalling his feats on our practices and lectures, his remarks and pieces of advice.

Looking in the mirror I see my usual reflection, yet my eyes are not the same after being blinded by the sun that he is. Unconsciously, I was clawing at my palms. Will this reflection ever be so shining as his?

Since I've been secluded all my life, I lack many abilities. However, I thought that I was a good enough fighter, but he destroyed me as a relentless avalanche would to a wooden cabin. I am not yet fit to stand by her side. A blade that cannot kill is useless. I rather die than to become a disappointment to her, to make her regret spending time on my person.

All I've ever wanted to was to make you proud and be able to aid our people. Which is why I accepted your order to join the UN without qualms, for it was the chance, the new winds I always awaited.

"But… nothing has changed." I look away from the mirror as my throat shuts itself.

Everybody here treats me just like I was being treated before. It is most odd that we are also allowed to have personal rooms instead of being placed on a single shared room. You even sent Tsukuyomi to look after me, when she should be by your side.

I thought you needed me, but you just sent me to another cage. Am I so unreliable? What am I to you? Family? A useful tool? Perhaps… Am I already a disappointment? Maybe I do not want to know. Sometimes, the answers that you seek are not the answers that you would like to hear.

I sigh and shake my head. This is not what I should be thinking about. After all, there is someone who treats me differently now.

Shirogane is a such a mystery, but not only because of his exquisite skills. Surely he has realized who I am by now. But then, why is he still acting with such open friendliness towards me? Why does he not have that fear and respect in his eyes, like everyone else that approaches me has? Not that I mind though…

He did call everyone by their first names, even Yashiro. Does he just not care? Perhaps, since he lived abroad, he does not know? Surely, he must have grown suspicious after Tsukuyomi confronted him the other day. He must have noticed that I look just like the Shogun, and yet he's still all smiles whenever he speaks to me. You're such a mystery, Takeru Shirogane.

I sigh as I again look in the mirror, yet this time I manage to hold my reflection's gaze.

I'm not making enough effort, I need to improve myself even further. However, if I continue like this I'll be caged forever. The sudden change in our training since the beginning of October is not something that happened on a whim, I fear that the next CCSE might

be stacked against us once again. The Instructor, while severe, wouldn't have changed our curriculum without good reason.

… I cannot deny that I'm envious, jealous of him. We're the same age and yet he's so much more skilled than me. I can't seem to find a weak point in him, either in his knowledge or in our bouts. It is not as if I haven't realized he's holding back, however…

I take one long breath from my nose, relaxing my shoulders. I need to improve much. That's why I'll swallow my pride and ask for your help. Shirogane, you're the key that will free me from this cage. You're the only one who seems to be honest towards me, the only one who can practice with me to improve my technique with a blade, the only one I can rely on.

Even if I have to get on my knees and beg I need you to train with me, both in body and mind. If I could gain just a drop of your fighting technique and knowledge about war, as well as the temperance you have when you fight, I'm sure I would be able to surpass whatever stands in my way, both in the CCSE and in the future after we get commissioned.

Otherwise, I'll never be able to fulfill the role I have to play, I'll never be able to help Her Highness. But if I don't prove myself worthy… I already am a burden on her shoulders, the least I can do is to meet the expectations she placed on me, to be her protector. Otherwise, as a cursed child, I'll spend the rest of my life in isolation.

I get out of my room and make my way to Shirogane's. He said he was in the second room to the right after the split in the hallways, if I remember right. But will he be awake? It is just a bit over 8 AM, surely he should be up by now. What if I wake him up rudely and put him on a bad mood? I should knock softly, and I'll try to not raise my voice too much.

As I approached his room and turned around the corner, I saw an unexpected figure standing guard by the door.

"Yashiro?"

She seemed to flinch slightly, apparently I startled her. Her surprised expression lasted but a second, it quickly dissolves as she returns to her usual emotion-lacking face when she greets me with a bow.

"Good morning."

"Good morning. Yashiro, what are you doing outside of Shirogane's room?"

"Waiting for him."

"Does he have another mission from the Professor?" If he does then there's not much I can do.

"No."

"Is that so? Then, why would you be waiting for him?" She squints her eyes as the long, black things on her head move a bit.

"That's none of your business." She retorts, her brows curving as if I had upset her but without changing her calm tone. Again with this?

"Yashiro, I have an important favor to ask of Shirogane. So I would like to know if-"

"Takeru-san is unavailable today."

"… Why? He does not have a special mission, surely he couldn't be busy all day long."

"I call dibs."

"Dibs?" That sounds like one of those odd words he sometimes uses. Why does Yashiro…

"I asked him first, so he comes with me."

She asked him? She arrived even earlier?! Could she have asked him yesterday? Mmmgh, I shouldn't have grown angry at the lecture. I could have asked him during dinner to help me. No, regrets will beget no beginning. I fold my arms, returning her stare.

"I can still ask him what I came for. You cannot decide for him what he'll do all day." Why am I so upset at her? I can't lose my temper so easily.

"You're being a bother. Please leave."

"What?! That is very rude, why are you being so hostile today?"

"Because you're being noisy and stubborn. Please leave."

"You're one to speak! And I am not leaving until I have spoken with him."

"He's busy today, so he'll say no. Leave him alone, please." Not changing her tone or expression, she then held my gaze in silence.

What is wrong with her?! I didn't knew Yashiro was such a rude person. Such lacking form of speech, to send me away in this manner. I know she is young, however…

"Kasumi, what is all the noise about?!" The door slowly opens, and then Shirogane gets out in the uniform he had when I first met him, only to then raise a brow as we made eye contact. "Meiya? What are you doing here?"

"Good morning, Shirogane. I came to ask a favor out of you."

"A favor?"

"Takeru-san, let's go." Yashiro starts pulling on his sleeve. I can't help but glare at her.

"Kasumi, wait a sec please. So, what did you need?"

"Ahem… Well, I was wanting to ask if you could do me the favor of training with me. I would like you to practice swordplay with me, and to teach me about your style." It's too similar to the Mugen Kidou, but I'm sure it must be a coincidence. "And if you were so kind, I also wanted you to help me with my studies."

I lower my gaze, embarrassment suddenly getting hold of me. I cough again, clearing my throat and folding my arms.

"I know I'm imposing much, asking this of you, but I am having quite some trouble since the Instructor hastened the pace of the lectures. Of course, I don't ask you to do this without a fair reward. If there is anything you ever need from me, I'll gladly repay this favor tenfold. You can ask anything you desire from me. So…" I deeply bow towards him. "Please, Shirogane. Would you be so kind as to lend me your aid?"

"I see. So that's what you wanted. Sorry, but I'm going to be busy for the following days, so I can't help you with your training."

…

"… Eh? But Yashiro said you didn't have a mission!"

"Kinda. It's a personal project. It's like independent training, in a way. And I promised to spend some time with Kasumi today. Sorry, I just don't have the time." He gives me a short bow. Of course, he's focused on improving himself even further. Despite how skilled he is, he still desires to better himself. Compared to him, I'm…

Yashiro clings to his arm, with a hint of a smile on her face. He said he 'promised' to be with her. To spend his little free time, with her?

"But… will you be busy all day? Do you not have even a short while during the late afternoon?" I can't believe I'm pleading like this, staring at him in this way, I should be ashamed of myself. But still, please… even just some minutes…

"Sorry, I'll probably be busy until the late evening."

"… I see. Forgive me for holding you, then." I coil my hands into fists, denied of the handshake of acceptance they were looking forward to. I resist the urge to bite my lips, I cannot… I must be firm, I must not shame myself further.

"Don't apologize, Meiya. I just had plans already, I'm sure you'll be able to get out of the slump you're in. Just keep on training! Well, see you later."

Don't smile at me like that. Don't give me those kind words when I've been doing my hardest since the start of the month to see no decent results whatsoever. Why do you think I asked such of you? In such a humbling way, to boot.

"… Yes, see you later." Yashiro starts pulling and he starts complaining again, he waves at me as they go into the hallways.

And as always, I'm left alone. I hug my sides as my eyes cannot release themselves from their shapes.

What kind of relationship do they have? Why does she call him by his name? Why is she going with him when he has to do this personal project? Why is he spending his free time with her?

"Sigh… This isn't like me." I shake my head, looking away from their silhouettes.

He's just another squadmate, nothing more. He's friendly to everyone, not just me. And Yashiro did seem to know of this endeavor of his, which is why she tried to make me leave. I suppose they must be on good terms… Well, it doesn't concern me. I do not wish to be a bother to anyone anymore.

"I suppose I'll keep training on my own." Alone, like always.

---

*A few minutes later.*

*( A h allway on B4F .)*

**[Takeru]**

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"You didn't have to be so rude, you know?"

"She was being annoying." Don't you give me the puppy eyes!

"Why are you so mean towards her anyways?"

"She wanted to get in your way. Finishing the consoles is more important than her own training."

I mean, I get it. But I could hear you two arguing from inside my room. Just what the hell did you tell her to make her so mad? It's weird to see Meiya being that openly angry.

"So you got defensive because of that?" She nods.

"I could tell she wasn't going to back down, so I said what I thought would make her less likely to pressure you."

"You know what? You're smarter than I give you credit for." She smiles as she moves her bunny ears. I will have to apologize to Meiya later, I don't want her to think badly of Kasumi.

"She wasn't going to accept a no for an answer. She's very stubborn."

"That she is. So, are all ten prototypes ready for testing?"

"Yes, I finished the instructions you gave me yesterday regarding the plastic case and the buttons. They should feel fine now, the team already made the unified D-Pad piece you told me about and finished fixing the analog sticks with how they should move

according to what you said. Both types should work like the originals now."

"Cool. Can't wait to see the fruits of our work."

Sensei left me in charge of the assembling and testing of the consoles. Apparently the plastic that is underneath the buttons doesn't exist in this world, so they had to make it from scratch. Since they designed the things burrowing concepts from the controls of the TSFs, the joysticks and buttons were super stiff and hard to move compared to the ones I brought back. They even used four separated pieces for the D-Pad instead of a single one.

These few days, I've spent the nights talking with the designers with Kasumi's help to get them an accurate idea of how things should be. Thank God I was studying an engineering career back in my world, otherwise I wouldn't have been able to help at all with this. The speed at how these guys work is truly something else, they're the best of the best. To think they're following my orders makes me feel so bad for them, but since Sensei kept her word and gave me power to do stuff it's up to me to prove her that I can help.

Frankly, I learned a lot on these nights. More than what I learned on those two years in college, I dare say. Both in electronics, assembly of machinery, design patterns and how to pinpoint flaws just by looking at the device's configuration. I think I'll keep coming here to ask questions every once in a while, especially regarding TSFs. I would like to know if it's possible to mod them even further, and to learn some tips and tricks for maintenance.

"Takeru-san, how have your nightmares been?" Kasumi's question took me out of dreamland, surprising me a bit.

"No changes for now."

"I see. Are you sure you don't want my help?" She stares at me intently. You're such a good girl, Kasumi.

"It's fine. Even if it hurts like hell, this is my cross to bear. I don't want to forget it." Sensei did say that, if I wanted, Kasumi could repress the most painful memories to let me rest well.

However… How to say it? Ever since I came back, even if I wake up crying like a bitch, squeezing the pillow like a scared kid, after I get my shit together and I remember they're right here, by my side, I can stand up again. I don't want to forget, because the pain is what reminds me that I can't screw this up.

We take the elevator, talking about the reports the team left us about their work, and eventually we arrive at the room on B17F Sensei prepared for us. It looks just like a normal meeting room, it's walls painted in that diluted brown. It has six 29" CRT TVs aligned in a row, each with a Stallion connected to it. There's also six sofas and a small table to the side. On the left side there was a lot of equipment, probably what Sensei will use to collect data during the 'training' sessions.

"Alright. What do we start with?"

"The Professor said to use the MMTS first." She says and we go to the equipment corner, getting the briefcase with the prototypes.

Mobile Multipurpose Training Simulator, the official name Sensei gave to the Game Guy. The Stallion was named the WMTS, Wired Multipurpose Training Simulator.

Getting two of them, we sit down on the sofas and take out the cartridges we were going to be testing.

"Ok, let's see if the two player connection works." We start up F-Mega on our Game Guys. The game starts flawlessly this time, no scanlines, no sound problems.

Now it's practically a perfect copy, both the consoles and the cartridge. Just in a few days they got completely done, the Alt. IV

team is truly awesome. Now, let's check if the Join Cable works as it should.

… And it does!

"Hell! Yeah!"

"So Takeru-san, what do we do now that this is done?"

"We play against each other, obviously." She twitches with a shocked expression.

"We can do that?!"

"Didn't I explain to Sensei how it worked?"

"The Professor told me you said the wired connection was important, but she didn't tell me why."

"Well, let's try it out and see if we can complete a race. You ready?" She nods and we start up the two-player game.

It's been so long since I played F-Mega, I forgot how fast it was. I'm having trouble taking the curves with my Red Lightning TUE. However, compared to Kasumi…

Kasumi crashed for the third time in a row, her brows curving downwards and making a cute groan. I told her she can press B to immediately use the brakes, but she apparently forgot about it.

I recharge my fuel on the lane and speed up once more. Only one lap left for me and I'll win. We managed to keep the game running for a whole race, so that's a huge improvement over last time.

Meanwhile, Kasumi's Desert Thunder LPT drifted off course and exploded, one of her cheeks ever so slightly puffed.

I ended up winning while Kasumi could just barely finish two laps.

"Well, the connection works fine. That's good to know."

"This is too hard. I don't like it." She's pouting as bitterly as me when I lost to Mikoto. Well, F-Mega is a hardcore game.

"Ahaha, everybody has a hard time on their first try." She groans a bit. "Alright. Let's try out PoyoPoyo then."

We spent the next hours trying all the games on all five Game Guys, all worked flawlessly. Sadly, Kasumi could only enjoy our round of PoyoPoyo as I had more experience with the rest and they were too hard for her.

"Well, I guess it's time for the Stallions now. We still need to connect the new ethernet adapter, right?" She gives me nod as she goes towards the equipment that was here.

I go to the equipment corner again to check whether the wired internet connection is working. I don't know how this differs from the internet we have back in my world, but since we got our own servers and stuff we practically have no lag or anything, it's like having all the bandwidth of a provider all for yourself.

As we were setting up things, Sensei entered the room carrying a bag.

"Hey Shirogane, Yashiro. How's the testing going?"

"The MMTS are now running perfectly, we were about to test the WMTS prototypes." Kasumi reports as I finished setting up the last Stallion.

"Good work, you two. Here's some snacks for when you get hungry." She leaves the bag she brought on the table. "Shirogane, when do you want to start using these things for training your squad?"

"There's a day after Mikoto comes back in which an argument over how they failed the CCSE will happen. I'll suggest them to do some

'special' training after that."

"Alright, I'll leave that to you. Tonight we'll be doing some more testing of the OS, after you spend some time with Yashiro to see if you can trigger a change in Kagami come in your suit to the usual spot. I think it's almost ready for being actually used without bugs or drops in performance."

"Awesome. By the way Sensei, there's some questions I wanted to ask."

"Hm? What is it?"

"You see, I was thinking that maybe this isn't the world that I went to during my usual loops." Her playful expression vanishes as fast as yakisoba in front of Kei.

"How do you mean? Didn't you say that you went from your world to this one many times already? What makes you think this is a different world?"

"First, is it normal that Nikkeis are seen badly by the Japanese population?"

"Yes, there were a lot of people that ran away when the news that China, and later Korea, had fallen reached here. They and their children are seen as traitors to the Empire, because they sold their honor to the foreigners for their own selfish wishes."

"Ok, second question. Is the UN hated by the Empire?"

"I wouldn't say hate, but they definitely don't like it. The UN employs many protocols and strategies from the American Army. I mean, they're the most effective ones so it's obvious why they use them, but the Japanese don't like to use only guns, to do 'tactical retreats' and to prioritize the result of a battle over the lives of their people."

"Could you explain that in detail?" She sighs as she closes her eyes.

"This is going to take some time, still wanna hear it?"

"Yes, I think I should have at least a basic knowledge of the politics of this world, just in case I ever need it. It would be bad if I didn't knew stuff that's common sense here and someone noticed it." Just like how Tsukuyomi-san did when we talked by the hill last loop. Sensei nods, runs a hand over her hair, and looks upwards at nowhere.

"The invasion of the BETA onto Japanese soil could have been halted if the Empire had agreed to let the UN and America use their nukes on the lands that were going to be ravaged by the BETA. The people would still have died, but the bombs would have taken out a very large chunk of the BETA invaders, since the Laser Class were not yet in position to take the missiles down. However, thanks to some political tension in the American bases on Okinawa and the refusal to retreat of our armies, the Empire refused the proposal and you know how it turned out in the end. They also rejected most of the help from the UN army, when the laws of the Vancouver Pact allowed them to, after the accord with the US fell down on the pretense that they were here to take control and enslave us to their wishes. The UN forces had a tough time moving and helping us thanks to the blooming chaos that ensued after Kyoto fell, we had our hands full defending the mountains that stood between the few cities that were still safe and near our bases. The Empire kept that tough act until the Yokohama Hive was confirmed to be built, then they had no choice but to lower their heads and allow the UN to mobilize all around the nation without much bureaucratic barriers."

She takes a bottle of water from the bag and drinks a bit from it. She starts talking again slowly, something is the way she squinted her eyes made me shiver. To make this Sensei openly show her displeasure… And when talking with me, of all people.

"Actually, it was the current Shogun that requested the help of the international community when I proposed to assault the 22nd Hive with the intention to capture it. She did so against the wishes of the

other Regent Houses, who wanted to perform the mission solely with the forces stationed in the Empire."

She rests the bottle on the table, folding her arms and leaning onto the wood, eyes still squinted and sparks still flying out in her words.

"America demanded many things for their help, one of them was that the Hive would fall under the UN's total control. Japan lost its chance to obtain G-Elements, lost around half of its territory to the establishing of the defense lines requested by the UN, and lost a great deal of independency in regards to how the country dealt with its problems, since it now was the frontline against the BETA on top of being the place where Alt. IV was taking place." She then frowns, and I can tell what's coming up next.

"And then, there's the mess made by the G-Bombs, right?" She nods, letting the air go as she ruffles her hair.

"Yes, and the G-Bombs. Many Imperial soldiers who were in the vanguard were caught on the explosion, and to make matters worse the American army blocked the Japanese pilots from entering the Hive. Only the UN teams were authorized to do so, as per the agreement, but the prideful Royal Guards made quite the scandal that day. Of course, the UN was also trying to stop the Americans from taking some G-Elements without authorization but that job went by without any thanks or recognition." Her frown intensifies, Kasumi hid behind my back. Sensei noticed that and sighed, chilling a bit. "To this day, while they acknowledge that without America's help Japan would be nothing more than a memory by now, there are many Japanese that feel like the Empire is being corrupted by the 'American Way'. From how much power the Prime Minister has, to how little influence the Shogun has on actual matters, to how feeble our self-defense power is, and to how America pressures the Empire to adopt its protocols and fighting methods."

"So, they know they can't survive alone but still reject the help they're given? I know that the traditions and core beliefs of the Empire are really important, but to go as far as to put themselves in danger…

This is just madness." It has nothing to do with having a resolve or honor, this is just a power struggle of the nobility that doesn't want to lose its grip on the steering wheel of Japan.

"I already told you last time, but the new project to renovate our armies was cancelled. America was helping Japan, to mend our relationships, with the development of the Shiranui Second TSF, but after how many people started spewing venom towards them after the last operation they cancelled the project. Now, Japan can only produce some spare parts for the older models and can only build the Fubuki, Shiranui and Takemikazuchi. The first two are already on the low end of their generation and the Type-00 is too expensive to mass produce, and it's kept as the special toy of the Royal Guard to make matters worse. If everything was tense before, now it's taken a turn for the worse. Japan most certainly has a hateful boner for both the UN and America, even though it owes its life to them."

"Holy moly, I didn't expect things to be… Last time there was resentment towards America, but this is on a completely different scale."

"It is what it is. Japan is too prideful to ask for help earnestly and accept its past mistakes. If the Empire collaborated with the UN and put all it's CQC knowledge on the table, adding the expertise of America's gun savants, we could make the most perfect TSF humanity has ever seen. Or at least a fighting protocol that used the world's most effective tactics in both close and long range. Sadly, all that went up in smoke after these last incidents."

"By the way, how are the Empire's relations with the rest of the world?"

"The TUF, the Philippines, and the Asian troops absorbed into the UN hate us, because Japan not only didn't send much help during the Invasion of Korea, other than a few reinforcements for the Continental Force, but it also refused to collaborate with them until the Yokohama Hive incident. There's also, you know… the grudges of the Second World War. COSEAN could be considered our only

ally, thanks to the good relation we have with the remaining Southern Asian nations due to the efforts of our Task Force in aiding them with the defense of their land, as well as for providing them with some Shiranuis before the Invasion demolished our own forces. Europe and Africa don't really care, officially they follow America in regards to their international relationships since American soldiers are the ones helping with the delivery of their TSFs and supplies. Oceania and Canada are on our side only because we're the only thing preventing the BETA from moving towards them. The Soviets are a mystery, and South America is… neutral, I think? You don't want to deal with them, trust me."

"Huh? Why? Are they not helping with the war?"

"Yes, the BrArg alliance is the biggest food producer in the world, and they're the third on taking refugees after Australia and America. But the way they fight is… brutal. America is a baby compared to them." What the hell? The trigger happy America is a baby? What the hell do the South Americans even do?

"Sensei, what do they do? I mean, I never heard of them fighting at all."

"That's because nobody wants to see a Fighting Hawk or a Super Tucano being deployed. They act on their own, they don't follow rules or regulations. They're humanity's suicide squad, the ones with the highest kill rate against the BETA. The only problem is that they destroy everything along the aliens, be it allies or civilians. Not even Americans are so cruel in their methods. To them all that matters is the result, victory at any cost."

"What?! Why? What do they even-"

"You have seen the XG being deployed, right?"

"Yeah, I have. What has that to do with this?"

"They have two smaller machines similar to it that run on a nuclear engine. Those two were made as a test, with the collaboration of America in the early eighties, to test the viability of using nuclear energy as a weapon of mass destruction against the BETA for when we couldn't drop nuclear missiles on them. And while they indeed work, the collateral damage is just too big. However, the BrArg army doesn't care about that. If they get deployed, they'll use their own special TSFs to clear the Lasers and after that they'll just wipe the BETA away with a nuclear cannon blast, along with anyone who is also in the beam's way. Their interventions are one of the reasons Africa didn't get overrun when America had its hands full trying to help the Empire, Europe and the Soviets against the BETA in recent years."

"I never… We had nuclear cannons?!"

"Yes, and they're deadly. For the BETA and for us. That's why we don't use bigger shells on our guns and the usage of tactical nuclear bombs has to go through UN approval first, to try to limit the amount of nuclear radiation we generate. Anyways, I guess that's the gist of it. We basically shot ourselves in the foot this time and the world got fed up with our way of doing things."

"Yep, this definitely didn't happen last time. Our relations with the UN weren't that bad, I had to rescue some people once and they didn't show any hostility towards me for being a UN soldier. I didn't really know much about our international relations, but I'm sure that our connections with America weren't so bad."

"I see. Well, is that all you wanted to ask?"

"No, I still have one more question. Sensei, why did you assume I was a spy?" She grimaces as she breaks eye contact.

"Because I found some weird intel on your records, that's all." You're not deceiving me with that dry tone, nor scaring me with those sharp violet flares.

"I want the details, if it's possible." After a moment of silence, she sighs and strokes her hair.

"I told you I had found something odd in your records, right? You had very little information on your profile from the public database. Very few people can have so little data, but I found one bit that made me suspicious."

"What was it?"

"It said you left your school but didn't move away from the Hiiragi district, but you also weren't transferred to another school. Obviously that is a lie, it's illegal to not send your child to get formal education in the Empire since the eighties. I found that to be a very stupid way to cover info, but I decided to dig deeper. Then, I found a profile with your name and picture in the databases of the Royal Guards."

"Wait, the Royal Guards? Was I being targeted by them?"

"No, you were one of them. A 1st Lieutenant, in fact."

…

Wait, what?!

"I was a Royal Guard in this world? And a 1st Lt.? How old was I?!"

"Fourteen, maybe?"

"How the hell did I became a 1st Lt. at such a young age?!" This doesn't make any sense! That means I wasn't a civilian here. But then, how did I met Sumika in this world? How does she remember me? Was she also a Royal Guard?

"Don't ask me. There was very little info on that profile too, and it was very well hidden. It took me two hours of hacking to open it. That made me really suspicious. But, wanna hear something crazy? Apparently, this world's you died twice."

"What? How do you mean? Was he also a quantum anomaly?"

"It's probably not that. His civilian report said that he died when the BETA took control of this area. But the report of the Royal Guards states that he was killed during the Invasion of Hiiragi, one of the phases of Operation Lucifer."

"Wait a sec, Lucifer was the attack on the Yokohama hive, right? That means he got commissioned under the Royal Guards two years ago?" So, he wasn't captured by the BETA like in the other world?

"Yes. He was fighting on the vanguard along the other Imperial troops as far as the report goes." He was a pilot? At such a young age? Man, what a badass I was here.

"So the fact that 'I' was a member of the Guard, had next to no personal data, and had two different death dates despite being alive and kicking is what made you think I was a spy?" I mean, it's totally understandable. That was suspicious as hell.

"Exactly. I still don't know much about this world's you. All I know is he lived in a lot of different places until he was seven, then he apparently lived in the Hiiragi district until he was ten. There's no more data from then on. In the Guard's report it said you were recruited since an early age, but at what age and why you were recruited was not written anywhere. Any data about your family, education, medical records, military training, or anything at all is gone."

"It's like I was erased or something."

"If you had been erased there would be no records at all. I think someone was trying to hide you, that's why I assumed you were part of a special task force working in the Intelligence Division of the Royal Guard. And then… you know the rest."

"Yeah, this pretty much seals it for me, this IS a different world. You would have warned me about this last time, or at least reacted to this

in some form of way, like you did here."

"I see. Do you see any other differences?"

"Kasumi talks a lot more now, Marimo-chan is angrier, our training is way more harsh, and the Royal Guards approached me earlier and seem to know me, though I already know why now."

"They… approached you?" I tell her of what happened with Maya-san, which… I had forgotten to do. "To think something like that went unnoticed. Shirogane, if you're ever threatened I authorize you to defend yourself by any means necessary."

"Roger. By the way, there's no records about Sumika in this world, right?"

"No, not a single one. Any trace of her existence has been wiped off the face of the planet as a collateral effect of the G-Bombs' explosion when the conduit between the worlds was created, I think. No one remembers her ever existing and there is no data left of her, save for a bare bones report in the public databases detailing her academic grades and who her close relatives are, all of them are dead though. So we won't know how she and this world's you met until Yashiro can properly talk with her or we turn her into the 00 Unit."

"I see. Well, I'll be extra careful when dealing with the Guard from now on."

"You do that. I'll be waiting for the report on these consoles, and be ready for the OS' tests at 8 PM. That's all. Oh, and be nice with Yashiro! She's not very good at these games." Sensei laughs while smiling, which makes Kasumi move her ears as she shots an annoyed glare at her.

"Takeru-san, CryRing Saga is ready for the test."

"Ok, let's give it a spin."

*At the same time.*

*( A h allway near the track field .)*

**[Mana]**

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My position illuminated by the sunshine, I stood just besides the window in case she turned her head towards me.

Meiya-sama was training alone in the track field. Her swings were as good as always, her pose firm and resolute. Her hair sways through the air as if it were waves hitting the shore, her movements keep following the patterns I taught her as if it were but a dance, swiftly and without wasted movements like a bird soaring through the clouds. However, despite the immutable posture, her eyes were laid upon somewhere else.

Going by how she's squinting them, by the lack of a delay in her swings, it is clear that her heart is resembling the surface of a lake after being assaulted by a pebble. Considering how intense her training has become in the last month it wouldn't be odd for her to be troubled, and yet something tells me that is not the reason that is causing her gaze to waver so.

Meiya-sama, what is the source of your worry? I wish I could just go and ask you, yet I must remain still, limiting myself to watch.

Our current situation is in a stark contrast with my cousin and her pupil. Maya confirmed that the man who joined Squad 207 was no spy. His informal and dismissive tone, his contrarian way of speaking, his annoyed face, the answers he gave her, all were proof enough.

And if that wasn't enough we had the privilege to spy on his mission that night. Ebisu reported to me that he had gone to a changing room and had come out of it in a suit, and me and Maya went to her

ride to observe what was happening through the cameras of the carrier ship.

Maya had always thought that she wasn't a good enough teacher for you, since she couldn't fix those eccentric moves you were always doing in and out of a TSF. However, if they evolved into your current style, it was for the best that she didn't. You always had talent, but that night's performance was simply marvelous. Your speed and dexterity resembling a diving hawk, and your accuracy was also spectacular. To think that you took ten pilots on your own and almost managed to win, you've grown quite splendidly in these years you were away. Had it been a fair fight without the turrets you would have been the clear winner, I'm sure.

If only I could have guided Meiya-sama to that level of skill. A sigh escapes my lips as I continue to watch. A stagnant air finds its way to my lungs as Meiya-sama's footing becomes irregular, her swings less graceful as she needlessly puts too much force behind them.

You told Maya you had someone to protect. If I were to guess, I think Her Highness sent you to have someone watching over Meiya-sama in case she gets commissioned, as I won't be able to stay by her side once she does. I only hope Meiya-sama accepts your aid openly when she finds out, maybe you will be able to mold her into a proper samurai. She seems to have taken an interest in you, hopefully you can continue to keep her safe when I'm called back to the Shogun's side.

My communicator beeps, another call from HQ-01. Must be my orders regarding how should I approach you.

"This is Tsukuyomi."

"Good afternoon, 1st. Lieutenant. I am hoping to have called at an appropriate time." This calm, gentle voice…

"Forgive the rude greeting, Your Highness! 1st. Lt. Tsukuyomi, at your service." I stand upright instinctively, holding my breath as I

leave the window.

For Her Highness to call me herself, I can only hope I did not incur her wrath.

"At ease, Mana. Maya informed me that you were wishing for new instructions regarding… the shadow that lies in Yokohama Base. I already have been made aware of the changes that had occurred there, you are to continue your duty as you were. Keep your distance and do not intervene, unless a serious situation presents itself."

"Yes, Your Highness!"

"That is all. I am greatly thankful for your efforts, Mana. You have my sincerest gratitude."

"Your words are more than what I deserve, Your Highness."

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*At the same time.*

*(Tokyo. Imperial Palace. Audience Room. )*

**[Yuuhi]**

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Finishing the call, I leave the communicator in Maya's hands. She then bows and leaves my personal chamber. I slowly rearrange the golden crown atop my head, resting my hands on my lap afterwards.

I sigh, looking towards the balcony, towards the clear skies we are enjoying today. The sun's company enticing the golden ornaments to shimmer, the room was pleasant as it hasn't been in a long time. The pillars sending small shadows onto the magenta carpet, I simply enjoy the silence of solitude for as long as it'll last.

I am hoping to have been able to offer some measure of comfort to her. I have heard of the increasingly arduous training Meiya has

been enduring. It must be hard on you Mana, to only be allowed to watch from the shadows.

I must praise Maya for going to survey the situation herself, to keep it all a secret. When she notified me you were troubled by the shadow in Yokohama I assumed the worse. However when she told me there was no danger to the mission and that Mana simply was wishing for new directions on how to approach the situation, I had to keep a sigh from escaping these lips of mine. I don't know what I would do if I lost you too, Meiya. I pray that your resolve stays strong, and I hope Mana can continue to support you regardless of the results of your training.

The door to my chamber opens, and the Chamberlain leads a tall man in a pale gray business suit into the room. He gets on his knees and puts a hand to his chest, tipping his hat with the other.

"I am honored to have been called to serve you once again, Your Highness."

"Yoroi, raise. Be at ease, no unwanted eyes nor ears are upon us here. Would you have the reports I asked of you?" He remains kneeling, and, as he raises his head from the floor, he takes out some envelopes from his coat and hands them to the Chamberlain, who then hands them to me.

"Your Highness, I'm afraid to inform you that the deal for the Shiranui Second has fallen completely. The Americans have lost all interest in the machine after the comments of the members of the Guard reached the ears of the president of the company responsible for the engine, and no amount of negotiating was enough to get them to resume the project."

"That truly is a shame." I was expecting this, but I still held onto the hope that our relations could somehow be repaired. "What else?"

"The EU's council rejected the proposal to start the joint development of the food plant you had sent them, for the same

reasons as the Americans."

Even that project was rejected? I curse my powerlessness, if only I could dissuade more members of the Regent Houses to give America and the UN another chance. Sigh… This will only make Raiko-san even more adusted. How distressing.

"I see. What of the report on the internal skirmishes?"

"There's many that are unhappy with the current situation of the UN, especially regarding the Diet. There's some that are still suggesting to take control of it, while many others in the lower echelons are very much opposed to any kind of further collaboration with them if they keep on infringing on what they believe are your rightful entitlements."

"So it's the worst case scenario." I remain with my eyes closed for but a moment, to vanquish this freezing hold that was wishing to make nest in my heart. "Has Kurechika-dono revised the plan to renovate our military?"

"I'm afraid to tell you that he's at an impasse. There's no feasible way in which we can produce the amounts of Type-00 and Type-94 that we would require to modernize all of our forces, and that is only looking at the time it would take to build the units, not the funds it would require. However, he cannot request the UN for spare parts or new units without gaining the animosity of many VIPs, especially within the nobility going by my intel." And we also have missed our chance to push for the Shiranui to other countries. "Obviously, America and Europe won't do business with us, and the Soviets have their hands full with the defense of Kamchatka." And the COSEAN army is in an even worse state than ours, as far as I know.

Our tomorrow looks grim indeed. I fear a war between those who support the Diet and those who oppose it could break out at any moment now. I can only dare to pray the next delivery of those Shiranui arrives in time before our MDF suffers further casualties.

"This is most troubling indeed. I certainly appreciate your dedication, Yoroi. I hope next time we meet we can discuss a better outlook for our nation."

"Your Highness, I still have one last report to give you." One last report? Am I so restless that I forgot something?

"What would it be about?"

"I received a call from the Vice Commander of Yokohama Base, former Imperial Researcher Yuuko Kouzuki-san."

The name made me drop my smile, for if she is troubled… If this are yet more setbacks to the project…

"What did she require of you?"

If there is something I do know about her is that Kouzuki dislikes Yoroi much. So for her to be the one to call him, it must be a dire setback that she's encountered. And for him to come to me instead of Kurechika-dono or the UN's High Council… Whatever could this be about?

"She requested my services for a certain matter she did not divulge much about. However, she mentioned that if I agreed to aid her, she'll show me the blueprints of a few projects she had been working on alongside the Alternative Project. One of those is a stealth system made from the ground up with Japanese technology."

"What?! A stealth system? You speak of something similar to the one the American Army employs?"

"Yes, she said she was quite proud of her invention. She also mentioned something about refurbishing older TFSs with some new tech her engineering team designed to improve their performance until newer models become widely available."

"… Is this true? Has she truly developed such inventions?"

"This is what she herself said to me. She was very careful not to slip what she wanted in return, and asked me to keep this as an absolute secret. I fear she might be losing her faith in me, ahaha." He smiles, I couldn't help but to chuckle along for a moment.

"If she has indeed developed such technology, then… However, why would you be informing me of this, Yoroi? Is this not a personal request she asked of you?" I know he is loyal to me and that this intel is truly precious, but to inform me of it when he still hasn't confirmed it? It is not like him.

"Yes, it is a personal request." His tone then lowered, almost becoming inaudible from my position, as he also lowered his head as if to hide his lips. "However, she did reveal that she wanted me to modify the public databases. She didn't give me a name, but she wishes to alter the profile of someone in her service."

Is she trying to cover someone? It must be a very important individual for her to ask this much. However, with my current standing, if it were know that I accepted such a thing… If anyone notices this, I'll lose most of the little power I have. In no way the other leaders of the Regent Houses would let this go unpunished, for it is borderline treason.

However, I believe that there is a way for me to make ample use of this opportunity. It shall not be treason if the Empire gains a great benefit from this deal. As much as I may abhor the idea of employing a stealth system, I can use it to gain the favor of quite many people. And, if she also has a means to enhance our forces, that will only enhance our defensive capabilities against the BETA. Furthermore, these news would equal that her research is, hopefully, proceeding well. In which case, my morals aside, there is little choice left but to support her.

"I'll give you permission to alter the databases, on the condition that the unit of the Royal Guard stationed at Yokohama Base going by the callsign Blood is allowed to test this stealth system. I want them to be my eyes regarding all these developments she spoke of, and if

the results are satisfactory I want the Empire to have exclusivity or priority when it comes to acquiring the licensing and producing rights to them over any other bidders. If she agrees to these terms, I shall give you the code to fulfill your part. You also do not need to tell me what this favor entails, but I would like a very detailed report on all the inventions as soon as possible. Of course, all of this is to be kept secret from any other party."

"Yes, Your Highness. I shall relay the message with utmost secrecy."

"Was there anything else regarding her that merits my attention?"

"No, that was all. Worry not Your Highness, I shall make sure Yokohama remains safe. Even if it seems like I'm losing my fans over there." He smiled again as he rose from the ground.

"I see. Thank you kindly for your support, Yoroi. Please do take care."

He bows to me and, after saying his parting words, he takes his leave escorted by the Chamberlain. And so, I am alone again in the room.

Such good timing, perhaps this is fate sending me one last ray of hope. If Kouzuki has a way to enhance our current weaponry that will do wonders for the relations between the UN and our people. It would also be a much needed breath of air until we can arrange another deal or restart the Second's development. I do not think the prototype I'm working on will be ready before the end of the year, so devising a way to empower our military is a top priority right now.

But I cannot help but to smile at this turn of events. The help had to come from Yokohama. I slowly stand up, going towards the balcony. Looking at the Capital from this colossal height, looking at all that we have managed to protect so far, I finally sigh and relax my shoulders. The incoming sunshine warms my entire being, and yet what spurs such glee in me, what unties the chains in my shoulders, what banishes the worried wringing in my hands comes from within. I look

back, he is not there. Yet, I cannot help but to feel as if he were here after being given these news.

"… Could this be your hand aiding me from the afterlife, Takeru?"

A sudden gust of wind reaches the balcony, briefly caressing my face, making my fringe flutter faintly. My smile widens as I look back at our azure skies, a few fingers of mine come to thread my cheeks, others go to the crown I've been always made to wear briefly.

I can only hope the peace you gave your life to obtain can last some more. Nobody can tell what will happen if this tension keeps escalating. Hopefully the waters will calm down before either side decides to make a horrible decision and bring a storm about.

The door to my chamber is yet again opened, shattering my daydreams and reminiscence. Subduing my smile, I return inside to the many meetings that still await me for the day.

# Sore Point

### 2 nd Arc: Distrust

### Chapter 11: Sore Point

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*October 31st. 05:42 PM.*

*(Classroom.)*

**[Takeru]**

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The sun was already done with today's shift, leaving its post up there. In the same way that the sky is losing its afterglow, the classroom was filling with the quick scribbling of our notes as they muttered our faint complains, that we could not voice out.

A few pages were turned and, without waiting a second, she placed, or almost slammed, a hand on her desk.

"Next question!" Wow, Marimo-chan is not easing up today, huh?

She looks at us, to make sure we were paying attention and were on the right page, and then begins to tackle the next assignment.

"You are stranded on enemy territory, fleeing from an infiltration mission and carrying valuable data with you. Two enemy units located some two hundred meters to your ten and two respectively are stationed on a cliff, and they have a clear aim at you. You all managed to arrive to a safe location behind some trees, where they cannot snipe you."

Still holding the book, she goes to the blackboard and begins to draw in it the images found within the pages using blue chalk to mark our units. When she was done with it she leaves it on top of her desk

and then picks up a diluted orange one and begins to press it as she marks the enemies' positions, sending a small piece of chalk flying about.

"However, as you were crossing open terrain, some of your comrades were left behind as the assault from the cliffs scattered you. They cannot move from their current position or the enemy units will snipe them on the spot, and they will surely be either killed or captured if you do nothing. You know that reinforcements will not be arriving for at least ten minutes to extract you from the field, however they'll have to deal with the rest of the hostiles in the area to keep you safe, and the window of time you have to board your ride is very small. You also cannot rule out the possibility that you could also run into other chaser units as you proceed from now on."

She stops drawing and we focus onto the rest of the problem on the book, she holds it up as if she were practicing for a play while eyeing us to make sure we were keeping up. I couldn't help but to arch my brows a bit when she stared at me for a sec too long.

"You're low on ammo, have no sniping rifles or smoke grenades with you, and you are only halfway to the designated escape point. However, those comrades who were left behind had part of the intel you gathered during this mission. Regardless, you cannot rush to their aid or you risk being sniped, and every second matters in the field. Therefore, you must make a decision quickly. Do you proceed to the extraction point and leave your comrades behind; or do you devise a plan to rescue them?" She then lowered the book, giving us some seconds to ponder our answer.

Looking at the map, it's obvious this is a trap. If we try to circle around the cliff, we'll end up without enough time to escape and reach the extraction point. We can't rush out or we'll get killed, and we also don't have any sniping rifles to deal with the units on the cliff. The best option is to leave an element behind while entrusting the intel to the rest, the others then go to the extraction point.

If the element doesn't make it back when the reinforcements arrive, we bail out. Those who escape will be the focus of the enemies on the cliffs, letting the element slowly approach our comrades after some moments even if they have to move further into the trees. Those who go to the extraction point can try to bait the enemy by drawing their attention on purpose too when the reinforcements arrive. It all depends on whether we can avoid the other hostiles in the area, but we don't really have a surefire way to protect those left behind from the snipers. Of course, we could just leave and prioritize the mission.

"Instructor, I have an answer." Chizuru raises her hand, Marimo-chan nods, and, after tapping her glasses, she stands up. "Our whole team could cooperate to rescue our comrades. While we cannot rush out of cover towards their location, we merely need to distract the enemies on the cliffs to allow our allies to move out towards us."

"I see." Marimo-chan crosses her arms but then her eyes squint a bit, making my stomach feel as if it was just hit by a DMP. "However, there are two units on the cliffs. One could easily snipe them as they move."

"They could take a longer trail, using the terrain as cover." She counters, again tapping her glasses.

"Then, how do you deal with the hostiles patrolling the area? What if they surround you all once you rendezvous with your comrades?"

"We can either retaliate or flee towards the escape point."

"The time frame is too tight. Your friendlies might not be able to cover you if you don't arrive in time to their vicinity. You're putting the whole mission at risk, Sakaki." She rises her chin and narrow her eyes, Chizuru seemed to compact her arms onto her sides as she returned the gaze.

"Instructor, leaving our comrades behind also presents a failure. We may lose valuable intel and, if they were captured and took in for

questioning, the enemy would attain critical knowledge about our mission's goals. There is also no guarantee that we won't be sniped once we move out from our current location." Chizuru retaliates without backing down.

"Then, what do you do once your time is up, Cadet? The reinforcements won't be able to hold their ground indefinitely."

"In that case, once we confirm our comrades are out of the snipers' range we can also start moving towards the extraction point."

"So, not only you give the enemy time to surround you on your current location, you also guide them to the escape point. And the safety of your comrades is still not secured, and I'm being lenient on any of you not incurring injuries during this distraction. Anyone else got any other proposals?" Chizuru sat down, her brows fusing into one tense V.

"Yes, I do." I rose a hand, the Instructor nodded, and I stood up. I then explained my reasoning. "… And, worst case scenario, we can leave our comrades behind."

"So you're willing to abandon not two but four of your squadmates?"

"We would be buying them as much time as we possibly could. Circling through the cliff would be a waste of time for us and we cannot remain stationary or we risk being surrounded. That would also make it easier for the enemy, since they would already know of our location and they have the advantage of being familiarized with the terrain as well. While time will be against them and they will surely run into hostiles on their way, we cannot remain behind waiting."

I take a second of pause, Marimo-chan still doesn't seem convinced but doesn't ask anything. Again feeling my stomach tense up on its own, I continue.

"The biggest threat are the units on the cliffs, so if we draw their attention as we escape our comrades would have a bigger chance of making it out alive, while not compromising our arrival to the escape point. There's also the matter of the chasers, since we must have assaulted a facility many hostiles are sure to be coming for us. Also, we don't know whether reaching the extraction point will be enough. We don't know if the enemy has anti-air missiles or a way to give chase to our ride. Time is of essence, and escaping with as much time left is the priority. If the situation is too dire, or if we have too little ammo, then perhaps all of us should escape together without leaving anyone else behind. Delivering the intel we have on us is better than risking us and our reinforcements to die on the field. That is all." She holds my gaze, silently judging me.

I know this is a tricky question. There is no right answer, not with so little data. That's what this problem is trying to portray, that orders in the field are not absolute.

A single bullet hitting us from the cliffs would change the game plan completely, leaving us with no choice but to abandon those who were left behind. If those same comrades managed to avoid all pursuers or maybe ambush them, they would make it in time if we give them cover. There are many pitfalls here, and this is not really a problem that requires an answer. I remember Marimo-chan used this as a small debate in my past loops, not as a questioning. It was actually fun during my first time around, it was like a puzzle game. Only after getting commissioned the first time around I learned that 'game theory' was used in military simulations and exercises.

"May I ask why are you choosing to leave your comrades behind with such ease?" Marimo-chan asked, a hand on her chin and a brow curved slightly.

"I mean, the images on the book have barely no info on how the terrain is. That is realistic, I guess. But there is no 'right' answer, there isn't a 'correct' solution in my opinion. In which case, we gotta rush the win condition. You can't fight what you don't know, and there's a lot of unknown details in this mission while there's a heavy

responsibility on our shoulders. I believe we should focus on what we can feasibly accomplish, Instructor."

And trying to save some might lead to many more dying. That's… something I know well. But, hey, maybe my logic isn't that good. Those two years back home and the guilt of what happened might have screwed up my compass.

"… That was a well formulated answer, Shirogane." She smirks for a moment. "However, your organization's standing could be put at risk if your comrades are captured. And the intel they have could be more important than the one you possess. So, any other answers?" I sat down and looked at the rest. They avoided my gaze, looking down. "I see. Well, let's debate on this matter for a moment. Turn the page, the enemy positions and possible outcomes are listed there."

The rest of the class went by as we discussed what could have happened on this mission. For some reason, Chizuru was being extra contrarian now. Eyes squinted, brows low and arched, the edge of her lips twisted and twirled when I tried to debate with her. Meiya was also rather cold, using short sentences and all.

"Well, that will be all for today. Do remember to read the following pages, we're tackling the next chapter starting tomorrow. Dismissed!"

"Salute!" We all stood up and saluted. Marimo-chan returned the gesture and left. "Sigh… These last few questions were too abstract." Tapping her glasses, she begins to put her books in her bag.

"I agree." Meiya sighed as she crossed her arms. "It is most frustrating to be left with so little data to formulate a plan. There was a very large room for error in that last question."

"I think that's the whole point." I grabbed my books and put them into my little bag. "It's supposed to show how volatile the battlefield can be."

"I think so too, Shirogane-san. Even so, you formulated a good answer very quickly." Tama smiled as usual as she put her own bag on her back.

"Yeah, 'good answer' Special-kun."

"Hey, what's with that leering?"

"Nothing." Kei turns around and walks to the door.

"Well, let us go leave our books in our quarters." In answer to Meiya's words we all left the classroom.

"But anyways, I still think this is going too fast."

"Yeah, that's right. We're already starting another chapter tomorrow." Tama sighed and scratched one of her ears softly.

"Well, you still got the best answer so you're doing good." Chizuru said as she walked in front of me, sour as lemons.

"There was no right answer. That was just what I thought was best."

"… I see."

Hey, what's wrong with them? I know they've been kinda overwhelmed since this new regime started, but I didn't do anything to upset them. I know they kinda got upset at Kasumi thanks to how cold she was when she came to pick me up, but I did apologize to them about it.

We arrived at the barracks and after leaving our stuff in our rooms, we went to the PX. Bustling with yells, chatter, and complains as always at this hour, we got in line, without saying anything. We got our food and went to our usual table. As we ate, we debated over the exercises and lectures but…

"I'm only saying it was the most effective way to deal with the mission, with what little data we had on hand."

"Huh, I see." Chizuru took a moment to drink some miso, then glanced at me with lowered eyelids. "Then, would your answer be the same if you were the one left behind?"

"Of course. If I'm a hazard to you, you should cut your losses and prioritize your own wellbeing."

I rather die myself than see any of you die or get injured because of my carelessness. It would be hard for me to leave one of you behind, sure. But if it's that or putting everyone at risk, I would… shoulder the decision myself. I already forced you all to sacrifice yourselves more than enough times. That's not happening here.

"Such a team player, asking us to leave the dead weight behind." Kei, who was sitting to my left, narrowed her eyes at me as her tone was a like branch hitting the window during a storm, catching me completely off guard in its aggressive vibe.

"Hey, I'm just giving you my opinion. And it's just a debate. No need to get upset."

"Whatever." She gulped down her miso and stood up, lifting her tray with a bit too much force. "Later." And she left the PX as quickly as if she were a blue hedgehog.

"Sheesh, what got into her?" I know Kei doesn't like abandoning people or retreating thanks to all that business with her dad, but still, I think this is too much.

"I wonder." Chizuru again averted her eyes, her brows were still tense in a V. She only looks like that when she's really upset, if my memory of our relationship isn't wrong. "Well, I'll be going too." She also stood up and left swiftly.

"Um… I want to review some stuff, so I'll be going too."

"Okay, later Tama." She did smile as she got up, and said her goodbyes to me and Meiya with a waving hand.

Sigh… I wonder why they're so upset. I know I've been doing better than them despite their best efforts, but I'm just trying to help you guys out. If only you listened to my advice instead of getting like this. You won't be able to save everyone… Sometimes shit just hits the fan, and there's nothing to be done about it. All you can do sometimes… is just take the fall in stride, and move on from then. I know it's kind of weird coming from me, the guy who keeps going back to the past, but life's a bitch sometimes and won't hesitate to sucker punch your kidney like a bastard when you least expect it. They should know that better than me, since they've lived their whole lives in this world.

"Shirogane, might I ask you something?" Meiya looked at me as she put down her chopsticks.

"Sure, what's up?"

"Would you truly forsake your comrades if you were placed in a similar situation to the mission that was described in our last question?"

"… Yes. Even if that meant that I could be the one left behind. Trying to save a few can end up causing the death of many more, but above all, you can't fight the unknown. It would be too risky to compromise the mission."

"… I see." She looked down, slowly picking some more food as her shoulders lowered a bit.

"Hey, I'm not saying we should abandon anyone without trying, it's just-"

"No, it is alright. That is your opinion and you already explained your reasoning."

"Okay… So, hey, sorry about Kasumi. I know I already said it, but she really can be too cold without meaning to sometimes."

"There is no problem. You have made yourself clear already."

It feels as if I had knocked a wall of glass. Hmm… Knowing how she is, she surely took offense with my comment about the mission.

"So, Meiya…"

"Yes?"

"I really am not saying we should abandon our squadmates without a second thought. But sometimes… things will get tough and you won't have a way to save everyone."

"… I know that well. You do not need to justify yourself to me. I can… see your point of view. There is no need to keep debating over this. Also, isn't that Yashiro?"

"Hm? Oh, you're right." I turned towards the entrance and saw Kasumi staring, moving her bunny ears *really* slow once we made eye contact. Sigh… Deadlines are a scary thing, indeed. "Well, I'll be going. Oh, and take a look at the graph on page 68 if you can."

"Why?" Meiya raises a brow.

"Well, I skimmed through the pages before leaving the classroom and it seemed to have a lot of useful stuff for next class. I would have liked to talk about it with the rest but, well…"

"Do not worry, we can manage on our own." She looks away, returning to her food. "You shouldn't keep Yashiro waiting, since you promised to spend time with her."

"Yeah, later." I pick up my tray and leave the table.

Why was she so upset? Sigh… I know I'm cruising through this while you all struggle, but that's no reason to give me the cold shoulder like that. Also, is it me or is Meiya cross towards Kasumi? I mean, the bunny has been real rude to her when she came to ask me for help these last few days. I know I have been ignoring Meiya and the

rest for a short while thanks to the testing of the consoles and the XM3, but I've been trying to help during class. Eh, I'll just do my best to not be so obnoxious. Maybe I shouldn't be so insistent on my own answers? Yeah, I should let them form their own words instead of being so pushy.

Well, I'm sure this little thing will go away once they get some more good results in their belts. Also, Mikoto is sure to help them regain their cheer.

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*Same Day. A bit past 9 PM.*

*(Takeru's Room.)*

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"So, what do you think? Should we accept the deal?" Sensei asked me on the other side of the line.

"This just might be a stroke of good luck for us, Sensei. If you think it's safe, go for it. But make sure we can also record their data, I'm sure it'll be useful for the XM3."

"Alright, we'll discuss that later. That's all." And she hanged up.

So, in exchange for clearing my records and fixing my profiles, the Shogunate wants to have early access to the stealth tech and the other stuff Sensei made, as well as letting Tsukuyomi-san's squad be the testers.

This is truly convenient for us. I remember that despite all the fighting she and her squad did during the defense of our base, their Takemikazuchis were still in good condition after it. They lasted quite nicely during the Kashgar Raid, too. I don't know if that's because of the TSF itself, but their skill should be a great thing to analyze. If by looking at their control logs and combat data we can somehow figure out how they make their weapons and TSFs last so much, we would get a serious boost in our performance. The less our TSFs and

swords wear out, the less supplies we need on the field. This came with such good timing, perhaps this is fate throwing me a present after all my efforts.

The consoles are more than ready, the XM3 is shaping up to be even better than last time. All the stuff I brought ended up being useful to Sensei. We're all green on that front.

On the other however…

During this week the training became even harder in all fronts. I can now call it training, but the girls are being driven to their limits. The lectures, the fighting exercises, the practice in the range field, the running, everything is overwhelming them. They're certainly getting better than how they were in my past loop, but Marimo-chan is not letting up.

Since I've been busy with the consoles and the XM3's testing I haven't had the time to help them train much, and somehow I feel like there's a wall between us now. I know they might be upset at me, going by our talks after today's lecture, but still…

When it was the other way around you guys didn't give up on me, despite your complains and teasing. So surely you won't hold it against me now, right? I won't give up on you, so you should rely on me a bit more you know. Well, tomorrow Mikoto comes back so she should help me lighten the mood between us.

"Sigh… I'll just do what I can. Let's keep practicing." I grab the Minaru Kamui and start swinging again.

I've been doing some practice with it at night when I have the time. I don't have much room to move here, but it's better than nothing and it's also a nice way to train for any time where I'm surrounded or stuck. I did promise Maya-san I'd keep improving myself, and since not even Meiya can give me a good challenge in her current form, having some mental battles with myself is the best method I have to at least not lose my edge.

Also, holding the sword with the ribbon has been a great help to keep my resolve these days, since honestly I feel like crying sometimes. I have been making a conscious effort to be nice and try to help the girls, but I'm getting shot down faster than aircraft on the range of a Laser class. I know I shouldn't expect them to be nice and intimate with me, but being treated so coldly despite my best attempts at not being a jerk hurts. A lot.

So having our sword with me helps me remember why I'm here. The oath I made, to protect them no matter the cost. So long as some of them survive this hell and can find peace and happiness, I can keep on fighting. Even if I'm apart of them forever. I rather end up alone by their choice than having to be alone because all of them are dead. I wouldn't be able to endure it, not again.

Once I was done training, I carefully stash the Minaru Kamui in the closet, wash my face on the sink, rinse my mouth, and then hit I the sack.

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**Some odd minutes before 6 AM.**

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"Ugh…" I stir under the bed, supporting me with one arm as I stood up. Rubbing my forehead, I blink as the grogginess leaves me.

I just had a dream about the time when I ran away to my world, dammit. Ugh, I thought I had these things under control… but they're getting more and more vivid.

It still hurts like hell to remember that. How Marimo-chan died, how Meiya forgot all about me in a few seconds, how Sumika forgot me and got crushed at the gym…

I breath in, clearing the mist in my eyes. I take my feet off the bed, resting my arms on my knees. I again inhale deeply with my nose, eyes closed.

… That is not gonna happen again. They're alive, t-they're still alive.

Sniff… I can prevent that. Yeah, I can do it. Wipe those tears, man. No one's dying like that.

Come on, breathe in. Exhale… Breathe in… Hic…

"C'mon, get your shit together. Hic… Stop crying, dammit."

I stand up and go to the sink, wiping my nose. A splash of cold water always helps. Hell straight, I'm wide awake now. I inhale sharply, returning my reflection's stare.

No one dies here this time. I can and will lead them to a better future, no matter what. Remember what you caused the last time you doubted, remember Sensei's words. Focus on attaining victory… and you'll attract a solution to your problems.

"… Let's get ready, last thing I want is to miss roll call."

Today, Marimo-chan told us we have lectures on how to assemble rifles. Again. Only this time it's also a competition, the two last ones have to run ten klicks. I wonder how good I am at zeroing a gun now, that is one thing I haven't practiced.

I took some minutes to get my shit together in my room before going to the PX, and when I got there the girls weren't at the table. I ate quickly and made my way to our classroom before I suffered the wrath of Marimo-chan. Luckily for me, I arrived at the door of the classroom and hear all the girls talking inside. So everyone is already here, first time I'm the last one to arrive. But I got here before the Instructor, so that's a win in my eyes.

"Yo, good morning!" I try to sound cheerful as I enter, to hide how shaken I still am from my nightmare today.

"Good morning, Shirogane-san." Tama is the only one who answers. She wasn't particularly happy as usual.

I take my seat, and not a single word was said. I can't help to feel something crawling up on my neck, licking my lips as I throw a glance at them. I bet they didn't want me hearing whatever they were talking about. Sigh… I need to find a way to get things back on track.

"Good morning, Squad." The Instructor enters while pushing the box with the rifles into the room.

"Salute!"

"Alright. You already know how this goes. I'll scatter the pieces of the rifle on your desk and put a blindfold on you, then you assemble the gun. We're doing this twice, one for a normal rifle and another for a sniping rifle. After all have finished, we'll go to the firing range. The ones that misses the most, or the ones who takes the less accurate shots, have to run ten klicks. Understood?"

"Yes, Instructor!"

The pieces get scattered, and all of us are blindfolded. After Marimo-chan's shout we all started to assemble our rifles.

Let's see… this goes here… And this is… no, this is for after I… And this thing here is the bolt… Now, I put you there. And now this goes… You get in place, and I just gotta…

"Instructor, I'm done." I say without removing the blindfold.

"What? But… Let me see… Hmm, yes… Nice work, Shirogane. I'll bring the next one."

I lift the cloth a bit, the girls weren't even close to finishing theirs. Oh well, can't start to pull my punches now. The sniping rifle is scattered this time, blindfold back on place. Let's do this.

This one is the… Then this goes… The handle goes with this… and here's the scope… Put this here, some pressure over here and…

"I'm done." This is child's play to me by now.

"Already? Let me check… Another fine job. Now, wait until everybody else finishes." I take off the blindfold and hand it to Marimo-chan.

The girls had just started with the sniping rifle. Meiya just finished the first one, she looked at me as I was staring at her and immediately avoided my gaze, looking bothered. What did I even do? Is she that envious of me?

We made our way to the firing range after everybody finished, without sharing a single word yet again. We get three shots with each rifle, with the first one towards the 300M target, and towards the 1100M with the sniper one.

Aight, let's see if I got any better at this. We all go into position, locking on our targets.

"Fire!"

First rounds blow off. Let's see… Second inner circle after the bullseye. Not bad.

Next shot, some centimeters off the center of the inner circle around the bullseye, third shot… near the bullseye, but still not dead center. Still can't do it, crazy how I have things to improve after all this time.

"Change rifles!" We get the sniping rifle, now let's see how I hold up. "Fire!"

First shot… On target, on the middle circle. Second shot… just on the line between the first circle around the bullseye and the next one. Now, last one… No dice, still not on the inner circle. Dammit, I got better no doubt but I'm still nowhere near Tama's level. Eh, I think this is fine, to finally show a not so awesome side of myself.

"Ayamine, Sakaki! Ten klicks on the track field!"

And off they go. Didn't expect Chizuru to have to run. So Meiya surpassed her? Way to go, girl.

"… Shirogane-san." Tama called out to me. She wasn't smiling and her brows were lowered, this is so not like her.

"What's up, Tama?"

"Why did you hold back?"

"Huh?" Tama being angry during training. This is a new one.

"Y-You heard me. Why did you hold back today? You could have scored a shot to the bullseye if you were trying seriously." Where the hell did this come from? She was the one who WASN'T mad at me yesterday.

"I wasn't holding back. I'm not so good at zeroing a gun. I can assemble them easily, but adjusting them manually is not something I'm good at."

"Not good at?" One of Meiya's brow rose as her lips plucked. "You almost managed to land a certain hit to the bullseye in both ranges, you're not fooling anyone Shirogane." Her every word hitting like one of her slashes, I can't do more than scratch my head. Last time they weren't so envious of my skill, even if I did hold back.

"Hey, I wasn't holding back, and I told you I don't like to brag. Look at Tama, she got two hits to the bullseye of the second target."

"Shirogane-san, if you were serious I'm sure you could have done that too." Her gaze falls down like my history grades, again looking dejected for real.

No Tama, I can't be as good as you. I've been trying for… I feel like Lonk on the Magorea's Mask game now, always going back in time to save the town.

"What do you think I am, a super elite soldier? I have flaws too, just that I trained a lot to polish them."

I probably trained for more than a lifetime in total. It's scary when I think about it, I'm like one of those prepromoted units of CryRing Saga since my 'growth' is capped. Wait… Does that mean they're gonna bench me in the late game?… I mean, I did end up sitting in the XG firing missiles last time.

"Making excuses? Do you not feel motivated to do your best against us, perhaps?" Seriously Meiya, why are you so angry at me?

"Why don't you believe me? Just because I'm good with many things doesn't mean I'm good at everything."

"However, your performance has been excellent since you arrived. You were always several steps ahead of us in all you did. Why would your performance on the morning practice suddenly drop yesterday and today?" Because I'm tired and having horrible nightmares? Because your attitude is making me really sad? Not like I can be honest with you.

"… You know I have that little project with Kasumi, and I also get tired. I'm a human too. I have peaks and valleys."

"But you have showed us your aim is much better than that. And you don't look sleep deprived, your movements do not denote exhaustion."

"Mitsurugi-san is right, you can always hit the 1500M target's inner circle even if it's on the outer rim during practice."

"Yes, but that's thanks to all the practice I got in my old squad. I was really pushed to my limits, that's why I'm so good now." I mean, I really put some effort in improving myself before coming back here. All the lessons with Tama also helped me out much to even be remotely decent at it, to begin with. I'd be nothing without her training from my first loops.

"Really? And why would you have received such harsh training regarding your gun skills, I wonder?" Meiya, stop with that glare. I guess I could be somewhat serious with them if it makes them drop the cold act.

"It's not that the squad got that training, I wanted to take a harsher course. I just… wanted to be better."

"Eh? Shirogane-san, you chose to take a harder training?" She stared at me curiously as if I were some weird animal.

"Don't you guys want to get as good as you can?" They share a look, looking down.

"Well, of course we do." She folds her arms and groans a bit. "But you're on Tamase's level, and she is a great sniper. You also possess very good skills in CQC and you never fail a question in the lectures. You're telling me you attained your current skill through independent training alone?" She again narrows her eyes at me, sending purple flares through her gaze.

I dunno why they're so mad at me, so… let's be honest with them.

"What would you have done if you lost someone important to you?"

"Huh?"

"I told you guys before. I… got someone killed. I do not want that to happen again, ***ever*** . That's why I pretty much spent the last months before coming here training myself, from dawn to the evening. That's why I'm so good." Meiya's eyes relax a bit as she caresses the top of her head, Tama looks down as her eyes almost close while holding one of her elbows real tight.

"… I see. However, why have you been holding back?" Meiya asks, eyes still not entirely losing their edge. Sigh… So there lies the root of the suspicions.

"Are you sure you want me to be serious against you?"

"Of course I do! Why would I not want for you to- Ah!" I stepped towards her in a flash, aiming one finger towards the base of her neck. I poked her, making her squeal and fall back.

"If you can't dodge that, you won't be able to keep up. And anyways, I wasn't holding back today. This is the best result I've ever gotten zeroing a gun myself." I push my chest out, since that is no lie.

"Why did you touch my neck?!" Aww, you look so cute when you're embarrassed.

"You wanted me to be serious against you, I showed you my speed. So, look, I know you're all taking this very seriously and that it's important to you all. So, from now on, I'll be serious against you, using all I've learned so far. So can you stop being so cold with me, Meiya?" I smile at her, but…

"Mitsurugi." A harsh tone together with an aggressive stare.

"What?"

"Stop calling me by my name. Call me Mitsurugi from now on, Shirogane. I will take you on and defeat you, don't think I'll let you ridicule me further." And she leaves for the classroom. Shit, she took it the wrong way.

"Hey, wait a sec! I wasn't making fun of you. I'm sorry, can we-"

**BAM!**

Ugh, that hurt! Why did she punch me?!

"Who do you think you are, grabbing my shoulder like that?!"

"Hey, what's going- Shirogane! Your nose is bleeding!" Marimo-chan sounded furious. Great, just what I needed. "Mitsurugi, you better have a good reason to explain whatever happened."

"Cadet Shirogane tried to grab my shoulder quite forcefully, so I defended myself."

"I was just trying to apologize! Seriously, what the hell is wrong with all of you today?!"

"That's enough. Mitsurugi, two laps on the track field. Shirogane, go to the infirmary and get something to stop the bleeding. We're continuing the lesson in a short while. I expect you two to be on your best behavior for the rest of the day."

Deluxe, this is the best thing ever. Is she really so pissed off at me being better than her? I just offered to be serious too, I don't know why she's so mad. Standing up again while the Instructor goes alongside Meiya to the track field, I rub my nose a bit.

"Hey Tama, do you know why Meiya was so mad?"

"Um… You should stop calling her in that way. But, um, is this really your best result so far?" She eyed me sideways, with small shadows creeping within her gaze.

"Yeah. I practiced a lot to get this good with a gun. Don't be so cold with me please. I just didn't want to overwhelm you guys, I'm not ridiculing you or anything." I bow to her, hopefully she'll see that I'm being serious.

"Oh, sorry. I wasn't trying to… Well, I know they are very prideful, so please be more tactful from now on. I'll try to talk with them, I don't like this at all." She holds her hands close to he chest, looking down.

"Thanks, Tama. Really."

The rest of the class went by normally, except for the cotton on my nose being bothersome. Chizuru and Kei didn't even ask me what happened. Meiya did not apologize, didn't even look at me. I guess this is on me for being an idiot and poking her.

Class ends and the three storm out of the classroom again, like they have been doing for awhile. Marimo-chan looks at them, but chooses to say nothing and leaves too. Tama looked at me clearly at a loss, I wave at her and she leaves after giving me a bow. You're too sweet Tama, I can't get you in trouble because of my stupidity.

I'm not as dense as I used to be, so I know that going to the PX with them right now is not a good idea. Pushing them for answers won't give me anything good in return. Let's give them some space, I'm sure Tama will tell them that I didn't mean anything bad.

"Sigh… I guess I'll take my lunch and go eat somewhere else."

As I made my way to the PX after waiting a while I saw Mikoto going towards the barracks. Right, she's going to see Marimo-chan. Maybe she can help me get out of whatever the hell is happening here.

I grab a tray and ask for yakisoba and some bread. I ask them to make a sandwich, leaving the tray I go to the track field while eating the thing.

I think I screwed up, I alienated them. Whatever, so long as we pass the CCSE and they get better than before I'm happy. Yeah, that's my goal. So long as they get to live a better life here that's enough for me. I shouldn't get so down, dammit.

… It's not like I'm all alone, anyways. I'm sure they'll chill in a few days. It's just a matter of time, and of me being tactful.

What did we have this afternoon? First Aid? Didn't I bring a book about that? If I try to change my attitude they'll get offended like this morning when I showed them that I honestly am not perfect, so let's do all I can.

I go back to my room and after a little searching I found the book in question. Taking a short shower, then putting some cream on my nose afterwards, I go to class. As I approach the classroom, a conversation reaches my ears.

"… He's truly amazing, I tell you. And never brags or anything." Tama was describing someone. Probably me.

"He randomly uses our names to address us. He knows much about tactics, he's good- no, great in every type of combat." Chizuru sounds somewhat displeased, like when she complained about my eating habits back in my world when we got together. Only with more fire in her words.

"And he's basically the perfect soldier. I do not know why he is even here." Meiya… Why do you… sound so angry?

"Special-kun is too good to be here."

"Oh, so that's how the new guy is?" Mikoto was there.

"Yes, he is excellent in every aspect as a soldier. But I honestly can't bring myself to trust him." W-What? Why did Chizuru say that?

"It's rare enough that he was scouted despite being so adept, it is even more odd considering he was in another country. And to make matters worse, he's playing around with us. He doesn't even take us seriously." Meiya's tone gave out a vibe of aggressiveness I've very rarely felt from her.

"So he's like a super soldier?" Mikoto, are you like them too?

"Shirogane-san is amazing no matter how you look at him, and he did say he wasn't looking down on us. But it makes you wonder, why was he scouted?" Tama was the only one that still tried to sound calm and friendly.

"Special-kun is toying with us. He should get bent."

"Ayamine-san, don't say that! He's one of us!" Tama tried to defend me, but…

"Tamase, we both know where he comes from. Only an American can be so adept with a gun, only one of them would propose such a

solution to yesterday's debate. You're telling me to trust an American?" Chizuru's venom was crystal clear.

Tama tried to argue, but Chizuru remarked that Americans are not to be trusted. Meiya agreed, and they told Mikoto to be wary of me. I clenched my fists so hard it started to hurt, it felt as if I had butterflies in my stomach. Alongside a bonfire, that is.

Why did things turn out like this? What did I even do to you? I was just training alongside you, doing my best, giving you advice, preparing the consoles so that you got even better than before. I came here to save you.

…

… To save *them* ? Or to save the memory of the other world's versions of them?

That's right, they're not the same people I remember. This is a different world after all, it wouldn't be rare for them to be completely different people here.

But even so… I gotta do something. I can't let our relationship take a nosedive here. Even if they're different, even if they're suspicious of me, it's up to me to clear the air. I did this to myself, I gotta fix this shit! Different or not I need them to win this war, and I want them to live.

"Cadet Shirogane, what are you doing there?" The Instructor addressed me as she got close. Right, this isn't Marimo-chan. This angry woman is different. I wonder why she turned out like this?

"Just taking some air, giving the girls space to catch up on stuff with Yoroi."

"That's really tactful of you. Now, go inside that the class will start."

Stepping into the classroom, they looked both startled and angered. They probably hadn't noticed I was listening on them, and only realized when Mari-… when the Instructor called out to me.

"Hey guys." I wave at them as I sit. They avoid my gaze, clearly uncomfortable as oil mixed with water.

"Are you all here? Yes, you are." The Instructor goes to her desk, clearing her throat before continuing. "As you know, today and tomorrow you have First Aid practice during the afternoon. I'm sure I don't have to tell you, but if anyone punches someone without a very good reason they're going to get a reaaally nice punishment. Now, I'll trust in you today and leave you on your own. Do not make me regret this decision."

We all salute and she leaves. She obviously was warning Meiya to not do something stupid again. Knowing her that's not going to stop her if she wants to punch me again. She is really stubborn.

"Hey, you're the new guy? Takeru Shirogane, was it?"

"Huh? Oh, yes. I'm the new guy." Mikoto stares at me from top to bottom, a finger on her lips. Is she… also like the rest?

"Hello! I'm Mikoto Yoroi, nice to meet you."

"Likewise." She smiles like she always does. So… Which is it?

"So, hey, I'm just gonna throw this out there, but are you as much of a jerk as they say you are?"

"Excuse me?"

"Yeah you see, everybody was like super mad about you! He's so perfect, he's been conscripted, he's an alien!"

"Wait, what did they-" Mikoto keeps talking on her own. As usual.

"But you don't look so bad! You even kinda look a bit goofy."

"Goofy? What do you-" I'll never be able to reach her when she gets like this, am I?

"Anyways, I was in the medical bay for awhile, so I need to catch up super fast guys!" Mikoto now addresses the girls, who look even more lost than me.

"Yoroi, you… You shouldn't speak of matters we discuss in pri-" Meiya also didn't get to finish.

"Oh, I remembered! I met a really nice soldier when I was in the bay, he gave me all kinds of advice for the CCSE and for when we get to ride TSFs!"

"Yoroi-san, please hear us out. Everybody is really tense now, so ple-" Much less Tama.

"I also read a lot of books! There's this novel I just know you're gonna love, Chizuru-san."

"Yoroi, we're trying to-" Not even Chizuru can stand up to Mikoto, it seems.

"I know we're going to get along Takeru, it's good to have you on the team."

"Sure thing." I have to hold a chuckle, seeing her doing her usual bullshit. Mikoto is still Mikoto. "Uh… How should I call you?"

"Mikoto's fine. Can I call you Takeru?"

"Sure." The girls wince upon hearing our exchange. They really do hate me in this world, huh?

"Deal then!" She doesn't seem to care, though. "You see Takeru, I'm really good at medical stuff."

"So I've been told."

"All right, how about I do a simple summary as a refresher for all of us?" She offers while going to the blackboard. "Hey Takeru, what's that book you're holding?"

"Oh, just a book on First Aid. Thought I'll bring it to not get anything mixed up."

"Hmm, haven't seen this one. Gaman Editorial? Don't know about this one. This book look really nice, though. The cover, the pages, it's almost new, isn't it?"

"Yes, Professor Kouzuki gave me some books to cover the knowledge I was lacking when I came here." I made up that excuse some minutes ago, I think it's not half bad.

"The Professor? Wow, so this must be… Hmm, what is… Hmm… " Eyes glued to the pages, she gets engrossed in the book.

"Yoroi, is it really so interesting?" Chizuru leans over Mikoto's shoulder to peek at the book.

"So it's not so important to use it, since the risk of death from bleeding out is too big… Yes, that's it. I knew I wasn't wrong about that."

"Yoroi? Hey, Yoroi!" Chizuru is literally yelling in her ear right now.

"Say Takeru, could you lend me this book? You finished reading it yet?"

"Yeah, you can take it. I already read through it." Back in my world when I had the time.

"Yay! Thank you!" She jumps at me and hugs me. Typical Mikoto. The rest look really uncomfortable right now.

"Uhh… Mikoto? You don't have to be so happy about it, it's just a book." Also please let me go, I can't take you being so sweet now of all times.

"No, this one has a lot of interesting things going by the summary. Really, thanks a lot!" At least someone is still the same here.

Unlike the others who are staring with a mix of surprise, towards Mikoto, and annoyance towards me.

"So you even know about medicine? Is there something you don't know, Shirogane?" Meiya asks in a mocking tone, brows surrounded by wrinkles.

"Of course. I'm not a surface pilot yet, so there's lot of stuff I don't know."

"Really now? And what kind of subjects are you not proficient in, if I may ask?"

"Repairs, for example."

Mostly thanks to how much I trashed my TSFs I rarely got to work on them, since they were so bent out of shape the mechanics had to personally deal with them last loop. And I also didn't get much beyond the basics then, with you… with them throwing wrenches at me as if they were freaking tomahawks. During my first loops I was never deployed until Iceberg, so I haven't had to handle a damaged TSF on my own so far.

"Special-kun, you can't do repairs?"

"I didn't have much practice with that, I focused more on combat. I'd like to believe I'm not bad, but I'm not awesome or anything." Kei stared at me for awhile, then looked away. Her eyes told me she believed me, since she did relax them a tiny bit.

"So let's start the class! Miki-san, what is the first thing you have to do when you encounter someone collapsed?"

"Huh?! I… Erm, you gotta…" Startled by the sudden question, she struggled to find an answer.

This went just as I remembered, with Mikoto shooting random questions towards us. Only this time I got all the answers right.

"… So, when you use a tourniquet, after which time is it safe to remove it?"

"You don't have to. It would be the same as if you hadn't even used it, so you gotta take the patient to a medic as soon as possible, before the necrosis starts."

"Right again! You're so smart, Takeru. Alright, now let's see… why don't we practice some CPR? Takeru, would you mind to lay down?" Sigh. I won't be able to avoid this, will I?

"Ok, laying down."

"Now, stay still. Here we…"

And this happened again. She's pinching my nose again, how long does she plan to do this? Well, at least the class is going on without incident.

"… And that's more or less how you do it." She says as she releases my nose, standing up. "Now, let's move on to how to stop bleeding injuries. Takeru, raise your arm."

"Like this?"

"Yes, so we already reviewed the others in the questions, but just in case you have to use a tourniquet here's what you need to do. You need to get a cord or something around the limb, and then tie it really tight. Then you put a stick right here if it's still rather loose… And if it's one of the hands you gotta raise it above the heart, like this."

I can hear my bones creaking a bit. This still hurts dammit! Why do I always have to be the dummy?! Mikoto, please stop! My arm doesn't bend that way!

"Okay, t-that's enough of it, right?" She arches a brow, but then lets go of my arm. Sigh… It's always the same with you, haha.

"So even Shirogane-san can't deal with this kind of stuff?" Tama don't tease me! At least the others seem to have loosened up a bit after seeing these simple practices.

"Yeah, that's pretty much all about it."

Mikoto put both hands behind her back, her right brow lower than her left one. So she got pissed I didn't let her finish the explanation? Haha, she really doesn't like it when she gets interrupted.

"Now, there's one last thing you have to take care of." She aimed a finger around, then finishing by pointing it at me, probably because she's a bit mad. "That's the patients mental state, since they can go into shock. You need to reassure them, lay them down gently if their head isn't injured and slowly loosen their clothes off, also don't forget to keep them warm. Remember to cheer them up, since they will surely get anxious. Now, Takeru could you lay down again?"

Last time she laid down, so if I can avoid that embarrassment again I'll do it. Let's just get this day over with. I sit down on the floor, then slowly lay on my back.

"Is this fine?"

"Hmm… Could you take off your jacket first?"

"Huh? Well, fine." Why would she want me to do that, though? "Anything else?"

"No, that's all. Now, if you'll excuse me." She knelt by my side and pulled up my shirt. But she got it stuck on my head, and now I can't see shit.

"Mikoto, I can't see anything."

"That's part of the plan! You need to feel anxious after all."

"Why?"

"Otherwise it's not much of a training. By the way, do you exercise much? Because we could grind meat on your chest." Great, now I'm getting embarrassed. Nothing ever goes my way when it comes to you, you always march at your own tempo.

"Can we continue with the practice?"

"Sure, sure! Now, don't you worry." She started speaking in a small, sweet voice as if she were reading a book to a child before bed. "Everything's gonna be fine. You just need some bandages and that's that. You just lay down and let me take care of you."

… This is not helping. Brain, quiet. No flashbacks of that right now. Go away, first CCSE! Damn snake… I'm boiling it this time around. Mikoto, hurry up already!

"Say Takeru, what are these scars from?" She suddenly asked in her normal tone, a hand of hers tracing one of my sides. It kinda tickles.

"Scars?"

"Awawa, Shirogane-san! Where did you get hurt like that?!" Why is Tama making such a fuss? What are they talking abou…

Oh right, the scars from the terrorist attack. I forgot about them.

"You have this reeeaaaallyyy big scar on the left side of your chest." She says as her fingers trace it slowly. "Did you get hurt when fighting with Kei-san, perhaps?"

The left? Oh, that's the scar of when I took a metal bat trying to shield one of the professors, I think my back is also full of those small marks too.

Wait a second… How do I even justify this? They were getting super paranoid about me being an American, about me being conscripted… Seeing the scars… is only gonna make this worse.

Dammit… Life, when I called you a bitch that sucker punches people, I didn't *actually* mean it, you know. There was no need to lay it down on me like this. Sigh… Goddammit.

"Let me see, move a bit to the…" As I was lost in thought, Mikoto moved me to a side. I could only shut my throat up as she gasped when seeing my back, probably. "Uwah, even your back is full of these! Did Meiya-san beat you up during sword practice? All that talk about you being super strong was just a joke, right?"

"Uuh… Not exactly." Shit… I screwed it all up, didn't I?

She returns me to my position, and after putting some paper over my scar and continuing to reassure me for awhile, she declared the exercise finished and I can finally pull my shirt back where it should be. I remain sitting on the ground, unable to lift my face, while I put my jacket back on.

"But really, you all had me with the talk of him being special. Just look how much you beat him up, you shouldn't be so mean to the newbie!" She threw an accusing finger towards the girls, who were clearly lacking words after seeing my scars.

"Yoroi, that's not what happened. He truly-" Meiya again got interrupted.

"Man, don't I wanna hit the PX right now! Wanna go grab some grub, Takeru?"

"… Sure, that's a wrap for today." I take my chance to end this day, the sooner I get to bed the better. I need some time to think how to approach them from now on. I can't strain our relationships any more.

Me and Mikoto made our way to the PX, and shortly after the rest arrived. Nothing much was said on the line, they were again ignoring me as Mikoto kept rambling on and on. We went to the usual table, me trying to not make eye contact with any of 'em.

"Hey everyone, lemme tell you about that thing I saw on TV the other day!" Mikoto started telling them of the news of the dog that got lost and made his way back to it's owner,.

Everybody reacted like last time, then she started to tell them about how Chop-kun's show was still being aired. However, Meiya and Chizuru were staring at me. Their expressions are a mystery to me, as if they were juggling conflicting emotions behind those cold eyes. Meanwhile, I finished my food quickly. There's nothing for me to say now, since they might take it the wrong way. They might not even want to train using the consoles going by their attitude, and even less now that they might suspect me even more thanks to the scars. All that work for nothing.

Wait one second…

"Say guys, can I ask you something?" They all look at me. Life's a gamble, so let's roll that dice. Let's just hope she's not pissed anymore and sends me three ones in a row.

"What is it, Shirogane?" Chizuru placed her chopsticks on the table and looked straight at me. The rest also stared intently.

"Can any of you lend me hand? I've been asked something for my special mission, but I can't do it alone." Let's make it sound as if I was the one asking for help, maybe that will make them more willing to listen. If they're curious… let's use that to my advantage, even if only to make you all be better.

"Shirogane, you said to me once you always performed your missions alone." Meiya gave me a side glance as she kept eating. "What could have compelled such a change, now of all times?" Can't say I didn't expect her to give me the cold shoulder now.

… It still hurts, though.

"Whenever I needed help Kasumi would come to give me a hand, but she's busy for the time being and I can't do this alone. I need

someone else to spar against." Brain, thanks for that wording. Their eyes sparked up as the word 'spar' left my lips. I just know this is the best bait I can use right now. Or so I think.

"Takeru, what are you doing? What's this about a mission?" Mikoto stared at me, lost as a penguin in a desert.

"Oh right, Yoroi doesn't know." Meiya folds her arms and coughs before speaking up again. "Shirogane is usually tasked to perform certain special missions for the Professor. He calls her Sensei for this reason, since he learns many a great deal of valuable lessons from them."

"Mitsurugi, you knew of that?!" Chizuru looks at both of us quite surprised. Right, I only ever told Meiya that I call Sensei that way.

"Yes, he mentioned it to me once. Anyways, that's the gist of it." Mikoto nods at her words.

"Huh. So Takeru, are you doing some fighting training?"

"Something like that. I can't tell you the details, but tomorrow I won't be there for the First Aid class. So, can any of you lend me a hand?" I give them a small bow while scratching the back of my head.

Meiya and Chizuru exchange a glance. I see their lips tense up, they must want to say yes but since they think I'm an 'American' for some reason they-

"I'm in! I'm really curious to see whether you're as good as they said you are."

"I owe you one, Mikoto. Thanks a bunch."

"U-Um… Shirogane-san? Could I maybe tag along as well?"

"Sure, the more the better. If you want to come too, just tell me. I'll tell Sensei when I go report today, and she'll tell the Instructor."

"Then, would it be okay for me to help out too?" Don't ask me so timidly, Tama. I don't bite.

"Of course! It'll be a great help." I beam at her and she smiles shyly.

"Ahem… Shirogane, what do you say if the whole squad helps you with this mission of yours?" Chizuru, you just fell into my trap. Thanks.

"I mean, I won't say no, but do you two agree?" I look at Meiya and Kei. Kei returned a blank stare as she devoured her third yakisoba sandwich, while Meiya kept moving her lips as she had her arms folded.

"I'm in. Wanna see you get serious." Kei sends a thumbs up my way as she grabbed yet another sandwich, but her eyes were just a tiny bit narrowed. Anyways, it works for me.

"Thanks Ayamine. What about you, Meiya?" Her brows twitched, more purple fire came out pouring. Oh right, she didn't want me to call her that. Uuh… That's gonna be hard.

"I suppose I should. It would be pointless to be the only one left out. Surely you won't hold back?"

"Hey, no need to be so cold. I'll face you in what I do best, so you better get ready." Their eyes spark up again.

"What you do best? So is it some sort of sword practice?" She leaned forward, the fire intensifying.

"No, it's something I do better than handling a sword." Because Gamer is my middle name, baby.

"B-Better than…"

… Maybe I shouldn't have said that. Now her eyes were wide, shining like a thunderstorm, but with the surprise of a cat after you find it doing trouble in the kitchen.

"Better than your swordsmanship?!" She rose from her seat like an eruption, smacking both hands onto the table.

Some people stopped talking and looked at us, before remembering that they had to mind their own business as they saw who was the one who rose her voice. Still, the silence was apparent as the not so subtle gazes they were giving us.

"Mitsurugi, don't raise your voice!" Chizuru had to grab her tray, because it almost fell as Meiya hit the table.

She looked around while tapping her glasses, her brows tensing into a V again at the sudden silence around our table. Tama lost her gaze into her soup, Mikoto and Kei didn't seem to mind, though they were also looking down.

"Meiya-san, is he really that good?" Mikoto's question only invigorated Meiya's purple flares, sitting down she folded her arms again and shot a glare at me with the intensity of a Heavy's beam.

"Good? No, he's great. Excellent, I dare say. And you're better at whatever this is? I expect you to be telling the truth. Shirogane, this better not be a lie." Sigh… I'm doing my best to fix this bridge, can you stop with the furrowed brow?

"Of course. Well, I gotta go. I'll go get you guys at the classroom in the afternoon after checking everything, see you tomorrow."

"Later, Takeru!" Mikoto and Tama waved at me, Kei kept eating the… How many sandwiches does she have there anyways? Meiya and Chizuru were whispering something, leaning closer to each other.

Well, I can only hope that being serious with them will be enough to mend our relationship. Whatever, I gotta go warn Sensei about the attack on Niigata and to ask her permission for this training.

… I wonder how they'll be from now on. Having seen my scars after voicing their distrust so openly to Mikoto… Just what the hell is

wrong with this world?

… It's not too late, right? I can still mend this bridge… right?

Sigh…

As I got out of the PX and made my way towards the stairs in the empty hallway, scratching my head as I felt my stomach empty despite having just eaten, someone called out to me.

"Wait, Shirogane."

"Hm? What's up, Meiya?" Ah…

"Shirogane, I told you to call me-"

"Sorry! I just… Bad habit, not doing it on purpose. So, what can I do for you?"

"I have some questions for you." Please drop that scowl. It's really painful to see her like this, even if she isn't my Meiya.

"Alright. Fire 'em."

"Could you explain me how were you inflicted those scars?" Shit, I don't have an explanation prepared yet. Alright, bullshitting my way outta this one.

"That's classified. I can't talk about my time before coming to this base in detail."

"Whatever is that supposed to mean?"

"That the Professor forbid me from speaking about it."

Her face reminds me of that time me and Tsukuyomi-san argued about the way the Empire did things during the coup and she called me an American sympathizer. Those hateful, predator-like eyes were now in Meiya's face.

"Shirogane, where and how were you inflicted those scars?"

"What about the non-interference policy?"

"… So you refuse to speak of it?"

Sigh… I won't get her to stop asking this, I know how stubborn she is. Once she sets her mind on something, there's no stopping her. And refusing… might actually finish burning the bridge. Let's use her insistence to my advantage.

"… If you tell me what the hell was going on today with you, I might consider answering." She sharpens her eyes once more as she folds her arms.

"Surely you already know. We do not like to be treated so lightly, even if we know you're better than us."

"Again with that? I told you that I wasn't holding back."

"Not just today. When you first came here, you were holding back. And all of these days under the new regime, you constantly showed more and more how good you truly are. Can you blame us for becoming upset? You acted so friendly but you were just mocking us, not even taking us seriously during our training."

"I wasn't mocking you. I was just minding my speed, didn't want to alienate you all."

"Please, do you think me so gullible?"

"Sorry if I offended you, but I had no intention of doing so. I'm being serious, I was just minding my own strength. And honestly, it hurts to be treated so badly despite me trying my best to fit in. I don't want to end up excluded so, can you stop being so cold?" She flinches back, trying to find her words.

I can tell she's somewhat conflicted, but I've never seen Meiya like this, I've no idea what to say to her right now. Not even when we had

fights as a couple she looked so clearly angered.

No, wait… I do recall those eyes… For the briefest moment, when she came to talk to me after Marimo-chan died and I screamed at her, right before I tried to rape her. She was making a similar expression to the one she has right now. Which means she's… truly upset, from the bottom of her heart? But I didn't… do anything…

"Say… Why are you this mad? I… didn't do anything to you guys, as far as I'm aware." She sighs and looks to the wall.

"… Look, we all are here for a reason and we cannot fail this coming CCSE, no matter what. If you do not take us seriously, can we truly call you our partner? How can we develop trust between us if you keep fooling around?"

"So, what? Instead of asking me to be serious for once, you all clam up and treat me like an outsider? Why didn't you just ask me to be serious?"

"Because you're not taking us seriously on your own, you seem to be making fun of us."

"I tried answering seriously during yesterday's lecture and you all got really upset. And I told you, I don't like to brag. I'm not that good, really."

"Huh… Then, allow me to ask you. If you are 'not so good' then, what are we in your eyes? What are you trying to say? It's as if you were looking down on us for some reason…" She takes a step towards me, locking her flare-filled eyes with mine.

"Hey, calm down! I'm not picking a fight with you."

"Really now?"

"Mitsurugi, you're my squadmate." I slow down my tone, gulping and meeting her gaze head on, so that she can see I'm not lying. "I

believe we formed some trust between us in the brief time we have spent training together. Can you tell me why are you so upset with me? Is it all about me not being serious with you?" She closes her eyes and takes a breath.

"When we asked you to not hold back, you kept fooling around." Folding her arms real tight, a small frown sprouts on. "We asked for your help earnestly and you just toyed with us. And even during the lectures, you answer as if everything was trivial to you, dismissing our efforts and struggles. You have not been as tactful as one would hope. How can we see you as our partner when you treat us so lightly?"

"… I see. I don't know why you chose to not talk it out before, but you must have your reasons. If you want me to be serious from now on, I'll do it. Just… Forgive me if I harm you, when I focus on a fight I tend to strike with all my strength." That wasn't a problem with Maya-sensei since she could dodge and strike back, but I really don't want to harm any of you, since you're still not at your best level.

"You shouldn't concern yourself with that. Pound me to the ground if you must, but stop holding back. I want to know where I stand, I need to get stronger." Locking eyes with her, I give a nod.

"Fine. No more holding back from now on. And I'll also try to not be so… rude when giving you all advice. I wasn't and am not looking down on you guys, for real." She stares for a second before giving me a nod. "Well, I'll be going now. Gotta give my report." I turn around but feel a hand on my shoulder.

"Shirogane, you haven't answered my question yet. How were you inflicted those scars?" I thought I had made her forget about it. Damn it.

"Why do you want to know that so badly?"

"I… I can't see how you could have sustained such injuries." She lets go of my shoulder and looks away, as if she suddenly got

embarrassed. This isn't like her, she's usually so straightforward with everything.

"Why?"

"Why? Because you're basically perfect! I can't even fathom how you, who surpasses all the challenges the Instructor throws your way, could be hurt to the extent of leaving such scars! It wasn't just one, your back was littered with them. I saw them clearly when Yoroi moved you around."

"I told you, I'm not perfect. Nobody is."

"Answer me! How… How could you, someone so skilled and strong, be hurt so? If you truly weren't conscripted before, then… How?" Her lips tightening into a small circle, she holds my gaze in place with hers as if she were an angry crab.

On one hand, I don't want to have them assume I'm conscripted already. On the other, why does she idolize me so much? I had thought she was upset at me for being 'an American' but…

Wait, she kind of did the same last time. Yeah, she said I was the squad's pillar of strength and was willing to let me have my way with her to make me get my shit together again. I suppose she must admire my swordsmanship now, she must have noticed the similarities my style has to the Mugen Kidou she uses. And now she saw the scars, right after all of them assuming I'm from America, for some reason. Sigh… What a mess.

"… If I tell you, do you promise to keep it a secret?" Can't exactly let the squad know about this, since it's technically a military secret. But refusing to tell her will only damage our relationship.

"Of course. You have my word." Earnest and sincere as usual. I know she wouldn't taint her honor by lying, so let's trust her.

"I got attacked by terrorists and got hit by a metal bat and several other things."

"… Huh?" Her face slowly contorts in fear as the meaning got to her.

"The place I was in before coming here got attacked by a bunch of terrorists. I helped the officers that were there deal with them, but I couldn't do much." Not a lie, this did happen. But I probably can't lie without her noticing, and I also can't have her telling this to the others.

"How many were they?"

"Thirty something where I was when it started." Her eyes go wide in surprise. "So we protected the people, or at least tried to. I got some cuts and got hit by bats and other stuff more times than I could count. That was… some months ago."

"You fought against terrorists? I can't…" Shit, her eyes are now filled with a weird glow. I think I just made her think even higher of me.

"So that's how I got my scars, that all?"

"Did you manage to protect the people?" She eyes now draw a downwards arc, she must be feeling bad for me.

"No. The bastards… They just didn't care and attacked everyone. Two of my friends… They died that day." Technically, my squad got wiped out according to my cover, so maybe I can link this with that somehow.

But repeating these words bring forth the memories, brings back the cold hands to my shoulders. The explosion comes back to my eyes. The wings of fire, their scorched bodies, how Sumika was gone when I came back, how my world's Meiya told me of their deaths when we met. And how later she too…

If only I hadn't waited…

"Shirogane? Are you alright?"

"Eh? Y-Yeah, I'm fine."

"You're crying. Forgive me, for making you remember such awful memories." She gives me a small bow, not meeting my eye.

I hadn't noticed the tears falling through my cheeks. Shit, I can't… F this shit, I'm out. I can't keep talking to her or I might end up saying something stupid.

"I'm busy, so I'll be leaving. See you tomorrow, Mitsurugi."

"Yes, see you tomorrow."

I turn around and resume my walk, turning it into almost jogging after a couple of steps.

I slow down after a while, wiping my face. Once I got my shit together again, I took the stairs and went towards the elevator on B5F. After arriving at usual the floor, I walk up to the office and knock twice, waiting for Sensei's voice.

"Come in." The door is unlocked, and inside I go. She spun around in her chair to face me, holding some papers in her hand.

"Good evening, Sensei."

"You sure it's good? I saw through the cameras your little argument with Mitsurugi." She strokes her bangs as she begins to spin in her chair.

"Of course you did. Can't do much about that, I did what I could." Couldn't even muster any strength to say it, I sigh as I sit down.

"Any idea why they're acting like this?"

"I alienated them, training with all I had. They think I'm conscripted, and now that they saw my scars they're probably convinced of it."

"In that case don't worry too much. When the time came for you to train on a TSF alongside them it would become obvious you had experience."

"Yeah, I guess. But that's not the only thing I came to talk about today."

"Really? Then, what is it? Want me to comfort you tonight?" She stops spinning, her devilish smile appearing again along her playful tone, placing a finger on her chin.

"Thanks for the offer, but we have some serious problem coming at us."

"A serious problem? Out with it, what's going on?"

Then, I give her all the data I remembered about the invasion of Niigata.

"… And that's all. What do you think we should do, Sensei?"

"Let's see… I could give them some warning, to watch their sonars more carefully, perhaps convince them to move out if they already had some faint readings. What did I do last time?"

"You sent a warning to them, though you never told me what exactly. You also sent the Valkyries to capture some live BETA."

"So I had the same ideas this time. So, should we go with the same plan?"

"Yes, but this time I want to go there too." Sensei's brows lower, her face suddenly resembling the gaze of a basilisk.

"No, I won't allow it."

"Why not? It'll be a perfect opportunity to test the OS in real combat without having eyes upon me, and I could prevent you from bringing too many Laser Class."

"No is no. You're too important an asset to risk you in a little side quest. I can't lose you this early in our plan. You're staying here, that's an order." Facing me with a poker face, her voice was cold as snow.

Wow, I didn't think Sensei would go so far to keep me by her side. Last time she never really showed me any kind of real praise or worry until the very end.

"You won't let me go?"

"No."

"Even if I give you the theories?" Her eyes grow wide, and I can tell she is wavering despite returning to her poker face.

"You'll give me the theories? What about our deal?"

"The deal was for you to complete the XM3 and let me help you in your problems. If I test that the OS works as it should during the battle, you'll be clearing both conditions at once. The OS will have been completed, even if we can keep improving it, and you'll prove to me that you don't see me as just an expendable pawn this time."

"You are not a pawn. You're more like… a tower. Perhaps, would you like to be the Queen?" She smiles again as she brings a finger to her cheek. You never change, really.

"No more teasing, Sensei. If you want me to be the Queen piece in your chessboard, prove me that you trust in me. Let me show you what I and the XM3 can do against the BETA."

We stare firmly at each other, saying nothing for a little while. Eventually, her serious expression reveals a smile.

"Alright. I'll let you go, but you'll have to follow my orders to the letter. No selfish stunts, got it?"

"Yes, Sensei."

"Well, we don't have any Shiranui you could use. I'll arrange an F-15 to be modified with the OS and the new tech we're developing right now. It'll be another nice batch of data for when the Empire asks for results."

"Alright. By the way, how did the talks go?"

"Fine, I guess. They still have to answer my counter-offer, since they didn't expect me to want access to their data while they were testing the stuff. Really, how stupid can they be?"

"But does everything looks on the right track?"

"Yeah, they were willing to alter the databases, so this time I won't have to hide you under a rock all the time someone important comes to the base I guess. Now we have to wait until I can clear your old records and replace them with the fake ones I made up. However, let me tell you that they seemed really interested in our inventions, given the Empire's position I expected as much. I'm sure I can use this to mend the relations with the UN a bit, gaining the favor of both sides while turning some other heads towards me."

"I can see how the Empire and the UN would welcome the aid right now. If it's the UN offering the help, they might be more inclined to accept it. This will make them a bit less paranoid about us with some luck, and since these things were developed with Japanese tech the UN can even suck up to the Empire with them. Pretty sure you'll get many favors in exchange to have the brand new stealth system and all the new engines and stuff be recognized as a Japanese invention." Sensei smiles at me.

"Exactly. And I'm sure the Americans will surely be intrigued by all these babies. I wonder what they will do. So don't worry about the negotiations, you go out there and bring me more useful data without getting harmed. With data on both the Gekishin and Kagerou I'll be able to properly devise a new improvement plan for both models, using all the stuff you brought here."

"Good to know I'm helping. So, I'll be sorting with the Valkyries?"

"Yes, we'll decide your callsign later. And, by the by, what are you going to do with the consoles?" Let's hope she allows me to do this.

"Can I use tomorrow's afternoon class to introduce the things? I kind of told them I needed help for my mission and all of them agreed to aid me."

"Tomorrow? Fine, I can arrange that. I'll inform Marimo about it so that she can keep things under control. Now, why don't you go spend some time with Yashiro? I'm sure you need something to take your mind off things with how much you two have been working as of late."

"Yeah, I'll do that. Good night, Sensei."

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*Around the same time.*

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**[Chizuru]**

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"But he seemed really normal, you know?"

"Yoroi, I'm telling the truth. He excels at everything he does, he was just playing around with us. And those scars? He is definitely a conscripted soldier."

"Agree. Special-kun is super duper good, no way he's a Cadet." I'm agreeing with Ayamine a lot lately. The end of the world is coming closer.

"Um, are you guys sure you're not just jealous?" She still doesn't believe us, huh?

"How could we not be? All we do, all the effort we put in everyday is trampled over by this 'special protegee'. Why did he even need to take the course?" As a Squad Leader I should be ashamed. But as a person, I just can't stand it. He's so good, I don't believe he failed a CCSE.

"Shirogane-san had… trouble with his last unit, right? So he needs to take the CCSE-"

"Tamase, he comes from a foreign unit. Why couldn't he finish his training abroad? Why did the XO personally scout him?"

"… I'm also curious about it. But he's our squadmate now, whatever he did in the past, if he is here to help us, shouldn't we try to be nice to him?"

"Working with an American? I'll pass." I can't believe I'm agreeing with Ayamine yet again. Who could trust an outsider? All they want is to use us to do their bidding.

"Kei-san, that's just cruel. There are a lot of foreigners in the base, they're our comrades too." Yoroi, you're too naive.

They're here to keep this base under the control of America. We can't let our guard down around them. They'll retreat again when it's no longer convenient for them to be here.

"But didn't you all… welcome him just fine when he arrived?" Tamase's gaze sinks in her plate.

"I though he got fed up with the outsider's way of doing things and decided to come back to his roots. After all, if he got taken to another country as a kid he had no say in it, as a child he couldn't disobey his parents." I know that very well, that's why I sympathized with him at first. "But he showed us that not only he is well trained, but he knows much about the foreigners' way of training and thinks they're better than our methods." Even if they're indeed good, we can't… We are not inferior to them. Japan can stand firm by its own might.

"But we can't just leave him alone, the Instructor will rip our heads off." Yoroi says, seriously for once.

"Even so, we have to be careful. I also don't want to seclude him, but we must make sure he truly is our ally and not some traitorous American." And going by his answer to the debate… I have my doubts regarding whether we can place our trust in Shirogane or not.

"So what do you suggest we do, Sakaki?" Mitsurugi said as she approached the table, coming back. She looked conflicted as she slowly walked to her place, a hand caressing her hair.

"So, how did it go? Did you find out where those scars came from?"

"Yes, apparently he received them while defending some people."

"Huh? Defending them from what?" Tamase cocked her head as Mitsurugi sat down.

"Sorry, I promised I wouldn't say."

"So he doesn't want us to know? See? We can't trust in him, he's still keeping things from us."

"I… don't think that's the case." Mitsurugi says as she folds her arms.

"What do you mean?" She avoids my gaze as she tugs at her elbows.

"He seemed truly saddened when he spoke of the matter, he even let out some tears out, so I do not think he was lying. He asked me not to divulge the matter, but he is not a conscripted soldier at the least."

"But… that still doesn't make him any less suspicious. Why can't he tell us about that?" If the XO ordered this, why is she preventing him from speaking? Because it'll confirm that he's an American through and through?

"Chizuru-san, you're being paranoid. Why can't you trust him?" Yoroi joins her hands, eyes downcast.

"Because he arrived at the most perfect time." Mitsurugi answers for me before I could. What is your position regarding Shirogane, I wonder? Are with or against him?

"What do you mean, Meiya-san?"

"He came just before our training became harsher, as if to warn us that we had to improve ourselves even further." She places an elbow onto the table, looking down at nowhere. "He had many words of advice for us, and not a single complain about our performance. Never bragged, never made fun of us, always smiling and being friendly. He's truly an impeccable example, too good to be true. Isn't it odd? What would have we done if not for him taking all the difficult questions and putting the Instructor in a good mood everyday?"

"… You're right, it can't be a coincidence." It aligns to well to be a mere coincidence. Even if he had trouble in his last squad, why would he be so considerate towards us? Even when we argued with him, to never grow upset… to never raise his voice and always be so patient… It is odd.

"… We'd have been so dead." Ayamine says, leaning back and looking up as her lips twist in.

"Also, the fact that he came here under the personal orders of the Vice Commander is another reason to suspect him. What reason could the XO have to add him to our squad a mere month before the CCSE?" I'm glad to have him on the team, but I'd like to know where his loyalty lies. I can't work with an American in good conscience, who knows what he'll do in the CCSE?

"Shirogane-san has to take it to be able to become a surface pilot. Even if he's so talented, if he doesn't graduate it doesn't matter."

"Tamase, you are too kind." Mitsurugi says. "He could have easily graduated anywhere with his skills, it's actually hard to believe that he was allowed to come here. Who would give away such a talented soldier? I wouldn't have let him slip out of my grasp if I were the commander of his former base."

"Mitsurugi is right yet again. I want you all to think about what we'll do during the CCSE, in case he decides to go against us. Let's try to get along, to avoid enraging the Instructor, and let's see how he acts from today on." I look at all of them in the eye, as a leader I have to transmit my resolve to them. Otherwise they'll just go and tell him everything.

"Chizuru-san, you're too cold." Yoroi's eyes almost close as she looks down into her plate.

"No, I just don't want to fail again. If there is anything that might get in my squad's way it's up to me to bring the matter to the table, so that we can decide what to do as a team."

"Then shouldn't we ask Shirogane-san about this?" Tamase, you truly are too naive. Surely you know what the word 'betrayal' means, right?

"You think he'll talk?" It's really weird how much we agree these days.

"Exactly. Even if we ask him, he'll just say again that he isn't perfect and that he wasn't conscripted."

"Actually…" Mitsurugi caressed her ponytail, looking up. "Shirogane did seem pretty shaken about our attitude today. He did ask me to not be so cold towards him, to not leave him out of the squad. He told me he was going to be serious from now on. I believe we should refrain from making a judgment until we see if he truly shows us his true colors."

"He did? Well then, I suppose we can give him a second chance. But Mitsurugi, what do you suggest we do if he turns out to be influenced by the American Way?"

"… I suppose we can only grit our teeth and work with him until we get commissioned. I'll be going back to my room. Good night." Mitsurugi stands up to leave, and we all soon follow.

I can't let this chance go away, I have to pass the CCSE. Even if it's in the UN, after two years of service I'll be able to request to be transferred to the MDF. Even if my father disowns me, I rather die fighting under my nation's flag than live on as a dog of America.

Shirogane, I don't know who you are or why you're here but I won't let you ruin this. The squad is already quite hard to control, I don't need another reason to fight between us. I thought you would be a good addition, but you're a giant mystery. All that skill with guns must have come from America. No way in hell I'll trust an American soldier. Not after what America did.

I know, I'll go check his records. I wonder if I can find from where he got transferred. Yeah, he is Japanese. I'm sure he must have his reasons. I shouldn't judge him because he was forced to live in America.

I sigh, shaking my head. Moving my neck in circles, I crack my knuckles as I speed up in the hallways towards the library, since it's almost lights out.

The clerk lets me in, reminding me I have less than an hour to be here before he has to close it down. The dim yellow lights partially illuminate the library's rows of bookshelves, the farthest part of it being blocked by shadows. I walk to the open space to the left, where some PCs were placed on rows, separated by small walls into cubicles. I sit down and swipe my ID Card, putting my Rank and name in the confirmation box that appears on the screen.

The PC is unlocked, bringing me to the black screen with just a few icons. We Cadets only have S1 level of clearance, but this should be enough to look at his summarized personal data. Let's go to the records…

"Cadet Squad 207th… Members… Shirogane… What?!" I could only gape at what the error message said.

I blinked, it didn't change. I took my glasses off and rubbed my eyes. But the message didn't change. I closed my eyes and sighed, exiting the window. I then tried again. But the message didn't change.

There's an S5 lock on Shirogane's personal data, I can't even access the screen pop up. What is this? Why does he have such a high security lock? Who are you supposed to be? Even if you're the XO's special boy, this is just unacceptable. Not even Mitsurugi or me have such a lock, even if I suppose her profile is as bare bones as my own.

Wait, let's check the public databases of the Shogunate. At least some info should turn up there. How was the address again? Let's see in the book of useful links… Here it is.

Now, I don't know anything about Shirogane other than his name so I hope there aren't many Shiroganes with the same name. Let's sort it by age… Hmm… This one should be his profile, going by how old he looks. There are no other Takeru Shirogane profiles in the right age range anyways. Why does it only has his name on it? The rest of the columns are all blank. Well, doesn't matter. Let's see here…

But, again, an error message popped up on the screen.

… What does this mean? *Access Denied?!* Why would his public profile be blocked as well? Did he… hack the database? This is illegal. No, scratch that, it's impossible. No civilian should have this kind of privilege.

"What can I… Mitsurugi! She is the only one that can know for sure." With her resources I'm sure she'll be able to find out more about him.

I rush out of the library, towards Mitsurugi's room. If there's anyone who could find out the meaning of this it's her. There's no justification for his data to be blocked. But… what if… he's an undercover agent? That would explain his skill. But from which faction? From Japan to spy the UN; or someone sent to spy us?

No… He got sent to our squad so suddenly… Considering mine, Mitsurugi's and Ayamine's backgrounds, even if I do not know of Tamase's and Yoroi's, this could only be one of two possibilities. He's here to watch over us, or… And with his skill with guns, coming possibly from America… He's here to make sure we fail the CCSE.

I reach the barracks, slowing down as I feel my boots' grip ease up on the floor, and go knock on Mitsurugi's door. I hope she didn't go to sleep yet.

"Mitsurugi? Are you still awake?" A short while after I knocked the door opens.

"Sakaki? I was about to go do some jogging, why did you knock so hard? It's not that late yet for me to be asleep." She looked surprised as she stroked her long ponytail.

"I have a favor to ask of you. Could you come with me to the library?"

"The library? What is this about?"

"I think I found out… a lead on Shirogane's background." Her gaze grows sharper as she raises her chin, I had forgotten how imposing she can be.

"Is this true?"

"Yes, and only you can obtain this information. I know it goes against our non-interference policy, and that you dislike using your influence without good reason, but we cannot ignore this. Could you please come with me?"

"… Understood. Let us go."

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**[?]**

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"Hmm… A most interesting development indeed."

"All leads on the matter make us believe that your suspicions were correct." The soldier said. Truly unexpected, but a welcome surprise.

"I see. Then regarding our deal…"

"It will be done. If everything goes according to plan, they will get the approval to send the project there."

"Do you think you can convince that fox?"

"Professor Kouzuki is a very hard to approach woman, but given her current position she won't be able to reject the proposal, in my opinion."

"And what if she does?"

"We can always resort to them. I'm sure they also have the same wishes as you do regarding this business." Yes, despite our differences this is a matter in which we think alike.

"Then you have my support. I expect good news soon. I'll give the orders to my fellows once you confirm the deal on the other end. I suppose they won't mind this arrangement, what do you think?"

"No, they seem mostly pleased with this deal. If they can get their hands on those Type-94 you promised them they will be satisfied. So

long as they keep the 1Cs that will be produced under their grasp, I believe they'll be satisfied."

"A reasonable demand. By the by, did you acquire any intel on that new cadet on Squad 207?"

The man looks down, coughing once.

"… I'm afraid not. Any info on him is under a heavy lock."

Damn you, Kouzuki. Just what are you doing now? You've stopped giving reports on your research and now this. On whose side are you?

"Alright. Let's not push our luck in that matter. I'll be awaiting your call."

"Very well. Have a good day." After a small bow he turns around and leaves.

I wasn't expecting the pieces to fall down with such ease in this lineup. Be as it may, I have little choice but to leave the 1C on their hands. However, with their support, I'm sure Kouzuki will find herself unable to refuse our terms.

Now all that's left is dealing with this 'Shirogane'. How should we off him?

# As the Fog Sets In

## Chapter 12: As the Fog Sets In

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*November 2nd. 02:26 PM.*

*(Hallway. Yokohama Base.)*

**[Takeru]**

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Sunny day, the sky only has a few clouds up there. The usual bustling in the hallways, the complains in the rooms coming from the people having to wait for their next orders for who knows how many minutes, the bored soldiers doing patrols, just another uneventful day in Yokohivema Base.

I already checked the batteries, the joysticks and the connection to the data center. The consoles are ready to be used and today I will start the special training of the squad.

During breakfast, Mikoto and Tama remained the same, and later asked me some tips to complete the morning exercises, but the other three didn't do much conversation. I expected Meiya to be a little less cold after the talk we had yesterday, but I guess I'll have to start over with them. They might be more different than I thought to the ones I knew in the other worlds.

… It's depressing, really.

The Instructor was coming along to make sure the girls behaved well and to monitor the data from the exercise, so I was in charge of the 'class' this afternoon. I never thought I would be teaching someone officially, the hairpins of life are a real mystery. I'll just have to careful with my braking to avoid more discussions and grip onto what little good signs I notice.

I enter the classroom and the girls fall silent in attention, except Mikoto who keeps on rambling about a trick with a kendama.

"Hey y'all, good afternoon!" An unnecessary loud and joyful greeting.

"Hey Takeru! Are you ready to spar with us?" Mikoto comes up to me by the door with her usual giggling face.

"I was preparing that, yes. So, are you all coming with me?"

"Wait, we haven't got approval from the Instructor to go with you yet." Chizuru, why must you always be like this?

I take out a small paper from my pocket, the official document that allowed me to treat this as a real training.

"What is… Why do you have this?!" Haven't seen her this surprised in my life. In any of all of them.

"I did tell you yesterday that I was going to get permission from the Professor. Now, you're not forced to come along. If you don't want to, you can remain here."

They started exchanging glances. Mikoto seemed all in this, Tama was nervously looking at everyone else as if unsure of what to do, Meiya and Chizuru were whispering with each other with their backs turned to me, and Kei switched glances from me to the rest as if bored.

I waited for a minute, but Meiya and Chizuru were still debating. What the hell are they even talking about? You know what? Let's roll.

"Alright, this is already taking too much time, the ones that do want to help me with this training follow me." I turn around and exit the classroom, with Mikoto following closely behind me. Soon after the rest also catch up to us.

"So Shirogane, what are we going to do?" Meiya asked, trying to get by my side.

"Don't be so impatient. You'll have enough time to figure it out. And it's not like you have a chance to beat me in this." I say in my old cocky tone, poking fun at them.

"What did you say?! If it's a duel you want, I am more than happy to oblige. I won't lose to you today, Shirogane." Meiya, you're so easy to taunt. Even if you do look very intimidating right now.

"Shirogane, as the Squad Leader, it's my responsibility to put you down from that pedestal. Don't look down on us just because you trained abroad!" Chizuru's pride wouldn't let her back down. I mean, Kei is always triggering her, she's super sensitive to any kind of teasing.

"Special-kun, you die today." Kei, I knew you were going to be game too.

"Hey Takeru, what are we gonna do? Can't you tell us just a bit?!" Mikoto was… how to say it… rebounding upon herself in excitement.

"Nah, we're gonna do some special training. You'll face me in some new training courses, you'll see when we get there."

"Um… Shirogane-san, is this really okay? I mean, the Instructor…"

"The Instructor is already in the room where the training will take place. Don't worry Tama." I smile at her, making her relax a bit. I do wonder why they fear her so much… I guess Marimo-chan doesn't exist in this world, huh.

We kept walking, going towards the elevator in B5F. When I got to the stairs, they seemed to stop for a second before following.

"Shirogane, can you tell us where we're going to do this trainings?"

"You'll have to follow me to get there Sakaki, don't be impatient."

"We would like to go at our own pace, there is no need to rush." Chizuru is being extra cold today.

"Can't do that, because the training will take place in one of the lower floors we usually don't have access to. Just for today, we can go there. But only those who come with me will get permission to pass."

"Why? Whatever is the meaning behind such secrecy?" Sending a hand to her air intakes, she glared at me. "And why are we going to the lower floors? Could we not train on our usual grounds?"

"I told you already. This training is different. We can't do it in the track field or in a classroom." They wanted to protest, but remained quiet and kept following me.

Eventually, we made it to the elevator in B5F. I swiped my ID Card and it opened, but as I got inside they again remained standing there, as if unsure of whether to cross the street right before the light became red.

"C'mon, get in." Mikoto and Tama come in, but the other three remain outside.

"Shirogane, what level of clearance do you have?" Chizuru keeps glaring at me, what is her problem? I know I kinda took them lightly, but weren't they the ones who wanted me to take them seriously?

"S1, but for today I can go to the floor where the training will take place."

"Oh, really?" She sounds like she didn't believe me.

"You're free to stay behind, if you want. The elevator won't stay open forever."

She and Meiya again shared a glance, but then Kei walked past them and got inside, sending a gaze my way as she passed my side. With a sigh, Chizuru came in and Meiya followed.

As the elevator made its way to B17F the faces of the girls grew more and more surprised the more the elevator descended. Even

Kei's eyes are widening.

"Shirogane, where are we going? At which floor will we stop?" Meiya arched her shoulders as she looked at me.

"B17F."

"… What? Why are we going to such a lower floor?"

"Having second thoughts, Meiya?"

"Never said that, I'm surprised as everybody else is here. And I told you to stop calling me by my name." Man, look at that fire. You're beautiful even when you're mad.

"And I told you manners are not my strong point. But please do forgive the rudeness, Meiya-sama." She flinched when I called her that.

For a second an expression of pure bewilderment showed itself on her face, but she closed her eyes and then simply returned an angry glare to me.

"Shirogane, what makes you think you can mock us so openly?" Chizuru spoke with clear disgust.

"Hey, I'm just breaking the tension here. Really guys, this isn't the end of the world. Relax, otherwise you won't be able to do your best against me." Tama and Mikoto nod in agreement.

"You are right. Sigh… It's still a surprise, to go to such a lower floor." Meiya kept gazing at the panel as we went down and down.

"Shirogane, you could learn a thing or two about respect."

"Sorry Sakaki, but that's just how I am. I'm not good with manners and I'm always doing lame jokes and puns. Is what I do to avoid being a ball of nerves." And to not get depressed about how much you all seem to hate me now.

"… Really?"

"Hey, can we stop with the aggressiveness and try to get along? It goes against all you told me about teamwork when I first arrived." She always insisted on how important it was to generate trust with your comrades, both here and in the other loops.

"What do you know? You're not even… Forget it." She clicks her tongue and looks away.

"I'm not even what?" What was she gonna say?

The door opened as we reached our destination and the girls got out quite fast.

"Alright, follow me." I take them to the room in question.

The same room where me and Kasumi worked on the things, the same boring meeting room lighted by a bright, cold, white light. Inside of it, the Instructor was sitting by the table.

"Salute!" Chizuru ordered as soon as she saw her.

"Good afternoon, squad. I see all of you accepted Shirogane's proposal. I am here only to oversee this training. To prevent any unnecessary fighting." She shoots a glare towards Meiya, and then sits down again.

"Well Takeru, what are we gonna do here? What's the deal with those TVs?" Mikoto I appreciate your enthusiasm, but those are for later.

"We're not using those yet, you all take a seat in the sofas. I'll check everything is set up properly before starting."

They looked rather puzzled but sat down without much complain. Now, let's check that the data cables are all in their place. Yes, now… the wireless tracker is on, all Game Guys are linked. The

Instructor gives me a nod to indicate everything is all green on her end as well. Okay, let's get this show on the road.

"Ok, all green. Allow me to explain what you'll be doing here. You'll face me in a special training, one designed especially by Professor Kouzuki. This is part of my special missions, so as you can expect I'm really good at this. Any questions?"

"What kind of battles will we do? I do not understand how we could face off here of all places." Chizuru really didn't like being here, facing the unknown is something she is terribad at after all.

"I'll give you your… terminals now. That should answer your questions." I hand one MMTS to each. They look surprised, to say the least.

"Shirogane-san, what is this? A Pleiades, maybe?"

"No, this is a new training device developed by Professor Kouzuki with me as its tester. The MMTS, Mobile Multipurpose Training Simulator, is a portable training terminal that can perform many different types of training depending on the cartridge you insert in it."

"What?! Such technology exists? You said you were the tester, is this the reason you are special?" Meiya looked exactly like when she… when the other one found it during first loop.

"Yes, I can't tell you the details, but I've been helping in this thing's final stage of development. Today you will all face me with these in the trainings it can do. Let me tell you that I'm quite proud of the results I got with it."

"Special-kun, this for real?" Aww… She's using my words. Sarcastically, yes, but she's using them nonetheless.

"Yeah, if you got scared feel free to leave." I shrug while chuckling a bit. Kei looks like she wants to choke me right now.

"Shirogane, enough with that attitude. So, how do we operate the terminals?" I answer Chizuru's question using my own Game Guy to show them how it's done, and again they're shocked at how 'easy' it seems to be.

"Now let's start this show. I'll let you decide in which order you'll face me and in which training course."

"Someone is confident." She taps her glasses, giving the tiny machine a good look. "Now, what courses are available on this sim? It can't be too powerful."

"We have a race simulator, a stealth simulator, an army management simulator, a puzzle simulator and a TSF simulator." All of them open their eyes as wide as they could when hearing the last one. Tama's eyes went white, Mikoto is shivering, Kei and Meiya have their mouths wide open and Chizuru almost dropped her glasses.

"WHAT?! A TSF simulator?! Shirogane we have no authorization to train with that!"

"Sakaki, you're too loud. And we have authorization from the XO to use this things, so no worries there. Right, Instructor?"

"Indeed." She smirks at their reaction. "Do not worry about that, these machines are nothing like a real TSF simulator. No one is going to go after you for this, so use them to your heart's content." Nice follow up, NotMarimo-chan!

Their hesitation and shock loses traction after hearing it, then they start talking between themselves to decide who goes when and what games they'll play first. Of course, they don't know these things are games. I can't wait until I show you the Stallion, if you're so surprised about the Game Guy I'm sure you'll be blown away by it. Assuming they want to keep training and don't start suspecting I'm evil incarnate again for some reason.

"Shirogane, we will face you in this order. Me, Yoroi, Tamase, Ayamine and Mitsurugi. We'll use the puzzle sim first, then the racing, army management, stealth and TSF sims in that order. Is that alright?"

"Sure thing. I'll give you the cartridges, you can practice a bit to get a feel of how it's going to be. Take some minutes to see how awesome the MMTS is." They do seem intrigued, but are still keeping it to a minimum. Except Mikoto, she's beaming at the Game Guy. You'll always be a gamer, no matter what world you're in.

I hand them the PoyoPoyo cartridges, and proceed to enjoy their sparkling eyes and gasps as they start up the game. Looks like they're enjoying themselves, I mean the first levels are really easy.

"I can't believe such a thing exist. This is truly a wonderful invention." Meiya was impressed, absorbed into it.

"Yes, it's simple enough to get the basics down in just a few minutes, but I think it has a surprising depth with the formations you can do." Of course Chizuru would over analyze this.

"Well, do you all feel ready to challenge me?" Ohoho, look at those eyes! Yes, be motivated! Get fired up, I'll throw you all into a cold sea in just some seconds. I'll show you the real horror that lies behind those cute Poyos.

I start up my Game Guy and sit down on a sofa, between Meiya and Chizuru.

"So, are we going to compare our scores on each stage?" Chizuru said as she peered at me.

"No. We will use this Join Cable to play against each other Sakaki."

"Eh? Play?! You're treating this as a game? What about being serious?" And here we go again! Seriously, I'm starting to get fed up

with your screaming. You weren't so noisy before, not even back on school in my world.

"You'll see soon enough. Let's see if you can make me go serious on you." Her brows again form a V, her lips pluck into a small line.

"I'll make you eat those words."

Cable connected. Two Player connection established. All right, let's do this.

We start on stage one, I drop my cute slimes down fast, forming towers to make combos. Chizuru seemed puzzled at what was going on in my side of the screen.

"Shirogane, what are you even doing? You can't get points if you- Huh?!" Once my big combo was executed, a lot of black slimes appeared on her side.

"Fuhuhu! If you do big enough combos you can disrupt your opponent with black slimes!" Full accel ahead, get your game on Chizuru!

"That's not fair!"

"There's no fairness on the battlefield! Prepare yourself to be creamed, Sakaki!"

"Creamed?" Meiya, not now!

Two combos later had me on a nice flow, while Chizuru was almost close to lose. She had very little available space left. Oh, two triangle slimes! C-C-C-Combo!

"Aaah! No, I have so little… I lost." She looked at the screen in a daze.

"Well, you did last more than I thought you would. Good fight, Sakaki."

"Shirogane, how did you even move your slimes so fast? Have you been training with these for a long time?"

"Yeah, these things are really good for training your hand to eye coordination. And it's also really cute." Tama and Mikoto gave a nod in agreement.

"Must be nice to have these things abroad. I'm sure you had a lot of time to perfect your technique over there." Ouch. Careful with that edge, Chizuru. You're gonna cut yourself.

"These sims were made in Japan, though."

"WHAT?!" You all look just like Yuuko-sensei when I told her the same.

"Look at the back of the thing. It says 'Made In Japan', right?"

"Shirogane-san, are all the training simulators and their courses made in Japan?"

"Yeah, they're an invention of Yuuko-sensei." They look shocked at me. Now what?

"… You use her first name?" Chizuru was simply tilted. Meiya was in whatever state comes after that.

"… Special-kun, who are you?"

"Takeru Shirogane, it's a pleasure." Giving her a smile and low eyelids, she returns back her usual poker face but I can tell she's upset, and also curious, thanks to how the edge of her lips retreated inside for a millisecond.

"It is a very interesting way to train, indeed." Meiya says with a nod. "I would never had thought about it. The screen looks far sharper than that of a Pleiades, the buttons feel truly nice to the touch, and this software is simply amazing. Shirogane, are those black computers by the TVs also training simulators?"

"Indeed Meiya, those are the more… awesome ones. After we are done with these trainings you'll get to face against me in those. Assuming you still want to do so after I beat all of you." And she's upset again. I mean, she was upset from the beginning but now she seems like… determined to win, I guess?

"Now's my turn! Takeru get ready!" Mikoto came and sat where Chizuru was before.

I ended up beating them all. Tama was the only one who seemed to know what she was actually doing for some reason, the others lost their cool as soon as the black slimes appeared on their side.

"Now that we are done with this one, let's start the racing one." Whatever happens, I have at least showed them the things. Let's just keep at it with a positive approach.

"We couldn't even put him in a pinch…" Chizuru hangs her head, looking as if only a rope was keeping her from falling down a ravine. Come on, now. Don't get so down.

"Here's the cartridges of F-Mega. Practice for awhile with it." They switch the cartridge and after powering up the MMTS again, their eyes sparkle at the sounds and graphics.

"Alright. This time we have to defeat him. Let's start this!" Following Chizuru's howl, all of them started the first race in the basic track.

However…

"What is even this speed? I can't… I'm crashing!" Chizuru, that's not how you use the Desert Thunder LPT. Stop trading paint with the walls.

"A-Ah! No, to the left! Not so much! Why did I explode?!" Meiya, you look so cute right now. It's just like when we married and I kept making you play against me. And just like back then, she knows no cornering.

"Awawa! I'm constantly hitting the walls! I can't do this." Tama, have more faith in yourself. You did got very good in both worlds once you got some practice.

"… This sucks." Kei I think you and Kasumi would get along really good.

"Uwah, this… is so COOL!" Glad you like it Mikoto, but do try to not… Aaand she went off course. She doesn't seem to care and as soon as she respawned she blasted the accel again. Hahaha, typical Mikoto stuff.

After they finish their first race, and by finish I mean ran out of time after exploding a lot, I put my own F-Mega cart in.

"So, ready for our showdown?" She groans as she taps her glasses, crossing a leg over the other and getting comfy onto the sofa.

"… Yes, in such a hard training course we should be evenly matched. You will surely have trouble controlling your vehicle." She raises a finger at me, taking a pose similar to the ones she did when she was Class Rep in my world.

"Ohoho! We'll see about that." I pick my Red Lightning TUE and choose the basic track after the two-player screen came up.

"Shirogane, why would you choose a vehicle with such low handling? You're certainly going to crash much with it."

"Thanks for your concern, Meiya. But there's no reason to worry, I will win." She still looks mad when I call her by her name, but is curiously peeking behind me as we start the race.

Alright, not yet… A bit after the second honk… And off we go! I stick to the inner side of the curve, quickly leaving Chizuru behind.

"What is the meaning of this?! How are you not- Oh!"

"You sure you got time to worry about me?" Apparently she already crashed.

Slightly let go of the accel, veering left. Accel again as I take the rest of the curve, now I got a nice, steady long road without any curves or anything.

Chizuru was getting closer now. Not that it mattered, since as soon as she has to take a curve… I press the brake and do a power-slide, managing to go In-In-In. Chizuru tries to take it in stride, and ends up going off the course.

"Say Sakaki, are you even trying?"

"Of course I am! You're just…" She bites her lower lip as she crashes again.

"Perfect." Meiya said, jealousy dripping from her voice.

"Aww, don't praise me so much. This is just the first track, there's another twenty something more difficult than this one." And I never got as good as Mikoto was in racing games. Damn bastard always beat me in them, he and his super precise cornering.

Chizuru was going steady along a clear road and ended up crashing. Really, it's not something to be so surprised about.

"Huh? Shirogane-san, is that true?" Tama couldn't believe it.

"Yeah, this is the easiest mode to take this training. If you can't pass this, the next generation of Cadets is going to steamroll you."

"Next generation?" For Kei to speak up, this must have piqued her interest. Meanwhile, to the left. Slightly lower the speed…

"Yes, the idea is to eventually have these sims distributed worldwide to aid Cadets in their training." Their eyes keep getting wider and wider.

"Is this true? All Cadets in the world… trained with these?" Meiya seemed surprised, but in her tone something else stirred.

"Well, last lap. Not much left."

Chizuru still tried to bridge the gap, but her control wasn't getting any better. I won while she still had three laps left.

"I can't believe… You had no problems with this one. Even when it's so hard to control." She adjusted her glasses while getting off the sofa.

"Practice makes perfect. Now Mikoto, your turn." She smiled widely, crashing onto the seat ready to play.

We made our way through the games, they were trying their best, but…

"I'll attack your Guard with my Commander. Axes have an advantage against spears, so it's guaranteed to defeat it." Pressing the buttons, I get ready to choose the right weapon.

"No, wait! She can survive the hit, you're just wasting your attack!"

"Meiya, dear, did you forget that I picked up a Shield Smasher axe last turn?" Meiya's eyes are filled with horror as her Guard dies. This now gives a path for my mounted units to kill her healers.

"NO! Not the clerics!"

"Are you begging me, Meiya?" Her narrowed eyes lock onto mine, the emotion made her raise her voice.

"Stop it! Claire and Ramyl are… those two are unarmed, why would you do something so low as to attack them?!" I can't believe she got attached to her units just by reading their summaries.

"Because they're your lifeline. Do you think the enemy won't attack our suppliers in real life if they get the chance?"

"Ah, you have a point… But we will fight the BETA, not other people!"

"Then today you will learn how important it is to secure your supply lines, to avoid your formation from crumbling. This is what happens when the frontliners fail!"

"Please, don't! They're…" Ouch, I got a crit against Claire. The animation was quite brutal, Meiya looks dead inside. "This is… so frustrating… Now that I can't heal my knights…"

"Giving up already? Is this what they sacrificed themselves for? You wouldn't make a good commander, Meiya." Taunting: Successful.

"Never. I won't yield, your cavalry is surrounded now! Even if I lost five comrades this turn I can still-"

"My turn isn't over yet."

"Huh? What? None of your warriors can attack me from their positions."

"Meiya-san, he still has a mage right there. See?" Her eyes go wide in terror as Mikoto points to my mage. It's so nice seeing so many emotions in your face today.

"AAH! I forgot about it!"

"Say goodbye to your Samurai." I know she has a fetish for swords, but to see her choose the Samurai as her prepromote without a doubt was really funny.

"No, not Kenshin! Stop Shirogane! Don't… Aaaahh, what can I do now?!" She lost her cool once I took down her favorite unit.

"You can give up or die fighting." I give her a smile, and get a furrowed brow with daggers instead of eyes back at me.

"No… I'll win. I'll defeat you! I just have to defeat your King, then your army will fall!"

Sadly for her, I killed her king two turns after that. She looked completely defeated, looking at me with a mixture of envy, terror and respect. Next up was Steel Gear.

"Hmm, you wouldn't happen to be… near the second room to the right, Ayamine?" She keeps her poker face, but I saw her brows move a bit. "Would be such a shame if I set up this bomb here."

"Tch. I'm not dead yet."

We can't really see each other in the Steel Gear game, we are each taking our turns to find and kill the other but she's giving me a hard time.

"Hmm… I wonder where could you be?"

I'll move here, and set some explosives in this hall. This should do it.

"Don't get confident. I'm still on the game."

"It's your choice, Ayamine. What are you gonna do?" She returns her gaze to her screen. All the girls were behind her sofa, peeking at her game. They all were rooting for Kei.

"Done with this. Get ready." Her face changes, her eyes get a flare on them.

Let's execute the trap, then. I've been laying wired explosives along a hallway and now that I'm gonna blow them up the whole hallway will be blasted, but some items will be destroyed too. Like the gas tubes.

I press the command to detonate the explosives and the chain reaction appears on the screen. For a Game Guy game this looks really good. Then the game displays that some tubes were destroyed, leaking a poisonous gas into the area. But since a wall

was about to fall, it broke and blocked the way I had gone to hide. Now the gas can't reach me. It's all a matter of whether Kei is or not close enough to me to kill me before the gas kills her, so she can't hide anymore.

"Cheap. Coward."

"Say whatever you want, but you're gonna lose." The girls behind look dejected. Meiya and Chizuru look especially shaken.

Kei looked more serious now. She pressed the buttons faster than before. However…

"Eh?! Why is the laser trap activated?!"

"I found the room some turns ago and flipped the switch."

"Tch, damn you." As she moved her character it appeared on my screen, she hadn't detected my character yet. All right, it's my chance. Let's use the sniping rifle, and here we… Dead!

"Eh? I… What? From where?" For the first time since we started this she looked genuinely shocked.

"You fell right into my trap." I send a wink her way, which makes her more annoyed.

The other girls didn't knew what to say to her. Ayamine was the one that got the most close to be a problem for me in this game.

When we made it to Valgern-On they were blown away by it, but due to how fast paced it is they stood no chance against me.

"Awawa! Jump! And from here I'll- Ah!" My Kaiser stunned her Xao-Myun and then I strike it with more shots. She has 23% shields left.

"Fuhuhu! Is this all you have, Tama?"

"It's too fast! I gotta pull back to counter attack, then-"

"How about no?" I shoot at her and bring her to red numbers. Her jumps are really predictable, she always jumps and later moves instead of pressing both buttons at the same time.

"Awawa, I'm gonna lose… Maybe if I go on the offensive!" She tries to counter attack, and that surprisingly went well.

She took 20% of my shields with that unexpected move. But she was already too low on health, some shots and down she went.

"Nice fight, Tama. That trick at the end was really good."

"I still lost. You truly are unbeatable." She sighs, looking dejectedly to the ground.

For a first time it wasn't so bad. They do look dejected as hell right now, let's see if I got them interested in the trainings.

"So, what did you think of the MMTS?"

They exchange some glances and, after some nods, Chizuru speaks up.

"They are most interesting. The simulators are very polished and the teachings they have are very impressive. To think this training method could one day be common worldwide is honestly shocking." Glad to see all that work wasn't in vain. "However, as a Japanese citizen, I am worried about the Americanization of our training. I do not think this was made completely in Japan as you said, it's too similar to a Pleiades. The same could be said for the software, that has many English terms despite being of Japanese origin. Even the fact that the TSF sim is about Anti-TSF training makes it clear it's an American invention." But all of this was made in Japan. Also, why do they let their hatred towards America get in the way of everything?

"I mean, it is a Japanese invention. Also you do know this is a UN base, right? We should be fluent in the international language, and if using some English terminology can speed up the translations and

help foreign Cadets who don't know so much of our language to not be so lost during training I don't see the problem." She did not seem to agree.

"Hmph, English can eat… Ahem, regardless of that matter, I believe I understand how much one can improve using a MMTS."

"So would you all like to continue training with them?"… Wow, they did not expect that question.

"But… these must be a military secret, right? We couldn't keep using them even if we wanted." Chizuru shot down my proposal as fast as a laser.

"A secret you already know of. And I got permission from the Professor to allow you to join me in my special mission if you want. It's up to you if you want to use them or not."

They look slightly troubled by my offer. Meiya and Chizuru were again whispering between themselves while Mikoto and Tama looked at them worriedly, restlessly folding their hands into their pockets.

"While they are indeed useful devices, I believe our priority is to prepare for the CCSE." Chizuru said in a monotone while doing circles in the air with one finger. "The next generation of Cadets will surely make good use of these. And if they're deemed worthy I'm sure we will get another chance to train with them."

"Sakaki is right. While there is much to be gained through this method, our current objective is the CCSE. Increasing our physical aptitude should be our number one concern." Meiya spoke solemnly, not meeting my eye.

"Mikoto, Tama. What about you guys?" Meiya and Chizuru looked at them, they looked downwards.

"I… agree with Mitsurugi-san." Tama barely managed to bring out the words, arms compacted onto her sides. Mikoto gave a small nod to indicate she also thought the same. Sigh, can't say I didn't expect this.

"And you Ayamine?"

"Who knows?" She shrugs. Kei, dear, please give an answer.

"What does that mean?"

"These things might just explode."

"C'mon, don't be like that. They were made very carefully, they wouldn't-"

"Oh, one caught on fire."

"Huh?! Wait, they're fine." I see her smirking at me. KEI!

"Huhuhu."

"Ayamine, can you give a me straight answer?"

"No, can't do that." She says in her usual bored tone while looking away.

"Why not?"

"Cause I'm lesbian."

"Wait, WHAT?!" This is one major change in this world, what the hell?!

"Just kidding." Don't deadpan me like that!

"Ugh, I don't know why I try with you. So you're refusing too?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Can you tell me why?" She seems irritated at my questions. She faces me and looks right me in the eye before answering.

"Because I don't give a shit about this. I'm here to become a Surface Pilot, not a tester. Don't dump your work on us."

"Hey, that's not what this-"

"Shut it. I don't care. They're interesting, but useless to me. I have a test to pass, these things won't help me pass the CCSE. You happy now?"

I can't say I didn't see this coming. Well, I tried. No hard feelings. Right, they're not who I'm remembering them to be. They are, but they are not. I have to get to know them from point zero, since they are different.

At least Sensei might find some use for the consoles, maybe we could trade them to get resources or something. It's clear the anti-American sentiment is stronger in this world, so let's stop digging this hole.

"Alright, I guess that ends this training session. Thanks for your cooperation, squad."

"Eh? Shirogane, are we not using those black ones?" Huh? Meiya seemed interested in them, but considering all the English terms that are in both CryRing and Steel Gear… Yeah, I better wrap this up before they start to openly call me an American sympathizer.

"Nah, you already did enough. Plus Ayamine is right, this is my mission. I wanted some input, a different point of view one might say, and you already gave it to me. As you all said this won't help you pass the CCSE, so let's end this here. Thanks a lot for helping me out, guys." I say as I take the Game Guys out of their hands and put them back in the briefcase they were in before.

They seemed to want to say something, Chizuru was glaring blades at Kei who simply looked the other way. Now, what the hell is their problem? They already rejected the idea of working with me, they don't trust in me. Now what?

"But… you promised you would fight us seriously today! You still haven't finished this training!" Meiya was not letting go of the idea. What got into her all of a sudden? They just said they wouldn't benefit from this, they'll just get more paranoid anyways.

"Meiya, you all just said this is useless to you. Let's not waste more time, you can still go use the rest of the afternoon on your training. I don't want to get in the way, so let's-" Chizuru came closer, took a pose similar to my world's Chizuru when she was Class Rep, and objected firmly raising that same finger again, more circles being drawn on the air.

"Mitsurugi is right. You said those were more amazing than the MMTS, so why don't you show us what they can do?"

"Because they're a military secret. And you just said you didn't like the idea of training with these machines. Honestly, I'm not stupid. I can tell you don't trust me, and I don't want to force you guys to go through with this if it makes you uncomfortable. It's okay, I'll deal with this myself. You did enough for me already." I have to mind my words, I don't want to anger her further.

But she looks super annoyed at my response. Chizuru was again glaring at Kei. Tama and Mikoto were exchanging glances from me, to Chizuru, to the Instructor, as if unsure of what's going on. Meiya just folds her arms and sighs.

I don't get it, if you wanted to use the Stallion, why did you refuse so vehemently a second ago? What are you playing at?

"Alright, so if we agree to help you in your mission, would you show us those machines?"

"Of course. I welcome the help, but are you sure? You just refused a second ago." I won't say no if I can get you interested in them, but I can't read what you're playing at right now.

"Well, maybe I should have waited a bit. I… cannot believe you performed so well in these trainings." She looks away, clearly bothered.

"Hey, it's just a matter of practice. So, do you all wanna try them out?"

"Yeah! I'm in!" Mikoto jumped up with stars in her eyes.

"Me too!" Tama chimed in.

Why were they being so cold a second ago? Were they testing me? Wait, I think they did something like this in my world when I started dating Sumika. They were constantly trying to make me step on the stick, trying to make me admit we were dating. That was such a silly thing, but I feel they're doing the same here. What did they expect I was gonna do? Are they so suspicious of me they felt that they had to test whether they can trust in me?

"What about you Meiya?"

"I too would like to face you in those machines. And you still insist on referring to me by my name." Her sapphires turn into blades aimed at me, making my heart ache. I've been calling you that since forever, you can't just expect me to…

No, forget it. She's different, another person. Let it go, man.

"… Sorry, I'll try to fix that. Well, Ayamine, you're the last one. Are you-"

"Sure, whatever." If I hadn't spent a lifetime with another her I would think she was just flipping me off. But she does look at the Stallions quite intensely. She wants to see them in action.

They wanted to use them, yet they pretended to not care. So they were testing me. Sigh… It's gonna be hard to regain their trust.

"Alright. Instructor, can you check the ethernet connection as I start them up?"

"Yes, leave it to me." Not showing any interest in our discussion, more than as an spectator, she begins to help me with the checks.… I wonder what she thinks of this, why is she doing nothing.

… Maybe she agrees on the Anti-American sentiment, and so, doesn't care what they say to me. Guess I'm just another trainee for her… as it should be. She really… isn't Marimo-chan.

Once everything was set, I put the disk in each Stallion and turned them on. As the anime opening of CryRing Saga played on all the TVs, the girls jaws pierced the floor. Their eyes stared in shock at the images, producing not a single sound as they were lost in what they were seeing.

"… Shirogane, what is this?" Chizuru had to adjust her glasses, trying to keep her cool.

"CryRing Saga. It's the awesome version of the same named program we used a while ago."

"How is this… This is… The drawings are moving?!" Meiya's eyes were going to pop out any second now. Tama and Mikoto's eyes became white dots as they stared in awe at the screen. "Shirogane, how is this possible?"

"… Science?"

"Be serious! How… I cannot believe these drawings can move…" Meiya was again mesmerized by the opening, staring firmly at it with wide eyes.

"Special-kun, this for real?" Even Kei's eyes were wide as a watermelon.

"Yeah? C'mon, bring the sofas closer. Let's make you go through the tutorial."

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**[?]**

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"This is a most welcome surprise." I reread the report the agent gave me, a smile yet again forming on me.

"It seems he said the same thing when informed of this matter, according to the agent. He already was suspicious of some movements some people were doing in one of the hangars." My fellow tells.

"Haha, I see. Great minds think alike." How would I like to have such a competent person on my side. But perhaps it's because we're so similar that we will never be able to work together.

However, this is truly a most unexpected surprise to be sure. Not even in my boldest dreams could I have thought her able to convince them of this. I didn't knew she had it in her. That incident must have left quite a shock in her soul.

With this piece I'm sure we'll convince Kouzuki to… see the same landscape we do. She could never refuse to be in charge of this research, much less in her position. Her support will disappear faster than a candle's flame in front of a typhoon if she doesn't procure any further results. I'll have to thank her in person for this piece she gave me. What could I reward her with, however? Some fruits, a bottle of sake perhaps? A fruit basket with some sake, that should be most appropriate as a show of thankfulness.

"Sir, according to the report, he promised his support to aid us in the production of the amounts of Type-94 you requested. He also agreed

to let the Fuji Corps be the exclusive users of the 1Cs that aren't in our control, and to ease the pressure to take them from our units."

"Perfectly perfect. All the pieces are falling into formation. What about the medicine?"

"Still not secured. They demanded some Type-97s in addition to the money we proposed them." Sigh… I need it, so badly.

"I'll allow it. Send ten of them in good condition. So let's review, we hand her and her research to the fox, we have acquired all the needed hands to approve the new budget for the production of the Type-94, all in exchange for our support in keeping the status quo. Of course, I hope the UN keeps their end of the deal and keeps that squad as mere Cadets." The last thing we need is the hostages getting deployed. I can only imagine the amount of political fuckery that would cause. It would be funny to see, I admit.

"Actually, sir, about that… I have one more matter to inform you about." For him to waver in this way, I wonder what the informant relayed to us this time.

"What is it?"

"There's a new member in Squad 207."

"Hm? Just that? I don't see how that deserves my attention."

"All data about him is locked behind the highest lock in the UN, and his public profiles are also locked."

"What did you say?!"

"He also possesses great skills in all areas, be it fighting or in war knowledge. He doesn't seem to be an average recruit, sir."

"Who is this person? A foreigner?"

"No, sir. He's Japanese. From what little info he could gather, this young boy came from abroad after his former squad was wiped out not so long ago. His name is Takeru Shirogane. The other faction wants to put him out of commission." A Cadet from abroad… whose squad was wiped out in recent times… Could he have been stationed in that base as she was?

"You said Shirogane?" He nods. The name doesn't sound familiar. "And under whose wing is he? America?"

"No, Kouzuki seems to be responsible for this. She herself asked for the boy to be transferred to her base, and I doubt she would be conspiring with anyone to harm the hostages."

Kouzuki found another pawn, huh? Killing him may be the smarter solution, but I don't see the need to rush. We should investigate more throughly. Plus, if she finds out one survivor of that was assassinated she may turn against us. And, for all I know, he might be on our side.

"Send a message right away telling him I want to observe this Shirogane. Do make sure he is unable to intervene during the CCSE, we can't allow the hostages to grow wings or they may turn into a problem."

"Yes, sir! Will that be all you require of me?"

"No, could you call her to a meeting? I want to thank her personally for the efforts, as well as relay the news of the soon-to-come transfer to Yokohama."

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*Same Day. A bit over 7 PM.*

*( Brain-cylinder room.)*

**[Takeru]**

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No sounds in the room, I slowly move the thread in the small gap available. Inhaling deep, to not screw this up because if I do it's back to the beginning for the third time, I slowly move my hands back. And so, finally, I managed to form the shape I wanted to show Kasumi.

"Sigh… And this is a Dancing Butterfly. Think you can you do it?" She gives me a nod, and she tries to imitate my movements.

The first times she also got it wrong, her brows moving for a sec as she got pissed. Giving her some pointers, since her hands are much smaller than mine, she gives me a nod and tries again. Very slowly she moves the thread, and, after a while, she manages to make the butterfly. A wide smile appears on her face.

"Thanks, Takeru-san." Eyeing the shape, she can't hide the smile, which I can't help but to share. "Do you know more tricks?"

"No, not really. Cat's Cradle wasn't something I used to do back home, after all."

"I see. What did you do in your world for fun?"

"Playing videogames, most of the time. The Game Guy has been my main go-to console for a while, but I also got a Dreamcost and a Nientedo 64 back home." I only used the Stallion to play through Valgern-On 2, I didn't get to actually play either Viper Eater or CryRing to the end.

"… Those programs don't seem much fun to me." She pouts a bit, moving her bunny ears real slow.

"Haha… I know you think they're hard, but not all of them are like that."

"So… What were you playing back there?"

"Oh, someone gifted me a used copy of Magorea's Mask for a test I passed, so once got some time I played through that one. Had

finished it before recovering my memories, too." Was actually looking forward to discussing it with Mikoto back then.

"… What is the game about?"

"You see, the protagonist is looking for an old friend that was always with him during his last quest, but as he traveled he got lost in a forest." I feel a tingly feeling on the back of my head just as I began to remember the cutscene, her eyes widen a bit. "But then he runs into a kid wearing Magorea's Mask, a mask that is imbued with the power of an old and evil deity." Slowing down my tone, I arch my brows as to make it sound scary, remembering that cutscene.

… Which in all fairness, was scary as hell.

"And then, what happens?"

"Oh, our hero tries to fight him, but the masked kid is too strong and turns him into a coconut scrub." For real, I still get shivers remembering that scene. Kasumi quivers a bit, eyes fixed on mine as she waits. "Well, the boy then has to find a way to go back to normal, recover the Magorea's Mask, and save the town of the game before the moon falls down. And he has a very limited amount of time to actually pull it off, only three days is all he can afford."

"Oh…" Her bunny ears fall down, dried up like a flower left without water. "But, how does he fight back?"

"You see Kasumi, our hero also has the powers of masks on his side." She twitches, making a cute squeal as her bunny ears move.

"But aren't the masks evil?"

"No, not all of them are. He also has his own magical instrument, that lets him go back in time to the beginning of the three days. So long as he doesn't give up, he can always keep trying."

"I see… So, how is the game played?"

"By doing side quests and exploring around, there is a vast world to explore with lots of different locations and characters." I tell her of what I remember of the game, the tingly feeling intensifying as I recalled the landscapes, the temples, and the puzzles, and she nodded quickly, asking all about it, and getting surprised when I told her of some solutions and of the bosses of the four temples. "So, the more you play and explore means you can get more useful masks that will help you in your mission, and also help the people of the area during those three days."

"So the one with the better mask wins? That sounds like a masquerade."

"Hahaha, yeah, it kinda does. But guess what? The best way to win is to not have a mask at all." I rise a finger with a smile, enjoying her widening eyes.

"But how? You can't be in a masquerade without a mask."

"You see, once the hero loses all his masks after gathering them, he obtains the strongest one in the game, the Fiery Daemon's mask. It is *so* OP, it can almost one shot all the bosses of the game!" And thanks to Onimura, I knew that tidbit before going into the game, though I didn't knew what exactly would happen once I returned all the masks.

Seeing the transformation for the first time was oh so *awesome!* Going back and mowing down the bosses in one or two hits felt so satisfying, too. Especially to that damn bull. Had it coming to him, damn bastard.

"So, you win in the end?"

"Yeah, Magorea's mask is sealed and the town is saved."

"Does the hero find his lost friend?"

"… No, he has to keep searching on his own, leaving the friends he made in the town behind."

"That's sad. I don't like it."

"Well, yeah. But it isn't all bad, you know. He did help out that town, without him they would have been screwed." She closes her eyes, nodding after a while.

"So… Are there other games like that one?"

"Oh, yeah! There's a whole franchise of 'em. You see, there was this one time where I tried playing the first game when I was little, and I hated it."

We kept talking of games and their stories, she listening intently and curiously asking me about my world, about what games I played with Sumika, and of why I didn't bring those games here, instead of the 'harder ones' I brought, a small pout in place.

Thankfully, Kasumi is still friendly with me. Coming here to chill while we play is one of the few pleasures I have left in this rotten world. She said that Sumika feels really happy when we do, but that she's feeling some confusing feelings in her as well. Don't worry Sumika, your pain will be over soon. I swear I'll end this the right way this time. Even if it seems I'll have to go alone for the most part.

The girls were blown away by the Stallion. But after we finished 'training' with them, Chizuru got all defensive about how it was impossible that they were made in Japan. Meiya also seemed distrustful, believing it was an American invention as well. Mikoto and Tama looked like they enjoyed it, but I didn't want to put them in a rough spot and said that I was going to keep performing my mission alone. Kei didn't stop staring at me intensely since I started up the things, so I know she must also be suspicious of me.

Thankfully, NotMarimo-chan stopped them before they started asking questions or getting too bothered. She then made us give an

overview of what we thought of the new sims, to think of how we could improve further in our trainings from what they learned today. While it seems they do see some merits in the consoles, their suspicions that they're from America made them close up. The Instructor simply closed the class by saying we can always improve, especially when looking for different ways to train, and that was it for the day.

Sigh… Whatever. I'll be myself and stop antagonizing them. I don't want to keep fighting with them. It does seem like the bridge has been burned, but even so I still gotta try to put out the fire.

A sound echoes through the room, what's that?

Kasumi moves her ears as she goes over to a machine and comes back holding a paper. Is that thing a fax?

"The Professor is calling for you." The paper read 'Shirogane get here'. Sigh, as pushy as always.

"I'll be back in a second." I stand up and get out of the room, Kasumi trying to do origami by herself by the cylinder.

My steps echo in the silent hallway. This long hallway always manages to creep me out. I get back to the main floor and knock on Sensei's door. I hear her voice and go inside, where I find another old face I recognize.

"Oh, so this is him?"

"Yes, the one and only. Shirogane, allow me to introduce you to Sakon Yoroi. He's the one that will help us with your files here." Yep, that's Chief Yoroi alright. Same coat, same hat, same face. But is he the same inside?

"Good evening, I'm Takeru Shirogane. Thanks for your help, sir." I take a serious tone as I extend my arm to offer a handshake, but

then I'm met with two ice spears in his eyes. At this point I'm not surprised.

"Are you really Takeru Shirogane? Please, you can use your real name with me." Smiling, he addressed me with his playful tone.

"I am Takeru Shirogane, sir. That's my real name." His smile vanishes as he takes a step closer, ignoring my hand.

"Oh, perhaps you think you can fool me, American dog?" Oh shit, here we go again.

"Chief Yoroi, what's the meaning of this?" Sensei sounded really angry and… Holy shit! She took out her gun!

"Please, Professor. Forgive my curiosity." He raises his hands in a defensive manner. "I merely wished to test whether the man was who you said he was. His records were already cleared quite throughly, and it's surprising to see a young Japanese man that willingly joined the UN and came back here despite being abroad."

"Yeah… About that. Yoroi-san, do you know anything about the reason my records were cleared?" His faces goes back to his usual one, showing no concern at the gun that was still being pointed at him.

"The Professor just told me you were unaware of this. She also told me you were living in Yukon since two years ago, enlisted as a Cadet in the UN."

"Yes, pretty much." That's the story she came up with to cover me.

"You have no idea why your data is missing?"

"No, honestly don't have a clue. One day, I woke up in a hospital without knowing why I was there, and it seems that no one was able to locate any relatives I might have had. Been living there since then, enlisted as a soldier to not have to go to the refugee camps." I

practically have the thing memorized by now. He looks into my eyes, I quietly return his stare. Lying with a straight face sure gets hard in front of people like him.

"… You must have had to deal with many unpleasant situations back at Yukon, I'm sure."

"… Yes, I had it hard before coming here." I can't help but to frown. All those messed up accidents… and now they won't even trust in me.

"I see, forgive me for prying." He smiles again, taking a step back, this time offering me his hand, which I then shake. "I am not in a position to know of how the databases are handled, so I do not know why this error happened. I'm afraid I cannot help you with that." He tips his hat forward slightly.

"Don't worry Shirogane, he's already agreed to fix your profiles. We'll find out about your past if it becomes important enough." Sensei was still pointing her gun towards Yoroi-san. I mean, things are different this time around. I shouldn't be surprised.

"By the way, Shirogane-kun. Do you like American food?"

Again with the misdirection? Talk to the suspect about a random topic, and once they seemed to relax, throw a hard question at them. It's a simple trick, people tend to lie less when they're relaxed.

"Yeah, I do."

"Hmm, I see. Maybe I could bring you a hamburger next time I bring intel to the Professor."

"That would be appreciated, Yoroi-san." I return his smile with my own. "Though, I like pizza more than hamburgers."

"… Oh? Is that so? Out of curiosity, what would your favorite Japanese food be?"

"Hmm… Steamed doubin, without a doubt. Though, mackerel and natto rolls are what I like to eat the most everyday."

"Hoho, I see…. And just to make sure, you were trained in America right?"

"Yes, I was part of a UN base in American soil these last two years." According to Sensei's plan, that would make most Japanese people not care about me. Since they would keep their distance, I would not have to be giving explanations about my origins so much.

"And they allowed you to come here? Such a talented soldier, I would keep you close if you were in my team. I cannot imagine what reason they could have, but reading your report I can sort of understand." What is there to understand? What's about the base Sensei chose to be my transferring point?

"Chief Yoroi, you're asking too many questions. I only allowed you to ask a few things about him." Sensei was not fooling around here.

"Alright. I do not wish to see your beautiful face making such a frown, so I'll just ask one more question. Shirogane-kun?" He now looks at me, and takes a serious tone again.

"What is it?"

"What do you think of Her Highness, the Shogun?" Shrinking stern eyes gaze at me, the severity of his question is not lost to me. He's asking me where my loyalty lies. Though, I've no reason to lie about my loyalty.

"I think she's a good person. With her as the pillar of strength, the Empire can look towards the future with hope."

"And what about her situation? I'm sure that you must know of the Empire's affairs after coming back."

"I do not have a reason to voice my opinion on the matter. The Empire's matters should be solved by the Empire. Even if foreign powers could lend a hand, it's Japan and its citizens who must decide how they wish to interact with the world. It's up to the Empire to decide how it wishes to manage its power."

"A very… interesting answer. So, you do not care about who holds the power?" Hostility, disgust, rejection. Right, he is loyal to the Shogun so hearing that I don't care about who holds the power here might have sounded like I didn't care about her current struggles.

"If the people wish the power to be with the Shogun, I see no reason to oppose or antagonize them. I'm here to help, not to create more problems. Butting my head into the political struggles would cause more harm than good, due to my role in the army. Sometimes, one has to know when to keep some distance from certain discussions." His gaze somewhat relaxes upon hearing my words.

"I see. You know about the current power struggles and decide to remain neutral to not spark a conflict. Professor, you got yourself a good guardian." Now he was nodding in acceptance. I'll never be able to read you or your daughter.

"Enough with the chit chat. Can we get on the business? Those records are not going to fix themselves." She finally lowers her gun. Sigh, thank God she didn't have to use it.

"Do forgive my curiosity. Let's get on with it then. Takeru Shirogane, we'll need your fingerprints for the registry and your blood type." Sigh… Again using my full name, huh?

"OK, let's get this done."

More papers to sign, some confirmations on my medical test, a fingerprint registration, and that's all done.

"Good work Chief Yoroi. Here are the reports you asked on the devices we've made." Sensei hands some envelopes to him, who

puts them inside his coat.

"Thanks for your cooperation, Professor. I assure you this aid will not go unnoticed, if it brings the results you speak of I'm sure the Shogun will prepare a very generous reward for you."

"Yeah, I know. But you might want to hold onto that, I'm very close to making another breakthrough in a more… tasty project." She looks at me while licking her lips. Sensei, you just love to stir the bees. No, you couldn't let this end peacefully.

"Hmm? I wonder what could it be? Does it have anything to do with that live test of the stealth technology?" He knows of that?!

"So those Royal Guards were spying. Yes, the devices are not the only things I created. You would do well in looking forward to it."

"Ohoho, and I suppose Takeru Shirogane is involved somehow?" Sensei makes her devilish smile as she chuckles.

"Maybe. You'd do well in not antagonizing us. I may not be willing to give you early access if you get in our way."

"Oh no, that would be troublesome. Whatever will I do." He says in a deadpan tone. "I'll be awaiting that intel. And as thanks for you sharing all this… Let me give you one warning."

Me and Sensei lose our smiles as he changes his tone. What is this going to be? The coup? The HSST?

"You might receive a bad present this Christmas." Oh, it's just Alternative V. But I guess they don't think we already know about it. We should act concerned and-

"Oh, that? Yeah, I know. My guardian already warned me about it, but thanks for the reminder." Sensei, what the hell? And why did you have to mention me?! Don't give me that smile!

"Hmm? He did?… Interesting. You wouldn't happen to be willing to exchange him for some very large funds?" Great, now I'm on the sights of the Ministry of Information. Way to go, Sensei.

"No." Despite Yoroi-san's playful tone Sensei answered fully serious, with a bothered face.

"Ohoho, I think I might want to not push my luck further here. It's been a pleasure, Professor. I'm glad you have not forgotten your duty to Japan." Sensei ruffles her hair as she sighs deeply. She does not like to deal with him, after all.

"If that's all I'll call Pyatkh to escort you. Wait by the elevator, and do not go wandering off."

"Yes, I know. Until next time." He bows to us and leaves.

But before leaving he shot a glare at me. Not the playful one, not the serious one. A small trail of smoke coming out of a forest, a lone dark cloud floating up above. His glare was filled with doubt, with suspicion. I don't know if it's a good idea to be on his bad side. I waited a bit after he left to turn around and face Sensei, who was spinning on her chair again.

"Sensei, why did you tell him about me telling you of Alt. V?"

"For you to have a serious enough reason to be here. You are supposed to be the guardian the UN assigned to me, in case I get attacked by my enemies. You are a special individual trained in many areas, and were sent here to protect me under my direct orders. I asked you to come here as my bodyguard and my American allies sent you with a tip for me. That's your cover, for those who can and will access your information. And it's not like it's a lie, only the part about you coming from America is."

"I mean, yeah, I get it. But I think you just made him more interested in me." She strokes her bangs as she stood up again, grabbing her mug and going to pour some coffee in it.

"Look Shirogane, you were a Royal Guard here. Those guys are practically fanatics of the Shogun, the thought of one of them joining the UN is not unheard of, but it's still rare. You were not given on a loan, you joined us. So you needed a damn good reason to be here while making them reluctant to approach you. They would have still put you under the microscope, but at least now that they know you're here to protect and aid me they will be more careful about what they may try to do to get intel on you."

"Yeah, I know this world is different. Thanks for taking care of everything again."

"Aww, don't be so humble now. I'm just doing my part, so long as you play yours there's no thanks needed. Do be careful around them, and in the CCSE as well. I know you realized, but your training is harder now. And so will be the CCSE, so be on your top game and don't take it lightly."

"Yes, I know. By the way, did you see the data from today's training?"

"Not yet. I was making some adjustments to the OS and the engines today. Let's talk over this after today's training, you have until nine. Go and keep Yashiro company for awhile longer, will you?"

"Yeah, got it."

"And Shirogane?"

"Hmm?"

"I want you to push your squad with all of your might starting tomorrow." She was serious, I can tell when she is simply talking and when she's giving an order by now.

"Why would you want me to do that? I thought you would be against me revealing my strength."

"They seem to be doubting you, so at least let them see how good you truly are. They won't stop being jealous, but maybe they will stop being so annoyed about how you seem to be playing with them. Do not hold back, at all. You can pound them into the ground all you want, I'll tell Marimo to not intervene." I did my best to not harm them today, and now you're telling me you want me to beat the crap out of the political hostages that are being watched by, like, the whole base? Yeah, what could go wrong with that.

"Uhh… Pretty sure that harming them is not a good idea."

"Don't harm them, show them how good you are. Shame them, crush them, and all without actually hurting them. I know you can do it, so go out there and show off a bit. It will also work as a warning to all the eyes that are laying their sights on you."

"So that's the real reason."

"No, both are equally important. Now Shirogane, what are you gonna do tomorrow?" Sigh, she loves to boss me around. How I'd like to wipe that smirk off your face when you get like this, Sensei.

"I will continue to give my all in the trainings, until the CCSE. Anything else, Yuuko-sensei?"

"Yes, I have a question for you."

"A question? What is it?" That's weird, she's doubting. Her eyes moved down for a second, her smile is getting smaller.

"Shirogane… Regarding the theories, do you think you could tell me more about the Causality Nucleus thing you said you were?"

"The Nucleus? I guess, since it doesn't really have much to do with things here. Alright, let me remember… "

It pulls itself towards causal leaks if it's connected, it brings towards itself data that is related to him with a strong pull, it's own information

cannot be leaked easily and can grow in power from time to time. That was all, since even though I tried to read them I didn't get a thing from Sensei's notes.

"I see. And you had said that emotions can cause causal leaks during one of our talks before, right? About how you work as a conductor, something about an emotional link."

"Yes, that I did. You explained to me back in my world how the emotional state of a person can affect the kind of futures and parallel worlds it receives information from, and that the conductor can strengthen said link."

"That applies to someone who is a Nucleus too, right?"

"I guess? Why would it not apply?"

"Oh, not saying it doesn't. But if you're both anomalies at the same time, and depending on your emotional state you, as a conductor, can open links to other worlds, then also you, as a nucleus, will receive any data about you from those worlds as soon as the conduit is formed." Her eyes are burning with the passion only found in her when she is theorizing about some crazy idea.

"But you also said that it's really hard to do consciously. I don't really have any idea if I have affected anyone so far with a causal leak."

"And that's what we're going to test after the Niigata incident." She declares with a smile.

"Huh? Test?"

"I was thinking of how to gather data regarding your petition, to fix what caused your world to fall in ruin. So after you give me the theories and I confirm if my ideas are correct or not, we'll start working on that as well."

"For real?! That's… much faster than I expected. What about the 00 Unit?"

"I will still need time to recheck all the theory throughly, instead of just copying the equations. I might also need to modify parts of its hardware too, and that will take its fair share of time. So, in the meantime, we'll start dealing with your problem. To be sure nothing bad happens try to stay in a good mood, don't let things get to you." Her gaze was piercing me, but I know she means well. Can't go screwing things up now.

"Yeah, I know. Is that all, Sensei?"

"For now. Don't be late for the testing."

"Got it. Later."

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*Same Day. Near midnight.*

*(Imperial Palace. Tokyo.)*

**[Maya]**

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Having finished the meetings for the day, I bow and leave Yuuhi-sama's side. Walking on the hallways, I draw a long breath. However, I cannot yet go to rest. I look around and after confirming no one is in the vicinity, I lean onto a wall.

"HQ-01 here. Chief Yoroi, do you copy?" I say in a whisper into the comms I had in the neck of my dress.

"Loud and clear." His usual voice reached my ears. "I am in the usual spot."

"Roger, I shall be going."

Taking one of the secret passageways, I arrive at the small garden that's outside. The cold evening wind greets my skin, the sound of distant steps reaches my ears. Instead of going into the garden, I turn to my left sharply and approach a small building that's left in a corner. I look behind me and at what's around me, and after sensing I was not tailed, I go into the storehouse.

Closing the door behind me, I take a few steps into the darkness. A small sound appears to my right.

"… Good evening, 1st Lt. Tsukuyomi. As cool and beautiful as tonight's evening breeze." The man said giving me a bow.

"Chief Yoroi, please do not waste our time. How did the meeting went?" He looks as expressionless as usual, what dim light filters into the building tells me there's a certain tension in his posture.

"… Well, here's the documentation the Professor handed me." He produces a few folders from his coat and hands them to me. "She mentioned a few other tidbits that were not in the papers before I left, however." He proceeds to inform me of what Kouzuki told him.

Some more developments, perhaps? Why is she researching weaponry instead of finishing… Or, is it because she's close to starting the project?

"As per usual, your dedication is much appreciated. Is there anything else left to report?" He closes his eyes for a moment, then tensing his brows he opens them again.

"Yes… Fact is, she let me meet the person she wanted to cover." Yoroi's tone grew slow and serious. Who is it that made his complexion waver so? "Ahem… Please do not shoot the messenger, I am merely telling you of what I saw." He raises both of his hands slowly, lowering his head slightly.

"I understand, Chief. Who was the one Kouzuki desired to cover?"

"… 1st Lt. Shirogane."

"Oh, is that so?"

I see… Yes, if his profiles were not fixed then he would have been put in a most precarious position. It makes perfect sense, however, I wonder if Her Highness… No, if she sent him there to that squad, she should have expected something of the sort.

"You… do not seem surprised, 1st Lieutenant."

"I am not allowed to speak of the matter, but I myself have confirmed that man is not a spy or a faker, if that is what you were concerned about."

"But… How is this possible? I thought he-"

"Chief, you should know when to stop asking questions." I take one step forward, glaring at him amidst the darkness.

"Oh, apologies. I still have a rookie in me, it seems. Hahaha…" His laughter trails off as he puts his hands inside his coat's pockets. "Still, I suppose Her Highness-"

"I already reported his presence in the proper manner, and we were given no special orders regarding him. I assume he is performing a Top Secret mission there. Do keep in mind his standing, Chief."

"However, the Professor doesn't seem to know who he truly is. She said he's there as her guardian." His eyes squinted, letting me see he was telling the truth.

"Is that so? I suppose this is the Shogun's way of supporting Kouzuki." Though, perhaps the fox requires of his… services if the project is soon to be started. "In that case, I am sure you did not speak of-"

"Absolutely not a word left my lips." His eyes narrow, I nod as I gesture for him to continue. "However, I think that, in light of certain

circumstances, Kouzuki should be… informed of the minimal intel."

I inhale slowly, then I tap my glasses. It is true, if he is to stay in that squadron under his real name people will start recognizing him. Hmm… I cannot mention his name to Yuuhi-sama since she ordered us not to, but she ordered me to remain as we were unless something happened. If I keep bringing this up, someone might notice it. I would like to believe the Shogun's chamber is free of bugs, but walls have eyes and ears in this palace. Regardless of why Takeru is there, we should do something about this.

"Chief, could I rely on you to misdirect Kouzuki?"

"I doubt anyone could pull such a feat." He says as a small smile is painted in his complexion.

"She could be deceived to facilitate a meeting, regarding his 'lost' data. We'll use that to contact him and see what the fox has planned for him. I am sure Her Highness also desires to hear his report, however, for whatever reason, she has left him incommunicated in Yokohama. I trust you know how to approach this."

"Yes, you can leave this matter in my hands. Though, he didn't even flinch when we met. He was also very calm, eerily so."

"Truly? Was Ta… Ahem, 1st Lt. Shirogane bothered by anything?"

"No, he seemed comfortable. Even when Kouzuki showed her hostility, he remained calm and composed. Some of his answers denoted an air of maturity he did not possess before." He then tells me of his answer regarding the questions he gave, especially the one regarding his loyalty. Of course, remaining neutral is all he can do in his current role. "He did arrive quickly when called, so I suppose the Professor has him stationed near her office at times. I suppose that after that little matter with the infiltrator she wanted an extra layer of security now that the cyborg left." I nod in agreement, looking at the sole window that filters what little moonlight is accompanying us here.

I see… So you're calmer now. If he didn't react or give any signs to Yoroi, then I suppose I should have no motives to make a move. And I do agree, Takeru is well suited to guard that fox. That being said, I do wonder why Her Highness allowed him to be on the Cadet squad. However, knowing him, he might have pressured Kouzuki to be near Meiya-sama in her daily activities. You are terribly stubborn when something gets on your head, after all.

"However, did he remain at ease all throughout the meeting?"

"Yes, as I said he was oddly calm. He didn't react to my usual approach, nor showed anything when I asked him about this fake data in his new profile. It was shocking, to be honest. I was ready for him to get angry and raise his voice at some point." Yoroi looks upwards, a hand on his chin.

"If I may, what is the cover story for him?"

"Well, he's supposed to be a recruit from Yukon that was living there since two years ago. Of course, he 'has no idea' why his past data was erased in his absence from the Empire and he so conveniently doesn't remember his past either." Sigh… Such an obvious lie wouldn't normally fly, but I suppose Kouzuki should be able to give credibility to his identity there. I only hope he doesn't stay out in the open for long.

"Alright, I will be returning to my post. Next time you go to Yokohama, you know what to do." I say, tapping my glasses once more.

He nods and tips his hat, leaving the storehouse. Waiting for a moment, I get out and remain gazing at the sky. For a brief moment, my feelings betrayed me and I allowed myself to smile. So you're comfortable in Yokohama. Sigh… If you feel no need to show your fangs, that is one burden that has been lifted from my shoulders.

… I still harbor doubts on the reason Her Highness sent you of all people, but Yoroi is right. After that little incident, we couldn't merely

stand idly by. I wonder when you'll grace us with your report… There are so many things I wish to ask you. Where were you all this time, for one.

I sigh loudly and take the hidden route once more, returning inside to finish my night duties. Sadly as it is, I can't tell those two about the good news. Hopefully you can come back home soon, Takeru.

# Watering the Seed of Doubt

## Chapter 13: Watering The Seed of Doubt

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*November 2nd. 07:33 PM.*

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**[Meiya]**

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After the afternoon's event, Shirogane returned to the lower floors and we haven't seen him since. He didn't return to his room and didn't come to have dinner, according to Kyouzuka-san.

While we were taken aback by his sudden proposition to join him in his mission, those machines were definitely marvelous. I can't stop feeling jealous of him, he's skilled, knowledgeable, and has whatever it is that's necessary to aid the Vice Commander in her developments. How could I ever compare? Even after what I learned yesterday…

"I still think you're being too paranoid, today you treated him horribly! He was just trying to show us some new ways to train. Imagine what we could learn with those things!" Yoroi complained to Sakaki about today's training.

We had to talk things through with everyone during lunch today, to tell them to let us test Shirogane. We couldn't tell them what we found out, but they still agreed to be more tactful with him and let us control the situation.

Of course, all that went out of the window when he proposed us to keep training with him. And even after that, those machines… The WMTS, such an advanced machine, to be able to make those

images move. I have not seen anything like it, it was truly more 'awesome' than the MMTS, and that was already quite impressive.

Yet, I cannot see how we could embark in such an endeavor with the UN, considering how much the Empire is struggling to make ends meet. I doubt we have the resources or the tech to start that kind of project. And, if we did, I doubt it would be handed to the UN for testing. Why did he lie about them being Japanese inventions?

"I really think we should apologize. Takeru didn't deserve that."

"Then Yoroi, why did you not join him in his training?" She cannot hold my gaze, she starts fiddling with her hair.

I'm envious of you, you can be so honest with yourself. I also wanted to see what one could gain through those machines, but if they come from America… And if he approves of their use…

"… I think we should all work together to pass the CCSE. Antagonizing him like this will only make things worse." Yoroi said as she returned her attention to her dinner.

"That's assuming he is going to help us." The venom pouring from Sakaki's voice was apparent. Tamase rested her spoon and, after a noticeable moment of stillness, spoke up.

"I… I think we need to have a talk with him. He may not be able to tell us everything about where he comes from, but if we make it clear that we want to trust him, I'm sure he'll open up a bit." I wish I could be as positive as you, I suppose that is yet another difference between my upbringing and theirs.

"He'll just dodge the question." Ayamine, who had remained silent until now, squinted her eyes as she spoke up.

"Ayamine-san, please. We need to try. Mitsurugi-san, what do you think we should do?"

"I… do not have an answer yet." Not when I still don't know as much as I would like to know about this.

"Why not?" Ayamine was sending a dubious look at me with one finger on her cheek.

"Because there's something I'd like to confirm."

"What is there to confirm? Mitsurugi, if you don't want to tell them then I-" I meet Sakaki's gaze, she swallows her words.

"Sakaki, I would like to ask you to give me more time. You all already know that I cannot simply ask for information whenever I please. I would like to make my decision based on hard data, not on an emotional outlook." That's easier said than done, however. Shirogane, who are you really? I want to know, I want to trust you. But you are a too grand mystery, I cannot let my guard down around you.

"Fine. I'll say nothing for now." She taps her glasses, sighing. "Then let's change the topic, it's already November. The CCSE is around the corner but I would like us to discuss possible ways we can deal with it. Now that we have gotten such a hellish training, and that we have confirmed that Shirogane has ties to America since he's involved in the development of those simulators, we can expect a lot more obstacles than last time."

"Sakaki, I told you to not make such a rash judgment. Please, leave the matter to me." This time, however, her gaze doesn't waver. She moves her hair out of her face as she shrugs.

"Oh, really? Then what should we do? We need to start thinking on a way to neutralize him, in the case that he turns against us. Those machines, his skill and knowledge of guns, how he defended the use of English over our own language. He's clearly influenced by the American Way. Moreover, if he became our enemy, I fear that even with all of us fighting together we would come short in trying to stop him." I nod in agreement, leaving my gaze on my plate.

Remembering this morning practice sent a chill down my spine. Now I'm sure of it, he is using the Mugen Kidou. However, where and how did he learn of it? Is he a traitor? Perhaps, a fellow in disguise? Is that why Tsukuyomi approached him before? However, if he was trained in our style… Why was he in America?

"So Chizuru-san, what are you suggesting we do? Harm him?" Yoroi did not like where the conversation was going.

"I don't know what to do about him. That's why I'm asking you all. I also want him on our side, but he may abandon us when we need him the most." She raises both hands in a defeatist way as she sighs.

"Can't we just abandon him first?"

"Ayamine-san, please don't say that!" Tamase sent a glare at Ayamine, she is very sensitive when it comes to our constant infighting.

"Then what do we do?" She returns the gaze and Tamase falls silent, holding her hands close to her chest.

"He is stronger, faster, smarter and has more endurance than all of us. It won't be an easy fight." Sakaki was serious about the idea, it seems. I know why, but even so, I would like to confirm our findings before we have this conversation.

"Um… I don't think he'll betray us." Tamase said as she poked at her food.

"Tamase, you're too naive." She shook her head, again tapping her glasses. "If he's from the American Army, he won't hesitate to leave us behind if we become a burden to him. I cannot trust someone like that!" She raised her voice, sounding somewhat agitated.

"Sakaki, stop. There's no reason to treat Tamase with such harshness."

"Mitsurugi, stand down. I am the Squad Leader, it's my responsibility to keep order in our team. If she is doubting we have to address this, now." I can't argue with that, I know she is right. But Sakaki, your way of doing things is just…

"I don't see a bad person in Shirogane-san, I think he's trying his best to fit in, despite how we're treating him." Tamase was doing her best to hold Sakaki's accusing glare. "I am kind of jealous of his skill, and I would like to know where he learned all he knows but, to go as far as treating him like a traitor? That's too much."

"Then, you're on his side?" Sakaki changed her tone to a small, slow whisper. In doing so, she sounded far more threatening than before. She adjust her glasses, leaning forward to meet Tamase's gaze, who cannot hold it and flees away from her eyes.

"No… S-Since when are there sides in this? Aren't we all part of the same squad?" Her hands began to shake.

"Sakaki, that's enough. We shouldn't be-" Without even registering me, she continues to talk.

"Tamase, think about this please. If he is indeed a Cadet, why is he so skilled? Why is he the tester for those machines? Why does he address the XO so casually? I find it preposterous to think other Cadets are trained like we are being as of now." All of that is true. Shirogane does not seem to be a Cadet, no matter how you look at him.

"… You're right. Sorry." She hangs her head, not wishing to further the discussion.

"Don't apologize, Tamase. It's not like I don't understand your or Mitsurugi's concerns. But… I can't let you down again. It's my fault that we failed the last CCSE, so I can't let anything get in our way this time." She returns to her usual position, hanging her head. So it's still bothering you.

"Chizuru-san, don't say that. There's no need to go reopening those wounds." Yoroi gave her a pat in the shoulder.

"She's right, though." Ayamine, must you?

"Ayamine-san, please don't-"

"No, Tamase. Let's hear her out." Tapping her glasses yet again, she narrowed her gaze as she looked at Ayamine. "Do you have anything else to say to me?" I wish I could stop them, but they won't hear my words. It's always like this, these two are too prideful.

"You didn't listen to me. We should have not used the toolkit on the bridge, and now you're doing the same. You speak over us, using your position as the leader to give your opinion more weight. You're no soldier, you're a politician." Her scowl and hateful tone resurfaced once again. I send a gaze to Yoroi, and she slowly moves to the edge of the table.

If they start fighting again, we will have to call for the Instructor. Even if she is already fed up with us and this will only result in another hour of lectures about teamwork. Sigh… I wish I could do more than give advice and logical arguments. Why can't I convince them to stop fighting with my words?

"Oho, and why don't you try to actually take part in our conversation, instead of throwing one liners all the time? And I am your leader, my orders are absolute. If you don't obey your orders, you'll bring chaos to your team."

"That's not true. Orders in the field are not absolute, there's never one surefire way to say which decision is the best. That's why command is split into many small teams, and why it's recommended to soldiers to give immediate reports if they see any change in the situation. Taking two seconds to consider a suggestion can make the difference between victory and defeat."

"Now you sound like Shirogane when he questions some of our lectures, are you on his side? Also, taking time to consider what? Those at the top have more intel than whatever a soldier could see. If you want such freedom, you have to scale the ranks."

"Superiors who don't take advice from their comrades are trash. Your rank doesn't make you better than your subordinates. Also, there's the chance to have an inept or corrupt commander. What would you do if you're given orders that go against the Empire while you fight under the UN's flag? You'll accept them because they're orders? Such loyalty to our nation." Sakaki lost her poker face, now being clearly gritting her teeth.

"You two, stop this. We should be-"

"Mitsurugi, stand down. My loyalty is with the Empire, Ayamine. I can't say the same about the daughter of a pair of traitorous pigs who joined hands with the Americans, and now is defending someone that seems to be an American soldier through and through. Must run in the blood." Ayamine's face twists into a look of pure rage. Yoroi gets up to go look for the Instructor, I need to calm them down at the least.

"Stop this! We shouldn't be fighting among ourselves in this way. Both of you have to calm down, this is what caused us to fail last time." But it's as if they didn't hear me.

"Wanna go outside, princess?"

"Fine by me, traitor."

By the Holy Emperor, not again. They leave the PX towards the track field, without losing eye contact as they got up. Why did Ayamine pick a fight with her? Was she defending Shirogane? Then why was she so harsh with him during this afternoon? Or perhaps… she was annoyed Sakaki spoke so harshly to Tamase? I can only sigh and shake my head, send a hand to my forehead.

"Mitsurugi-san, is this really for the best?" Tamase was quivering as we watched them leave the PX.

"Leave them be, Tamase. They will never listen to us."

"Um… So about Shirogane-san, do you have… an idea on what to do if he does abandon us?"

"… No. I have no idea what to think of him at the moment, to be honest." I want to trust him, truly I do. I don't see a bad person in him. But my success comes first. I cannot fail this CCSE or it's back to prison for me. And if he turns out to be a traitor…

"Do you suspect him too?"

"I have my doubts. He did seem honest when I approached him yesterday, but…" He lost two friends, he wasn't lying. But then, why was he sent here? And from where? Did… Sister sent you to me? Is that why your records are locked?

"But what? Did he say something harmful?" Her brows arched, her voice stirred imitating the sounds of shattering glass.

"No, nothing of the sort. I just wish to confirm something about him with my sources, that's all."

"Alright, if you say so. Sorry, for making a scene with the leader. It's my fault they're fighting again." She hangs her head as affliction shows itself in her face with the brightness of an eclipse. You worry too much about everyone, Tamase.

"Please don't apologize, it's not your fault. You of all people should know how stubborn rivals can be." She laughs weakly.

"Yes, that's true. Oh, Yoroi-san! What happened with the Instructor?" Yoroi scratched her head while sighing, one eye closed.

"She's calling us for another personal lecture in her room, she's currently going to the track field to stop those two. She seems really

angry this time, more than usual." And to make matters worse, Shirogane won't be there with us to somehow put her in a good mood like he always does.

Sigh… I guess I'll have to go talk with Tsukuyomi tomorrow. As we go to the Instructor's room, I detach myself from what's in front of me, choosing instead to relieve my battle with him today. It was hard to keep my eyes to myself today during our trainings. My blade has never felt this kind of… pull from someone else. Trading blows with him, a heat wave surged from me, I couldn't control myself as we danced together. For the first time in months, I forgot about the dark cloud that ingrained itself in the back of my head, about this cold drill on my chest.

I just thought about you, my eyes focused on those two magnets that glared at me, my hands looking forward to that shiver that came when I parried your swings. I didn't want our duel to end, it was too… pleasurable, as shameful as it is to admit. I enjoyed every second of it like nothing in my life, I never thought that sparring seriously against another Mugen Kidou user could fill me with so much sunshine. It was like peering into a window, to remember my lessons with Tsukuyomi, those so distant peaceful days with Grandfather.

Even when I did an effort I was throughly bested again, and that has only made me more curious about you. Shirogane… Who are you? An American? Or, perhaps, are you truly a fellow of mine?

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*November 10th. Near 6 PM.*

*(Yuuko's Office.)*

**[Takeru]**

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"… and that's the whole mission. I do not need to remind you that I expect you to be on your best behavior and obey all my orders."

"Yes, Sensei. I know." I roll my eyes, making her sigh. "So, what will my callsing be?"

"You'll be given the codename Viking, and outside of my orders you'll have to follow Isumi's too."

"Roger. I'm deploying in a Kagerou, right?"

"Yes, you'll recognize it immediately. It's a midnight blue one, with all the new parts we made and the polished XM3 prototype installed. I also made some quick adjustments to its joints like you asked me, that should give you a bit more dexterity but be careful with how many weapons you use, that stunt of carrying more than full load on the Gekishin won't work this time."

"But can't I play a Gun Sweeper role? I mean with four weapons I could-"

"Shirogane, you had five weapons back then. And if you had an additional pylon in your back, I'm sure you would have used it too. Stick to using four weapons, along the Retractable PR Daggers. Was I clear?" I can't really object here. She is right, I can't screw up against the BETA.

"Yes, Sensei. I'll hold back on my stunts. Will I be deployed alongside the Valkyries?"

"Yes, but I modified your comms to distort your voice and block image feedback. Last thing we need is a rumor about a Cadet that's already on the same skill level of the members of the Special Task Force without even taking the piloting test."

"Yeah, makes sense. Then, what are you going to do with the BETA we capture?" She closes her eyes, and starts moving one hand in the air.

"Live testing, to see if we can make Laser weapons a reality, to find a virus or something that kills them, to know more about them in

general. Did you know that the Destroyer's shells can regenerate? If we could copy that, our TSF's could repair themselves. That's especially important for the small and hard to produce parts that go in the joints and radars."

"Alright. Since I'm giving you the theories already I think I can give you some more accurate intel. I'll tell you what I know about the BETA, first I'll give you a hint and then you'll tell me if you want to hear all of it. Is that alright?" She gives me a nod, entwines her fingers, and slowly moves forward in her desk.

"Go ahead. Tell me, Shirogane."

"Do you want to know why viruses can't kill the BETA?"

"Yes."

"Because they're not alive."

"Huh?! Not alive? Explain."

"They're technically biological weapons, they do not 'think' or 'feel' anything. I don't know if they have a heart, but they definitely seem to not feel pain going by my experience when I infiltrated a hive."

That was nuts, those bastards kept charging at us even when we blew up their limbs. They are truly monsters in the full meaning of the word.

"They're not like ants or bees. They feel no fear, they have no emotions whatsoever. They are made from carbon based materials like most life in this planet, but you could say they're somehow 'programmed' to act in determined patterns, that's why they don't adapt to our tactics on the go and most of the time they just use the same basic approach. However, since they're not 'alive' and have no self-preserving instinct, even if they are infected by something they probably would ignore it as they keep doing what they're supposed to do regardless of the state of their bodies. So unless we make a

virus or something that kills them in a short while or cripples them so that they can't move, chances are they're going to keep rushing at us."

"Is this true? They're not… Wait, but if they're not alive, how can we communicate with them? Does the 00 Unit work against them? Is this why the fatal mistake happens?"

"No, but it's the reason to something important regarding their behavior. Should I tell-" Sensei's burning eyes stop me mid-sentence.

"Everything. Spill it, I don't care about the ripple effects anymore. I need this intel to counter them."

"Alright. Since they don't see themselves as 'life' they think that any other carbon based entity is just like them, therefore they're not alive. The BETA will never recognize us as a self-aware, intelligent, living race."

"… Never? How can you be so sure?"

"Because we did manage to communicate with them, for a brief moment. They don't think themselves superior to us, they see us as resources to be recycled just like any other dismembered BETA corpse. We're nothing but building materials to them." Sensei closes her eyes for a few seconds, rubbing her forehead in silence..

"That's… I see. So using the 00 Unit to pilot the XG and scan their hives should be enough, right? Since we can't even get on the same terms as them."

"I don't know about that. Our talks got interrupted, but it seemed to not be aggressive towards us. Only when we attacked it with the XG it started to defend itself." Sensei eyes sparkle as she leans forward.

"Are you talking about a BETA? What class was it?"

"A Reactor Class."

"Huh? A Reactor Class? What does that mean?"

"That the Reactors are not machines, Sensei. They're BETA, and they are the 'antennas' that send the orders to all the other BETAs. And one of them was… uuh… Kinda self-aware? It was intelligent that's for sure, I could talk with it for a while." I honestly don't know how to describe the Superior well, since we only talked for… What? A minute?

"So the Reactors not only record information… But they're also a type of BETA, like a commander. And one BETA out there is smart enough to hold a conversation with a foreign entity, huh." Her eyes stare off into space as she massages her chin and leans back in her chair.

"Want me to tell you how the conversation went from what I remember?"

"Hmm? Oh yes, please do."

I tell her all I recalled from my encounter with it, save the fact that it was on Kashgar and what happened to Meiya. If she knew that rushing Kashgar is a way to prevent the BETA from outsmarting us she might try to send us as quick as possible, I need everyone to get better before that.

"There's also like… billions of them across the universe, I don't remember the exact number it said. And the more a hive grows the stronger the Reactor may become, so the more time we take to exterminate them…"

"The stronger they will get. Billions of BETA… Even if Alt. V was enacted there's no guarantee that humanity would be safe from the BETA in the planet that was chosen. Fighting now seems to be the only way for us to get any chance of retaking our peace for sure. With how little people will go in the shuttles, if the planet is attacked

they'll be done for. And after the Earth gets bombarded with all those G-Bombs…"

"Exactly, that's another reason to not let Alt. V happen. That's why we need to get as many resources as we can, starting with an improved XM3." However, Sensei stopped talking all of a sudden. She's holding her chin looking at nowhere, deep in thought. Did she figure something out from what I told her?

"Hmm… Then I might have to…"

"Sensei? What it is?"

"Shirogane, I have something to show you." She takes some papers from the pile and hands them to me. What's this? A diagram? Let's…

… ! This thing!

"I received a 'proposal' to take care of a certain project that was abandoned after an incident. I don't think this is a coincidence, so-"

The blue Takemikazuchi appears in my mind, firing at the BETA inside a hive. That's… When did this happen? This is… the… JFK Hive? Where was it again?

… It's cold.

"Shirogane? Are you listening?"

"Sensei, there's… Sigh… There's no hive near American soil here, right?" She makes a puzzled face.

"Huh? Of course not. Wait, did you remember something?"

"I… remember a blue Takemikazuchi shooting the EML-Railgun in a hive. The hive was… near America, I think?"

"A blue Takemikazuchi? When was this? After or before Sadogashima? How did the operation go? Who took part in it?" Her

tone was tense as she spoke the questions quite rapidly.

"I can't remember well. I think it should be after Sadogashima, during my first loop. Along America and the Japanese troops there were… French ones, I think. Sorry, it's all just a blur." Sensei relaxes as she breaths a sigh of relief.

"For a second I thought Kamchatka was going to fall to the BETA before we got our shot at Sadogashima. So you already know of the railgun, how does it perform?"

"I think… it does great, from the bits I can recall." Ugh, my head hurts a bit. Stupid railgun, making me remember these things.

"Hmm… So do you think we should accept the deal?"

"What deal?" She sighs as she narrows her eyes.

"So you weren't listening. I got a proposal from the Ministry of Defense, they said they are willing to let the UN finish the development of the railgun. It makes sense since that thing could only be completed after I handed them our advanced weapon's data and an essay on how to apply G-Elements to weapon design. Thankfully they managed to retrieve the black box of the thing from Russia, but now that the XFJ Project fell down they had no more backup funds to finish the testing and development."

"XFJ Project?"

"I told you about it before, right? The deal to make the Shiranui Second with America. The railgun was also included into that, under the Project Prominence's portfolio." Okay, stop. Too many new words in a short while, I demand an explanation.

"Sensei, what's that about?"

"Prominence? A plan to make a countermeasure against the BETA without making use of any materials obtained from them. Thanks to

our current relations with America and the accident in Alaska the joint project is in shambles now. I think only the Eurofightas Project is still ongoing on that fortress, the rest of Prominence was halted after America dropped most of its support, I think."

"… Sensei, you do know you're just dropping a lot of unknown info on me right now, do you?" Why does she look surprised?

"Wait, really? Didn't I tell you about this already?"

"No, you only briefly explained the overall political situation of the Empire. Is this something I should know?" She readjust her position on her chair, and after collecting her thoughts for a second she responds.

"Yes, it is. So… In summary, Prominence was a plan to make 100% Earthling weapons. Its HQ was assigned to Yukon Base in Alaska, but last September there was a terrorist attack there. They managed to activate some bombs America had set underground and ended up blowing up half of it."

… Huh?

Half of Alaska… was blown up?… You have to be kidding me.

"… So you're telling me that half of Alaska was nuked out of existence by some terrorists?"

"Yes, the units stationed at Yukon Base were charged with stopping the terrorists, and many of them ended up getting caught in the blast. This happened on the 21st of September. After this, the Soviets lost a lot of power and got in a huge argument with the UN after the vast majority of their bases in Alaska got wiped out, which is why they're holed up in Kamchatka now. The rest of the forces managed to not lose too many people, but many politicians started to question Prominence's viability compared to the use of G-Bombs or the Alternative Projects."

"But it was a terrorist attack, how could they have let that happen? And so close to America too." I just can't believe they could get ambushed like that. I mean, if that happens to America, what's left for the rest of the world?

"There were many sleeper agents within the forces at Yukon Base. The only way to stop the bombs was to go to the underground command center nearby them after the terrorist broke Yukon's control room, then they took many TSFs from the base and made a defense line around it to prevent anyone from disrupting their plan. This allowed some BETA to reach the detonation point of the bombs before anyone could get to the command center, and that triggered the activation of the Red Shift. Since the activating program was fully automated in case of a BETA invasion they couldn't stop it, and more or less half of Alaska disappeared that day." This is… Did this happen last time and I didn't knew?

"But… What could they gain from that?!"

"Matters not. They're against us, so that's that. Europe is the only power who still continues supporting Prominence. The Empire would too, if they hadn't picked another fight with America." Again this. All these grudges and doubts are going to end up being the Empire's doom.

"And why should I know about this?"

"Didn't you read your report? I wrote that you were a Cadet from Yukon Base, your squad got wiped out during this incident and the UN reassigned you here, on the grounds that you had potential and I requested you to be my personal assistant. I did that because most of the files on that base and the ones nearby got destroyed and the vast majority of the young squads were killed during the incident, along with their Instructors. It was easy to put some false data in the report, since it's still being updated with all the unknown casualties that have yet to be accounted for. I did have to use a favor on someone important, but it was worth it." She went to such lengths to

cover me? Thinking back, I never knew what she wrote on my file in my previous loops.

"Huh… I somehow forgot to check that, with how tired I've been after training and the testing of the OS. So the railgun has been offered to you?"

"Yes, and while it is tempting, there is one little problem that comes with it." For her to be bothered by it and be willing to tell me about it, what the hell is this problem?

"That you'll owe a favor to the Shogunate?"

"Well, yes." She closes her eyes, fuming a bit. "But that's not what I'm talking about here. See this, do you recognize this person?" She hands me a profile, a woman with long black hair and violet eyes. Yui Takamura, a member of the Fudai.

"No, I don't know her. What's the deal with her?"

"She's in charge of the project. If I accept to take care of the development of the railgun she'll have to come along to oversee it. Having another pair of Imperial eyes on the base doesn't bother me, what irks me is the timing. This woman was in Yukon Base during the incident, and I put in your report that you were from there. So…"

"The Shogunate is sending her to watch me?" Sensei gives a nod.

"It's too soon to be a coincidence, Yoroi was quite suspicious of you after all. I wouldn't doubt that he informed the Shogun about you, and then she sent this Takamura to both get the railgun done and to gather intel on you, since you're supposed to be a member of the Guard. The timing is too suspicious to be anything else. I don't think she actually knows about all the people that were in the base during the accident, but I think she would be suspicious of a Japanese soldier that she didn't knew about at the time, since Imperial soldiers tend to try to get close to other fellow Japanese people when they're doing missions abroad, even if only for surveillance purposes. Had

she heard about a Japanese Cadet being there, I'm sure she would have at least gone to watch this person train."

"So they didn't have any intention of cooperating with us, huh? All that talk Yoroi-san did about his duty to Japan and how he didn't knew a thing about me was just an excuse to get the intel without getting into a fight. You think they're trying to silence me despite knowing I'm your guardian?" Sensei nods, this time with a furious look on her face.

"I would call him to ask for an explanation, but that would be too obvious. If the Shogunate is willing to go so far I don't think I can keep relying on their support for long. So, how do you feel? Is the railgun worth the risk of having a spy in the base? I mean, if they're sending her after you despite all the security I put on your profile, I don't think it'll take much time for them to send someone after me." She's right. This is a clear sign of aggression towards us. I'm basically Sensei's guard dog now, according to the cover, so if they want me gone they might want her either gone or under their control. I can't let them harm her.

But if the thing is as powerful as I remember it, then it would be worth the risk. But I never had to deal with someone tailing me. Tsukuyomi-san wasn't exactly ordered to deal with me during my last loops, that's why she didn't harm me. She was being considerate of Meiya's position. But if this Takamura is sent specifically to take care of me… I probably can't harm her without ruining the UN's relations with the Empire since she's a noble. If I can't fight her then… No wait, what if she teams up with Tsukuyomi-san? If whatever made Maya-san not attack me that day is proven wrong by this Takamura, then both Tsukuyomi cousins might come after me.

Damn it, but this… If we had the railgun at Sadogashima… No pain, no gain.

"Yes, let's do it." Sensei rests her chin on her palm, raising a brow.

"You sure? This might be getting us into more problems than we can take care of, you know? And I'd like you to stay alive, if you don't mind."

"But if we can get one railgun I assure you that the invasion of Sadogashima will go really smoothly. You also probably will get in trouble if you refused, so I would like to not give you more things to worry about." She ruffles her hair while giving me a look with squinted eyes.

"I should be the one worried here, they're coming after you. If they moved so quickly I don't think this Takamura will be subtle about her true intentions. It's not like I can do much with this fanatic type of people, they won't listen to reason or threats."

"Point taken. Then we will have to tie her hands. If she is assigned as a UN officer she will have her hands tied, any action she takes will be on the Empire after all. Wouldn't that work as kind of a limiter? Pretty sure the Empire can't lose the UN's support, as much as they might hate it." I want to believe their hatred is not strong enough to either blind them or make them do something more stupid than the coup.

"Hmm, that's true. In any case, the railgun is a very powerful weapon so if you're sure you can deal with her, I'll do my part to restrict her movements as much as possible."

"Alright. Oh, and we should also take this in consideration when we reveal the XM3, I think a certain faction should have it harder to get their hands on it." I mean, this isn't the world I remember.

Her Highness might be a completely different person here, so, as much as it pains me to be branded as the enemy of Japan, if the Empire gets in the way I'll have to take care of them too. Sensei gives me a devilish smile.

"Ahaha, you say some nice things from time to time. You're absolutely right, now that we know the Shogun's position towards us

there's no reason to give them anything else easily. I'll keep gathering data on the Blood squad, but that's all they'll get for now. I'll arrange things to have the railgun be put under the Alt. IV's Research Team. That should keep them at bay from trying to steal it once we finish it."

"Do you have more data on this Takamura? Just in case I have to fight with her."

"Yeah, I'll whip up a report on her. Now then, let's return to the Niigata Operation. Here's the detailed plan, read it before going to bed. Rest as much as you can, I want you before midnight at the hangar, I'll send Yashiro to wake you up. Now, let me tell you in detail what I modified in your TSF."

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*November 11th. 0 8:15 AM.*

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**[Meiya]**

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"So nobody has seen him since yesterday's afternoon?" We all give a nod. Sakaki looked troubled, and we all fell silent as we finished our breakfast.

These last few days after the day we went to the lower floors Shirogane kept training with all he had, but after some days his attitude changed. He was now more distant towards me, Sakaki and Ayamine. I could keep up with him but his attacks kept throwing me off balance. We are evenly matched in Iaido, but I cannot beat him when he switches to Kendo. He also stopped giving me advice after our bouts.

The same could be said for all the rest. Ayamine was the only one he had trouble with in CQC, but during firearms practice he stopped missing the bullseye. The lectures were the same, since he was already perfect in them. He finally stopped playing around, but now

he shows no hint of a smile when we spar, he even stopped making jokes and doesn't try to participate in our conversations at the PX much.

He's still friendly towards Yoroi and Tamase, and they did try to get him into our talk at dinner, but he excused himself saying he had to take care of a special mission. Sakaki says he's minding his distance because he's an American, but going by how she looks at him I think she does feel some measure of guilt. Yoroi was right, we were unnecessarily harsh on him and now he feels left out.

The contrast between his old and current self is too large, me and Sakaki have tried to engage him in conversation yesterday at dinner, but he said to be busy and went his way. It's as if he were scared of saying something wrong and therefore decided to shut himself in to not clash with us anymore.

And to make matters worse…

That night at the library we found out his records were blocked, however shortly after his public profile was reuploaded. Shirogane does come from an American base, even if it was under the UN. Apparently there was some error in the older data from when he lived here. However, his UN profile is still under the heaviest lock. That made us doubt him much, and maybe that was what caused him to feel like an outsider. Sakaki is still doubting him, but I… How should I react to this?

When I asked Tsukuyomi to investigate him…

"Meiya-sama, you should not involve yourself in such matters." She answered bluntly to my petition.

"Eh? Tsukuyomi, this is a matter regarding my security. I wish to know more about him, please. Would you look into him? Anything is fine, I merely-"

"Meiya-sama, I cannot comply." Her eyes were now stern as well as her tone.

"You cannot? Even if I order you to do it under the name of the Mitsurugi House?"

"Please, do not ask the impossible out of me. You should focus solely on your own endeavors." She closes her eyes and does a small bow.

"Tsukuyomi, what is the meaning of this? Why can you not investigate him? Who is him?" Does that mean that you cannot involve yourself because it would cause problems for the Empire? You refuse because it would blow his cover as a fellow in service of the UN?

"That is none of your business. I cannot involve myself with him, he is not a danger to you so there's no reason for you to worry about him." So… Is he… with us then?

"… How can you be this certain? Who is Takeru Shirogane? Please, tell me."

"… I'll say it only once more. I cannot involve myself with him, and neither should you. That's all I'm willing to say." What? Not involve myself with him? A slight dizziness strikes me, the puzzle shifting in me, leaving not a drop of assurance in me. I want answers, clear ones.

"Is he an enemy spy, then? An American soldier sent to-" Tsukuyomi's cold eyes bathed me with a frozen downpour, halting any movement I was doing. She was still composed, but it's clear to me that I angered her.

"Meiya-sama, do not speak any more of this. Do not involve yourself with him more than necessary, unless he approaches you himself. And to quell your doubts, I would never let anyone dangerous get

close to you. It pains me to hear you say such words, for you to have so little faith in me."

"No, that's not it. I'm very thankful for all you always do for me, Tsukuyomi. It's just that… He's such a mystery, I want to know more about him. I… My mission is… "

"Curiosity is not a sin, but you should be careful with it. Do not seek answers you do not want to hear, haven't I taught you that since you were little?"

"Yes, but… "

"Meiya-sama, you have to focus on your training. Only through it you'll be able to fulfill the role you've been given. Do not worry about anything else for now, if there is ever a problem I will deal with it. Please, trust in me." She bows deeply to me. Tsukuyomi, don't… I don't want you treating me in this formal way too.

"I do trust you with my life. If you say I shouldn't worry then I won't. Thanks for your efforts, Tsukuyomi. Forgive me for troubling you."

"There is no need for you to apologize or to thank me. I'm merely doing my work as your retainer."

Since then I've tried to keep my curiosity at bay, but with how much he's excelling in the daily trainings I can't help it. I find myself staring at him before I realize it.

I want… to train with him more. He knows the Mugen Kidou. I still don't know whether he is an exile or one of us, but, if I am to be her guardian, I have to be the strongest I can be. So, sparring with him is the best method I currently have, and you tell me to not get close to him?

Are your movements bound by something, Tsukuyomi? What wouldn't I give to be able to talk with him like before. I am thankful that he's being serious against me, but I miss his remarks and little

pieces of advice now. I truly… shouldn't have been so harsh with him, he did make a point to voice his worry about our attitude towards him, and I let my prejudices blind me. But… But on the off chance that he is on the Americans' side… Ugh, what should I do… I know I can't let this be, and yet…

"So guys, what are you all doing today?" Yoroi broke the silence, trying to engage us in conversation.

"I will go train my swordplay." I answer first, there is nothing else I could do if we can't find Shirogane to have a talk with him.

"I'll go to the library to review some material from class." Sakaki said, as she finished her breakfast.

"Oh, could I join in? I have a lot of trouble keeping up." Right, Yoroi was behind us in the lectures.

"I guess… I'll go to the firing range. Ayamine-san, what about you?"

"Hmm… I'll rest today." She said as she finished her last yakisoba sandwich.

Then, as we all got up from our seats…

**VROOOOOM! VROOOOOM!**

"What is happening?!" Tamase was so startled by the sudden outburst of the alarm that she almost fell down from her seat.

"An emergency summons?!" Sakaki and me looked around, and we realized this was no drill.

The rest of the people in the PX started running out, the sound of many footsteps in the hallways could be heard along the sirens

"Sakaki, we have to go to our classroom!"

"Yes, you're right Mitsurugi. Squad! Make haste!"

We all left along the stream of people, navigating towards our destination while dodging rushing operators and MPs. We managed to arrive there rather fast, the Instructor was already there. Shirogane was not. We salute her once all made it inside, forming in a line in front of her.

"Squad, do you know where is Shirogane?"

"No, Ma'am. We haven't seen him today." Sakaki answered.

"I see. Then you'll have to inform him when you find him, assuming he isn't on his way here. Alright, I'll begin to explain the current situation."

At 6:20 this morning a Brigade-size herd from Sadogashima started moving south, eventually making landfall at 6:48 AM near the old national highway. And since 7:10 they have been engaged by the MDF forces, along with some reinforcements from the Royal Guard. However, by their movements, it was decided that the target of the BETA was our base, and we would move to DEFCON 2 until all the BETA have been eradicated.

"This is not a drill. I repeat, this is not a drill. Go to your rooms and gear up for any eventual battle. If the base moves to DEFCON 1 you all will have to grab a machinegun and fight as well. You all are to remain in standby in the track field. Dismissed!"

"Yes, Ma'am!"

We all went back to the barracks, got into full gear, and made it to the track field. However…

"Shirogane-san is not here yet?" Tamase said nervously as she looked at the clock on the outside of the base. Over half an hour had passed since the alarm rang out.

"Where could he be now of all times?!" Sakaki was clearly nervous about this, holding her elbows tightly as her arms where pressed

against her body. We went to check his room, but he didn't answer when we knocked.

"Should we go look for him one more time?" Yoroi's hands tightly embracing each other, she asked us as her eyelids cascaded downwards. I am anxious too, where could you be?

"Squad, are you all… Shirogane is still missing?"

"Instructor! Is… Is the base on…" Sakaki stuttered at the end and couldn't finish her sentence.

"No, we're still on DEFCON 2. I came to see whether you had found Shirogane. Mitsurugi, go and check his room again. Yoroi, go back to the classroom. The rest stay here, I'll try to contact the XO to see if he's performing a special mission now."

"Salute!" We salute her as she leaves, and me and Yoroi go to fulfill our orders.

Of all the times to be gone! Now's when we need you by our side, Shirogane. American or not, having you fighting with us would be a huge relief. For you to simply vanish like that…

I reach the barracks after sprinting from the track field non-stop, and pause a second to catch my breath. Alright, here we are.

"Shirogane! Are you there?! Answer me!" I knock strongly. He couldn't have slept through the alarm, right?

But if he's been doing some mission until late, he might be exhausted. I have to confirm whether he's here or not. I resume my knocking.

"Shirogane! If you're there answer!" Mmgh, where could he be?! Wait, why don't I just enter his room? Is the door locked? No, it isn't. "Shirogane, I'm going to enter. If you're in there, please answer." Nothing. Sigh, guess I am left with no other choice.

I slowly open the door and am met with darkness. Upon flicking the switch on I see that the room is empty and soundless. So he isn't here? Where could he be then? I should go back to tell the Instructor about… Huh?

As I was about to leave, a strange object caught my attention. What… is that thing on his desk?

A small metal box was on top of the wood. It looks… beautiful. The metal is more bright than any I've seen, and it has some sort of pattern on its surface.

"Whatever could this be? It's so beautiful." I grab it and inspect it closely, it's truly nice. The feel on my hands is very smooth, I've never seen such a polished steel case.

Wait, what am I doing? I should be notifying the Instructor that… that he isn't here. Right now, he is not here. So… I can… do whatever I want in his room. I can search it, top to bottom, as much as I want. I can get the answers I want, starting from this box.

Who are you? Are you my ally? Why are you so skilled? Where did you learn the Mugen Kidou? Give me all the answers I want, let me confirm whether I can trust you. I open the box and I see a badge and an ID card.

"Is this… a militar badge? 'Champion'? What is this thing?" Did he get awarded for something? Maybe for helping with that terrorist attack? And what about this ID Card? GR Card? GR…

Whatever could it mean… I have to make the most of this chance and search his room throughly, but I don't have much time before everyone else starts to wonder where I am. Let's put this back on the desk and be fast about this, I may be able to…

No, what am I doing?! This is against regulations, this is violation of personal property! I'm doing what Tsukuyomi told me not to do!

But then, what is this ID Card? It's also made of a different material than ours, it's more bright, it also says Champion and has Shirogane's name. It also has a most odd black line on its back. Another mystery to the Shirogane list.

I'll come back later, and if he isn't here by then I'll… Being a bit curious is not bad, I'm not stealing anything and I'm not harming him. I want some answers, that's all. It's… for the good of the squad, and the CCSE. Yes, I have to make sure I can trust him. That's why I'm spying… No, why I'm intruding…

"Mmgh, fine! I'm doing something wrong and I don't care! I want answers!" I desire to know who you are, and nothing will stand in my way. Ugh, why am I so obsessed with you, Shirogane? Tis a most shameful display indeed, yet I cannot restrain myself.

I leave the room quickly. Sigh… Me, someone who is always so insistent about sticking to the rules and the morally right thing to do, is now willing to go against the regulations and my own morality to satisfy my curiosity.

No, this is a serious matter. I have to confirm who he is, only then I'll be able to untie this knot on my chest. Only then I'll be able to trust him again. Yes, I'm doing the right thing here.

I don't know where you are right now, but please don't come back Shirogane. Let me see whose side you're on. Let me satisfy my curiosity.

# The Start of the Storm

## Chapter 14: The Start of the Storm

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*November 11th. 23 : 4 3 P M.*

*(Takeru's room.)*

**[Takeru]**

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Zzz…

Ugh… Who's shaking me so much? It's so cold. Someone took my blanket off, they have some nerve.

"Wake up, Takeru-san." A kind, sweet voice drives me away from slumber.

"Ugh… Kasumi?"

"Good morning." Her usual smile greets me as I open my eyes.

Oh, right. Niigata. I stretch my arms as I raise from the bed. It's the first time Kasumi comes to wake me up in this world. I had almost forgotten she used to do that.

She jumps in surprise, did she read my mind just now?

"Um, did I use to wake you up in the other world?"

"Yeah, everyday just before my alarm went off. You don't have to do it if it's a bother, though."

"… No, I think I'll start waking you up. Sumika-san will be happy when I tell her about it."

"Alright, you do you. I'll get ready. You can wait outside." And there she goes, not hitting herself against the door this time.

After a quick shower and changing into my uniform I open my closet and grab the Minaru Kamui and hold it close to me for a while. I won't screw up, I'm definitely coming back alive. After taking one last look at it, I stash it again inside the closet. Going up to my desk and taking out the metal box, I remember that last peaceful week we had. This is my first step to regaining that, like hell I'll fail. I will protect the Valkyries, I will make this mission go better than last time. There has to be something I can do to help, there has to be a way for me to at least watch their backs so that we can all come back from this mission.

Leaving the box on top of my desk, I turn out the lights and get out, and along Kasumi I go to the changing room to get my suit on.

"Are you nervous?" She asks me as we walk.

"No, I'm actually quite relaxed." For some reason I didn't have a nightmare today, so I'm as fresh as I haven't been since I came here.

"Why? You'll be fighting the BETA, you might die today."

"Because I won't die, Kasumi. Have some faith in me, will you? You saw all the simulations we did, right?"

"But to go into battle with an untested OS is very risky. What if a bug appears while you're fighting?" She sounds really worried. She does have a point though.

"I won't be alone out there, and I won't be doing any risky stunts this time. I promise you I'll come back home safely."

"If you say so." You don't sound convinced.

I go into the changing room and get into my suit. Finally, I'm marching into the battlefield again. If I remember correctly, three

members of the Valkyries that I never met were put out of commission today, two died and one was hospitalized, so this is a prime chance to change history for the better. If I can save them, or at least one of them, our survival chances will go up. We will need all the hands we can get for the eventual battle of Kashgar.

With Kasumi leading the way, we made it back to the elevator and we dropped all the way down to Hangar 90, where Yuuko-sensei was already waiting for us.

"Good night, you two. Good to see you're here on time."

"Hey there, Sensei. How are the preparations?"

"Perfect. I already gave the briefing to the Valkyries, so you're all that's left. That Kagerou over there is your unit." She points towards a midnight blue TSF, I remember seeing Eagles during my missions and in the hangar but this one looks different.

Just like the Gekishin I piloted the other time, this one's shoulders and chest are more spiky. Its head is less round too and now has a small antenna and additional sensors to its sides. However the biggest difference is in its waist, I remember the Eagle to have a more square shape to its waist, but this one's was not only a bit smaller and had a certain inverted triangle shape to it, but it has some sensors in it as well. It also has two thrusters on its back where the pylons are supposed to be, they look more curved than our usual Jump Units and instead of having one set of Variable Wings it has two smaller ones. Sensei, you did this on purpose, didn't you? If I can only fight with guns and daggers there's no way I could go and do some of my reckless movements. I wanna sword.

"So Shirogane, what do you think of it? I based its improvements on a prototype that was tested in Project Prominence. Since you're supposed to be one of the few survivors you should get used to hearing about the different projects that were there."

"I was just a Cadet according to the report, so why should I know anything about all the different stuff they were testing there?"

"Because there was a competition there, the Blue Flag, where all the nations showed off some of their TSFs in live combat."

For real?! We have TSF tournaments here?! Why did nobody told me that last time? I would have loved to see any footage that was recorded!

"So this model is based on one prototype? I suppose that it's made this way for quick maneuvering at mid-range, right?"

"Exactly. You'll be fighting as a Gun Sweeper today, even if you'll only have two rifles with you. The extra speed from the new engines and the two additional thrusters along with the XM3 will make up for not having another two guns in your overall performance. Since you'll be using 36mm ammo you'll be carrying two extra magazines along with your daggers, one on each knee. Also it's painted with ARP and all its sensors and the new radar and antenna should give you some stealth capabilities, even if you're not using the complete stealth protocol we discussed the other day. I couldn't make it in time to change it to OBL but it should still be fast enough for you to be comfortable in it. I'd say it's almost like a 3rd Generation TSF now."

"Yeah, there's no reason to use only infrared today. So I guess this will be a more accurate test of all the tech you made using the notes I brought, right?"

"Yes, especially the new Jump Units. I added the Variable Wings to give you more control on all those aerial movements you were doing last time. I updated the XM3 with our most recent avionics and adjusted them as much as I could to fit your piloting style, the new radars and sensors will give you more accuracy and will also help in sending jamming signals to cover your position. Remember that this is a secret mission, you're not supposed to be spotted by any other force. But with all the new toys you'll have I guess I shouldn't worry."

"Don't worry, Sensei. I know how important the mission is, I'm not screwing this up."

"So long as you understand. Remember to leave Isumi and the rest to deal with the capture of the live specimens, and since you're not a Vanguard do not try to go after the Laser-Class unless something unexpected happens or either me or Isumi order you to do so."

"Even if I could save someone?" She stops when she was about to respond, and after a second of pause she answers.

"Only if you won't put yourself at risk of getting killed. If you do something stupid I won't let you take the CCSE. Are we clear?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Alright, you'll move out in one of the carriers in a private room until you reach Yokota Base. I've assigned Pyatkh as your escort, to keep you unnoticed until you get there and can ride your TSF. She'll deal with any troublesome people that might try to snoop around, but she won't know who you are. So, utter no words during the travel."

"Got it. So… We do have confirmation that the route we'll take is safe, right?"

"Yeah, don't worry. The intelligence crew in Camp Zama is doing their job well. The location I chose for the mission should also be rather far from the IJA bases near the shore, so there's also nothing to worry about. Yokota Base does tend to do air surveillance missions to ensure the area around this base is safe from time to time, so we'll use that to keep this little trip from being noticed, though I did tell everyone to be on their guard for this mission."

"… So the rest of the UN is also helping out. Good to know. Anything else I should know before leaving?"

"Yes, as soon as you reach Yokota Isumi will contact you once 'the Viking' has entered your TSF. Do not, I repeat, do not talk at all until

board your TSF. I'm sure many will be very curious about who 'the Viking' is, and whether you're just a smokescreen or the real deal. Your carrier's position should be in the second railway, Pyatkh should be waiting at the exit of the elevator back at B5F. That's all."

"OK, I'll be extra careful out there. Well, time to go." I turn around, ready to leave towards the carrier.

"Shirogane?"

"Hmm? What is it?"

"How many members of the squad were lost last time in this battle?" How weird. I thought you would be the last to be concerned about that kind of thing, so long as we brought back results.

"Three. Two died, one got hospitalized."

"I see. Don't try to do the impossible if you see them about to die. I know you said before you were prepared to not being able to save everyone, but don't push yourself too hard."

"Thanks, Sensei. And don't worry, I won't do something stupid." I smile at her, as I did the Kagerou was released from its hold, the platform it was on taking it away from the hangar.

"Well, looks like the ground carriers are almost done. Get to your ride, and put on your helmet." Back to her usual bossy tone, she waved a hand to send me away.

"I know, I know."

"Good luck, Takeru-san. Bye Bye." Kasumi waved at me as I left the hangar, I waved back before putting the helmet on.

Hurrying back to the hallway, I rode the elevator back up and meet 2nd Lt. Pyatkh once I got out of it. We exchanged a salute and she guided me to my ride, without asking any questions. The way there wasn't through the usual road to the railway, but around all the boxes

and trailers that were stocking the carrier ships. A few people were waiting for us, I recognized some of them from the underground control room. Sharing a salute, they formed a human wall around the loading ramp that I would use to enter my ride. Following Pyatkh to my room, a few soldiers seemed to stare at us, until she glared at them and they scattered.

Two MP were guarding the entrance of a single door with nothing too special about it, Pyatkh dismissed them and said she would guard the room herself, to which they agreed after she mentioned it was an order from Sensei. She bowed to me, reassuring me she would keep me, and any details she might infer about my identity, as an absolute secret. I bowed to her in return, entered the room, that looked like a more compact version of an officer's quarters, sat down on the small chair and awaited the vehicle to start moving.

Sigh… Today is when the true change starts. I'm taking the Valkyries to victory no matter what. Different world or not, I gotta do what I gotta do.

A few minutes pass before the ride begins to move. There's no windows in my room, so all I can do is sit tight and wait.

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**Around an hour and a half later.**

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**KNOCK! KNOCK!**

I stand up and open the door, Pyatkh salutes me as I did.

"Viking, sir, we have arrived at our destination. Please follow me, your TSF should be at the ready." I nodded, almost answering to her. Getting out of the room, I follow her lead out of the carrier.

The few people that were still in the ride were all from our bases, they didn't really look my way but gave me faint nods as I passed them, that I returned in kind. Since we could move faster due to the

space in the hallways, we quickly made it back to the loading ramp we used to ride the carrier.

The ride had touched down in the open field, we were surrounded by people in UN uniforms, some supply trailers, and all the Support Vehicles and their crew that were readying up the TSFs and Infantry Armors.

Stars having exclusive use of the sky for now, the paved road in the middle of the countryside was obstructed by all the vehicles we came with. In the distance, I could see what I think should be Yokota Base. The Support Vehicles were already putting our TSFs in formation, some of the people that came with us were going to what I believe are the carriers that will accompany us in the mission while the personnel from the nearby base was refueling our machines, that would return to Yokohama.

Hurried murmurs booming in the night, only a few lights stroke through the night to aid the crew's sight as they worked on our machines. However, there was a large area where there was no one working at the moment, behind all the trailers and whatnot, and through it me and Pyatkh walked without no one noticing our presence.

"Allow me to inform you that you shall be traveling at low speeds, to not waste fuel and make as little heat as you can." She said, leading the way to the Kagerou that I could see at the distance. I nodded her way, she did the same. "I know that sending someone who hasn't practiced with the STF to such a mission is nothing but madness, however the Professor has chosen you for a reason. I hope this mission can be a fruitful one for us. Best wishes, Viking." She smiles, offering me her hand.

I take it and shake it firmly. I was about to answer but had to shut up as I remembered I can't talk. I bit my tongue, can't do much more than groan a bit. It hurt a lot, dammit. She seems to be holding a chuckle. Now that I think about it… I never talked much with her. Nodding my way, she ends the handshake, softly sending a hand to

her fringe, before gesturing towards the kneeling midnight blue machine.

"Well, I believe that Kagerou is yours to pilot. I think you should board your unit as soon as possible. And don't worry, no one will inquire about your identity. I made sure no one was foolish enough to try. I shall do a short patrol around it, just to make sure the coast is clear." I nod, she salutes me with another smile, I return the gesture.

She goes up to the Kagerou, I lose sight of her. Looking around me, I sense no one staring. I sigh, looking up, enjoying the calmness of the night with the background noise of the workers as they hustled about. Pyatkh came back in sight, gesturing with a hand for me to approach her. Jogging towards her, she gave me a nod, I gave her one last salute, and then finally move towards my TSF while she hurries to the carriers that would accompany us.

Looking to my left, I could see the Shiranuis, where the shapes of the Valkyries could be seen by their feet in the distance. They had lined up far away from my Kagerou, all to keep me hidden I guess.

Sigh… Alright, time to bring forth a good change in this world. And you Kagerou will come with me in my first hope-filled step into this bloody road of carnage. Getting close to the TSF, that was kneeling on the ground, I trigger the rope with my headset after linking it to the machine by using the control pad on the lower part of its legs, and grabbing onto it I reach the cockpit.

Closing the cockpit, I bolt myself to the seat as the images and confirmations appear on my view. Completing the data link, I do a once over the system. Everything is okay… the prototype OS is running well… no lag or errors coming up… All systems functioning well, the suit is linked, the weapons are ready, the voice distortion is working…

"Sigh… All set, I guess." I lean back on the seat, feeling a small rumbling in my hands as I finish linking up. I take a slow breath, filling my stomach with air until I have to release it.

"Viking, Valkyrie Mum here. Report your status." Haruka's voice reaches my ears. I had steeled myself during this week, but man, my feels have received a crit right now.

"… Viking here, all systems green."

"Roger that. Please proceed to the formation and be ready to launch at my signal." Grabbing the controls and moving them, my TSF stands up. The head visor coming alive, I walk to the side of the other TSFs.

On the view, the carriers had already taken off. Through the data link, Cpt. Isumi's orders and flight plan came to my unit. I quickly do the set up, beginning to warm up my Jump Units, starting to set the coordinates and path we'll take. Making sure I was lined up with the ramp correctly, I lean back and await the signal.

I inhale slowly through my nose, grabbing the joysticks a bit more strongly. Remembering our last talk by the memento, remembering what happened in the Reactor's room, I lick my lips and then exhale loudly. This time you won't die Haruka-san, nor anyone else from the Valkyries. I'll make sure to do my share so that this loop goes right, starting now!

"Valkyries, Viking, take off! I repeat, take off!" I step on the pedals and move the controls forward. Let's go, Kagerou!

I'm met with more speed than I had thought I would have, blasting off the ground with a loud burst. This is almost like the Shiranui I had last time. Did my notes brought such a huge improvement? Perhaps them and the data of that Prominence project mixed well together.

I'm on the sky flying towards my designated point in the formation, the rest of the mechs are all Shiranuis. With me, we are a total of thirteen TSFs in the squad and there are two large carriers coming along us. There's three TSFs on the front in an arrowhead, I suppose Hayase is there with the other two Vanguards. Then on each side there's two Gun Sweepers, one Gun Interceptor, and one

Impact and Blast Guard. If nothing has changed about them, then the Interceptors are Munakata and the Captain. Akane should be a Sweeper, Kashiwagi should be an Impact Guard, and Kazama should be a Blast Guard. I'm also a 'Gun Sweeper' today, so that leaves two unknown Sweepers, one unknown of each Guard and the other two Vanguards I also don't know about.

I heard from Kashiwagi that Tsukiji was also in the squad, I wonder if the rest of Akane's team in the lacrosse match is here as well. I'll find out soon enough.

A beep sounded in my ears, a permission for a connection appeared in my view. Accepting it, my eyes meet a pair of crimson eyes that I haven't seen in many, many years.

My heart delayed a beat for a sec, I had to gulp hard and stop my breathing to not blurt out anything stupid.

"Greetings, Viking. I am Cpt. Michiru Isumi from the Valkyries."

"… Greetings, Captain." It's good to see you again, Ma'am. It's… truly a blessing.

She gives me a salute through the projection, then remains staring as her brows curve just a tiny bit. She must not like having to send her image but receive nothing on her end. I wonder what my voice sounds like through the distortion.

"I was told to not ask any questions, but for your feedback to also be obscured… I suppose the XO must value you much to go to such lengths." Yeah, I guess… So, she's just curious? She keeps staring, but then she seems to catch herself, as if suddenly getting the answer to a hard math problem in a test. "Oh, forgive me. You're not supposed to speak about yourself. Well, I know this is a rather precarious arrangement, however I shall be counting on you to cover our backs, Viking!"

I close my eyes, briefly remembering that talk we had on the ship, that last talk we had as she had to remain behind in the XG. Don't worry, Captain. Me and the rest will soon be ready to join you in the front. Sadly, all I can do for now is watch your backs.

"Yes, Ma'am. It's an honor to be here."

"… That is good to hear." She smiles, nodding. "Now… If I may, might I ask if have you received any special orders from the XO?"

"No, I was told to follow your orders on the field."

"Roger. If and when you receive any orders from her, please notify me of it immediately."

"Understood, Ma'am."

"Also… I know this might be prying, however, may I ask if there are plans to have you join us in our missions in the future?"

"Well… I suppose I will in due time. For the time being, I am appointed under the XO's direct command. Being her bodyguard, I do not doubt we shall work together in the future, yet, I do not know when will that be." I spent a lot of time rehearsing that answer to say it in one go confidently in case anyone asked. Pretty proud of it, to be honest.

"I see… That is unfortunate. Well, in any case, it is a pleasure to have you here today. Let's hope we can have more than one mission together." She seems to be chuckling, but I could only feel my stomach churning.

"We will bring Alt. IV to fruition together, Ma'am. Be sure of that."

"… Yes, well said. "I am waiting for the day when you can finally join our ranks officially. Well, if you have any questions, please do contact me. Valkyrie 1, out."

Sigh… Please don't joke about that, Captain. Though, I wonder what orders Yuuko-sensei has in store for me. It can't be something dangerous since she told me to not die today. Guess the stealth mech is the best recipient for any sudden orders, so they might not be for me but regarding the mission as a whole. And, as always, she didn't tell me about it. Dammit, Sensei.

Sigh… At least the Captain seems like herself, nothing like Meiya and the others. I hope she really isn't much different than before, except for that weird juice. I won't complain if she forgot about that accursed little juice.

That being said, it is a surprise for real. We're flying out in the open, and no one is detecting us. Our route being updated every now and then, green circles denoting where is 'safe' for us to be, the crew from Yokota seems to be doing their job with great efficiency. I know we're one of the most secret squads in the world but it's still surprising to see the scope of our operations.

And, despite all these resources, we're still getting our butts spanked by the BETA. Sigh… Leaning back, I slowly inhale as I let the rumble of the flight ease my worries, sending those visions away.

"Hey, Viking." A voice I recognize speaks through the common channel, startling me a fair bit.

The hell are you doing, Hayase? Yuuko-sensei told me that we were supposed to be quiet while we were flying towards Niigata. And to use the common channel instead of a personal connection… Well, I do have her authorization to talk while I'm in the cockpit, thanks to the voice distortion.

"Viking here. What is it, Valkyrie 2?"

"Say, in a scale from one to ten, how good are you? Because it feels reeeeaaaalllyyy bad to have a random join us in such an important mission." Ah yes, classic Hayase here. I wonder if she'll end up

hating me too? You know what? Whatever, they can't hear my real voice anyways.

"I'd say an eight."

"Oho, someone's confident! Well, try to not get in the way and actually get some kills, though in that TSF I'm amazed you can even fly alongside us."

"You say that but I bet you're actually interested in the mysterious pilot. Fast as always when it comes to seduction, Hayase." Munakata didn't waste time to tease her. Glad to see that some people haven't changed. "Viking, be careful or she'll gobble you up whole."

" **M-U-N-A-K-A-T-A!** That's not what this is about!"

"Valkyries 2 and 5, if you're done chatting remain silent!" The Captain scolded them before Munakata's teasing got stronger. You did this to yourself, Hayase. "Viking, Valkyrie 1 here." The Captain opens a private line with my unit. I'm getting scolded too, right?

"Viking, hearing you loud and clear."

"Forgive my subordinates. The first one is too competitive for her own good, and the other one simply cannot contain herself when she sees an opening. Do not take it as a personal offense." Always so dedicated to the team.

"I have taken no offense, Captain. A little bit of teasing is good for a team's morale on the field. It's alright, really." It's also really refreshing hearing their voices again. I can only hope I can get along with the Valkyries of this world, it would be horrible if all my squadmates ended up hating me.

"Thanks for your understanding. Valkyrie 1, out."

She cuts the connection, and I'm again left alone as we fly.

The rest of the flight went by peacefully. It almost doesn't feel like I'm going to battle, with the beautiful sunrise on my sight.

We finally reach the shore and take our position on the field. 5:47, we arrived with just enough time to get ready.

The whole land on my vision is also a wasteland, I read up on the invasion of the '98 and apparently it was because the BETA split in two groups that Japan didn't fall. A big part of the Kanto region got turned into a wasteland by the time Operation Lucifer recovered Yokohama.

All the Japanese forces had withdrew to the east and left the BETA from both Sadogashima and Yokohama to ravage the lands. Some places on the southern and central parts seem to still have some vegetation here and there, like the place where we found the Shogun last time and the area near Mt. Tengen, mostly thanks to the efforts of the Royal Guard and the fact that the BETA simply didn't have much time to gather all the resources near the mountains.

Unlike the lands beyond the Second Defense Line that are now declared inhabitable by the Shogunate and there's nothing there more than some lone military bases in case the BETA attack from the west again, and some people living in defiance to the law in their old towns.

"Valkyrie 1 to all units, listen up! Recheck your loadout and assume formation. According to our intel the BETA will be advancing towards us in some minutes, so be ready at any moment." The Captain ordered just as we finished landing.

The carriers went to another location, for when we have to make our retreat, after dropping the equipment to capture the BETA. Some big containers with an orange liquid, some Super Carbon wires and a claw-like add-on for our arms, as well as some more fuel to resupply what we spent on our way here.

All my equipment is fine, the thrusters are also in perfect condition. I refilled my first tank of fuel and have the secondary at full load. No problem with the joints or anything.

"Valkyrie Mum to all units, report your status." Everybody then answered the same, everyone had no problems with their machines.

Our mission is to engage the BETA near the shore after the initial bombardment from the MDF happens and before the rest of them arrive, to avoid being detected. Given the current relations of the UN with the Empire I wouldn't put it past them to attack us at first sight. I'm actually surprised we made it here without being detected, Japan's defenses are really bad.

Even with the support of the crew from Yokota to give us updated intel in our flight, even if this squad is using Shiranuis and all of them are registered as allied units, and even if my Kagerou has stealth protection this is just ridiculous. We made it from one end to the other without being detected, at all. No wonder the coup went so smoothly last time, Sagiri must have known the precarious state of our internal defenses. Or is Sensei abusing a crack in their system to make this happen?

The minutes slowly click by, when at 6:21 Haruka-san's voice could be heard again.

"Mum to all units, we have confirmed that there's a Brigade-sized herd of BETA moving towards your position. Approximately 50% of it is made out of Tank-Class, there's a 10% of Grappler-Class and a 5% of Destroyer-Class. Less than 5% of it are made out of both Laser-Classes and Fort-Class. The rest are infantry types. The MDF Naval Platoon will be engaging them shortly. Be at the ready for their eventual arrival. Valkyrie Mum, out."

So the bastards are coming already. In less than five minutes they should be arriving at the shore. Now all we can do is just pray that things go well out in the sea for our troops.

The minutes sway by, like the waves on the shore. The seconds draw out, like the light that begins to pour from the sun. My heartbeat suddenly becoming a clock, I watch the clouds move. Nothing keeps happening, the waves sway back and forth, the gust picks up some dust, swirling it back and forth, the clouds are tugged along, my heart remains present as I become aware of my breathing, watching the shore from my visor.

And nothing keeps happening.

And the waves keep swaying.

And the clouds move and dissolve, move and vanish from my view.

And the light becomes ever present in the landscape, the sun is ready to draw its usual arc up there.

And yet, nothing keeps happening.

6:25 AM. No updates yet. It should be coming right about-

"Mum to all units! The Ocean Defense Line has been breached! Prepare to engage at any second. The MDF Naval Platoon will be sending missiles towards the shore as the BETA surface, remain in your current position until the bombardment has ceased."

Sigh… Finally.

"Valkyrie 1, roger that. One to all units! Assume your formation, remember that we are here only to thin their numbers and capture some live specimens. Don't go doing anything crazy!"

"Understood!" All of us answered in unison.

Now, it's showtime. Come already BETA, I'll use every single bullet I have on you today. And as if answering to my challenge the first figures of the Fort-Class appeared on the distance over the water.

"Took you long enough, you bastards."

The radar beeps, the missiles are just about to hit. And as the Destroyers rushed out of the sea a whirlwind of fire ravaged the shoreline. Multiple tornadoes made of blazes scorched the BETA, only to be followed by giant explosions.

The mixed bombing approach, huh? First drop the heavy incendiary bombs, then the explosive ones hit the rest. With the first one you can deal easily with the Destroyers thanks to how squishy and fragile their bodies are, then when the Tanks and the rest arrive you drop the heavy missiles to deal with their overwhelming numbers with the great AoE of the explosions.

If I hadn't seen the drop of the Orbital Corps and the explosion of the XG I would be shocked right now. But I can't really be surprised when at least a hundred Destroyers are charging at me.

"Valkyrie 1 to all units! Commence operation, march forward!"

"Roger!"

The arrows appear on the radar and everybody charges at the BETA, flying NOE.

I boost jump and enter formation with my flight. The Vanguards are rushing towards the Destroyers, they jump to their side and shoot as they keep marching onwards. This makes some Destroyers stop, causing the ones behind to ram into them.

"Flights B and C, attack the Destroyers. Remember to leave some of them crippled so that Flight D can later capture them!" With the orders clear, the six members of both flights, me included, form a triangle as we advance.

With the Gunsweepers at the tip of the spear, the Interceptors on their eight and five respectively, and the rear flight moving side by side in a square, we advance into the BETA. I hope the aliens are ready for some tight service, because today's beach episode is filled with hot stuff!

As soon as they entered our range, we send our heat waves at them. Sometimes a spurt of blood gushed out, sometimes we hit their shells. Veering to a side along the small dunes, we prepare for the imminent contact with the charging Destroyers.

"Viking, come along! We'll flank them from their sides. Take my eleven!" Akane told me as she moved forward, she's currently Valkyrie 8 and is my pair in the right side of the formation.

"Roger!" Our side of the offense moved forward through the sand, we need to halt the Destroyer's advance before the gap made by the bombardment vanishes.

I do a double boost jump to gain altitude and using the thrusters in my back I adjust my position to have a clear look of the Destroyers. I lock both Assault Rifles onto the herd and shoot at them. Akane seemed to be a bit behind me, she couldn't keep up with my speed.

"Valkyrie 8, I'll spearhead the assault on our side, you stay nearby and finish all the ones that I cannot kill. If I get too far away, send a message."

"Roger!" Wow, didn't expect her to comply so easily. So when she doesn't have a bone to pick she's obedient? Who knows what Yuuko-sensei told them about me for this mission.

As I landed I flicked my joysticks hard, boost dashing out of the way of a charging Destroyer as I lock my gun on it, then with one gun pointing forward and one pointing backwards I open fire. The bullets break through the herd as the splashes of BETA blood paint the wasteland of sand, my quick turns create small splashes of dust as I keep moving in short hops.

Akane finished the Destroyers that I injured but didn't kill, covering my rear. I take a dash backwards as I sick my guns on the Tanks that appeared to my left.

"Viking, Eight, Nine and Ten. Move forward and finish this herd, We're wasting too much time with them. Five, help me cover their six!" The Captain ordered, showing us the positions she wanted us to take on our radars.

Without delay, me and the other three rush forward forming a line and attack the BETA.

The Captain and Munakata then covers us as we advance into the herd shooting left and right. I jump and use the thrusters to spin, making uranium rain upon the BETA. Using the extra thrusters I boost dash in midair, switching my gun for a dagger before I land, and once I hit the sand I dash forward while using only the left thrusters to make me spin again, slashing the Destroyers backs. By my side, the other three had penetrated the herd with their firepower making more of them crash into the others' backs.

A bleep in my radar catches my attention. The Vanguard sent us new data, the rest of the herd is closing in on us. Not a second later, the red spiders and boiled crabs appear on my view, dripping a bit of water from the ocean.

As I spin around and slash at a charging Grappler's head-like appendage, I keep shooting behind me with my other gun at all the Tanks that were closing in on us, taking the high ground of the small sand dunes.

The other Gun Sweepers were also nearby firing with their four guns at the BETA, then we get a warning to pull back. Shortly after canister shells sent from the rear rain on the monsters that charged at us, killing and crippling.

I start doing consecutive boost jumps to rejoin the line as the rear snipes the Grapplers that approached us, while the Captain and Munakata keep the Tanks at bay. I use this chance to change the magazine of the gun I was using and sheathe my dagger.

"One to Midfield and Rear! We're moving forward, break through the Tanks and secure a vantage point to support the Storm Vanguards!"

"Roger!"

I do a full boost jump to my right as I avoid most BETA in the way, but it seemed Akane was having some trouble keeping up with me and the Captain. Right, they not only lack the XM3 but they don't think to do anything more than a simple boost jump. The other side of the formation also seemed to be falling behind.

Doing a barrel roll and using the additional thrusters to drive myself towards the ground I put my left gun on the pylon by the side of my leg and I take out one dagger. I stab one Destroyer from above as I landed, did a sidestep and dashed forward into another one shooting it at point blank. Boost backflipped outta the way and sicked my gun on the herd from above, making blood and sand spurt high as I did.

"Valkyries, try to synchronize your jump timings with mine. You'll get surrounded if you don't put some speed in your stride." I can only hope they took it in good faith.

"Thanks for the suggestion. One to Midfield, synchronize your jumps with Viking's. We need to finish this quickly. Rear, cover our advance but do not fall behind."

We resume our double boost jumps as the Tanks and Grapplers rush at us as if they were sandsharks, the other three are having some trouble with the timing but they're definitely moving faster now. We shoot at the ones that get close as the four of us drive past the first wave. The Captain and the rest follow right behind us.

"Mum to all units, we have confirmed that the Laser-Class have reached the shore. Exert extreme caution from now on!"

"One, roger that. Valkyrie 1 to all units! Be ready for incoming lasers at any time from our twelve. Vanguards report your status!"

"Two here." Hayase sounded shaken. Don't tell me… "Half of my ammo remaining on my guns, no serious damage to my unit. We're currently retreating from the shore towards your position. We couldn't get past all the Fort-Class, there's too many of them to do it without support." Thank God no one died.

"Roger that. Attention all units, we move to Phase 2. Frontliners, cripple the BETA as much as you can. Flight D, switch one rifle to the paralyzing shells and be ready to zone out and capture the ones that are hit by them. Carrier crew, are you ready to deploy?"

"Mum, we're ready here to move out at your signal." I wonder how they're going to transport the Destroyers and Grapplers, though. Tanks could be dragged by our Humvees, so a TSF squad has to be with them too, as well as some mechanized infantry.

"Copy that. All units be ready to move out as soon as I give the order." The Captain said as our radars got the updated arrows and positions of our allies, now including the carrier's crew, as well as the area we could safely move in due to the approaching MDF units.

"Roger!"

"One to Three and Four, go to B Flight and coordinate as their vanguard. Two come to C Flight."

"Roger!"

"Viking, do you hear me?"

"Loud and clear, Captain."

"When Two regroups with us you are to join her as our frontliners. Leave me and Five to cover your backs."

"Roger." Of course, we have to operate in elements to avoid being flanked, and we do need to make haste before eyes fall upon our area of operation. Seems like I will have to go melee, Sensei.

"Two here. Captain, your orders!" Hayase's Shiranui dropped out of the sky, making tidal waves of sand fly away from its glistening frame under the sun. Half of it was painted in BETA entrails by now.

"You are to charge alongside Viking. Work together to cripple those bastards as much as you can!"

"Roger!"

A private channel is opened with my unit. I could imagine Hayase's smirking face despite having the feedback blocked thanks to how she was chuckling.

"Looks like I'll have to tag along with you, Eight." Is she gonna call me that now?

"I'll be right behind you, Two." Just like last time, eh? Seems like I'm bound to team up with you.

"You better! If you're as good as you said, go and crush those bastards as hard as you can! Now, on me!"

Now forming a spearhead with me and the three Vanguards, we charge towards the BETA. I do a double boost jump and use the backthrusters' Variable Wings to line myself horizontally above the BETA, blocking the sunlight to avoid it from screwing up my shots. I open fire towards the Tanks and Grapplers, ripping the Tanks' legs and damaging the Grapplers' backs. Hayase charges in after my attack gave her a path forward and slashed the legs of the Grapplers from their sides, tumbling them down.

As she back dashed shooting at the Tanks, I landed and boost dashed forward dagger at the ready. More Tanks and Grapplers were falling apart into the sands to our coordinated attacks as we moved forward. The others seemed to be having no trouble keeping up.

As we retreated before we were surrounded, the Captain's missiles hit our pursuers as Akane and the others kept shooting at the BETA that were nearby to give us room to retreat safely. We also kept shooting towards the unending stream of Tanks that jumped at us and the occasional Grappler. I had to switch another magazine. I'm already at less than half ammo, and around 12% fuel on my main tank. And the red dots on the radar seemed to not even be affected.

"Mum to all units, the Laser-Class seems to be stationed at the shoreline, unmoving. The XO orders the capture of at least ten Laser-Class. The Fort-Class will soon reach your position, be ready to intercept. Valkyrie Mum, out."

We regrouped as we retreated, we dealt with the vanguard quite nicely. Now's time for the real show.

"One, roger that. All units, we'll capture some Laser-Class and finish this mission before we're detected by the MDF. Engage Arrowhead 2 and advance! Storm Vanguards and Viking work as Flight A from now on, the rest of the Gunsweepers assume a line behind them and cover them as they advance along me and Five. Rear, be ready at any time to send the paralyzing at the Lasers. Valkyries, forward!"

"Roger!"

The whole squad starts dashing forward, towards the towering figure of the Fort-Class. Hayase and the other two cannot keep up with my speed as we slash at the BETA that come closer.

Now wielding the two daggers on each hand I slash at the Tanks legs. I keep my pace and stance as I dash and slash about. I take a step back and boost dash forward veering slightly right to avoid a Grappler and slash at its back legs, I do a jump backwards and do some quick slashes towards the Tanks.

I gotta say, my accuracy is busted now. Between how calm I am thanks to Maya-sensei's training, my new pace of attacks and the improved radars, I think I haven't missed a single attack today, not

even against the small Tanks with my daggers. I do a triple boost jump to get back to my position behind Hayase, and do a downward slash at the head of a Grappler that was on my way.

We're now just some meters away from the Forts, there's ten of them here on the right side blocking our way to the Laser-Class. Another ten to the left finish the circle that's blocking our way to the Laser-Class.

"A Flight! We'll go and kill some Forts to clear a path for the Captain and the rest to shoot the paralyzing ammo before the Lasers start attacking! Two and Three, take the left. Eight, you come with me to the right!" Hayase shouted over the speakers.

"Roger!" We both charge forward, ignoring the Tanks. I try to adjust my speed with hers as we close in on the Forts. The other two Vanguards take the Forts to our left.

A stinger flies our way, I sidestep to the right and resume my boost dash. Hayase just a bit behind me, we time our jumps and slash at the Fort from below together, tearing its sting apart before it retracted. We then switch to our guns and open fire from below it towards the head, uranium tears into the monster as a stream of blood is splashed onto our TSFs. One Fort down. We dash away from the tumbling corpse, slashing the nearby Tanks that tried to jump us.

I do a double boost jump to avoid a stinger and then use the extra thrusters to do a boost dash in midair, landing myself nearby the next prey. I dash under it from its side avoiding the legs and start jumping and slashing at it, it doesn't even flinch or stop in reaction to the injuries. Hayase arrives besides me and starts doing more damage with her sword.

"Hey, Viking! Take my rifle and go blow the nearby one's head off with your acrobatics! I'll cut this one's head myself!" I catch the rifle in midair as she threw it at me, it immediately gets linked to my unit.

"Do you not mind me getting all those kills?"

"You're killing them with my rifle, so they're my kills!" Hehehe, never change Hayase! You always manage to make me smile even in the direst of battles.

I double boost dash from below the Fort towards the other ones while clearing the red sea that's in the way, I got five shots of 120mm in this thing. I do a full boost jump, using the extra thrusters to balance myself in the air. Now, just like with the TR! Eat this! I fire two consecutive shots towards the head aiming at its neck, it exploded in answer to my treat.

I do a barrel roll to avoid another stinger, and I was ready to charge at the Fort with my dagger but Hayase dashed out of nowhere and cut the stinger before it goes back into the Fort.

"I'll cover you from the Tanks, you blow their heads off! With this the path forward will be done!"

"Roger!" I dash towards my left, shooting my remaining 36mm on the Tanks that appear before me and some Grapplers that got close. I do a triple boost jump and shot the three remaining shells onto the Fort's head from its side, making it explode. I do a boost dash to land near a Grappler that was getting too close to Hayase and slash its claws off with one dagger, using the other to tear through its flesh.

Now with some free room, Hayase boost jumped towards a Fort while shooting at it's stinger. Her Shiranui spun around with a sword on each hand, turning itself into a blade cyclone, slashing at the Fort's body and tearing its head apart in a flash. I dealt with the nearby Tanks to give her a safe landing. More fire opened from behind as the Midfield advanced and cleared the bulk of Tanks that were in the area. The other Vanguards were slashing at a Fort from below, getting showered in blood and flesh as they kept slicing at the gargantuan BETA until it fell.

We made a path between the Forts, the ones that were to the sides were bombarded with who knows how many ballistic shells in perfect synchrony to the same spot. There were still some of them, but we'll have to hold them until the Captain and the others manage to capture some of the Laser-Class.

"One to Storm Vanguards! Go after the Laser-Class, we will send the paralyzing shells as soon as you get close! Use the BETA as cover to advance!"

"Roger!" Hayase and the other two rushed forward.

"Viking regroup with the Midfield, we'll hold the line and give cover to the Vanguards until the Lasers have been captured! Rear guard, ready the paralyzing shells!"

"Roger!"

This is it, just one more push and the mission will be over. This is the most risky part for all of us, since the Vanguards have to rush into the Lasers and the rest of us have to hold this place to prevent the Vanguards from being surrounded.

I shoot what little is left of my ammo along the rest. Two Gunsweepers were facing towards the shore, sniping with their 120mm at the BETA that tried to jump the Vanguards. The Rear arrived behind us, and as we covered them they readied the paralyzing ammo.

But then…

From the corpse of a Fort many Tanks started coming out. We were surrounded by the corpses of the Forts as wave after wave of Tanks poured from them.

"Impact Guards, send the canister shells. All units with missiles use them freely, assume a Trail and watch each other's backs!"

This won't do. There's too many of them, we can't waste this much time here or the Vanguards will… I open a channel with the Captain.

"Viking to One, requesting permission to charge into the herd as a diversion. That way you can shoot them down easily as they chase me around. My higher mobility will allow to perform this without risk to my unit." I can't see her face but I can sense she's considering the idea, going by those small groans.

"Viking, permission granted. But stay close by, otherwise we won't be able to give you covering fire. Eight, lock onto Viking's IFF and cover him from the Tanks." Akane acknowledges the orders and boost dashes to my side, guns at the ready.

"Ten requesting permission to provide support to Viking, Ma'am!" A voice I don't recognize speaks on the common channel.

"Nine requesting the same!" This one is… Tsukiji? I can't really remember well but I think it's her.

"Permission granted. Five, regroup with me and aid me in clearing the other flank along the Rear."

"Roger that!"

"One to Viking, start the diversion!"

"Understood!" C'mon Kagerou, give me all of your accel! Let's flow into our enemies, like an unending waterfall!

I do a full boost dash, piercing through the Tanks. I spin around, do a forward dash, sidestep, jump, cancel and slash again. I take a step back and do a wide slash, killing three Tanks that were too close for comfort. The Tanks to my left are decimated by the other's fire.

Akane was shooting three rifles at the same time, timing each shot quite nicely with my jumps to hit most of the Tanks that were

surrounding me. I start retreating, dealing with the Tanks that get close as the Captain gives the order to raid the Tanks to both sides.

The three Valkyries that were behind me bombarded the corpses to the left with a flurry of shells, dealing with most of the Tanks that were still coming towards us.

A loud explosion could be heard as the rear blasted the canister shells upon the Fort's corpses that were in the other side, killing most of the Tanks that were coming out of them.

Full boost dashing ahead, I use the extra thrusters to align myself to make my Mugen stance as an inferno comes out of my lower Jump Units. I end up gliding for a while, ripping through the Tanks and some Grapplers, surfing onto the sand dunes. I cancel the dash and do a boost backflip to get back near my flight. As I retreat more uranium rains on the Tanks.

We can do this. There's not so many on my side, and the others seems to have dealt with their targets too. We somehow survived the Tank ambush, there's still a lot of them around but we dealt with more than half of them already. We just need to wait for the Vanguards to-

A warning appeared on my screen as a familiar beep sounded on my ears, and by instinct I moved backwards. Light flashed before my eyes, there were Laser-Class inside a corpse of a Fort we killed.

"Scatter!" Just as the Captain shouted, we all moved away as the beeping of the Laser alarm roared alive.

A shower of light poured from behind us, as we barely manage to escape the Laser's assault. Those bastards! A feint ambush to make us lower our guard, all to use the Lasers in a corpse that was left on our rear! This is the work of the Superior no doubt, only through him can the BETA do this kind of tricks.

We scatter about as we dodge the beams of light that follow us closely, using the BETA as cover. How many Lasers are in that corpse? If there's some Heavy Laser inside there…

"One to Vanguards! Give me a report!"

"T-Two here, Captain both Three and Four were hit by Lasers from our six. What's the situation back there?!"

What?! The ambush… costed us the lives of the two Vanguards? Damn it! I couldn't… Nobody could have done anything. You sons of an eldritch bitch!

"Two, get away from there. Capture of the Laser Class will be impossible in this situation. One to all units! We're retreating, Rear guards, aid the carrier's crew and ready the containers with the captured BETA." The Captain sounded nervous, it's rare to hear her like this. Only when things went wrong in Sadogashima she sounded so conflicted, so preoccupied.

"Shirogane, can you hear me?" A private channel opened up.

"Sensei? What is it?" I got startled by her sudden appearance.

"Suzumiya is getting me updated on the situation from one of the carriers, there's apparently a nice amount of Lasers near you. Tell Isumi to capture some of them and then issue the retreat order."

"You think we can avoid their attacks while capturing some of them? We're at our limits here." That seems crazy, going by the fact that we're barely dodging them while we retreat now.

"Give Isumi the message that I order her to use 'that' ammo. Get someone to cover you as you move around, leave the capture to the experienced members. That's all."

"And I suppose you won't tell me what 'that' is?"

"Shirogane, there's no time for this. Or do you have an idea, perhaps?"

"We could send canisters at them, forcing the Lasers to look up. Then, a small group can rush into the group, paralyze some of them to allow the capture, and kill the rest. Me and some others could remain behind to give them cover from afar. We won't be able to escape safely anyways without killing the Lasers."

"Not bad. That's similar to what I had in mind. Take a rifle from someone and send canisters from the back, do not go near the lasers. Tell Isumi to send 'that' after the canisters." And she cut the connection.

No time to waste then! I open a private channel with the Captain.

"Valkyrie 1! Orders from the XO have arrived!" I explain to her the orders Sensei gave.

"Roger! Blast Guards, ready the Yellow Dust shells!" The what now? Yellow Dust?

We retreat to a small clearing behind some BETA corpses, safe from the Lasers for now. One of the Valkyries hands me a rifle and I assume my position crouching along the Rear forming a line, aiming at the corpse from which the Lasers appeared. The Captain got her Shiranui in position, right in front of those of us who would provide the bait.

"Now, on my mark… Three, two… FIRE!"

Not a second later from the Captain's order, the canisters were flying towards the Lasers. They got taken out of course, but that's what allowed our two Blast Guards to rush out of cover, shooting the Yellow Dust straight at them while they were looking up.

**BOOOOOM!**

An explosion louder than anything I've heard roared through the battlefield. That shape… A cloud of literal yellow dust covered the battlefield. What the hell is that thing even?

"One to Five, Eight, Nine, and Ten. Come along with me, I'll use the paralyzing shells I have on me to stun the Lasers and you'll help me carry them. Viking, Six and Seven, cover our backs. The rest, prepare our escape route!"

"Roger!"

I stay behind slashing at the Tanks and Grapplers, while the other two Valkyries cover me with their guns. There's too many Tanks and there's also more Forts getting closer. The Laser on the shore have not attacked yet, but if they do…

We need to clear this last horde or… again someone will be gravely injured, or worse. Inhaling sharply, I refocus onto the battle. A beep reaches my ears shortly after.

I'm all out of ammo.

Well, fuck. I guess I'll just mind my pace with the daggers and-

"Aaaauugh!" What? What happened?!

A Destroyer charged out of nowhere onto one of the Valkyries that were covering me, she couldn't dodge it entirely and half of its TSF was broken, falling to the floor as pieces of its armor teared from its frame. She was still alive, but…

The other one shot the Destroyer from behind, and continued to shoot at all the nearby Tanks that were trying to climb onto the remains of the TSF.

I rush back to protect the broken Shiranui from the Tanks. Damn it, if things keep going on like this, this will end like last time. It's like I didn't change anything!

Wait… What if this time this invasion is also different?

"One to all units, we've captured some Lasers. We're retreating! All units start falling back. Two, report your status!"

"I'm retreating to the carriers away from the battle since one of my legs got hit by a laser, I'll be there in three minutes tops."

"Roger, everyone else let's get out of here! We've already lingered enough!"

"Eiko! Can you hear me?!" Kazama shouted over the common channel. They must be really close for her to lose her composure, since she was always so calm during our missions together.

"Touko, I… I can't feel my legs… I'm done for, get out of here." She sounded very weak. At this rate she'll die.

But we're ordered to retreat, we have to get out of here. If we linger here any longer… They're gonna die.

Feeling my heartbeat wanting to imitate a rocket, again an empty pit in my stomach as acid rose up from my throat, I looked at the radar, at my surroundings, at my remaining fuel.

I can do it. I'm not gonna be doubting here, every second counts!

Biting my lips as I pulled my controls too hard, I dashed to stand between them and the BETA.

"Viking to Six and Seven. I can buy you some time, get the injured one out of the cockpit ASAP!" Waiting not another second, I rush against the Tanks.

I'm getting low on fuel, but no way in hell I'll abandon a comrade that I can save. Even if I can't do more than simple boosts, that's more than enough! I won't give up so easily, I already went through a truly hopeless situation… and this isn't like back then! Biting back the pain in my head below my ears at my sudden sharp movements, I

suddenly slow down as I approached the red current coming my way.

A dash to the left, I slash at the Tanks with the sword. I take a step back, get one dagger out again, and dodge some of the ones that were trying to jump on me.

I keep jumping and canceling to distract them, slicing their hands when I find an opening, kicking them if I can't do that. I won't last much longer, if I can't rip through them it's very hard to land a killing blow with how small they are, and there's too many around.

Damn it, some of them jumped onto my back! I do a boost backflip into the ground, crushing the Tanks that were on me. I do a crouch dash as I slash the ones that tried to jump on me, but I can't shake all of them off. Some are now firmly grabbing onto my legs, not letting me dodge as well as I could.

"Dammit! Let me go, you damn monsters!" I was never surrounded by so many Tanks without ammo!

Shit, this is not going well… I can't line up a good slice to tear them up, I can't get rid of the ones clinging to my Kagerou's legs. Dammit… Dammit! What can I-

**SWISH! CLANK!**

Another Shiranui dashed forward, slashing the Tanks that were on me with its dagger.

"Viking, are you okay?!"

"… Y-Yes, I'm alright. Thanks, Eight."

But… something was wrong. Not only Akane's, but the Shiranuis of the ones that charged towards the Laser-Class looks like they're melting, like some mannequin made out of wax that got close to a source of heat.

"Seven to Viking, I've recovered Six. Let's retreat!"

"Roger!" Outta here! Forward dash!

"One to Rear, use another Yellow Dust to deny the advance of the BETA. They'll attract the eyes of the IJA if they follow us."

"Roger!"

I do some consecutive jumps and joined the rest of the squad. The Captain and the others were just a bit behind me. We move away from the path the BETA were marching on, flying NOE to avoid the lasers. The rear shot another of those yellow dust clouds at the BETA that were following us, forcing them to halt.

Some minutes after that there's no more red dots on the vicinity. The IJA is currently engaging the BETA, no one is coming to our position. It's over, we made it out.

"One to all units! Report your status!" Everybody reported themselves, Hayase had catched up to us in the way.

All the crew from the carrier were fine, those who survived at least. No one is coming here, so it seems we really weren't detected. By a hair's width, we got lucky the BETA separated into three different groups and no one detected our signals or came to out area. Sensei, as always, made the right call by choosing this battlefield.

I let out a sigh, moving my neck in circles. Gritting my teeth, I restrain my hand from hitting something. I exhale through my nose like an angry bull, leaning back into my seat.

In the end I couldn't change the outcome of this fight, was I not enough? Or is it because this world is different? The BETA didn't seem different from what I remember, so what happened? Had I not being here, would the result had been worse than last time?

A private channel opens with my unit, and an unexpected voice speaks to me.

"Viking, can you hear me?"

"Loud and clear. What is it, Valkyrie 8?" For Akane to do this, what does she want to say to me?

"Yes, I was wishing lto ask your opinion on my performance today as your partner in the right element, if you would be so kind." She's speaking formally to me, Sensei just what did you tell them?! Well… let's use this chance to help her out.

"You did well today. While your maneuvering is still rather rough, your accuracy is very good. You have a good sense for being on the offensive, as well as a good eye for providing cover. You saved my back in more than one occasion today, without counting how you dealt with the Tanks that had me at the last moment. I'd recommend you to work on your dexterity, if you can maintain your accuracy while moving faster you'll be a fine frontliner in the future. Just remember to take two seconds before acting, haste makes waste after all."

I remember that she was always rushing stuff last time, so if I can somehow convince her to take a more analytical approach to her offense she will end up being a great pilot. She was better than Chizuru as a Gun Sweeper, since she is more suited for offense. Last time, Chizuru was more adept for an Interceptor role but who knows how she'll turn out this time around.

"Thank you very much for your words! I'll keep them in mind during my practice. Valkyrie 8, out." Wow, didn't think she would be so elated to receive some praise.

Well, this might have been her first mission… Right, I don't know if they needed hypnotherapy or not. Maybe that's why she was so quick to follow my lead, maybe the Captain didn't want any accidents and preemptively gave them a does, just in case. And now that the

high of the battle is running out, she looked for an opinion on her performance.

"… You all did so much better than my first times, so you should be proud, Akane." You all must have been made a wreck of nerves, yet still managed to keep yourselves in check even during the last assault.

I hope she can stop chasing so madly after the Storm Vanguard position this time, if she can make the most out of her current role she'll learn a lot of valuable lessons. Which then will make her a better beacon for her squadmates from her cadet squad.

Being able to attack on all angles is something only the Gun Sweeper can do, it's not like the Vanguards are the best units of a flight. But I guess that with the sword fetish they have in the Empire, relying on guns might be seen as a 'disgrace'. But, if Akane manages to improve in this role, she'll fare better in the missions to come… And maybe she won't suffer the same fate she had to go through last loop.

I resupply my fuel near a carrier, and after the captured BETA are put into the tanks with the orange liquid, the Captain gives the order to retreat and we take off flying low. It's just 6:58, but it feels as if I was fighting for hours on end.

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*Same Day . 0 2:21 PM*

*(Yokohama Base. Yuuko's Office.)*

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"… And that's all." I finished telling Sensei of all that transpired, she pushed a button and stopped the recording she had set up.

"I see. So they used not one, but two ambushes. Did this happen last time too?"

"I don't know. Last time you didn't let me join the operation, and you told me nothing about it." When I came to talk with you about it I was super happy that things were resolved faster, but you were real cold now that I think about it. I'm sure it was because of the Valkyries we lost during the fight.

"Well then, I think I might know why this turned out the way it did." She starts spinning slowly in her seat.

"You do? What caused this?"

"You said that in the other version of this world the UN and the Empire were on rather good terms. It may not have been a perfect relation, but they were not at each other's throats like they're here, right?" I nod. "Then, since things are different here, it's possible that the MDF didn't take my warning seriously. I told them to be prepared for a possible BETA incursion, and yet it seems they weren't ready when the BETA surfaced from Sadogashima." Her lips plucking a bit, her spinning picked up speed. "We lost two ships today to the Forts, that is a lot of missiles that didn't hit the BETA when they reached the shore. It's also possible that in the other world we attacked the BETA as soon as they surfaced on Sadogashima, making the battle on the sea easier and thinning their numbers even further."

"Sigh… So it's the grudges again. Luckily we didn't run into anyone on our trip back, who knows what they would have done if they encountered us."

"Well, it's thanks to this that we had a big enough area to move on and just enough time to complete the mission. It's tough to know we can't rely on our most closest ally, even more after this matter with this Takamura. Here's the report on her I promised you. She's quite important, you know." She hands me an envelope with some papers.

Let's see… Her father created the Zuikaku, she graduated at a rather young age from a Surface Pilot Training Program of the Empire, fought on the Defense of Kyoto, served on the Royal Guard until she was given on a loan to the Ministry of Defense. She's been

working on the EML-Railgun and the Shiranui 1C since they were put in charge of Chofu Base, and she was eventually loaned to the UN when the XFJ Project was created as the leader of it.

She supervised the testing of both the railgun and the Shiranui Second test models in Yukon and Kamchatka along her squad. After her heroic actions on the Yukon Incident she was given the rank of Captain in the UN Army, despite the fact that she couldn't prevent the bombs from exploding and she couldn't save her squad from being caught in the explosion. Apparently that's one major problem the XFJ project has, since both prototypes of the Shiranui Second got destroyed they can't continue the testing without making another, which would require money and parts. From America. That's not happening any time soon.

She has also been trained in the use of a sword, like Meiya I guess. She has her own personal yellow Takemikazuchi and has ties with some important people in the Imperial Army. She's a big fish alright, I don't think I'll be able to harm her without getting all of us in trouble. Maybe I could make her have an 'accident' while on the field? I honestly have no idea what I could do to deal with her.

According to the report she's a very cold person. Strict with everyone, bound by her honor to serve to deliver the best possible results. A noble through and through, talking things out with her is out of the question. Maybe the reason Tsukuyomi-san warmed up to me a bit last time was because of a causal leak, but this time I won't be able to hax my way out of this.

Whatever, I'm sure she isn't stupid enough to try to harm me in public, so when she decides to strike at me I'll use the 'self-defense' card as my reason for dealing with her. Let's hope it never comes to that.

"So Shirogane, still think this is a good idea?" Sensei was still showing doubt in her voice.

"Yeah, the railgun is worth it. We probably will have to argue with the Empire to keep it after we finish it, but it's a weapon worth the trouble. If we had it today, the invasion would have been over in a flash."

"Alright, if you say so. Now then, there's a few questions I have regarding the theories that I was hoping you could answer."

"Sure, what's up?"

"First, what's the flaw of the 00 Unit?"

"… When Sumika is connected to the Reactor to purify her ODL, part of her knowledge is shared to it." She frowns, hiding her mouth with one hand. "The same can happen when she has to scan a hive for their data. By the way, we can get intel on all hives with a single scan."

"… Is that so? That's a small consolation, I suppose."

"Well… There's one thing I never got to know for sure. When the base was attacked in that memory I showed you, the BETA were already using our tactics against us but you couldn't figure out if that was because of any data shared through our Reactor or if they had chosen to take us seriously."

"Take us seriously? Didn't you say they would never see us as an intelligent race before?"

"Yeah, and the you of that world compared the situation to a typhoon or other natural disasters. We may not be alive in their eyes, but they might want to understand and neutralize us, if and when we become a problem."

"Sigh… I see. I suppose we should test whether intel can be shared through our Reactor first then."

"You mean… in case you can't fix the issue?" She nods, squinting her eyes as hard as I haven't seen her ever do.

"I… may not be able to find a solution without overhauling the structure of what I already built, and we don't have time to make an entire new vessel for the 00 Unit with so little time left for Christmas. So we'll start doing small tests, I'll try to force a connection with what I have built as of now."

"Wait, you can do that?"

"Of course, I have literally hundreds of failed prototype units to do tests with. What do you think I used to change your TSF's main unit to make the adaptation to the XM3 work as well as it did in such a short time?" She shrugs, again sounding dry.

"I see… So you used one of those CPUs… I never thought about it much, but it makes sense."

"Sigh… I do have to show some results to the UN, besides the main goal for Alt. IV. My architecture was just well suited to do what you asked me to with the OS, and it was a nice test to check some things could be emulated through the software." She smiles faintly, leaning back into her seat and spinning again. "Thanks to the theories, I suppose I could try to see if we can trigger a connection without the 00 Unit to see whether our Reactor shares intel with the BETA or not. I'll devise some tactics we haven't used yet, wait nineteen days, and then send the Valkyries to an expedition to Sadogashima for a short culling operation as an excuse. Of course, I'll try to see whether we can actually get any intel from the Reactor without the 00 Unit."

"Okay… Well, I can't help with that, so best of luck. Just make sure to wipe any data from whatever you'll use to test this."

"I know, I don't want to give them any advantage here. So, there's something else that's been bugging me…" She entwines her fingers, stops spinning, leans forward into the desk, and places her hands

atop the wood slowly. Her brows curving, her eyes seemed to pierce into me as she held my gaze. "I suppose the last mission you showed me was… an assault on the Original Hive, wasn't it?"

…

"Considering what you've told and shown me, and that we have plans being prepared to quickly deal with it after attacking the 20th or 19th Hive, it was the most logical option. What happened during the mission?"

"… I already showed you what's most important."

"Speak, now."

"… You really think it's a good idea to know?"

"Are you saying you aren't willing to tell me?"

…

"Sigh… We took down the Reactor, as I showed you before, after having a short talk with it. Only me and Kasumi survived." I claw at my pants, looking down.

"Why did you keep quiet about it?"

"Because… we need more firepower before we attack the Original Hive."

"We might not have the time or resources, as I suppose happened in the last world you were in. This is a direct threat to humanity's survival. Shirogane, you should know that-"

"That's why I made a plan for that. There's no need… to repeat that suicide." I take a sharp breath as I return her gaze, she sends a hand to her chin without showing any emotion in her face.

"Mind telling me what this plan is all about then?"

"The BETA take nineteen days to process new intel. Assuming the worse case, in which you can't prevent the data leak from the 00 Unit, we would have to give up on the scans to keep our intel safe." She nods, leaning back into her seat. "Then, we can use the XG-70B for another mission after Sadogashima. And we get another to use Model D."

"And then what?"

"That's only if we follow the same pattern as before. Since I know of what happens on Operation 21st, we can use the XG to blow up Sadogashima without giving the BETA any chance to pass its intel to a Reactor. The key here is that, since a BETA has to pass the knowledge manually if the 00 Unit doesn't make a link to the Reactor, so long as we wipe them out in a single swoop we can prevent them from gaining intel on us."

"… I see. Murder everyone in the place, to avoid having a straggler pass down the intel. Just like a medieval raid of sorts. Still, they might adapt as they did to our air raids at the very start of the war. So, what happens if the plan fails?"

"… That's why we have the better XM3, to be able to last longer in the field and destroy the Reactor without forcing the XG to deploy. And you'll have intel on the first mission, we have the upper hand now." However, her stare doesn't change.

"And what if that also fails?"

"… We cannot rush Kashgar as we did last time. I'm not repeating that suicide."

"… Even if that is our only choice left?"

"It won't be."

"And in the scenario that it becomes our only-"

"I won't let it happen!" Unable to hold back, I hit my leg. Unable to stop, I keep shouting. "That shit won't happen again. I'm gonna take down all the lasers in Sadogashima myself if I have to, but we're not repeating that mistake again."

"You say mistake, but I assume the operation was completed successfully?"

"At the cost of tens of thousands of lives, the 00 Unit, the XG, and…"

…

"And what?"

Now that I think about it… What the hell happened to Sensei in that world? We deceived the Americans to prevent them from getting more stuff to make G-Bombs.

I'm sure she would have… had to face some pretty heavy consequences for that. What if she convinced me that my fight was over… so that I didn't-

"Shirogane, what else?"

"… We lost all our influence at the end." She frowns, empty of an answer for a sec.

"How so?"

"You had to share the intel of all the hives to the UN because they didn't want to cooperate and wanted to switch to Alt. V at once. In the end… We barely were able to complete the mission, it was a miracle it happened at all."

"… So you're saying that, in this world where I have less support, we might not be able to successfully complete that operation with its best outcome as before?"

"… Yeah, I guess. I also don't want to have to rush it like that. Just… The rest of the UN was fine with switching to Alt. V, didn't care about the consequences, didn't even plan on using whatever of the fleet was ready. We had no choice left, that's why we took that drastic measure. So…" Even if that world's Sensei screwed me over… "… The future needs you standing with power after we take down the Original Hive. It's true I don't know what happened after that… But I don't want to leave behind that same situation here if I have to return to my world. We can manage this situation better to make sure that, at the least, it doesn't come down to that ultimatum." I take a deep breath, looking at her. "So, can we take some time to check whether we truly don't have a choice here?"

"… I suppose. However, if it turns out we do not… Don't make a fuss about it."

"… Deal. But if that is the case… Keep your end of the deal after this ends."

"I will. And don't worry, I also would like to avoid such a disaster." She stands up, going towards her coffee machine. "I'd like to start reading the theories now to begin the prep work, so you go on and rest for the day. If anything comes up just leave it for tomorrow, I want no distractions now."

"Roger. Later, Sensei." I stand up and leave the office.

And from now on the real fight starts. Once Sensei gets to work with both theories she'll have to tune the 00 Unit to prevent the leak. I'll have to wait until I can see the data from today's performance of the XM3, but I'm more than happy with it. The Kagerou felt like the Shiranui I used to pilot, it was truly awesome. No wonder, she used some of the tech she's been working on for the 00 Unit on it.

Well, at least she seems willing to give my ideas a shot. Even if we avoid the coup and make our TSFs better, there is little we can do against the bigger events. The defense of the base and the sharing of intel through the 00 Unit… Those are the main problems we have

to tackle to have a shot at a different road post-Sadogashima. Everything is just a preparation for that.

Sigh… I can't do anything for now, I already tried to make the most out of Niigata and barely made a draw with this world. I'll just eat and rest for today. All I can do is believe Eiko-san might live, that Sensei will find a solution to our roadblocks, and that I can step up if there is something I can do to help.

Reaching the end of the hallway, I swipe my ID and the elevator opens. Tapping the buttons, it rumbles to life again and begins to make its way to B5F. I lean on a wall, closing my eyes and simply resting until I have to get out.

# Before the Downpour

## Chapter 15: Before the Downpour

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*November 11 th . Near 4 PM.*

*(Hallway, Yokohama Base.)*

**[Takeru]**

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Getting out of the elevator at the ground level, squinting my eyes at the pouring sunshine, I made my way to the PX since it's still near lunch time. The habitual noise in the place, I grab a tray and get in line.

"Rice, miso, and mackerel please." I say as I hand my tray.

I did what I could, but still, the mission left an awful taste in my mouth. Nothing could be done, it still makes me sick. At least we finished the mission successfully, and we avoided the outcome the invasion had on the first loops too. Guess I should begin focusing on the next flag to avoid getting too down.

I wonder how things will turn out in the CCSE, now that I'm on bad terms with everyone. I barely managed to do anything in the mission, will I be able to make them get along for the test? Well, no point in worrying about-

My tray is dropped rather violently, it has less than half of our usual rations.

"That's your fill, move along now!" Kyozuka-san said with an annoyed tone.

"Um, excuse me, but this is not even half of our usual rations." Brows arching up, lips half open doing the same.

"That's all people like you get here. Hush now, and go to the table. After all the problems you're giving those poor girls… You have some nerve to talk back." I hear the other people in the line snickering. So, you hate me too.

I grab my tray and go to a different table that was empty. Screw all of you, really. I just got back from fighting the BETA, from saving your hides, and this is what I get? Well, they don't know about it. Sigh… Is there anything I can do to mend all this mess?

I couldn't do a thing to save the other two Vanguards, I still don't even know their names. I can only hope that Eiko-san doesn't die, if I'm going by what happened last time she should get hospitalized. But there's the chance that things go differently this time around.

I eat the little food I was given and got out. I can hear them whispering about me and calling me names behind my back. So this is what Dad meant when he told me once about how to deal with cowards. He always said that there was a group of people that would go around spreading rumors and trash talking about others behind their backs, but when confronted about it they negated everything, getting scared and playing the victim. I won't fall for such provocation, I'm here to help.

On my way to my room I saw Meiya at the distance, she's looking out of the window. She seems… angry for some reason. I shouldn't talk to her, I can't seem to make amends with them. I want no more problems right now and it hurts a lot to see their faces scowl at me.

I know they're not the same, I know I'm being an idiot. But my heart can't take it. I tried being serious these last few days, I tried giving them some pointers, and what did that achieve? Meiya and Chizuru were still frowning at me without answering, and Kei was seriously trying to hurt me during combat practice. I honestly don't know how to approach them anymore. They did try to smooth things over

during yesterday's dinner, but I could tell they were forcing themselves because they couldn't look at me in the eye.

Sigh… I honestly rather not talk with them anymore. I don't want to end up angering them on accident.

I walk past her, and as I did I heard her gasp. Maybe I surprised her walking so fast, whatever let's go to the stairs.

"Wait!" She calls out to me as I'm descending.

"Good afternoon, Mitsurugi. What is it?" I greet her after she reaches B1F. Her expression is a mess.

She looks at me, but then looks away. Kinda frowning for a while, but then chills down. Oh, she must want to know where I was during the alarm.

"Shirogane… Where were you during the emergency summons?" Paranoia, you're the fish on her plate.

"Special mission on the lower floors."

"Are those machines more important than… protecting the base?"

"Vice Commander's orders. Can't refuse them, you know." What is she after this time? Can't we just agree to ignore each other? For the sake of coexistence? Please?

"Is that so? Say, can I ask you a personal question?" A quiet, slow tone. Full of insistence, she won't take a no for an answer.

"Go ahead."

"Shirogane… Are you part of the Royal Guard?"

… What did she just say? Why is she asking me this question? Did she learn something about this world's me?

"Oho, a most revealing reaction indeed." She folds her arms, narrows her eyes at me, a brow of hers slowly moving up for a moment.

"Mitsurugi, I'm a UN soldier. I'm not part of the Guard."

"Really? Then, why is your profile on our database blocked?" Did she try to access it?

"There was some incorrect data on it, so they had to revise that."

"Hmm… Then why was your public profile blocked as well?"

"I dunno. I just told you there was some incorrect data on them."

"Dodging the question?" A disgusted expression floods her face. What got into her today?

"Say, is that all? I don't know why my profiles were blocked, for real. I'm kinda tired, can I be on my way?"

"Oh, yes. Do be on your way. But allow me to ask you one final question. I'd like you to answer it honestly, if you could." She gets closer, bringing her face just a few centimeters away from mine.

Usually I would have gotten embarrassed or excited to have Meiya so close to me, but this time she wasn't getting close with affection. I could feel the aggression emanating from every cell in her body. Now what did I do?

"What is it?"

"Why do you have a Minaru Kamui in your possession?"

… Wait, what?

"What did you say, Mitsurugi?"

"Oh, did I stutter? Forgive me. I said, why do you have a Minaru Kamui in your possession?" She raises her voice a bit, leaking hatred.

Why does she knows about it?! There's no way she…

"Did you enter my room without my permission, Mitsurugi?"

"Could you answer my question first?"

We stand there, gazing at each other for a while.

What did she enter my room for? What did she see? What is she going to do with that information? But more importantly, she now knows I have the blade. That is a treasure in this world, I can't bullshit my way out of this one.

"So, are you going to answer, Shirogane? Why do you have that sword with you?" What the hell do I tell her? I don't want to get into a fight, but how can I convince her that I have it rightfully?

"… It was a present."

"A present?" She looks insulted, as if the words had hurt her pride.

"Someone gave it to me as a memento before I came to this base."

"As a memento? Do you seriously think I'll believe that?!" She finally snaps as the anger surfaces in her voice like a whale near a shore, sending waves upon waves at me.

"Believe it or not, it's the truth. The original holder of the blade died and someone close to that person gave the blade to me, so that I wouldn't forget what I learned from that person, so that I would always remember our time together, brief as it was. That sword is not mine, it's *our* sword." Easing up a bit when I return her gaze, a hand goes to the ponytail.

"Hmm… Can you tell me who gave it to you?"

"No, I promised I wouldn't say. It has nothing to do with you. Why are you asking me about it?" Let's pretend I don't know.

"That blade is a national treasure, it can't be given away as a personal present. There aren't many of those intact, it's not something that someone like you should have." Why must you be like this?… What did I even do to you?

"And why is that? I got the blade fairly, I didn't steal it or anything. And why did you enter my room? That's against our regulations." She groans, brows lowering, getting angrier.

"Regardless of why I intruded on your privacy… Do you think you're above the law, Shirogane? That blade is not something anyone should wield, for it is meant for Japanese hands."

"Sorry to inform you, but I'm also Japanese." She purses her lips as she folds her arms.

"I didn't mean it literally. Only a few select people can wield that blade. And I doubt you are one of those chosen ones. You might end up court marshaled for this offense if you do not return it at once." I thought that she would lay off if she knew the owner gave it to me and I pushed towards her breaking the rules, but it seems I can't dodge this one. Seems she… doesn't even feel bad about it.

"Look Mitsurugi, that blade means a lot to me. It's from someone that's… truly important to me, someone that marked my life." She flinches back, her eyes ease up a bit. "So, I don't know how much it means here but, I guess I won't be able to keep it with me, right?"

"Indeed. I was probing you for answers, in case you had a valid reason to hold onto it. But as I thought you do not."

"So, what are you going to do? Report me to the authorities?"

"I may have to do so. That sword is too valuable an item to leave it in your hands. Do not take offense, please. It should only be wielded by

those in direct service of the Shogunate. You, a UN Cadet that came from America, should not have such an item in your possession. You do seem to be telling the truth, however. Would you accept a suggestion I have to resolve this situation then?" She looks at me waiting for my answer, sheathing her inner blade.

"… I believe that we should consult with the authorities of the base. I don't want to bother them, but it may be for the best to resolve this quickly. And you did enter my room without permission." I could maybe get Sensei to lend me a hand here, I think I should have asked her about the katana earlier. I need some cover and more info to deal with this. This might spiral out of control if we don't handle it with care.

"No, this is a matter that does not concern the UN." Wow, Meiya is not backing off. Is she not remorseful about entering my room? "I would like you to come with me to meet a unit of the Royal Guard that is stationed on this base. We should hand the blade to them, I will do my best to clear any suspicions they may have against you if you cooperate. I assure you no harm will come to you, so long as you hand over the Minaru Kamui willingly."

Can't say I didn't expect her to be so firm about the sword, though. But I can't go along with her idea. I mean, if Tsukuyomi-san learns I have a Minaru Kamui… I'm going to get us into a huge problem.

"I still think we should talk with the Instructor, considering how you learned of me having the blade. And even with you defending me the Guards might press charges against me." Or worse.

"You sound as if you didn't want to meet the Royal Guard…"

"You said it's illegal for me to possess the blade. Do you really think they'll let it slide?" No way in hell I'll walk into the lion's jaws. Since it seems like I'm on the watch list of the Shogunate, I'm sure Tsukuyomi-san must have received some orders about me. It's too dangerous to go meet her without a third party knowing of it.

Meiya sighs and looks right into my eyes, her sapphires brimming with fire, sharp as the finest blades forged by Muramasa. The sight sent a small spike into my heart, a twinge of pain right below my ears. Feeling a small shiver on my sides, a pair of cold hands on my shoulders, I sighed and looked away. She takes a step forward, her glare ready to slay.

"Shirogane, if you do not comply, I will call the Royal Guard myself and tell them to-"

"Tell them to what? Pray tell Meiya-sama, what shall you have us do?" Tsukuyomi-san, followed by the Three Idiots, approached us. Guess I'll die today.

Meiya steps forward and gives Tsukuyomi-san a small bow.

"Good afternoon, 1st Lieutenant. I have something to ask of you. Cadet Shirogane has-"

"Meiya-sama, what did I tell you to do regarding this Cadet?" Tsukuyomi-san's eyes were stern but her piercing glare was not flowing upon me, but onto Meiya. She didn't let her finish and seemed really angry, like when she came to the rescue when everybody got drunk at the hot springs.

"Huh? I know, and I haven't forgotten. However, he-"

"Meiya-sama, I told you to not get involved with that man. Forget whatever it is that made you argue with him." Meiya's face is painted with shock as her eyes waver, enlarge and shrink in disbelief.

… What the hell is going on here? Is Tsukuyomi-san trying to make Meiya go away to deal with me herself? Right, she doesn't want to put Meiya in unnecessary trouble. Can't say I didn't see this coming, but something feels off here…

"Tsukuyomi, this man has in his possession one precious item that-"

"Surely you understand who ordered me to take this course of action? Are you going to act against her wishes?" Tsukuyomi-san got closer to Meiya, making her slowly take one step backwards.

But what did she mean? The only person that can boss around Tsukuyomi-san, other than Meiya, is… Yuuhi. So Yuuhi ordered Tsukuyomi-san to leave me alone. Of course, a dead Royal Guard is suddenly alive as a Cadet in the UN. That's why she sent Takamura, and maybe I'm being observed by the Three Idiots on my daily activities. But why is she scolding Meiya so much? Shouldn't she just tell her to leave? And it's very weird to see this world's Tsukuyomi-san so furious towards Meiya.

"But… Tsukuyomi, please listen. He has a-"

"That's enough!" If she were getting upset at me, I could understand it. But with Meiya? The fuck is going on here?

"Tsukuyomi… Why do you refuse to listen?" Meiya's voice resembled a broken glass, her shoulders were trembling a bit.

"Do not make a scene, please. I taught you better than this. Besides, we cannot involve ourselves with him. I will not repeat myself, if you do not wish me to report this to her you will stand back." Meiya tries to hold her gaze, but eventually gives up. Her fists are tightened and shaking.

"Fine, I'll let it go."

I don't like this. Meiya may end up resenting me even more if I let things sit like this. As much as I want to get away from here, I can't let Meiya leave like this. But what should I…

Hmm… Wait one sec… I have an idea. A dangerous idea. But I could use it to gather some intel here.

I can't normally approach and speak with Tsukuyomi-san after all. Sure, they may already know I'm not this world's me but at least I

can use this chance to get some insight through her expressions and words. And it's not like she has the authority to detain me. She wouldn't harm me either, that will only strain the relations with the UN and she wouldn't do that now that we have the deal on the rails.

Sure, her sense of duty is very great so she might attack me. But I don't see them not coming after me if they ever learn I have a Minaru Kamui with me, so being honest about it might be the best thing I can do here and maybe I can score some points with her by showing I care about Meiya.

Sigh… Will the 'I have amnesia' card work here if she pressures me though? No, they must know he's dead since Her Highness seems to be wary of me. I can try to be as honest as I can and hand over the sword, and with Meiya's help she might not show her fangs at me. It is a very important treasure here so I have to show her that I really have no bad intentions or anything. And I'll send some questions in if I find an opening. But I gotta get away from her without making Meiya more hateful towards me. So, let's tell her myself.

"1st Lieutenant, may I?" She seemed startled as I addressed her. The Three Idiots stood uptight and ready to intercept, but Tsukuyomi-san waved at them and then looked my way once more.

"What is it?" She doesn't seem offended or angry… or she's keeping her cool real good. Meiya folds her arms and stares intensely at both of us.

"Could you please listen to Cadet Mitsurugi's worries? She found out I have a katana in my possession and wanted me to return it." The Three Idiots frown at my words, Meiya smiles faintly and addressed Tsukuyomi-san once more.

"1st Lt. Tsukuyomi that is what I wanted to tell you about. Cadet Shirogane has in his possession a-"

"Silence." A simple word. A calm tone. Yet, it was enough to freeze Meiya.

"Eh?" Her mouth grew smaller, but her shaking lips didn't close. I can't believe it either, I guess she wants to deal with me personally.

"Meiya-sama, you shall remain quiet. Cadet Shirogane, can you tell me what is this about?" She shifts her gaze to me as she took one step, getting closer.

"Someone gave me a katana, and Cadet Mitsurugi told me it was illegal for me to have it. I believe I should return it, right? I didn't knew it was against the law and I had no bad intentions, really." Tsukuyomi-san shakes her head, then strokes her hair as she looks at me.

"So this is about a sword? That is none of my concern." I don't know who's more surprised between Meiya, the Three Idiots, and me. Tsukuyomi-san continues to talk slowly. "There is no law that forbids an owner to give its sword to someone else, in fact that act of trust is one of the most sacred traditions of the Empire. To take the sword from you would be equal to trampling over the wishes of the original wielder. You may keep it, I shall not object." Saved by the honor code, who would have said it. But she seems… too composed. Even if they're suspicious of me and Meiya is here, this feels off.

"Tsukuyomi, that is-" Meiya shut her mouth as Tsukuyomi-san sent a glare her way.

"I see. Forgive the trouble, 1st Lieutenant. I'll try to not get in Cadet Mitsurugi's way from now on." I bow to her. The last thing I need is to get on her bad side, considering that I'm already on Yuuhi's black list. Even if I have a thousand questions right now, maybe she's just lying to not get Meiya involved.

"There is no reason to thank me." She gestures towards the trio, signaling them to leave. Once they were far away, she turned to face us bearing an angry expression. "However, do let me tell both of you

some things." Ouch. Here comes the 'Why you alive, dead man?' question, perhaps? Meiya also tensed up. Let me see what's under those emeralds, Tsukuyomi-san.

"What is it?"

"First, Meiya-sama it was most foolish to argue with your squadmate here when you could have come to consult with me on your own. You did not think on the repercussions this would have for both of you if someone saw you. And, *yet again,* you ignored my advice to not approach him. I do not know how you found out he has a katana, but I believe you should reflect on your actions."

Meiya lowers her gaze to the ground in shame. Her lips tremble slightly as she nods in acknowledgment of the words.

"Next. Cadet Shirogane, you should be more careful with your belongings. Had anyone else learned of such an item being in your possession, you would have been placed in a very compromising position. Meiya-sama's worry was well placed, even if you have the right to wield it. Luck has smiled your way for your squadmate to be the one who found out about this and not another. You should mend your carelessness so that this does not repeat itself."

She sounds like an older sister scolding me like this, even if she doesn't know I have a Minaru Kamui. However, she does not seem hostile towards me. I give her a nod and, for the briefest moment, she smiled.

"And last. Both of you really need to stop quarreling. As *fellows*, you have no reason to doubt each other. You will need to join forces in the coming CCSE, so stop with these needless arguments. Cadet Shirogane, I expect you to be on your best behavior around her. Meiya-sama, I expect you to start behaving in a proper manner befitting of your station. You seem to have forgotten what I taught you about poise and composure, that is most shameful." Critical Hit to Meiya's Mental Fortitude Stat. She seems really shaken by this scolding.

"Thanks for the advice. I'll keep it in mind." I bow again, Meiya follows suit.

"Forgive the trouble, 1st Lt. Tsukuyomi."

"Do not mention it. Forget we ever met today, we're lucky this happened after the alarm. If people weren't outside to breath some air this wouldn't have gone unnoticed. We have been ordered to not interfere with him, so do not expect our assistance next time." Ordered? This again…

I'd like to ask her, but… What if I blow my cover and she stops being careful around me? Being Meiya's guardian she must know about my situation already. So, she's holding back for now. If I want answers the only time I can get them is now, before Takamura arrives. But Meiya is here.

Sigh… I'll have to let it slide. The signs I got have only gotten me more confused, she really didn't send any aggressiveness my way. Is she holding back because of Yuuhi's orders? Is she not sure whether I am or not this world's me? She must have tried to investigate my background, after all.

"Well, I'll be on my way then." And with that she leaves with hurried steps.

After she went a considerable distance I reassured myself she wasn't going to suddenly turn around and come after me, and so I went my way to my room. I need a shower and a nap to clear my head.

"… Forgive me. I shouldn't have become so suspicious of you." Meiya said as she walked by my side, hanging her head.

"It's fine. I know you don't like me much. Let's just ignore each other until we get commissioned." I really don't know what to do with you anymore. Being friendly didn't work, being serious didn't work. Asking for their help didn't either. What can I even-

"Wait, Shirogane." She stops me as I was almost to the stairs.

"What it is?"

"… Are you truly not a member of the Royal Guard?" She drills her eyes into me, folding her arms as usual. Her gaze is wavering again.

"Of course not. Why would I be here as a Cadet then?" She takes a step towards me with clashing waves in her eyes. She's doubting, now that she thinks I have the right to wield a Minaru Kamui she must have assumed I'm on the Guard. Which is kinda right for this world's me.

"Then, why did she call us fellows?"

"Because we're squadmates?"

"Do not be foolish! She called us squadmates before, and don't tell me you didn't notice her tone changed when she said it. To refer to us in such a way… It means she sees you as one of us. So if you're not on the Guard… " Her eyes narrow at me again. Wait, 'one of us'?

"Mitsurugi, I don't know what got into you, but I'm not your enemy. I stopped holding back, I told the 1st Lt about my sword, and I'm not snapping at you despite what you did. Can you please speak your mind with me? What do you mean by 'one of us'?" I honestly have no idea what's she's talking about. How could I be 'one of them' if I'm not a Royal Guard? Maybe she thinks I'm a vassal or something?

"You're telling the truth? You aren't a member of the Royal Guard? Then, what about your swordplay? Where did you learn that style?" Again with this? I mean, can't blame her for noticing.

"I learned it on my old squad, I told you that already. Look, I'm not on the Guard. She said so herself, the blade can be passed to other people. That's all there is to this." Her shoulders start to tremble.

"… That's all, you say? If someone gave that blade to you… And you have the right to wield it… Then I'm… My mission…"

"Mitsurugi? Hey, what's up?" I've never seen Meiya so visibly troubled, except during the coup but that was a limit situation. "D-Did I say something harmful again?"

"Stop that. You… Because of you…" She looks at me as purple blazes roar alive in her eyes. Now what did I say?!

"What is it now? Can you speak to me? I don't know what's going on here, and I want to know what's up with you. Tell me what's troubling you, please? Why are you so rejecting towards me?" I take one step forward but then she moves away, avoiding my gaze.

"… Forgive me. What I can tell you is that 1st Lt. Tsukuyomi sees you as someone who serves the Shogun, that's why she called us fellows. Excuse me, I need to get some air." And she stormed out of here, not giving me a chance to stop her.

Okay, what the actual hell just happened? She said Tsukuyomi-san thinks I serve the Shogun, which means she must think I'm this world's me, and Meiya does not like that one bit. Which is weird, she should be friendly towards a member of the Guard or someone who serves Yuuhi, why did she react like that? She said something about a mission, so she was talking about how she's Yuuhi's body double.

How could I ever get in the way of that? Does she think that I got sent here to keep tabs on her? She did react super badly when they brought the purple Takemikazuchi here and when Tsukuyomi-san remained with her instead of going to Yuuhi's side during the coup.

I have so many questions. And I don't think that going after Meiya right now is a good idea. I need to go talk this out with Sensei.

Wait… She told me to not bother her no matter what. Goddammit, this is too important to leave it for another day, and it's not like it'll take too much time to tell her about it. I mean, what if Tsukuyomi-san

approaches me thinking I'm working for Her Highness and I blow my cover? With how little I know of the Royal Guard's way of doing things she'll notice right away I'm not one of them.

And so, I rushed towards Sensei's office.

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*A few minutes later .*

*(Yuuko's Office.)*

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"So you're telling me that this woman thinks you're here by order of the Shogun?" Raising a brow, hand on her chin, she stared at me.

"You don't have to make that face, I can't believe it either!"

"But… What does this mean, then? The timing for the transfer of Takamura was too good to be just a coincidence. If they think you're on their side, does this mean the Shogun thinks so too? No, that can't be. She should have access to all the data on the Guard, she must have some files on this world's you. But then…"

"Could it be that they are the ones that are misunderstanding this? They might have seen that my records are blocked and that I belong to the Guard going by my profile in their databases, and then they assumed I was here by orders of the Shogun in some secret mission, and didn't tell her about me." Yuuhi didn't knew Chizuru was in our squad last loop until I opened my mouth, after all.

"No, that's impossible. They would have reported this to her, they wouldn't have let this slip. Especially considering you're in Mitsurugi's squad. And even if they didn't, Yoroi surely reported your presence here. I don't know what happened in your other experiences, but do remember that our Shirogane was a Royal Guard here." She has a point there.

"Then… What the hell is going on here?"

"I have no idea." She shrugs then begins to spin on her chair. "But this also might be a trap, to try and make us probe for intel. They may excuse themselves saying that the Shogun ordered to not harm you because of your memory loss now that they know about it. Actually, that might be an explanation." Bringing a hand to her chin again, she looks up as her spin slows down. "Instead of confronting us directly, they use Yoroi to get something out of you. He's very perceptive, he may have noticed that fighting you head on would be pointless, so he suggested that the members of the Guard here shouldn't get close to you and if they did they could feign ignorance on your situation or lie."

"… And so, they sent one person I can't deal with easily. A noble who's part of a top secret and very important research project. Sigh… So all she said was a lie then?" I kinda hoped that I didn't have to go against the Empire, but if this is true and they're lying to get me by surprise… Tsukuyomi-san did say that they shouldn't involve themselves with me. You don't talk about your allies in that way.

"Hmm… Maybe. I'll call Yoroi to ask him if he could find any documents about you and then I'll try to get some intel about this Takamura. Depending on how he answers, we'll know what to do. You stay alert, they may go after you at any time." I don't want to admit it, but she's right.

"Yeah, I know. This was just too shocking to ignore, that's why I came in a rush here to tell you." I sigh as I scratch my head. Today has been crazy.

"That was the right thing to do, this is either a trap or a very important hint towards who the other you was. In any case, I'll move some strings and see what I can find, you go and rest for the day."

"No need to tell me twice. Oh, before I forget. Is there any way I can lock my door from the outside?" She shakes her head as she shrugs.

"No, we never had a problem with someone barging into another soldier's room without permission. I'll have Marimo give Mitsurugi a nice, long talk about it. That should help in keeping her from telling your squad about the blade." I'm sure the Instructor won't appreciate to have her day off be interrupted again, and by another lecture no less. And it will probably just make Meiya more resentful towards me. Great. Can't do much about that though.

I leave the office and go back to my room. I've checked that everything is still here. My books, my medal and GR Card, our sword. It was obvious that someone had entered and moved everything, just what was she after? Why did she enter my room after the emergency alarm?

Was she that paranoid that I wasn't there? Well, doesn't matter now. I've never seen Meiya look so… it was more than just sad, like she was genuinely scared of me for some reason. Lately, it feels as if this world was in the middle of a party where I am the pinata. I'm being hit left and right by unknown threats and low blows, I don't even know who's my friend anymore. Even Kyouzuka-san is treating me like shit.

I sit on my bed, letting out another sigh as I rest my arms on my legs. Hanging my head, I close my eyes and remain like that as I breathe in and out.

My squad is suspicious of me. Tsukuyomi-san thinks I work for the Shogun, but Yuuhi sent Takamura to take care of me so that smile of hers might be a trap. The UN and the Empire are almost done with each other's shit, we can't expect support from America but we also can't trust the Empire. It's a miracle the BETA haven't destroyed Japan already, going by today's battle at Niigata. Had the Laser-Class at the shore started to attack we would have lost many more people, their numbers worked against them this time. We lucked out to have so many BETA around us to hide behind, and even more to not get spotted by anyone.

At least the XM3 worked flawlessly today. Yeah, think positive! I totally stomped those monsters today! And this is just the prototype, with more live testing and the data from Tsukuyomi-san's squad it's going to be even better. Can't fail this CCSE no matter what, so let's help Mikoto and Tama as much as I can. I can only hope the other three don't give me more problems. So long as they don't try to harm me or take my stuff, they can say whatever they want.

No hard feelings, I know I'm an outsider here after all. They already… made that very clear to me.

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*November 12th. 11:10 AM.*

*(Track field.)*

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"Next pairs are Sakaki with Ayamine in HTH, Yoroi and Tamase and Mitsurugi with Shirogane using weapons."

I crack my knuckles as I go towards the box. I just had to do a literal Shoryuken to stop Kei. She's gotten good, like really good. Shame she hates my guts, though.

"So Mitsurugi, what should we-" A sword is sent my way, Meiya was already on her way with one in her hands. Sigh…

I did try to reach out to her during breakfast and got the silent treatment. I take my usual pose in front of her as she also takes her Mugen stance. After gazing at each other for some time she rushes at me.

To the left, parried. I move to my right and attack, she parries it, I send a slash at her waist and force her to take a step back.

We continue to spar, but she's putting more force in her slashes now. She's gritting her teeth, her eyes are once more filled with purple fire.

"… What's the matter, Shirogane? Are you not feeling motivated today?"

"Hey, stop that. I'm being serious here." I press her advance once more, forcing her to switch to a defensive form. Once more our blades are locked in a struggle.

"… Mugen Kidou."

"Huh?" The slight distraction let Meiya escape from my pressure. She again faces me, with her sword above her shoulder pointing at me in the bunny stance.

"Mugen Kidou. That's the name of my style. Shirogane, what's the name of yours?"

"… Name?" Maya-sensei did tell me she nicknamed it Unending Waterfall, and that she developed it due to her rivalry with Tsukuyomi-san, but… Should I call it that? I mean…

"What is it?!" She again comes at me, faster than before.

"… I don't know, I was just taught its principles." I dodge to my left, sending a slash at her shoulder.

"Really now?"

"Say, can you tell me what's up with you? This is no way to treat a 'fellow'." She scowls at me, again putting more force on her swings.

"Weren't you the one who said you were a UN soldier?" She forces me to take a step back as she comes at me with a downwards slash from my right.

"You're on the UN too."

"That's different! I'm here to-"

Gotcha. Her temper flared up and she loosened her posture for a second. I take a step back, pointing my sword backwards, preparing the upwards slash.

Meiya's blade went to greet the sun.

"Looks like it's another win for me." Thank God she's so easy to taunt.

"… Bested again." I gotta at least try to not make things worse.

"Good fight Mitsurugi." I offer her a handshake, but she returns a glare my way.

"Good fight? Do not mock me. I couldn't even graze you! What was good about it?!"

"That you did pressure me for a while? You are getting better, quickly at that."

"… Really?" Her aggressiveness slowly fades, she stops tightening her fists.

"Yeah. So, can we talk for a while? What was that about us being fellows?"

"I already told you." She goes to pick up her sword. Ignored again, what did I even expect?

As I leave my sword in the box and wait for the rest to finish, Meiya also comes back and leaves her sword in place.

At first she ignored me, but after a short while I felt her stare on me. I looked at her, she looked away. I remained watching her, eventually she tried to look at me again, and surprise filled her eyes when she saw me staring at her.

"Hey. You seem to want to ask something."

"I do not." I hold my chuckle down. She really looks funny when she gets upset like that.

"Then why were you staring?" I got a bit closer to her, she started playing with her tags.

"I was not."

"Mitsurugi, being honest here. What happened yesterday?"

"I won't intrude on your privacy ever again, forgive me for that." She answered fast and honestly, looking at me with clear eyes.

"I'll consider forgiving you if you explain to me what happened. Can you tell me why you got into my room?" She grimaces as she looks down.

"… I went to look for you during the alarm. I didn't find you, but when I was about to leave I saw a steel box on your desk. I…" She pauses for a while, grabbing a strand of hair and playing with it. "I opened it, and that sparked my curiosity. Then, after the base called off DEFCON 2, I returned to your room to… inspect it."

"Nice way of saying ransacking it." She bites her lower lip softly.

"Forgive me. I was too curious about you. Your swordplay and tactical knowledge are great, so I thought that I could find something that would confirm or deny whether you were on the American's side." Again with this. Sigh…

"And? What are you gonna do with that intel now?"

"What are you talking about? The books you had were all in Japanese, the uniform you had when we met was also of Japanese origin, even if I haven't heard of that brand." She slowly returns my gaze, small waves conflicting in her. "If… If it isn't something classified, could you tell me what does that steel box means? Why do you have another ID Card and that medal?"

"It's… a gift from Sensei."

"A gift?"

"Yeah, apparently the badge is some sort of commemorative of something. The ID card is for all the special missions she assigns me, I only use it when she calls me to her office. It's how I go to the lower floors when she needs me, like when we trained with the simulators." Necessary bullshit is necessary.

"Her… You can go to her office?!" She covers her mouth after shouting in a panic, and, after looking at the Instructor and confirming she didn't hear thanks to being away separating Chizuru and Kei yet again, she breathed a sigh.

"Yeah, how else am I supposed to report my progress? Though I only go there rarely, that's why I don't have the card with me at all times." Not a bad lie, if I say so myself.

"I see. So she considers you a 'Champion', huh? You are special after all." This time she didn't say it in with any sign of hostility, she's honestly praising me. Which is weird.

"So, what did you do when you found my sword?" Half closing her eyes and digging her gaze into the ground, she grabs the edge of her tank top tightly.

"When I got it in my hands I could tell it was a sword, but the cover felt familiar for some reason. When I removed it and took out the blade I…" Now her eyes close, lips twisting. Lowering her head as wrinkles fill her nose, she barely whispers out the words."… I fell to my knees. I couldn't believe my eyes, yet no matter how much I examined it, I could only reach one conclusion. You had the same kind of blade I do." She takes a deep breath and looks at me again. "Why did you have it? Who gave it to you? Were we supposed to work together? Doubt took hold of me, I even suspected you might have been a member of the Royal Guard sent to keep watch over me. And yet my doubt was unnecessary as you are my fellow,

apparently." Finally got to the important part. Not that the rest was unimportant, but this is what I want to know the most.

"What's up with the fellow stuff? I have no idea what that means."

"… That's what I want to know. You're not on the Guard, right?" I nod at her. "And you don't know what the Mugen Kidou is?"

"… No." She narrows her eyes at me, getting just a tiny bit closer.

"Why is there doubt on your voice, Shirogane?" I know I'm playing with fire here, but I gotta get some answers.

"Because I feel kinda bad not knowing my style's name. You sound so proud of it, and here I am with not a clue." I look at the sky, now that I think about it I may never get a chance to finish my training. Maya-san might have never developed this style in this world, and even if she did, the chances of us training together are null.

"I see. It means that, just like me, you have the right to wield the blade."

"That's all?"

"Yes, what else could it mean? Having the blade is a great honor in and of itself after all." So it's just like an honorary title given to those who have katanas? Like, 'fellow swordsman' kind of thing?

"Huh, neat. Well, I know we aren't really on good terms, but I'll try to not get in your way anymore. I do not want to get yelled at by that 1st Lt. ever again. So, can you promise me you won't barge into my room again?" She looks straight at me and nods. I know she's honest, so I can trust her in this.

"You have my word. I won't intrude on your private quarters ever again. Well, may I ask you what did you… think of today's bout? Did you notice a difference?" She looks away, but her tone was no longer full of mines. Let's sail this boat to calmer waters.

"You put too much force on your swings. That's not a bad thing, but your strength is your speed to draw your blade, you should focus on that. You did fight better than your usual."

"I see. So, Shirogane… What are you going to do with your sword?"

"What do you mean, what? I'm gonna keep it hidden as I was doing, it's not like I can go around carrying a katana."

"Yes, indeed. But I was referring to… you know, using the Mi… your sword for… its intended purpose. I know we're not supposed to talk about it, but being fellows maybe we could share some insight with each other. What do you say?" She gives me a small smile, but that only raises questions within.

"Purpose? What are you talking about?" Meiya looks intensely at me, first scanning my face throughly and later furrowing her brows at me.

"You… do not know of its meaning?"

I'm pretty sure she isn't talking about the whole 'giving you the handguard' business here, so what is this about?

"Again, no idea what you're talking about."

"Do not be foolish! Don't tell me you-"

"Squad! Assemble!"

Our talk interrupted, we went to the Instructor. Meiya was once more staring blades at me.

"Squad, with this we've finished this morning's practice. You're all doing good times and slowly improving. However…" She briefly glares at Meiya. "I've heard some of you have been causing quite some trouble. If I hear about any more problems in this squad, all of you will receive a punishment harsher than anything I've given you until now. Understood? Dismissed!"

We salute and she goes her way. I've never seen her so pissed off. She may have lost quite some free time yesterday, so it's understandable.

"That was so scary! What do you think happened?" Tama said as we started making our way towards the PX.

"No idea. Did anything happen after the summons? By the way Takeru, where were you during the alarm?"

"In the lower floors, forced to do a special mission."

"Shirogane, you're still… working on those sims?" Chizuru changed her tone midway, sheathing her blade.

"Yeah. It's not like I can refuse an order from the XO."

"… You sure about that?" Kei came to my side on the left, almost bumping her shoulder with mine she stared at me. Saying nothing, just giving me her usual deep stare.

"Yeah, I was on a mission during the alarm. What about it?" Not a lie.

"… Nothing." She looks away and marches forward to the PX.

Not much else was said as we entered and got in line. Again I got half rations.

"So, guys. About homework…" Mikoto asked the girls for advice as we started to eat.

Chizuru chose to sit by my side for some reason and leaned close as she talked to me.

"Shirogane, can I ask you about the problem on page 87? What would be the best approach to defend the beach head?"

"Page 87? Oh, right." The island assault one, was it? "Support from the Ticonderoga should go first to the vanguard and then to the

middle of the enemy force, let a small chaser force finish the stragglers that are too close, regroup and rebuild the line and keep the artillery support coming until the rest of the fleet arrive. The wincon isn't survival, it's annihilation. Don't bother pressing forward, use the artillery to keep the bulk of them as far away from the fronliners as you can, so that they can dispatch anyone who reaches the line without putting themselves in danger."

"Huh… Why are you not trying to expand the beach head? Wouldn't it be disadvantageous if your forces were surrounded?" I finish munching and after drinking some synth juice I continue speaking slowly.

"I got a Ticonderoga with me, that kind of fire is more than enough to keep the frontline safe, so long as a proper defense line is set. If you try to move forward you would have to spread the line, making it wider and thinner. And then you won't be able to provide fire support to all the line at the same time. By defending a smaller area you can create something of a bottleneck, which allows you to trim the amount of places you need to commit to artillery defense. So you won't have to choose between two different targets and risking your line to be breached. Remember that the goal is to protect the shore, not to defeat the aggressors."

"I see. Thanks for the advice." She gives me a small nod and continues to eat.

What's wrong with her now? Some days ago she was glaring at me with chainsaws instead of eyes and now she's being polite all of a sudden? Well, we just got scolded hard, she must be doing this to make it look as if we were on good terms, since we are being watched probably.

The rest of lunch and the afternoon lectures went as usual. Except Meiya kept staring at me, yet refused to answer when I called out to her. What's this about a purpose and why does she not want to tell me?

"Remember to read up on the questions you got wrong. Tomorrow we're doing more reading on combat scenarios at morning, so do be ready for that. We'll go to the shooting range for more practice during the afternoon. Dismissed!"

"Salute!" The Instructor leaves and we relax our posture.

"That was a good answer on the last one, Miki-san!"

"That's not true! I just got lucky, I didn't really-"

I leave towards the PX, I don't want to ruin Tama and Mikoto's talk by making the other three turn against me. I also don't like the stare Meiya's giving me right now. They followed closely after I left, and we again arrived together at the PX.

"So Shirogane-san, what are you doing this evening? Wanna play something?" Tama asks me as we all sit on the table.

Thanks, but I don't wanna ruin your games. I know the others will get on a bad mood if I'm there.

"No, I'm going to rest up. I am pretty tired today."

"Are you alright? Did you catch a cold?" Aww, your honest worry is heartwarming Tama.

"Nah, I just need some sleep that's all." Yesterday night I stayed playing with Kasumi again, and thanks to that my eyes hurt. I didn't realize how much strain it causes to look at a small screen for such a long time. She is getting better in CryRing, but F-Mega is just a no go for her.

Hm? Meiya, who was sitting to my side, bumped her feet on mine. I looked at her but she kept eating normally. Must have been just a coincidence.

"Shirogane, if you're free… Would you mind helping me in showing Yoroi some of the subjects we saw when she wasn't around?" This is

weird. Why is Chizuru being nice all of a sudden? Just because of the scolding? Whatever, this is a nice chance to try to fix the bridge.

"Sure, why not?"

Ouch! This time Meiya hit my ankle a bit more strongly, so she is doing this on purpose. I look at her but she's eating without even looking at me. If she wants to say something she can just speak up. Or is she looking for a fight? What's up with her?

"Thank you Takeru! I really can't keep up with all of this." Mikoto beams at me and Chizuru.

"Don't mention it, Mikoto. It'll be a pleasure to help."

Ouch! Why is she hitting me?! What the hell is your problem? Why can't you just talk?!

"Mitsurugi, what about you?" I stare at her, letting some of my annoyance slip.

"I have not decided yet. I was thinking on going for a jog later." She slightly narrowed her eyes as she took a brief glance at me. So you don't want the others to know?

"Miki-san, what will you do?"

"Me and Ayamine-san are going to do a juggle competition today." Kei nods with a small smile on her face.

"Well, we all need a break every now and then. Then Shirogane, can I count on you to help me with Yoroi?"

"Sure." She smiles faintly before returning to her usual cold face. Meiya was glaring at me as she ate.

We finish our dinner and exit the PX together.

"Ayamine-san, you wait for a while. I'll go look for the bean bags." Tama dashes off towards the barracks.

"Well, I'll be going to the track field." Meiya said, clearly staring at me. I wink, which seems to startle her a bit, but then she returns a subtle nod before going her way.

Us three went to the library after picking up our notebooks on the barracks. Helping Mikoto was a piece of cake, since I know what she usually has trouble with and could break down the problems nicely for her. Unexpectedly, Chizuru then demanded my help too.

"So, I shouldn't press towards the canyon?"

"No, you'll get flanked when you have to split. Your numbers will work against you here."

"Takeru, you're so smart!"

"Hmm… That does seem like a good answer. Well, let's leave it at that for today." We close the books we were using and returned them to their respective shelves.

"Thanks a lot you two! I really got a lot of things sorted out." Mikoto's usual smile widened as we exited the library.

"Don't mention it. Glad I could help you."

"Well, it's kinda late so I'll be hitting the sack now. Good night, you two." And off she goes. Now let's go see what Meiya-

"Shirogane." Or not.

"What is it, Sakaki?" She adjusts her glasses and takes a second to speak again.

"Thanks for your help. It was a relief to have you here today."

"It was the obvious thing to do, helping a squadmate."

"Yes, of course." She stops, looks down, and continues. "Well, the CCSE is getting closer, so… Thanks for giving your all on our training. Good night." She slowly goes her way without waiting for a reply.

So… We cool now? Was a scolding all that was needed? No, she's just being polite. She probably still sees me as an American and she did mention the CCSE. Oh well, whatever.

Now then… What do I do about Meiya? This may be a trap, she might just be setting me up. There's almost no one on the track field at this hour, so if Tsukuyomi-san wanted to get rid of me…

As I was lost in thought, I saw Kasumi coming towards me on the hallway.

"Hey Kasumi. What's up?" She gets closer, signaling to my ear. I lower my head and she whispers in a very low tone.

"The Professor says she wants to test the new data you brought with the OS. Come with me please, we'll go to the sim room after lights out."

Sigh… I wanted some sleep, looks like that's a no go.

"Fine, I get it. But can I ask you a favor before we go?" She nods as she moves her bunny ears.

"What is it?"

"Can you see if Meiya is plotting something? She wanted me to go to the track field, and was very insistent on not saying it out loud. I dunno why she wanted to keep that a secret, but it's weird. Can you lend me a hand?"

"Yes. Shall we go now?"

"Can we? What if it's dangerous?"

"Don't worry, I'll contact the Professor if anything dangerous comes up." She takes a small communicator from one of her pockets.

"Ok, thanks a lot Kasumi."

We stealthily made our way to the track field, stopping at a door. Opening it slowly and peeking through the space, we saw Meiya jogging alone in the night.

"Can you do it from here?" She gives me a nod and closes her eyes.

Only the distant sound of Meiya's boots hitting the ground can be heard now. After a short while, Kasumi moves back from the door.

"So, what did you see?"

"… She's weird." Kasumi's shoulders and bunny ears drop as a long sigh escapes her.

"What do you mean?"

"She's thinking about you. She's angry, sad, glad, all at the same time. I think she doesn't even know how to feel. But there is no one else here, and she isn't plotting anything that would harm you."

"I see. Then it should be safe to go talk with her, right?"

"I don't know. She is very unstable now."

"Well, if anything happens, just go and pull me away." She gives me a nod.

I go into the track field, Meiya notices me and stops jogging.

"Yo, sorry to make you wait."

"I thought you were not going to come, to be honest." She wipes the sweat off her forehead as she approaches me.

"So, care to tell me what this is about?" She folds her arms as usual as she scans my face.

"Surely you already know. Shirogane, do you really not know the meaning behind the Minaru Kamui?"

"I told you that I don't already. Is this about how you give the handguard to someone to tell them that-"

"N-No! It's not about that! How can you know of that and not of what I'm asking you?" Her narrowed eyes were again showing hints of purple embers in them, which contrasted with the slight red of her cheeks.

"I just heard about it once, that's all. So, I don't know what's the hidden meaning of the blade. What's up with that?" She closes her eyes for a while, and after she opens them up again they seem to have regained their usual shine.

"… You told me someone gave that blade to you. And that you couldn't tell me who that person was because you were forbidden of speaking about it. Am I correct?"

"Yeah. So, what about-"

"And you seemed terribly composed when you spoke to the 1st Lt. too." She isn't listening. How I hate it when she gets like this. "While I am thankful that you spoke up, it only raised more questions. She scolded us both, allowed you to keep your blade, and referred to us as fellows. Surely you see what that means, right?"

… No, I don't. I mean, I can't tell her that Tsukuyomi-san might have been lying, because I'm supposed to be a walking corpse to them. But Meiya mentioned her mission yesterday, she came at me more than seriously today, went out of her way to mention the Mugen Kidou, seemed to be nice until I told her I don't know of this 'meaning', and called me out here to speak about it alone. No, she tried to make it seem as if I was the one approaching her, since

Tsukuyomi-san ordered her to not involve herself with me. And she said having the blade made just like… Wait a sec…

"Are you trying to say that… they're giving me the same treatment as you?" She nods as small pyres of fire resurface in her eyes.

"Indeed. I also have a Minaru Kamui and I also cannot speak of my mission with anyone. However, I was… fated to walk this path, one might say. Shirogane, I am not going to pry into your life anymore but there is something I wish to know, so I ask you to be honest with me."

I give her a nod as I gulp. What is she gonna ask? To go talk with Tsukuyomi-san for confirmation?

"Were you aware of this? That you were seen as a servant of the Shogun?"

"I had no idea that the blade carried that meaning, for real." She relaxes a bit, the fire slowly leaving her eyes.

"I see. Then, I suppose you cannot speak about who gave you the blade not because of a mission you were given but, because of a personal reason?"

"Pretty much. I told you I'm not on the Guard. So, is the Minaru Kamui something that's given to people that are being scouted into the Royal Guard?"

"Yes, something of the sort. Its meaning is more deep, but there is no reason to explain it. So you are not a fellow of mine." She again sharpens her eyes at me. Now what?!

"Look Mitsurugi, I might not be a 'fellow' but I'm your squadmate. I'm fighting seriously with you, and I did came to talk with you despite what you did, despite me not doing anything to deserve this hostility. Being more civil with me isn't out of your reach, I'm sure." Unable to suppress my frown, I simply spit out some poison.

"I know that my recent actions speak volumes of how I saw you, and I do regret them to a certain extent." She slowly said, eyes closed and arms folded. "However, leaving that blade in your hands is something I cannot do. Now that I know you are not one of us, and that the 1st Lt. misunderstood your standing, I must once again ask you to hand it over before charges are pressed against you." She takes a step closer, staring right at me with those sapphire blades of her.

… You know? I should be getting intimidated or something, but… seeing her so shining again instead of filled with paranoia… She does look like my Meiya now. Like the one who struggled with her allegiance during the coup, the one who was willing to die to save a single old lady. I bet that whatever the hell the Minaru Kamui is meant to represent, it's something tied to this Japan's culture and she's protecting that from an evil 'murican from her point of view. I don't feel hatred coming from her, for now at the least.

"So, I suppose you want me to go talk again with the 1st Lt. right?"

"Yes, I wish to clear this misunderstanding. You came willingly to talk with me, you don't seem to be lying. Despite coming from America and my recent actions towards you, I can see you're being honest about this. So, I'd like you to return the blade to the Empire before you suffer the consequences of having it in your hands."

"… Okay, fine. But I want someone else to be there too, in case the guards try to harm me." She lifts her chin, sharpening her sapphires. Of course she would be offended.

"Do you really think the Guard would-"

"To someone they see as an American? Yes, they would. I mean, you also see me as a filthy 'murican, don't you?"

"I… well… I mean, I know you're Japanese." She looks away. That's all I needed to know.

"It's cool. Whatever. I know you don't trust me so-"

I stopped in the middle of my phrase as I heard something from behind as Meiya widened her eyes. Kasumi was quickly coming to my side. That means… something dangerous is getting closer.

"Yashiro? Oh, do you have another mission? At this hour?"

"I don't know. Hey Kasumi, what's-"

"Let's go. They're coming." She grabs my arm and starts pulling me.

"Hey Kasumi, stop that. What is it?" She shakes her head and continues pulling me. I feel a hand on my shoulder.

"Yashiro, I'm in the middle of something here with Shirogane. Could you please-"

"You should run too. The red guard is coming, and she's angry."

Meiya's eyes shot wide open, I see her tremble for a split second. Using that brief instant, Kasumi starts pulling me away again with me actually following her this time. I do not want to be on Tsukuyomi-san's sight when she's angry.

Shortly after, we made it back inside with Meiya following us closely, however Kasumi took a different hallway, and before Meiya could react we were out of her sights. I heard her calling for us, but I think it's better to put some distance with her. If Tsukuyomi-san finds us together again she'll get angrier. I'll apologize tomorrow to her.

"Kasumi, it's alright. You don't have to keep pulling."

"No." She grabs my arm tighter and keeps trying to pull.

I pet her head and return to my usual walking speed, and after some seconds she stops pulling and we walk together the rest of the way towards the elevator on B5F.

… She didn't let go of my arm, though.

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*Some minutes later.*

*(Roof.)*

**[Meiya]**

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"I told you to not approach him!" Tsukuyomi berated me as she hasn't done in a long time.

I managed to get to the barracks without running into her, but Tomoe was standing guard outside my room. She took me to the roof after contacting Tsukuyomi on her communicator, and here we are now.

"I didn't approach him. He came on his own to-"

"Meiya-sama, your feet were rather busy during dinner today." She noticed? I was trying to be subtle about it too. "Did you enjoy the feel of his legs by your side, perhaps?" W-What?!

"Tsukuyomi! I would never do something so unsightly!"

"Then, care to explain what were you doing?" She takes a step closer, drilling her gaze on me. My throat constricts itself again, barely allowing me to squeeze out a reply.

"I was… only trying to… have a talk with him."

"This is the last time I shall overlook your misconduct. Stain your honor one more time and I shall report all of this to her. Was I clear?"

"Yes, I understand. However, he told me he wasn't a fellow. He himself said that-"

"Silence!" I flinch back at her sudden outburst.

"T-Tsukuyomi?"

"That's enough. Perhaps, are you insinuating you do not trust in my judgment?"

"No, of course not! But he himself said it. That he… isn't one of us." I lower my gaze, unable to look at her in the eye.

"Could you answer that same question if he were the one asking?"

"Huh?"

"If he asked about your past, what could you tell him? How does he know you're with us?" What is she saying?

"Tsukuyomi, I'm… well, just looking at me should be enough."

"And yet, that's all there is to it. You just might be similar to her, by a genetic coincidence. How can you prove to him that you're on his side?" How can I… Wait, is she telling me to not judge him? Is he still being evaluated?

"But he cannot explain where he comes from or-"

"And could you explain to him where you come from, Meiya-sama?" Where is she going with these questions? She should know that I'm…

…

"… Tsukuyomi, are you saying… he's… the same as…"

"I believe I've already reprimanded you enough. You have been warned. Please, behave appropriately from now on."

She leaves without even waiting for my reply, without even stopping as I called out to her. I gaze alone at the sky, in the silence of the rooftop.

She was trying to tell me our situations are similar ones. He cannot explain to me why he has the blade just like how I can't explain that to him, and then he has to lie just like I have to about my origins and standing. We couldn't risk anyone hearing us by coincidence. But… An American, being admitted into the Royal Guard? A Japanese that willingly joined the UN?

Yet, he knows the Mugen Kidou even if he isn't aware of it. Perhaps, is that another lie to avoid a leak? He's better than me, even if he doesn't know of it.

Like the shifting clouds up above, my feelings clash against each other. Holding my elbows tightly, I go towards the fence, looking at the grounds below me. The wind blows, yet what makes me shiver comes from within.

Someone who Tsukuyomi watches over… that's in a similar situation as me… who was handpicked to wield a Minaru Kamui… and trained in the Mugen Kidou…

Someone who… could replace me.

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*November 15th. 05 :51 PM.*

*(Shooting Range.)*

**[Takeru]**

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"FIRE!" We all shoot towards the target. Let's see… not dead center, but bullseye. Nice one, myself. Internal high five! I got all my shots to the bullseye today, I definitely got better with a gun this time around.

During this week the girls got a little tiny bit more polite with me. Chizuru stopped looking bothered and started asking me for advice again, albeit very rarely. Tama and Mikoto seemed to be less nervous during lunch and dinner now, and Kei simply ignored me.

Chizuru and Kei are probably still suspicious of me, but they were trying to not let it show. For the sake of the CCSE, probably. I did my part and tried to lend them a hand when they asked me something. At least I can have peace for a while, I don't have any desire to spark another fight.

Meiya, on the other hand, reverted to how she was before. Didn't do much conversation with me, didn't reply when I approached her. I did try to apologize the next day, but she dismissed me saying I had no reason to. Oh well, I can't stop her from being suspicious and I can't risk myself and go to talk with Tsukuyomi-san about the Minaru Kamui.

That night however…

When Sensei showed me the data from the Battle of Niigata I was floored. I didn't notice due to either the adrenaline or tension, but I was moving 23% faster than the Shiranuis despite using an inferior TSF. Sensei said that I got a 54% increase in mobility and dexterity to the standard that the prototype was supposed to have. I also had an accuracy of 87%, which is probably my highest score ever. All of this with a refurbished 2nd Gen TSF, imagine if we could improve the Shiranui with these babes! Sadly, there's no money to make another Shiranui Second and all the Type-94-1C that are the base for the Second are in control of the Shogunate's elite forces.

Well, at least I know I have one TSF I'm comfortable with. I just need to get a blade sheath for a PB Sword and that's all. Maybe I could get our usual rifles that have both types of ammo instead of the lighter ones that only have one type. If I could have again 36mm and 120mm ammo at the same time… Oooh, I shudder just thinking about it. Then again, I'd like to know what that yellow thing was. Sensei said it was top secret and that she couldn't tell me, so who knows what that thing actually is. I mean, it did kinda melt the external armor of the TSFs in… What? Three minutes? That's nuts.

"Squad! I have an announcement for you!" The Instructor addresses us as the girls where looking at the targets. "This Saturday we

decided to give you a break from your training and let you go on a vacation to a tropical island to the south." CCSE, here you are. F-ing finally.

"Instructor… this is the CCSE, right?" Chizuru asked weakly, her nervousness apparent in her tone and eyes as the coming damage a kitchen will suffer whenever Meiya steps in it.

"Aww, you just had to ruin it. Yes Sakaki, this is your second and last chance to pass this test. You all will be allowed to take three items with you, but no weapons, food, or combat gear. I want you to decide your items by tomorrow. Dismissed!"

"Salute!"

So we can take stuff with us this time? Aside from curry powder, what could I take with me? Hmm…

"Squad! I'd like us to agree on what we're taking to the CCSE." Chizuru addressed us, signaling us to get together.

Maybe I could take an empty bottle, to get some fuel for the boat just in case shit hits the fan.

"I was thinking of taking some sort of sheet, to cover us during the night and protect us in case it rains." Meiya gave a nice suggestion, but there's already a tarp in Point B.

Wait, are we going to go to the same island? Everything has been kinda different this time, they may send us to a harsher island this time around.

"I'll take some tools, in case *someone* decides to blow it again." Ayamine spoke throwing mud at Chizuru.

"Thank you VERY much for your suggestion." Chizuru answered waving an axe in every word. At it again, huh?

Then again, taking another bottle is not a bad idea. I could find another source of water on the island, and that would give me more since from the start we are given less than what we should have so that's not a bad call.

"I was thinking of taking a small pouch with bandages and stuff. I know we can't take much gear with us, but some small tissues and some alcohol for injuries would do wonders. Also I wanted to take some synthetic incense to deal with the insects and arachnids we may find." Survivalist number one, nobody could outmatch you in that Mikoto.

So maybe I should take some cloth with me, too? Just in case?

"Tamase, what about you?"

"Um… I was thinking on taking some binoculars with me. Our kits already have both a small pot and some fire starters to cook, but last time we didn't have binoculars." We have the lens of the big as F rifle for that. Unless we go to a different island, of course.

"Well thought, Miki-san!"

"Shirogane? What do you think?" Chizuru stared at me as she played with one of her ponytails.

"Some curry powder and an empty bottle. Haven't decided what the third thing is gonna be."

"Curry powder? Why would you take that with you?" Tama seemed puzzled at my choice.

"I heard stories about the CCSE where people had to eat snakes and toads, so I thought that taking some powder would make them less disgusting to eat." Mikoto makes a disgusted face as she groans. Sorry about that.

"Yes, I've… heard about that too." Chizuru closes her eyes and spoke slowly. Bet you had to eat some during the first time around too.

"You do think ahead in a very peculiar way, Shirogane. As expected of our special member." Meiya smiled, yet her cold tone was apparent. Why is she so angry, yet refuses to tell me why? She never, ever, did this while we were together. Then again, different world.

"Ahem, given the training we've received until now, we can all agree that this CCSE is going to be very hard. We will need to be on top form for it, let's discuss what's on our minds during lunch."

We all then go to the PX. This feels kinda weird, even if Tama and Mikoto were always nice with me, I don't know for how long Chizuru will keep up the act or if she's being honest since she's keeping her poker face all the time.

I get the usual half rations again. If I didn't have to save my world I'd be so done with this. I'll have a talk with Sensei about this when I come back from the island, since she's engrossed in the theories for the time being.

Meiya sat in front of me and with her were Chizuru and Mikoto. The other two were to my left. The blue samurai cleared her throat as we all sat, and started talking as she got our attention.

"I would like to discuss our pairings. Going from our last experience, there's the chance that we will be split during the test at some point. Since we probably won't know the full layout of the island when this happens, I suggest we decide on some pairs now, based on our synergies." Meiya was being serious about this, in the end I never knew how their last CCSE went.

"I don't wanna pair up with glasses." Kei answered almost instantly.

"The feeling is mutual." Chizuru replied with the same edge. Careful, you two.

"Umm… I don't really mind who I'm paired with, but since I'm the one with the worst stamina I'll have to take care of the targets that are closer." Tama said timidly as usual while she poked at her food.

"Then… How about this?" Chizuru raised on finger and pointed it at Tama. "One possible solution is to have me and Tamase together, she'll cover my back and look for traps while I'm the one that 'protects' her from danger. I have adequate strength to be able to manage by myself just fine in case we need to use force for something." Stopping for a second, she points to Mikoto and Kei. "Yoroi could go with Ayamine, to help her deal with the traps and use any long range weapon you may find. Also to stop her from eating raw stuff and fix any injuries she may sustain." She then points to me and Meiya. "Last, we have the two with the most endurance. Mitsurugi and Shirogane could go to the farthest targets, and since both are nimble and strong I'm sure you won't have problems." I catched Meiya drawing a small smile before returning to her serious expression.

"Hmm… We could also go for me and Tamase, Mitsurugi and Yoroi, and last Special-kun and the leader." Ayamine brings another option to the table. Chizuru and Meiya didn't like it much.

"Ayamine, why are you suggesting that?" Chizuru questioned her as she started to eat.

"Me and Tamase are a good pair, both of us are equally good when it comes to disabling traps and have different skill sets. Yoroi and Mitsurugi are similar to that, one is more of a supporting soldier while the other is the one that gets shit done. And I just want to see you suffer dealing with Special-kun." Oh, here we go again. Kei is just smirking at her while Chizuru is holding back a retort.

"You two, please keep it down. Then, how about we discuss two teams of three members?" Meiya took the kayak to another river

before the rapids came.

They kept talking between them about different teams and their merits and bad points. I think we should be talking on the what and how, instead of focusing on who we're going with.

"Shirogane? Is something the matter?" Meiya was looking at me with an accusing glare. What's up with her?

"Nothing. Just thinking."

"Then I would like to hear your thoughts on the matter. Do you have anyone you want to pair up with?"

"No, not really." She narrows her eyes as she strokes her hair.

"Hmm… Then let me ask you something else. What do you expect from this CCSE? How do you think it'll go?" Sharp, relentless questions. What did I even do? I have been trying to be nice, despite how I feel like it's a waste of time with you.

"I expect the place to be full of traps. Other than that, I dunno. It'll depend on the weather and the terrain."

"A nice observation. Then you do not mind who we pair you with?" Chizuru was looking at me quite intensely. For all I care, it can be any of you.

"No, it can be anyone. I don't really mind."

"Alright. Nice to know that. Now then… Anything else? Does anyone have any suggestions or anything?" Chizuru asked to the table, resting an elbow on it.

"I do." Mikoto raised her hand, really slow. "I think we should take our time to deal with the targets this time. Since technically it's going to be either an infiltration or escape mission, if we destroy the objectives too fast it would ruin our score. If we get a low score we

won't pass the exam." So you can fail the thing if you screw up, even if you make it to the destination point.

"Point taken. Anything else?"

"I have one too." I wait for them to stop chewing and start speaking. "When we make it to the targets, we should not infiltrate them during daylight. The place is supposed to be dangerous so let's play our part accordingly. No sane soldier would try to sabotage a facility in the middle of the afternoon." Meiya did not like my suggestion and arms folded directed her gaze at me.

"Oho, quite the analyst aren't you? Then what shall we do if the place is brimming with traps? We would benefit from having light to disable them." Her bothered tone was showing her inner annoyance at my words, despite the smile on her face.

"We can infiltrate them at dawn break, where there is light and there's supposed to be less security compared to early morning." She tries to retort but closes her mouth shut. Giving a nod, she acknowledges my advice.

"I see. That does make sense." Despite saying that, Meiya still looked a bit bothered.

"Good advice, Shirogane. I think we should do just that. Alright, is that all?" Chizuru looked over the table and we all nod. "Well, all that's left is to get ready."

Seems like everything's done here. I already told them about the mistake I did last loop when I was trying to rush stuff. They're making small talk, so I guess I'll first get ready and then go rest for a while with Kasumi.

"Thanks for the food."

"Ah, wait Shirogane." Meiya called out as I got my tray.

"What?"

"We have something to talk with you about. Do you have the time?" Her sharp eyes betrayed her calm tone. What's this now?

"What's up?" I sit again. I can only hope this isn't about me being a 'foreigner' again. Chizuru clears her throat this time and looks at me.

"Shirogane, I know we have had our… differences. But I'll be relying on your talents these next days in the CCSE. Let's pass it together." Chizuru gave me a serious look as she adjusted her glasses.

"No hard feelings, Sakaki. I'll do my best." She answers with a smile.

"If you don't we'll kill you." Kei's words were full of venom. At this time, really?

"Ayamine, please don't. We don't need you two to start another fight at this moment."

"Like you're one to talk." They stare at each other, quite intensely. Kei gives me a look I don't really understand, and with a disgusted face she leaves the table.

I suppose she hates me. She was the most vocal one when I showed them the Game Guys. Can't really expect them to simply be civil with a 'traitor' because they have to work with him. Honestly, the foreigners that work here must be so stressed, I'm surprised that Alt. IV was even assigned to the Empire in the first place.

Meiya and Chizuru heave a sigh of relief as she leaves.

"Thank the Holy Emperor she left. We don't need another lecture from the Instructor right before the test." Meiya relaxed her shoulders and leaned back a bit.

"Ayamine never backs down on what she believes is right. I know I'm not one to talk, but she still seems to hold doubts towards you

Shirogane. I would leave her alone if I were you during the test." Chizuru tells me as her eyes immerse themselves on her tray.

"Can't force her to be nice with me, it's okay."

"I'm sure we will make it through. I know I also have given you quite some trouble, but allow me to say this. I will do all I can to make us pass this exam. Can I count on you to do the same, Shirogane?" Meiya, why do you doubt me so much? Do I really look like such a dick to you guys?

"We all are going to do our best! Right, Shirogane-san?" Tama spoke up, barely lifting her gaze from her tray. Mikoto also smiled my way despite choosing to remain silent. Thanks a lot, really.

"That's the idea, I do not want to fail this. Well, I'll take my leave."

Mikoto and Tama gave me a small smile as I got up, Chizuru retained her usual serious expression. Meiya however was drilling those sapphires into me again. If only you would talk with me…

When I got to my room I started preparing for the travel in the submarine. I took the Minari Kamui and held it close to my chest for awhile. This is another important step, I can't mess this up. I don't care what the hell Meiya thinks I am, I'm passing this and getting commissioned along all of you.

Now, let's see. The curry powder, the bottle and the blanket. I write that down in the paper we were given to present the stuff we wanted to take, I'll go file it in a while. I grab the metal box and look at the medal and the GR Card, this is for all of you too. To get to officially pilot a TSF again. One step at a time, I'll fix all these causal leaks.

Well, let's take a shower. After that, I'll go present that paper and then I'll hang out for a while with Kasumi. Tomorrow before noon we have to get on the submarine, so sadly we can't play until late. Though, she must also be busy helping Sensei with the theories somehow.

I enter the bathroom and close my eyes, enjoying the warm water falling on me. We will travel until we reach the island non stop, so I only hope nothing happens during the way.

# Muddy Water Moody Hearts

### Chapter 16: Muddy Water/Moody Hearts

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*November 17th. 3:11 PM.*

*(Yokohama Base. Runway 1.)*

**[Yuuko]**

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"Raise rifles! Fire!" One of the officers gave the order and several gunshots were heard.

All the staff present were saluting the three flags that represented the losses of our members during the Niigata Incident. Of course, we couldn't say they died during that so officially they died during a test run.

Eiko Higurashi, Ayu Daikuuji, Mayu Tamano. We lost three valuable members of the A-01 squad, I cannot imagine what would have happened if I hadn't sent Shirogane along with them. Thankfully he's out there making sure we get Squad 207B ready to join Squad A-01, but still…

I only hope you don't let your guard down. The CCSE's obstacles were decided a month ago so there was next to nothing I could do to aid Shirogane. I suppose I should trust in him overcoming this if he is to play the role I need him for. After all, High Command was suffering a lot of pressure this time so there was little room for modifications to the plan. Considering your warning of Alt. V and the elections next year I'm not surprised they're trying to keep the pigeons inside the cage.

Don't do anything reckless, Shirogane. If I had warned him, I'm sure he would have tried to take some weapon with him. Even if it goes

against what I promised him, I have to leave him in the dark to avoid people to get suspicious of him. Even if Shirogane is supposed to be my bodyguard, he's still a trainee according to the records so he shouldn't have access to this kind of intel. Furthermore, if he for some reason were to fail, I can still assign him as my assistant anyways and have him fight as the Viking.

The ceremony is finished, and all personnel returns to their duties. I take one last look at the flags, squinting my eyes one last time the faces and voices that no longer were with us, before I exhaled through my nose and slowly turned around. The Valkyries slowly came towards me, most of them still hanging their heads.

"Vice Commander, should we go to the briefing room immediately?" Isumi addresses me with no longer a hint of sadness in her tone.

"Yes, I know your squad is not on top form but we still need to start this project. I'll be waiting." I quickly make my way to our briefing room.

It's time we start the testing of the XM3, I'll use the Valkyries as additional samples to gather data. Since I'll be focused on these theories for the foreseeable future I need to take care of this now, especially now that I have to rely on her for the second one.

Once I reach the room, Piatiff comes up to me.

"Vice Commander, I received word from Y about the matters you discussed." Finally, it took your sweet time to answer my call.

"Alright, let's go inside. You can tell me in detail there." We enter the room and I sit down. It's rare for Chief Yoroi to take so long to answer, let's see what I got. "Tell me, what did he answer to my petitions?"

"He said he found no intel about Cadet Shirogane and refused to divulge anything about Captain Takamura."

"So he refused. Not unexpected, but more straightforward than I thought he'd be. Any word on their reactions to the testing the Blood squad has been doing?"

"He said that the Shogun was most pleased with the results she heard from them, and Her Highness would like to make a formal agreement for the licensing and producing rights." Fast as always, damn royalty. For all I know, Takamura might even take the railgun with her by force once we finish it.

"Remind me, the Blood squad was testing the F-4J variations of our new tech right?"

"Yes, ma'am. Engine 0460-NE-TH3, Jump Units 311-ZEU-I0, and radars and sensors V-C834-URI." Ugh, she had to use the codenames. I gave them nicknames for a reason, we made so many prototypes and diagrams that I no longer remember which is which.

"Then we'll make a deal for those models only. The improved variations that were used on Shirogane's F-15J will be released as a different batch, and will be out of our deal. Of course, the new armor and antenna designs are also out of the deal." I won't show them all my cards, if he refused to give me any intel whatsoever under the pretense that she's a noble is all I needed to hear. Time to put up the firewall.

"Yes, ma'am. Allow me to inform you that the revised OS has already been installed on all the TSFs of the A-01 STF. According to the checks it should be working flawlessly."

"Perfect. Has Shirogane's F-15J been repaired already?"

"Yes, it's back to full functionality."

"We'll use the data on its computer along the spare parts I got to make a whole new TSF. I already gave the orders to the engineering team, but make sure that they stay in Hangar 90 during the process. I obtained all the data I could get on the Active Eagle, so I'll leave the

Chief Engineer on charge of this. I want a daily report at 7 PM about the progress of this project."

"Yes, ma'am!" Since she's a foreigner I know she won't betray me to the Empire or America. At least I have some people I can rely on here.

We already have the tech tested to make a trial for mass production, with this all the F-4J and F-15J on the base will get a great boost in performance and will gain some stealth. Once we roll out the XM3 our firepower will be at its highest level. This will make some people happy, but now with this Takamura's arrival in a few days and Yoroi's answers I'm convinced the Shogun is only using us. The days where the UN and the Empire cooperated with each other seem to be at an end.

So, if I can develop our own brand of the F-15 using Shirogane's data, I'm sure the UN will give me much more support than before. Especially since most of the units that are fighting on Africa and on the Far East Frontline are F-15 variations, aside from the soviet machines of course.

Hopefully that will be enough to placate Her Purpleness, since all these new toys will be recorded as Japanese inventions. Doubt she will start a frontal assault on us, but with the Royal Guard behind her… If they come at us with all their Type-00 we won't be able to hold the line. Thanks to their policies, we can't have any TSF that isn't made in Japan. How would I like to get some Typhoons or even some Super Hornets, but I'm stuck with Shiranuis for my best squad. The only 3rd Gen TSF that is incompatible with any and all other pieces of hardware.

I believe that Shirogane's F-15 will end up being better than the Shiranuis we have, even with the XM3 he had there's no argument that his mech was still more nimble thanks to the upgraded parts. If the Empire would have given me some Type-00C I wouldn't be complaining, but thanks to their backwards way of thinking they refuse to give even one to anyone.

Isumi and the rest of the squad arrive. All of them salute me, how many times do I have to tell them to drop the formalities with me?

"Valkyries, let's get right to the point. From now on, during the evening, you will be testing a new OS for TSFs that has been in the works for some time now. Its prototype was used on the F-15J that joined you on the Niigata Invasion. I want you all to do your best during these testings. You will also have some special training on some new simulators I developed, in which you'll take some other training aside from the new OS's testing. Isumi, you'll be in charge of the drills. 1st Lt. Suzumiya, I want a daily report at 7 PM. The rest, break it down as much as you want. The more bugs and issues you find, the better. Of course, this is a secret mission. Not a single word gets out to anyone other than me, not even to the CO or High Command. Any questions?" 2nd Lt. Suzumiya quickly raises her hand and I nod her way.

"Vice Commander, will the pilot of the F-15 join us for the testings?" Oho, looks like you got yourself a fan Shirogane.

"No, the Viking currently undergoing a different mission. As I said before, that pilot is my personal bodyguard so do not expect the Viking to join this unit, in the short term at the least. Anything else?" Isumi raise her hand this time.

"Vice Commander, I have two questions. First, what kind of trainings do you wish us to perform?"

"All kinds. From urban fights, to infiltrations, to hive missions. I want a complete testing of this OS. Of course, in due time we will do some live tests with it. As for the new sims, just use them and get a feel on them. You'll have to go to the underground for these tests, but I expect you to be pleasantly surprised by them." If only those girls had agreed to train with Shirogane. Well, it's their loss. I want some data on that, and I want to see if the Valkyries can get as good as Shirogane by playing that 'Valgern-On' game.

"Understood. Then, due to the losses during the Niigata Invasion we no longer have enough Vanguards. How should we modify our formation, in your opinion?" I sense her worry in her voice, even if she is hiding it behind a poker face. The members of Squad 207 that joined the Valkyries just completed their first mission, they're not ready to take the position of Storm Vanguard.

"I know that sending someone on their second mission as a Vanguard is madness, but those are the cards we have been dealt. All members of Squad 207A did a good job, I'll let you decide who the partner of 1st Lt. Hayase will be. Any other questions?" And now Hayase raises her hand. What is today? Why do they have so many questions?

"Vice Commander, I wanted to ask… How did you predict the movements of the BETA? Do we have that technology with us?" Oh, so that's it. I forgot about that with the theories and the negotiations with the Shogunate.

"That's classified intel. And it's not like we predicted all of their movements, we didn't expect the Forts to be so full of the lower strains. Also, it was the first time they had Laser-Class in them. Now, next question. Anyone?"

Now, it seems that nobody has any more questions. I dismiss them and then go to my office, where Yashiro was waiting for me.

"Good afternoon, Professor. The scanning has been done. The list is ready."

"Well done, Yashiro. So did you identify all the spies in the base?"

"I think so. Many people were glancing towards the ceremony, and there were many whispering to try and learn what actually happened. But the ones that wanted that intel not out of curiosity or sadness, but with desire to profit from it… I have them all marked here. They're just ten."

"That's still a lot of people. Well, I'll give the order for them to be… sent on a very cruel mission to the frontlines." Yashiro shuddered at my words as a fearful expression flooded her face.

"What will you do with them?"

"Well, we do need more 'volunteers' for the live testing of the Yellow Dust, right?" She twitched with a horrified look on her eyes, as if a circuit board she was working on gave her a discharge.

"Professor, human experimentation is illegal." I know that already.

"They are going to be executed anyways, what's the harm in making them be useful one last time?"

"That is torture. You shouldn't do it. There's plenty of live BETA to test the chemical on." She was shooting an angry glare at me as she kept moving her ears up and down.

"We still need data on how it affects humans."

"I do know that. However…"

Then, the door to my office opens and… Ugh, her.

"Hi, Yuu-chan. I got the results of the analysis of those Shiranui."

"Motoko-nee, how many times do I have to tell you to not call me that? Also, knock the damn door before entering. And don't bring your smoke in here." I swear, she does it on purpose every damn time. She knows I hate the smell of tobacco, and yet she always comes here with a recently lit cigarette.

"Yeah, whatever. Here's the report, it's now 2% less deadly."

"2%? All our work for months just for a 2%?"

"What did you expect? They were in contact with the gas for around two minutes, it's actually amazing their jump units didn't melt too." I

know we are on uncharted territory here, using G-Elements to make chemical weapons, but to see so little progress is disheartening.

"No, you're right. How was the data from the BETA?"

"No changes, they still only get stunned for around five minutes. We would need to concentrate the liquid more to make the effects either last more or be more severe, but if we do that forget about anyone close from surviving."

"We don't even have enough G-Elements to make proper testing in the first place. I'll be handing you some more live samples to test on, remember to be careful with them. Also, tonight I want to have a talk with you, there's some papers I want you to read." I'm sure that the other world's Motoko had a hand in that second theory Shirogane gave me, only her could have helped the other me with all those psychological matters. She is truly an eminence when it comes to the human body, especially the brain.

"I know that, I'll be careful with the dolls. And what are the papers about? Are you going to finally introduce me to that Shirogane?"

"No, how many times do I have to tell you? Shirogane is my bodyguard. I'm not lending him to anyone. You just want to examine his brain, don't you?"

"And his blood, cells, natural immunities. If he is keeping up with you he's someone worth studying." You make it sound as if I were some kind of monster.

"Maybe when he gets back, I might introduce you two if you help me with my problem. I'll go gather the dolls, you go on ahead and ready the chamber."

"Fine, fine. Don't worry, Yuu-chan. We are making progress, so don't stress yourself over this."

"Chief Researcher Kouzuki, please stop calling me that." I try to glare at her, but she only smiles at me. I'll never be able to deal with any of you two.

"Ooh, so scary. Well, Vice Commander Yuu-chan I'll be on my way. Bye!" And with a half-hearted salute she leaves the room.

Seriously, why do they always tease me like that? Sigh… No matter what I do, they always have that attitude towards me. It's good that they haven't changed, but it's still annoying. Especially when I know Motoko-nee is only here to support me, stop teasing me if you know I don't like it.

"Professor… Are you really going to send the spies to the chamber?" Yashiro asked with a trembling voice.

"Technically, they broke their oath to the UN by taking part in multiple political actions. So we are just deciding their punishment. And if you have any mercy for them in your heart, remember that they won't hesitate to kill you or me if they were ordered to do so."

"I know… It's just that…" She hangs her head, clearly conflicted with our current situation.

"It's on my hands, Yashiro. You do not have to tag along if you don't want to." I turn around and leave, towards the Command Room.

Yashiro soon follows with her eyes glued to the ground.

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*Same Day. 9:16 AM.*

*(Tokyo. Imperial Palace.)*

**[Yuuhi]**

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"So the rumors were true then?"

"Yes, Your Highness. Someone did exert some pressure on both the Minister of Defense and some members of the Parliament for some reason." Maya was making a pained expression.

This is a grave violation to our political accord. I am the only one the Minister of Defense should obey, and the members of the Parliament should not be influenced by members of the other branches of our power.

"I suppose this is connected to what Yoroi had reported? The restart of the railgun project in Yokohama?"

"That's what he concluded, Lt. Colonel Iwaya also had the same thoughts." I'm glad to see some people on the Ministry of Defense are still on my side, even if it only brings hardships their way.

"I see. What amount of funds were taken from the Kyoto Project?"

"Around 20%, however some workers were fired as well."

Sigh… These men will never understand. What are they even trying to accomplish? What could possibly be gained from making our civilian's lives worse and ruining the restoration of the Capital? What could be worth taking such a daunting road as to hamper the restoration, knowing the nobility would certainly inquire into the matter? I am simply at an utter absence of answers.

"Give word to the MDF that I order more patrols in the civilian districts. Their security and wellbeing should be their priority, do not let anyone interfere with the repairs and maintenance or the distribution of food and medicine, even if they are from the Guard." I know that the army is not obligated to follow my orders now, but I hope they can perform this duty for me. It's frustrating, I feel like a puppet with its strings cut, left with no option than to further fall into stillness.

"Y-Your Highness! The Royal Guard would never go against your wishes!"

"Maya, you know that some of them bear quite the strong grudge towards me, for asking help from America during the '99. And that's without taking into account all the grudges they still hold towards Operation Lucifer." I'm truly surprised they still heed my words, to be honest. With how prideful they are, I had assumed they would have been much more dismissive towards my few requests. "Furthermore, it wouldn't surprise me if they began to openly oppose the MDF instead of cooperating with their men, now that the Diet has chosen, or perhaps has been forced, to take this road to gather the much needed funds for our rearmament in such way."

"With all due respect, no one would dare question your position within our ranks, for your efforts are what have maintained our peace thus far."

A frown betraying her facade, small taints began to burn away her composure, the darkening shadow of a paper being burnt atop a candle could very well be her expression as of now, just before it lights up in a blaze. And yet, as slow as the beginnings of a squall, the dam was almost about to overflow, those drops had amassed on her eyes, soon to simply spill away and flood everything around.

Kneeling in petrification, as if surrounded by barbed wires, she barely restrained her desire to look down, away from me, away from what she was recalling regarding that mission, those days, those so distant, so darkening, so sorrowful days were… we simply lost what we cherished oh so dearly.

She gulps, taking a moment to tap her glasses. I slowly sigh, entwining my fingers. That simple thought was plentiful enough, bountiful enough to force me to sheathe my smile.

I wonder when it this began, that thinking about you brought this pause to my heart. How a simple word made me abhor this nothingness all around me, how a mere thought could oh so easily enhance the solitude of this palace on my shoulders.

"… I appreciate your words, however, we both know what repercussions those days, and that particular operation, had in our fellows. It is most foolish to not take into account the possibility that, perhaps, my words have a listener no longer within the Regency Council."

"As much as it brought us shame what had to be done before and after that operation, you only had the wellbeing of the people in mind. I assure you, no one would dare to question your authority!"

"I appreciate your loyalty, truly I do, however that is no longer the state of affairs within our force." Yet again, I sigh. Yet again, she frowns. "By the way, how have those tests on Yokohama been proceeding? Has Mana sent her report already?" Giving her a smile, to change the air between us, she then taps her glasses and nods, her eyes not entirely satisfied with the end of this trail.

"… Yes, she is most impressed with the machines. Just with a few modifications and upgrades, the F-4J gained an admirable mobility and speed. If those parts are mass produced, our fleet of Gekishins, and perhaps of Zuikakus as well, would gain a few years of reliable usage. According to her report, Mana believes it possible that they could be deployed to the frontlines under this new block."

Impressing. For Mana to give such praise they must be truly amazing. I do wonder why no word was given until so recently, it is odd this went unnoticed for so long… and it is worrying to ponder that the UN could be hiding much under Yokohama's veil.

"Did Kouzuki mention anything regarding doing a similar refurbishing plan for the F-15J or other armaments?"

"No, so far Mana has received no word of any more developments from her. However, she did ask about Takamura to Chief Yoroi. She seems suspicious of her."

"Is that so? She is a member of the Fudai, with how the nobility has treated Kouzuki I'm not surprised she is doubting her. Did my

envelope reach Takamura already?"

"Yes, Your Highness. Yoroi delivered it to Lt. Col. Iwaya, so it is a matter of time before we receive an answer."

That is good to hear. Now, I think I know how I can prove to Kouzuki that I'm different from the rest of the nobles, so long as she is willing to listen.

"Then… Once Kouzuki sees for herself that Takamura is someone that can be trusted I want her to notify me, I have a message I myself want to give to the Vice Commander." Maya looks slightly troubled by my words but still nods at me.

"Understood."

"Maya, how many spare Type-00C do we have here?"

"How many? I think around… ten, perhaps? We still have not filled all the vacant positions with recruits. I apologize for the delay, it has been a tall ordeal to find people worthy of our trust." She bows down, I sigh as I slowly shake my head at her refusal to loosen her facade.

"Do not apologize. However, do not worry about recruiting more people. Please tell our mechanics to get those Type-00C in prime condition as soon as they can."

"What is the matter, Your Highness?… Have you found recruits by yourself?"

"No, I wish to give some Type-00Cs to Yokohama Base as a sign of friendship." Maya seems to be appalled by my words, for her to widen her eyes so, for her mouth to also follow suit, for the expression to last more than what a frail moment.

"Your Highness, please reconsider! If you do so, the other Regent Houses will not remain quiet, and that will *assuredly* brew animosity

towards your person. All variants of the Type-00 are the Royal Guard's prized weapon, to lend it to foreigners is-"

"I will not simply lend it. Officially, it'll be a test for export purposes. We are in grave need of more funds, and we have a very capable TSF at our disposal. With our current resources we cannot produce many of them, however if we manage to ignite interest on their services the Empire could then proceed to make an appealing deal. It is a nice business opportunity we cannot miss, if I say so myself."

"H-However… to give our most prized weapon to foreigners… Our trade secrets would get exposed! This won't be welcomed by the population or the rest of the Guard. Please, do not act on the belief that you are-"

"Sadly, that is the board we face today, Maya. And this is as little as I can do, to not upset the frail balance of power that has kept us afloat during these tempestuous years."

"However… Even if Kouzuki would be on your side, we cannot trust in the UN. Gifting our most advanced craft, our greatest domestic weapon, to the foreign powers so easily will-"

"By those standards, shouldn't we dispose of all of our F-4J and F-15J since they're originally foreign tech?"

"N-No, I was not referring to-"

"Also, under that same mindset, we should discard the Zuikaku as well since it is no more than a clone of an American TSF, a foul amalgamation of prized Imperial tech and foreign developments."

"No, I never-"

"By that logic then, we also should destroy all of our A-6s as well as all of our ships that were procured outside of the Empire with the aid of COSEAN, since they aren't produced domestically. The same should then apply to the tanks, helicopters, building materials, food,

and so on. Maya, do you truly think a nation can be self-sufficient in this day and age?" She lowers her head to the ground hastily, perhaps I let my irritation make it seems as if I were reprimanding her when I had no such intention.

"My apologies! I did not meant to criticize your judgment, I will accept any punishment you give me."

Why do always have to be so extreme? There's no need to be like that with me when we're alone. Maya you're like an older sister for me, and you should know that already.

… Takeru would be making fun of you for being like this right now. Sigh… I look backwards for a moment, to where he always used to stand, and am met with absolute absence. How much do I miss his optimism and smile, even if they had also vanished during our last months together.

"It is alright, raise Maya. I have taken no offense, so, if you understood my wishes, please relay the message to our mechanic crew. I'll have a talk with the other leaders, I am convinced we can reach an agreement."

"How can you be so sure of this, Your Highness?"

"Because they need my approval for the transfer of these next batch of Shiranui-1C to the Fuji Corps, even if only as a formality. The IJA won't welcome them unless I bequeath my blessing to this arrangement." Soft as it might be, it is the power I still hold today. And I have an obligation to wield it as best as I'm able, to ensure no more swords have to be broken. "I'm confident that I can make them agree to my terms after some cups of tea."

"Understood. I'll go right away to deliver this message. However, before I take my leave, there is one last matter I must inform you of." She then looks down, eyelids descending as softly as leaves during Autumn, the most chilling view of a desolated forest at dusk, the lack

of habitual sounds and tells, the forced neutral facade in her face forebode ill matters.

"… Whatever is the matter?"

"… After hearing the project of the food plant had been rejected, Raiko-sama has requested an audience with you. She also let me know she was desiring to discuss other… matters, regarding your refusal to continue the operations of-"

"I believe I have made myself clear enough on this matter. Inform her my stance hasn't changed, and do thank her for the patience she has showed during these trying times for the project. Also… request a report from her, regarding the matter of the food plant. That shall be all."

"… You do not wish to grant her an audience then?"

"… No, there is no need. Has her squadron remained stationed as I requested of her?"

"But of course, Your Highness. Raiko-sama's Chain Squadron has been sending constant reports to us on their surveillance of the Capital. Please rest assured, the Amato House has remained loyal to your wishes. I myself have confirmed she has followed your commands to the letter, despite her… strong opinions against your posture, which I must admit I share to some degree."

"… Is that truly so?" I inhale slowly, feeling a small twister form on the base of my neck.

It rotates, trying to spur back those days once again. What was lingering in my mind after our prior talk was drawn to the twister, biting my lips I swallowed all that vile down. All those words, all those images, all of it is taken to its tail, clogging my mind and stagnating my breathing for a moment.

"Do you still refuse to give her your blessing, Your Highness?"

"… I have made myself clear already. No more words are required between *that woman* and me."

"However, in light of recent events, perhaps it would-"

"Do tell her I am most thankful for her support and that I desire to maintain the peace we enjoy today, as he would have wished. No more blades need to be broken. Would that be clear enough?"

"… Yes, Your Highness." She nods, stands up, and after a deep bow she leaves uttering no further words.

I waited some moments, making sure no one would come in after she left. And once I gained that confirmation…

"… Sigh." I should apologize to Maya once the night is over for me.

I inhale through my nose, looking towards the balcony. I stand up and walk up to it, taking in the view, sighing yet again.

Grabbing onto the cold fence, those days return. Placing a hand on the base of my neck, I begin to take deep breaths, to reiterate my forgiveness towards him, to reaffirm my pledge towards peace, letting the twister run its course, letting it be drained away.

And yet, the absence around me only makes those echoes all the more unbearable on my ears.

"… It is no surprise, that you still remain trapped in those days. I do not believe myself capable of ever leading you, Raiko-san."

For I am not a warrior, my ways of fighting are different than what she holds dear. Yet, those days are over and I cannot let them return. Thinking twice, I should be requesting Daizaburou-sama's counsel for this matter. I am certain he should know how to quell her frustration, justified as it is. Our plans have all met with dead ends, and I cannot yet tell her of these accords with Kouzuki. While I…

certainly appreciate her fervent devotion, there is no more need… for such hostile stances to remain in our code.

Peace… I shall tackle those matters at a latter time. Until then, I shall focus on what little it is I can do without tipping the scales. Tis a harshest trial I am facing, yet these are the cards I've been dealt with.

Now that I think about it… Meiya must be about to begin her own trial as of now. I wonder, how is she faring as of late? Hopefully you can brave through whatever obstacles lay in your path, sister. Mana did report that she managed to endure her harsher training regime, and even said there was a new recruit on the team. Thinking back on it, Mana didn't report much about her, not even her name. What kind of girl could this sixth member be? A foreigner, perhaps? I only hope she's getting along with Meiya. I should ask Mana for more details next time.

"In any case, I hope the tailwinds remain at your back, Meiya. Please remain strong during these days." Closing my eyes and interlocking my fingers, I send a prayer to the skies. May you fare well in this trial of-

"… Your Highness, the president of the council of maintenance workers has arrived. Should I tell him to come in?" The Grand Chamberlain notifies me of my next meeting, breaking my concentration.

"Yes, it is alright." She bows and swiftly exits the room once more.

Sigh… I can't even have a minute for myself. Am I not even allowed to daydream for a moment? I wish I could contact Meiya from time to time, but even that is seen as 'taboo'.

Takeru, you were right. The Empire's traditions and customs are not upheld by anyone and are just twisted to the convenience of the powerful. I wanted to believe that there were more honorable people within our ranks, but most of the nobles only work for their own

house's interests as opposed to doing so for our people, and our politicians only wish to retain their seats. They rejected all the laws and projects I sent without much explanation, and suddenly they approve such a big increase in the budget of the production for the Type-94? Preposterous, how they think I'll be beguiled by such balderdash.

You must be laughing at me in Heaven. I never thought I would be chosen as the Shogun, but it's my duty and I will fulfill my role. I won't let your death be in vain when you took my place in Operation Lucifer, I'll fix this nation even if I have to go against all the other Regent Houses. I already know only the Kujo house is on my side, so I need to be careful around them.

However, it is no wonder how powerless I am now after the hardships that came after Lucifer despite your efforts to aid me. However, I cannot see how you would have taken these two years. I doubt you would have enjoyed this state of affairs.

"Hehe, you would have lost your temper many moons ago, assuredly." I caress my fringe, smiling. Even so, placating your anger would have been far more pleasant than it is enduring the void you left on my side.

The door opens and the man in question enters the room. This will be another endless day of reunions, I suppose.

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**[?]**

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"Are you absolutely sure of this?"

"Yes, I'm being serious. I must be careful about this, any odd movement they notice would get me in prison. Just… If it's possible, I'd like you all to consider my offer."

"I assure you, we are more than willing to agree to your plan and I might be able to convince them. But this eventually falls on you, we cannot involve ourselves unless there's definitive proof."

"I know that. I'll try to gather any intel I can on my end, and for the record I'm not asking you to rush in here and kill them all. I just wish that, if the situation escalates, and your end is secured, you can lend me a hand. I assure you your help will be rewarded quite gracefully." I hear him laugh on the other end.

"Your initial offering was good enough already, if you assure us we can get in there, I will definitely get the approval to deploy them. I shall await that intel, in the meantime I'll start the talks on my side to get things done. But I promise nothing, you know we are also on a very complicated position." Of course I know, I was there too. That's why I can't let this chance pass me by. It is my obligation to do this!

"Thanks, I'll end the call here. And worry not, the support for the Sakhalin front is already on the way. Godspeed." Hanging up, I quickly survey my surroundings to catch any possible eavesdroppers. I can only hope this went well and the call didn't get spied upon.

Luckily there's no one at this hour moving through the hallways. With this, the worst case scenario has been avoided. If they agree to help, I'll be able to stop all resistance before things escalate out of control. If I can bring the Royal Guard down, the rest should be over quickly.

And if I do die, may this blood of mine serve as the fuel that will spark up our soul's fire back. I won't let the Empire continue on it's current way, even if I'm seen as a heretic. I'm honor-bound to follow this path, no matter what awaits me at the end of the road. Nothing shall hinder my plans this time.

Is there anything else I can do? If I want to stay unnoticed I better leave it for today. Tomorrow, however…

There are a couple of people I'd like to call. The Captain of the 1st Regimen, Naoya Sagiri, and the Captain of the 2nd Regimen, Takako Saito. Of course I'll have to lie a bit, or a lot to be more accurate, but I need to confirm on whose side they are.

Maybe this is a too bold move, but I can't move my bishops before moving my pawns. Is there anyone else I should try to contact? Hmm… I should get one of those jamming devices to cover my voice before though. Last thing I want is they reporting me to the authorities. I'll try to be more careful from now on. There seems to be quite a commotion on the palace as of late.

Hahaha, what a fool I am. Of course there's a commotion, with Alt. IV standing on its last legs. Well, let's take one step a time. With some luck, the BETA will attack again and give me a window to act to my leisure here. Seriousness above everything, failure is not an option. I do need to get some more intel to get them to act, so let's be discreet about this. Only I can perform this duty, it's my responsibility to put a stop to this.

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*November 17th. 1st Day of the CCSE.*

*(Island. Around 6 AM.)*

**[Takeru]**

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"Alright. Squad, let's march to the rendezvous point!" Chizuru shouted as we finished burying the torpedoes in which we got sent here. I had forgotten how much this thing shakes.

The way here was pretty awkward. The submarine was so small we were all basically pushing against each other the whole time. Thank God I was the last one to enter and took my spot against a wall, I only had to deal with Mikoto's comments about how jacked I was. Honestly, she's always in her own world.

The sun started peeking through the horizon as we moved, eventually making it to the place where we meet up with the Instructor, however Sensei wasn't here sunbathing this time.

"Good day, squad. As of now, your second CCSE is in motion. Squad leader, here are your orders. Your supplies and equipment are in that box over there. Once all of you are ready I'll start the explanation."

"Roger!"

I ended up with the worn down one again, I make sure to apply the tobacco spray on it. Then I tear a bit of the broken belt and make a strong knot. I don't know how to knit so this is the best I can do, at least the belt won't break on me and I did the knot as tight as I could. After we all got ready the Instructor started the briefing.

And to my surprise, it's the same mission on the same island. Which means that there's gonna be more traps than before.

"If you are to separate, each team has to take one map and one radio with them. You have three of each, so be careful to not lose or damage them. You have 144 hours to complete the test. If anyone gets left behind and part of the team arrives at the evacuation point, we will give the rest one day more to finish, unless the remaining time is less than that. That is all. Synchronize your watches with me. Three, two, one… Start!"

…

"Alright, given the size of the island and how far apart are all targets from one another, I think the best way for us to rack up as many points as we can is by splitting up from the start in three groups." Chizuru said as she looked at the map. Just as before.

"Um… Can I take Point A? Since it's closer to the shore my stamina won't be so much of an issue if I travel through low ground." Tama pointed to the target to the west of our current position.

"I see. Shirogane since you're faster and have more stamina than us, can you take care of Point B?" It's like I'm fated to go there.

"Sure, I got it." I'm gonna get that fuel just in case. For all I know, the traps might be so brutal that escaping on the boat might be the faster and safer way to… Wait, what if they put traps on the sea too? Ugh, now I don't know if it's such a good idea.

"Then let's arrange the rest accordingly. Mitsurugi will go with Tamase, Shirogane with me, and Yoroi and Ayamine will take care of Point C. Any objections?" Surprisingly, Meiya raised her hand in protest.

"Yes. Why don't I go with Shirogane? I have more stamina than you, and our physical strength isn't that different. You could support Tamase well, and I would be able to keep up with Shirogane without hindering him."

"Yes, but if you go with him he'll have to use any long range weapons you find, nullifying his CQC strength. I believe I should be the one accompanying him." Chizuru was being insistent on this. She still doesn't trust me apparently.

Meiya sent a look my way, as if to gauge my reaction. Chizuru also looked at me narrowing her eyes, I just shrugged.

"Sigh… If Shirogane doesn't mind, what about you Tamase?"

"I also don't mind. I think Mitsurugi-san is right though. They are the ones with the better stamina after all." Chizuru drops her shoulders, clearly dejected.

"Understood, then let's go with that. I will go with you and Mitsurugi with Shirogane. Is that alright?" We nodded at her.

"Where do we regroup?" Mikoto had one map on her as she looked around. "How about that hill over there? It seems to be the highest

place of the island." Meiya and Chizuru looked at the map and then to our surroundings.

"Let's do that. We'll rendezvous atop the hill. Anything else anyone wants to say before we depart?" Chizuru looked around us. Nobody said a word.

Then each team took one map and one radio. Me, Chizuru and Mikoto are the ones who carry them.

"Squad! March on! We'll wait until the third day on the hill before departing for the evac point, so do not waste time. Let's clear this!"

"Roger!"

…

… This is harder than I thought it would be. Granted, I'm not having problems with it, but the amount of traps is just insane. Every five steps I have to either stop to cut a cable, trigger a net or take a turn to avoid a pitfall. These bastards went all out this time. Luckily for me, Meiya hasn't said anything and is focusing on clearing the traps to our right.

It feels as if we weren't moving at all, with how much we are stopping. Wait, I kind of can take care of these traps by myself right? So I should do what Mikoto did for me the first time around, I'll take the vanguard and dispatch most of the traps so that we can advance faster.

"Mitsurugi, I'll take the lead and dispatch as many traps as I can, we're not making progress if we keep stopping so much." Anger I can feel you. She stops and rearranges her hair.

"Are you saying I'm a bother to you, by any chance?"

"No, I said that I can clear the traps faster by myself, while you cover the flanks."

"But what if you fall in a pitfall? We would lose valuable time, and you could get hurt."

"I'm not so careless, and anyways you have my back, so if anything happens you can help me out. We're moving too slowly at this point." She seems to be considering it, arms folded. "The heat is just going to wears us down if we do this slowly, we gotta push forward without stopping every half a minute." She wipes the sweat of her forehead, her whole body is glistening with sweat right now, and I'm no different.

"Even so, there's the chance that either of us gets stuck in a trap, or hurt gravely. We should be careful, mind our pace, and advance together." No, we should… Whatever, I'll just do it and deal with it.

I turn my back and move forward faster, well not fast, but compared to slowly walking and stopping every minute anything seems faster. Oh, a net to the left. Well hidden too.

"Hey, come back here! Where do you think you're going?!"

"I told you already. Stick to the traps to my sides, I'll clear the front."

"You are no one to order me around, I did not agree to-"

**Click**

I react to the sound and throw Meiya to the ground as a barrage of bullets pass right above us. What the actual hell? They hid a machinegun with rubber bullets in the bushes, if that had hit us it would have hurt like hell! What are they thinking?!

"Shirogane… Could you… get off me already?" Huh?

I was on top of Meiya, like the time I… Ugh, F you brain. Why do have to remind me of that, now of all times?! It's not like I wanted to force myself onto her. I was just… Forget it. Let it go.

I move away, looking at our surroundings to make sure there's no more little cables hidden in the vicinity.

"… Thanks."

"Don't mention it. Be more careful, alright?" She nods, looking away.

We resume our march with me at the front, now without complains, and start moving a bit faster. Now we're making some progress!

…

Damn, the sun is going down already. I can't believe I'm making less progress than last time. Well, in my defense, there's ten times more traps and I'm traveling with Meiya, who is really slow when it comes to disabling them.

"Shirogane, should we set up camp? We won't be able to see anything once it gets dark."

"Hmm… Wait, this place is… It should be…"

"Shirogane? Are you… ignoring me, perhaps?"

I know it was close by, I recognize these trees. This is where we set up camp all the previous times, so the thing should… Oh, I think that's it. Behind some trees I could see the entrance that was built into the mountain. I feel a hand in my shoulders.

"Wha… Don't scare me like that, Mitsurugi." Why does she look so annoyed?

"Shirogane, I do not like to be ignored. I'd like it if we could… get along for the duration of the test. So, help me set up camp already before it gets dark."

"First, I wasn't ignoring you. Second, we're not setting up camp here." Now she's angry. She really likes to fold her arms when she gets upset for some reason.

"Why? It's getting dark, we won't be able to see anything if we continue to march. Explain yourself."

"The objective is right there, so we should get a bit closer today. That way we can destroy it at dawn when we wake up."

"What? Do not lie to me! There's no way-"

"Look over there." And her eyes go wide as her mouth hangs open.

"How did we make it to the target in a single day?!"

"You did count the amount of traps we dispatched, right? We walked without stopping all day long, save to eat and drink. It wouldn't surprise me if Tama's team is going to destroy their target tonight." You all gained a lot of stamina compared to the other loops. Even when we had to move slower this time we still made it in our first night.

"Be serious! There's no way… It has to be a diversion, how can you be so sure that is our target?"

"Look at the map, going by how much we walked it wouldn't be weird. C'mon, it's still far but we can close some distance before we lose all light."

"… You're serious? We made it… in one day?" Her tone relaxed as a smile made its way onto her face.

"See? So, come on, let's try to get a bit closer before it gets dark."

"Fine. Let's keep going."

"You're so much more nice to be around when you're not paranoid." I smile at Meiya, causing her to purse her lips as she puts her hands on her waist.

"Watch it, Shirogane. I do not like to be made fun of."

"C'mon, loosen up a little. We're making great time today. Stop being so down." I say as I resume my walk.

"… Fine. Lead the way, I'll follow you."

We walk for awhile more, for maybe two klicks, until I reach a place big enough to settle in. We still have a bit of light.

"Alright, let's set up camp here. I'll go deal with any traps nearby."

"Then I'll light the fire." Meiya says as she slows down, opening part of her beltkit.

All done here… Now, on our way forward for tomorrow… And that's it.

Meiya had hidden the fire very well from view, she was already covered by a sheet above a leaf bed.

I don't know how to make those, so I'll just sleep on the floor covered with the blanket I got with me.

"Shirogane, you stay on that side." Meiya told me as soon as I began taking my blanket out.

"Why? Shouldn't we try to be as close to the fire as possible?"

"Yes, but… You're male." She looks at me sideways, readiness to retaliate in her posture.

"I might be male but I'm not a pervert."

"So, you're not… going to try anything weird when the sun goes down, right?"

"… No, I'm not. I won't touch you, I promise." She seems to relax a bit. After giving me a nod, she opens her rations.

Way to bring down my mood, honey. Thanks for letting me know you see me as a creep. Sigh… I guess… the bridge is truly broken.

I too take out my night's ration. Let's just eat and… Those sons of a bitch! They gave me less than last time! Looking at Meiya, I see that she has even more than what I had in my previous loops. Who's the one in charge of making these things?!

I crunch into a small synth cereal bar that tastes like diluted toothpaste. The mark on the pack says E rank. The synth foods gets rated based on how much percentage it has of organic material and how 'good' said material is. It goes from A as the highest to E as the lowest, so I suppose this is only proteins and vitamins jammed together into some sort of… I was gonna say dough, but I have no idea how this is even made.

Instant ramen would beat the crap out of this thing. To think Mom said microwave food tasted bad, if she took a bite of this she would either faint or start making a ruckus about how could anyone consider this food.

… I wonder how are things over there. Did that world got rewinded too? Or is it still on the same spot in time? I look at the sky, the stars are really pretty. Sadly, they might all be overrun with BETA. Why is it that there's no BETA in my world? Did something happen to those silicon beings before they made them?

"Shirogane, are you not eating?" Meiya's words brought me back from dreamland. I had eaten only half of the rations.

"Yeah, I was just thinking."

"… About what? Are you worried about something?" It feels so weird hearing her voice without knives. It's really nice on my ears to hear her normal tone again.

"It's something personal, I was just lost in thought remembering something." She does not seem satisfied. Moving just a tiny bit

closer, she again talks to me.

"Then, what are you be thinking about? We're in the middle of the CCSE, what personal matter could be troubling you? We need to be focused here." She sends a doubtful look at me, I avoid it as fast as I did to my homework back in school.

"No need to glare at me like that. I was just remembering my Mom." I keep eating the… grovel? This tastes like overboiled veggies that got then dried at the sun for a day.

"Your mother? Is she still in America?" A hint of disgust appeared on her tone.

I sigh, taking a moment to answer. What do I even tell her? Anything I say will make her think badly of me anyways… She seems determined to be hostile with me, shouldn't I just shut up?

… But if I do that then, we'll never talk again. We'll never… never again…

Shivering a bit as I bite onto the dough again, feeling as if cold hands were poking my sides, I look up, to not see her rejecting face anymore.

"… I don't know."

"What do you mean by that?"

"That I don't know where she is."

"… Is that so?

Please stop… Don't look at me like that… Just shut up, dammit. Don't… use her voice like that. Just leave me alone, please…

"How could it be that you know not of where your parents are?" Tilting her head back, her eyes narrow a bit.

"Sigh… Look, she was supposed to be here in Japan, but all my data about my time here was wiped from the databases, so I don't know where she is."

Frowning, I return a glare. Holding it, her own seems to ease up as she scans my face. Sigh… Why? Why do you… No, different people, different world. Don't forget that, just shut up and take it.

"My parents might be… dead for years for all I know." At least here that's the truth, and I don't know about the other world. If time reversed, they might still be alive. If not, then… that world is also in ruins until I get Sensei's help.

"… Forgive me for prying. I did it again." She gives a small bow.

"… Don't worry 'bout it."

…

"So… Your mother was supposed to be here?" She isn't letting that go, huh? Refusing her would only make things worse, let's just be honest.

"I thought so. I don't really know much about my life here, after all."

"Huh?! What do you mean?!" Why is she so startled?

"Didn't you read my reports already?"

"Yes, I did. But there was nothing about this. Are you telling me you do not know of your past?"

I mean, lying about it is pointless. If I'm ever asked I'll have to be honest, and frankly, it is almost as if I had amnesia this time, with how different this world is for whatever reason.

"Pretty much. I woke up one day in a hospital without remembering where I was, how I got there, or anything at all. I do remember our culture and traditions, how to write, parts of our history. But I don't

really remember anything about my life here, not my family, friends, where I lived or studied. Since no one could find anyone related to me and I didn't have anywhere else to go I was offered to become a UN Cadet to have a place to live in, and that's how I joined the army. This was two years ago."

"You… You're basically all alone." Wow, thanks for the gut punches, honey. Keep 'em coming, who needs some peace of mind anyways?

"… Yeah, you could say that. I at least had my squad with me before but…" I bite into the cereal with too much force, causing part of it to fly away into the grass, as those days, those last days I was with them return to me. "… well, not anymore." At least Mikoto and Tama are still friendly with me and I have Kasumi.

*"… Just like me."*

"What was that?" She said something in such a small voice that I couldn't hear her at all.

"Nothing. So, does that mean that you do not remember all of our customs?" She moved her bangs out of her way, looking at me again. However, this time her eyes were like the ones of the past Meiyas, she put out the fire for some reason.

"Somewhat. I did have to read up on some stuff that I obviously had forgotten, but there might be some stuff that's common sense here that I forgot about." This also explains my usual weird words and lack of knowledge of this world's specific historic events. "That's all there is to it, for real." So please just let it go. It's cool, you don't like me. I get it and that's fine. Just… don't remind me of it every second.

"… I see." Closing her eyes, folding her arms, she seems placated with my answers.

Sigh… Thank God. I lean on a tree, gulping down what remained of my pitiful excuse of rations. I rub my arms, trying to drive away the

coldness that surrounded me all of a sudden. At least we aren't arguing about anything anymo-

"Then, allow me to ask you." Goddammit, Meiya. Now what do you want? "Do you know of the color rankings of the nobility?"

More and more accusations, I guess. But… As I looked back at her, I didn't see the frown, the downwards brows, or even a speck of alertness in her posture. She was squarely gazing at me, awaiting my reply. She's… not upset or anything? She then began to tap her forearms with a finger, a sign she was growing impatient at my silence.

"Uuh… It was white for the vassals, yellow for the nobles, red for the special guardians, blue for the Regent Houses, and purple for the one that's the current Shogun, right?" She nods, too slowly as she still doesn't break her gaze from mine.

"Exactly. It also matches up with the dresses of the Royal Guard, where black is given to those of common descent that are inducted into it. So you did remember that. Then…" She pauses for a second as she shifted her hands around.

Don't just stop like that. I'm already aware of my breathing, feeling my heartbeats as I wait.

I don't know why, but she seems to be less hostile right now. And if she is… let's see if I can fix the bridge a little. But nothing good ever comes when she hesitates like that, so I don't know if I want to pursue this matter. Sigh… Whatever.

"… Come on, now. What is it?"

"Well, you do know that only the members of the Royal Guard are allowed to wield katanas in the Empire, right?" Wait, really? So that's why she thought I was on the Guard before.

"No, I didn't know that. Is that why you got so suspicious of me?"

"Yes. However, that is not all there is to it." She again stops and looks away. Stop it, nothing good ever comes when you of all people start hesitating like that.

"Mitsurugi you can't just stop there, you know?"

"Do you truly not know? Or are you testing me?" She again meets my gaze, her lips molded into a small circle, her voice again accusatory, and yet… no fire is in her eyes. She's doubting, but why?

"I'm not testing you. I am really curious about why the Guard didn't take offense with me having a sword, so please tell me about it. I think… we both need some answers, right?" Forcing a smile at her, she closes her eyes but nods all the same.

"Then, allow me to satiate my curiosity. What is the color of the hilt of our swords?"

"Blue? Wait… Are you saying it's related to the Regent Houses?" Meiya smiles proudly as she raises her chin.

"Exactly! Most members of the Royal Guard, or those related to the nobility, are given nameless katanas, with their hilt showing the color of their station. However, those who belong to one of the Regent Houses are given a copy of that House's katana. The Minaru Kamui we both have is one of such, given to only the members of one certain Royal House or their most trusted acquaintances. I myself am a servant of a House, and is the reason why I possess it. Each house has a special blade design unique to them. Holding one of them gives one recognition within the Empire. It's as if you were part of said house and gives you authority over their vassals. "

Wait… The sword we both have… Given to only the most trusted people… The royal house Meiya serves… Oh my God… Realizing what that meant sent a shiver down my spine, again feeling cold fingers tap my chest and sides as a face returned to my mind. The Minaru Kamui is… the blue blade of the Koubuin House.

"So… holding our swords is almost like being a noble?"

"Not almost, you are a noble. Someone who is trusted to such length to be given the house's blade, someone who is considered family despite not sharing a blood connection, someone who can stand behind the leader of the house with a weapon at the ready. To give that someone the proper status, that is the meaning of all blue katanas in the Empire." She finishes with a proud nod as she puffs her chest.

Maybe bringing the Minari Kamui wasn't a bad idea. It was a horrible one. How am I going to explain this?! No, forget that. What effects will this have if people learn about it? I'm sure that the number of people that have blue katanas is very low, and all leaders must know of them. If they learn that there's no one who could have given me the sword… They might assume I came with a fake one to take advantage of it. So that's why Meiya was so aggressive towards me that day.

"I didn't knew it was so important. No wonder you got so defensive when you found it." She looks down, clearly bothered by something.

"You were chosen by someone to take their place in service of a Regent House. They must have trusted you much to bestow such an honor to you. I know you possess the skill to be granted a blue blade, however…"

"You can't trust an American with such an important item, am I right?" She winces as she hears me, but nods at my words.

"Exactly. I… Forgive me for bringing this up now of all times, but I still hold doubts towards you. I suppose 1st Lt. Tsukuyomi knew of it, and that's why she called us fellows. But you weren't aware of this. Now that you know, allow me to ask you. Shirogane, what will you do with your blade?"

I didn't expect this. I should have known the sword was related to the Koubuin House. And I have a tickling clock over my head to deal

with this issue. I know that she's worried about Yuuhi. She loved her sister a lot, and I know that hasn't changed in this world. Anyone who holds that blade could do some serious damage to the Empire now that she's the Shogun, most people in the Imperial Palace are her vassals. It may even be possible to request an audience with her and kill her during it. Honestly, this is such a stupid method to give 'status' to someone. It's actually surprising this hasn't been exploited in the past. So she will tell Tsukuyomi-san of this if I refuse to return it, and that will be my downfall.

If I'm right about this… having a 'fake' sword of the Shogun's house might be one of the worse crimes here, even worse than treason. It could be seen as an offense against the Empire's order, or the Shogun's integrity. I'm so dead, aren't I?

Can I hide somewhere on the base and fight with my voice distorted like during Niigata? I mean, Sensei might figure something out but that will only give her more trouble. We can't afford to damage our relations with the Empire. If this info gets out, I'm sure Sagiri could use it to spark a conflict.

" *The UN had a sword from the House of the Shogun illegally! They were plotting against us!"* I can already hear him saying that, this could very well lead to an earlier coup. If Sensei loses the support from the Guard… No, if the anyone from the Empire goes against the UN we can kiss Alt. IV goodbye, even if Yuuhi still supports Sensei. No way in hell that mess won't end in flames in this world.

Unless… I don't think apologizing will cut it, I don't think handing it over would solve this. But… I did this to myself, and since Sensei didn't react at all to the sword when I showed it to her after our talk, this might be a well kept secret of the Shogunate. I gotta deal with this myself, I have to be thankful I learned of this now before it's too late.

"… I think I understand how much damage one could do with it… But still, I'd like to deal with it myself." Reaching out to Tsukuyomi-san on

my own is better than having Meiya take me to her, as I hope it'll show her I truly want no problems.

"Why?" Her tone changed, her eyes filled with doubt. Shit, this is what I'm trying to prevent.

"Well, I'm the owner of the sword. Whether I'm recognized or not, it's my responsibility to deal with it."

"Then why not hand it over before more misunderstandings take place?"

"That's what I was thinking about. I'll go talk alone with 1st Lt. Tsukuyomi about this." Meiya furrows her brows again. Now what?

"Why do you wish to go alone? I could aid you in your apology."

"With all you've told me, I think it's best for me to deal with this alone." And I don't want you to learn that… I'm a faker. If she does, any and all feeble hopes of getting along I have will end up in ashes.

"You sound as if you believed that you were going to be punished. Why would you think that?" Her tone and glare, her tightened folding arms, all of her was once more blazing at me. I can only run away and look down, emptiness filling my insides.

"… Well, if I'm not seen as a legitimate owner I might get sent to prison or worse. And I don't know who I was here, what if I end up being a traitor or an exile?" Her accusing doubt is replaced by seriousness, she slowly strokes her bangs as she thinks.

"Hmm… You're right, that is also a possibility. But, well, you will return it, then?"

"No need to look at me like that. I don't want to cause trouble, if me having this blade is a problem, then I have to return it, that's all. I really don't want to part ways with it, but I can't let it be used to spark

a conflict. I can't allow the relation of the UN with the Empire be damaged because of me."

"You… You're more serious than I thought you would be about this."

"That was unnecessarily rude. What is it with you now?" I glare at her, mustering some anger to stop these cold, void waters that seeped into my lungs, making every breath hurt the more I look at her, the more those blue eyes creak open the dam of those awful accidents and in they flow, in they come with all the debris and shit mixed in the stream, filling the cold lakes in me.

Seeming to have flinched a bit, she coughs and sends a hand to the air intakes before returning my gaze again, this time having put out the fire once more.

"My apologies, I meant no offense. I didn't think you would… feel so strongly about this matter, since you lived in America for two years and lost most of your memories."

"Hey, I'm still Japanese. I may not be your fellow, but that doesn't mean I'm your enemy." Looking down, I hunch over and massage my shoulders.

I really would like to avoid a fight with Yuuhi. But I doubt the amnesia card will work, even less now that I have to give them the blade. Even if he was a 1st Lt. at such a young age, I doubt he would be related to the Shogun's House, and in the off chance he was for some reason I don't think he would have been given a Minaru Kamui. And when that happens… there won't be much I can do to salvage this mess. Sensei won't let my presence ruin her plans, who knows what she'll do in front of that threat.

… All I know is, if I don't handle this well they'll definitely ask for my head, or for me to be detained at the least. Sigh… Just what can I do to stop all this shit?

"Forgive me for doubting you." Back in the island, she was giving me a faint bow. "Well… You do not seem to be lying, but even so, allow me to accompany you when you go return it." I know that gaze, she isn't taking a no for an answer.

"Fine, if it makes you believe me. You can come with me, I guess." She smiles faintly at my answer.

"Thanks for agreeing to that. Even so, I wonder why they didn't reach out to you to explain this when you arrived here. Maybe they thought you already knew?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, honestly." I shrug, having finished my rations I lay on the ground looking at the stars, not wanting to speak with her anymore.

Sigh… What can I do? Apologize for not knowing it was a fake blade? No, I mean, it isn't a fake one. What will they think when they see it? And also, I was supposed to be a Royal Guard here. How will Sensei's cover work here? Will they believe I somehow survived without them knowing? If they don't…

… shouldn't I just restart all of this?

No, if I let this stand then, won't this data follow me later? But then, what *can* I do to stop this whole mess?

"Say Shirogane." She speaks up in a slow tone, laying down on her leaf bed. "What if… What if, when you go return the Minaru Kamui, you are asked whether or not you wish to serve the House it belongs to?"

"No way in hell that'll happen."

"Why do you say that?"

Because they know I'm not 'him', therefore I'm a 'faker' passing as a member of the Guard. And now I have a 'fake' blade of the Shogun's

house. Sigh… This is one big, effing mess.

"You really think they would welcome someone like me on the Guard?"

"… I think they would, going by how harshly I was reprimanded the other day."

"The other day? Oh right. Did they got you in the end?" She nods slowly.

"They told me to mind my words with you, to not approach you if you didn't talk to me."

I'm sure that's because they want to protect you, but they can't actually kill me for now. If Tsukuyomi-san doesn't want Meiya to involve herself with me, when she didn't do this in all my other loops, it means she sees me as a threat. And I can already guess how she'll react once I show her the blade, then. Sigh…

"… Maybe they were worried about you being close to an American. Can't trust someone like me, after all." I spit it out, not wanting to hold this shit in anymore.

"Do not be foolish! They… Well, doesn't matter now. Let's leave this talk for when we go back to the base. So, I'll take the first watch. You stay on that side, if you cross-"

"Yeah, I know. I won't put a finger on you, don't worry." She relaxes a bit, which drives another hit to my stomach. She was still doubting me.

"So long as we're clear on that. At what hour should we go towards our target?"

"I dunno. As soon as it starts to light up? We do need to do it early."

"Fine. Let's put the fire out, let's take shifts of three hours. Is that alright?"

"Yeah, sounds good."

I wrap the blanket over me, as I put on the little spray to ward off the bugs and stuff. I lay looking at the stars again. A fine first day, I guess.

I can't believe this. Thank God she mentioned this, otherwise things would have gotten ugly when this came to light. I can only hope the Empire is willing to listen instead of asking for my head immediately.

… Yawn, I'm beat though. I didn't expect so many traps today. That machinegun was totally overkill, dude. Let's hope we don't find any more of those. I curl to a side and close my eyes.

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**Around 5 AM.**

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"Shirogane… Shirogane!" Ugh… Shut up, Meiya. I don't wanna go to school today. "Shirogane, the sky is clearing already. We'll lose our window to gain points. Mmgh, give me that blanket!"

Why did she took my sheets off? She shouldn't copy Sumika in this… What is this feeling? Dirt? Why am I…

I open my eyes and find myself in the middle of a jungle, Meiya was staring at me as she smiled but with one of her brows twitching.

"Are we awake now, Shirogane?" A rather gentle tone with a wide smile. But behind it, a really angry pulse was apparent.

"Ugh… Yeah."

"What is it? Did you sleep in a bad position?"

"No… I had… a dream of my family."

"Eh? Oh, I see. Did you remember anything?"

"No, it was just… an everyday scenery, somewhat."

I had a dream about my world. It wasn't anything out of the ordinary, just one of those days where those two would fight over whose lunch I would eat. Heh, I didn't knew how happy I was back then. Compared to her, you…

"Hmm? Is there something on my face?"

I never noticed it, but my world's Meiya had a much more gentle and sweet gaze than this one. Well, considering the differences it's not weird. I guess… I'll never see that sweet gaze again.

"Sigh… Nothing. Let's eat our morning rations."

I again have less than what I should in my pack. One day I'm going to have that feast she made me for the food competition, or that super beef bowl I ordered at the cruise. Yeah man, how nice that one was. Best beef bowl anyone could ever eat.

"Why are you smiling in such a way?" She stared at me, tilting her head a bit and raising a brow.

"I'm just eating. What? I can't smile every now and then?"

"But… You're smiling from ear to ear while eating this tasteless food. What could you possibly be happy about?" She looks genuinely puzzled.

"I'm just thinking that someday I'll have the same food I had with my loved ones instead of this. What? There's no one you'd like to share a dinner with?" She nods slowly, understanding the reason behind my smile. Thanks God she isn't fighting me on this one.

We finish our food and, after getting our bearings in order, make our way to the target. Or so I'd say if this place weren't littered with traps. Thankfully we came here really early, otherwise we might have ended up arriving past noon at the cave. I'm so done with the pitfalls,

and the nets, and the random guns. Luckily there's no more machineguns hidden anywhere near.

"So this is the place?" Meiya takes a good look at the hangar from afar.

"Looks like it. I'll check for traps on the right side, can you cover the left one?"

"Leave it to me."

There were some traps that would have scattered little spikes all over but they were obvious to spot. Nothing else here.

"There's nothing on this side, Shirogane."

"Alright, let's move into the hangar. I'll check the right."

"Roger."

No traps here. But what is here is the fuel. Come to papa, oily friend. With this we can use the boat! Like last time when…

Huh? Did we… No, we didn't. But then… Huh? What…

"Shirogane, I found a tarp here!"

"… Oh, cool. There's some barrels with fuel here."

"Fuel?" Meiya gets to my position, her mouth widens as she sees the machine that's near. "Oho, a Humvee? Did you check it?"

"It doesn't have its engine, so it's useless to us." I did check, just in case. But no dice.

"Then, nothing else? It is truly a shame we didn't find a clue about the evac point."

"Yeah, let's make a fuse and blow this place up."

"Would you happen to know how to do so? I am… not particularly proficient on the manual endeavors."

… You don't know how nice it is to see that bashful side of yours again. Sigh… I sound like my Dad, wistfully reminiscing of old things.

"Leave it to me. I'll get it done."

There was nothing new in here. Now, there should be a box with some stuff that I can use to make the fuse right around here in one of these lockers… Oh, here it is. Now let's get this… Huh?

Inside the box there was a paper along the rest of the things. 'After ABC comes W' was written in it. What the hell?

"Hey, Mitsurugi! I found something!"

"What is it?" She came jogging to me. I hand her the paper I found in the box. "After ABC comes W? What does this mean?"

"Maybe it's talking about the targets? Something that comes after the targets, perhaps?"

"So it's a hint of what we have to do after? We should take it with us, the others may have found something similar."

This is a new one. Who knows what this is about? Well, no point in worrying about it. Let's make the fuse.

# Turbulent Winds

## Chapter 17: Turbulent Winds

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*November 18th. Second Day of the CCSE. 0 1:23 PM.*

*(Cliffside. Island.)*

**[Takeru]**

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**BOOOOOOOOM!**

"Look at that explosion! That went better than I expected!" It's the first time I improvise the fuse so this explosion feels more 'personal' than all the other times I might have seen that hangar get blown up.

"With such a diversion any hostiles in the area would be surely distraught with fear. Another fine work of yours Shirogane." She nods my way, an approving smile raising forth.

Thankfully, it looks like that talk we had yesterday calmed her down a bit. She still looks at me with a bit of doubt, but at least she isn't flat out ignoring me or sending knives in every word.

The way to the hill has been quite slow, we found another machinegun with a whole magazine of rubber bullets that we had to dodge. We also found some sonic mines near the base of the hill we had to avoid, and on the way to the top there's been quite some trip wires set up almost everywhere.

We slowly keep raising as the sun showers us with his heat. Honestly, it's nice to have the light but between the humidity and the heat I'm getting worn down faster than I thought I would. To make matters worse, I've had to disable a lot of the traps under the

sunlight, I can't even rest for a little while under a shadow without spotting another wire in the way.

"Shirogane, that over there isn't a cable?" She points to a rock nearby, a slim cable could be seen to its side. Another trip wire?

I get close slowly to check, and on the way I notice something weird on the stone wall. There were three 'stones' that looked somehow out of place. Slightly tapping the cable I see that the 'rocks' move a bit. What is this even? I slowly cut the wire, and the three things get ripped off the wall as a stream of muck comes forth from where they were.

Sigh… Now the wall is covered in mud. I feel like it's better this way, let's just look for another way up.

"Let's go from that side instead." I point to another path to my left. If I remember correctly, that's the way me and Mikoto always used, just that this time we couldn't go with that thanks to the sonic mines that were on the base of the mountain.

Meiya sighs with a tired face as she wipes the sweat off her face, her whole body is again drenched. She must be exhausted, even with her superior stamina with how much time we have to spend under the sun's relentless warmth it's no surprise she's so exhausted. Not like I'm any different at this point.

We climb the wall and reach the place where I got bit by a snake. I double check my belt, it's tight and in place. Not falling this time thankfully. Now then, the trap should be… Huh? It isn't under the usual leaves. Where is it?

She climbs up right behind me and starts moving forward, and as she does I see the snake that once bit me. I'm taking you for dinner. Fuhuhu! Slowly approaching the vines I quickly grab it behind its neck and snap it.

"Shirogane, what are you doing?"

"Found a snake, got it for dinner." Disgust flooded her face. Maybe she also had to eat one of these in her previous CCSE?

"Do you even know how awful they smell?"

"I brought the curry powder with me, so it's alright."

"Right, you did say so. Then, let's keep movi- A-Aaaaahhh!" Meiya stepped forward only to end up hanging from the cliff's ceiling upside down. So that's where the trap was moved, I didn't even see the wire.

"Can you reach your feet?" She was trying to bend upwards to cut the wire with her knife but it wasn't going so well. Grabbing her legs with one hand to not lose balance, she still couldn't cut the wire.

"Uuuhh… Such a simple trap. Ugh, get cut already!"

"Want some help?" She didn't look at me, but I know she's bothered by it.

"If I can't release myself from this, what kind of soldier would I be?" Stubborn to the core, what did I expect?

"The same as everybody else? We're wasting time, you know?" Her grip slips and she falls back. Again she grabs her leg and slowly tries to get her hand in position to cut the wire.

"We… still have until… tomorrow to reach the hill." She was struggling quite hard and the wire started to swing slightly.

And so, I waited for a minute. She finally cuts the wire and falls with a loud thud. That must have hurt a lot, she rubs her back while wincing a bit.

"Wanna rest for a while?"

"I am okay. There's no reason for us to stop for a small- Augh!" As she gets up she winces again, licking her lips. Why do you always

push yourself so much?

"Let me see that, we should treat it just in case."

"I'm not so weak to need rest after such a petty struggle. I can deal with this- Ah! Shirogane, stop- Ah!" I press my thumbs on her shoulders again, making her squeal once more.

"See? Your shoulders are all tensed up now. You did bring some bandages, right? It won't take long to treat you and we can't risk this pain getting in your way when you're climbing." Like hell I'll let you risk climbing with a pained back.

"Fine! I'll give you some bandages, but do not do that- Ah! S-Stop it!" You cannot stop me, not when I know where you always get tense.

"Shut up and pass me some bandages already."

"Uuh… Here." She passes me a roll and slowly starts to lift her tank top. "Y-You better not try anything-"

"Ouch, there's blood coming out. Do you have something to disinfect the wound?"

"I think I do. Yoroi recommended me a spray. Oh, here it is." She passes me a small white spray, I recognize it as the one Mikoto was always using on our usual skits when we got together in my first loop.

"Alright, this might sting a bit. So try to hold it in."

"Hmph, who do you think you're talking with? I'm not- Ahh! It burns…" Told you.

"Stay quiet. I'll clean the wound a bit with part of the bandage, and after that I'll hand it to you."

"Huh? Why are you handing me the bandage?"

"I can't really tie it myself. Unless you want me rolling the bandage on your stomach and end up accidentally touching your chest." She tenses up, she's so fun to tease.

I finish cleaning the wound and put the point of the bandage on one of her sides. After two rolls the wound was covered and I tightly tie both ends.

"And the knot is done. There, feeling better?"

"… Yes, thank you."

"What's up? Getting embarrassed?" I smile at her reddening face, causing her to pout.

"What do you expect?! You suddenly grab my shoulders like that, make me lift my clothes, and you even had to go and tease me instead of just passing me the bandage."

"Hahaha, sorry. Consider that payback for how coldly you treated me all these days."

"Uuuh… I cannot believe you're the same person that's so skilled with a blade. Anyways, we wasted enough time and I feel fine now. Let us continue."

"Yeah, I know. Let's go." Thankfully, I can joke about now. Sure, she's still quite pissed, but at least we can have peace between us.

We kept hiking to the top without crossing words. I know she isn't the same but I can't help it when she reminds me of the Meiya I met in the other world and in my own. It seems her body reacts the same though. Her shoulders are always so tense.

Eventually, we made it past the mountain. Now, this part should be easy since we're going downhill but I'm sure this place is going to be littered with traps this time. We're not so far from the hill, so we can take a slower approach to reach it. We are still moving almost as fast

as I did with Mikoto in the other loops despite all the traps. Oh, toad! Got you little fella, forgive the rude treatment but a boy needs to eat his daily portion of meat.

"Shirogane! Where are you going?!"

"Oh, shut up! Found a toad, that's all." I show her the toad and she grimaces.

"You… You truly are planning to eat them?"

"Yeah, of course. Why would I be picking them up if I wasn't?"

"Uuh… Yes, of course."

"Why the long face, Mitsurugi? Have you eaten some of these?" She jumps at my question as a thick drop of sweat tickles down her forehead.

"No, I haven't. We… had enough supplies last time. Yoroi found some… mushrooms for us." I would believe you, if it weren't for that disgusted face you're making. "Anyways, we are losing time. Leave the hunting for when we reach the hill, will you?"

"No need to get so angry. Let' go."

The way down was full of pitfalls and sinkholes. Luckily there were no more wires or guns. The rest of the way towards the hilltop was similar to the path to the target. It took us all the afternoon but we reached the top, we seem to be the first ones to arrive.

"We made it. Should we set up camp here?" Meiya says after taking a look at a small clearing between some trees.

I think this is fine, the sun is already going down and we don't want to be wandering around in the dark with how many traps are here this time, much less with her back being injured.

"Yeah, let's settle down here. Can you light the fire again?"

"Sure, are you going to take care of the traps?"

"And look for more toads!" She made yet another disgusted face as I left.

Moving in between the leaves and vines, checking every little suspicious spot, the traps are met with their disabler.… Does that word even exist? Eh, whatever.

There's a lot of trip wires that lead into a pitfall here. That over there… Another machinegun? What were they… Wait, can I disable it? Let's get closer… If I can cut this wire here… Please don't shoot, please don't shoot, please don't shoot…

… Is that it? Can I move it? I pick it up from where it was and move it around. It has a magazine in it and it's not that heavy compared to the guns we are always holding during practice. Oh, look at that! Another toad.

I return to our spot and Meiya was rubbing her back.

"You okay?"

"Yes, I am fi- What is that?!" Her eyes shot wide open as she saw me.

"A gun, can't you tell?"

"Where did you find it?" She got up and came to my side really slow, gazing at the machinegun I had with narrowed brows.

"It was set up as a trap, I saw I could cut its cables without triggering it and then got it with me."

"I would have never thought to do that. But why did you do such a thing?" She narrows her eyes at me slightly, tension in her stance.

"We may need it for something. What if we need to take out a trap from afar?"

"Hmm… Yes, you are right. But… Well, I suppose leaving it in your hands is for the best." She nods and goes back to her leaf bed.

"Want some toad?" She makes another disgusted face.

"I'll pass. I still have my rations."

I get the little pot we have in our kits and with my knife I cut the toads and the snake. I pour a bit of water and put half my curry powder on it. Now I just have to wait a while until it gets done. I set up some sticks above the small fire and put the pot above them. Shortly after, the smell of the curry powder reached my nose. This is going to be delicious, for being toads and snakes.

I caught Meiya looking at the fire and she immediately looked away, bet your tummy wants some of this. Some minutes passed and the food was done. I grab the plastic fork I have and start eating from the pot. It's better than the supplies we are given at least. Meiya was taking some glances at me as I ate.

"There's enough for two, do you want some?" It seems my offer caught her by surprise as she looked at me with wide eyes, but then she looked away again.

"No, thanks. I have my own food, and tomorrow we will meet up with Yoroi so there's no need for you to share."

"Yeah, sure. Here you go, I already got my fill." I leave the pot by her side.

"Y-You don't have to. I already have-"

"If you don't want it just throw it away." She looks down, avoiding my gaze, as she moves her lips a bit.

"… Thanks."

"Don't mention it."

We're on schedule, it wouldn't surprise me if the rest showed up tonight as well. The stars are really beautiful, just looking at them is enough to calm me down. I always used to look at the sky before going to bed, when we talked by the window.

If someone told me that I was going to end up in this causal mess back then I wouldn't have believed any of it. I mean, why did I even came to this world? I have no connection to it. Unless… No, this isn't the same world as before. It's way too different.

Then why? Why am I here? Is it because there's no Sumika in that world? So I can't will myself there anymore? But I time traveled back to October 22nd here, if I could do that then why didn't I end up in the other world at a point in time when there was still a Sumika there?

This is too complicated for me. Maybe it's because I choose to transfer myself willingly after my link got severed? Last time I went back I was still a conductor, and maybe a weak nucleus. This time I went not as a conductor, but as a stronger nucleus. I willed myself, I didn't get 'transferred' here by another force like in all the other loops. Just how I overwrote the Takeru of my world when I ran away, I overwrote this world's conductor when I arrived. Even my room was the one from 2003. Does this have to do with how the nucleus works then? Sensei said that it was drawn to the leaks when there was a strong enough connection. But what if there's more than one connection? I mean, from all the possible parallel worlds that I could have ended on, why this one?

Hmm… So the nucleus when it connects itself through a leak, instead of being the magnet it turns into the metal, being drawn by the strongest 'pull' or so I think. Then, I triggered a leak in this world by forcing myself into it with the microwave's help. But instead of appearing at the same point in time that I was in my world, I ended back on the 22nd. Because the 'awakening' of the conductor had more pull on the nucleus? That still doesn't answer why I came here in the first place. I'm going in circles right now, gotta calm down.

The Why, the How, and the When.

Why did I came here? How was I pulled to the past? And when was the connection to this world formed?

First, I had no connection to this world so unless there's some quantum shenanigans in play there was no 'when'. My world and the other world were the ones that were linked, this one was not even on the equation. So, we go to the first question. Why? What lies in this world that made me come here? I've been rejected by everyone at some point. Sensei tried to kill me, the whole base treats me like shit for being a 'foreigner', the Shogunate wants my head on a silver plate, and part of my squad was and probably still is suspicious of me. Only Kasumi has been always nice to me, probably because she can read my mind and see my emotions. So why the hell did I end up here?! Does it have anything to do with this world's me?

And that leads into the second question. How did I time travel? That only happens when the conductor dies and the loop is still in effect. I was not a conductor when I transferred, and I want to believe I didn't die during the transfer because I would… well, be dead right about now. So how did it happen? Was it because of the revisions Sensei did with her new theories? The higher power we used from the reactor? The fact that Sumika broke the loop after Ouka, blocking me from returning to that world? My emotions to save my squad? I was trying to sever the two worlds' connection, but what if I just got another world into this mess?!

Ugh, I'm going nowhere. I'll need to talk it out with Sensei when I get the chance. Sigh…

Why the hell am I even here? Surrounded by familiar but hostile faces, being pulled into this messed up Japan, blamed for being someone I'm not. I'm suddenly really happy that the me in the past loops was a nobody, imagine if I was part of the Guard like here. Tsukuyomi-san would have detained me on the spot.

That reminds me… Am I even sending data to the squad? I mean, I should be linked to the other two worlds right? Now that I'm a conductor again they should be receiving that data, and being a stronger nucleus would probably help too. Why were they so hostile then?

I look again at the stars. Just two or three days more. Once we get to pilot TSFs I'll do my best to put them to the real test. I failed to protect the three Valkyries on Niigata, so I won't fail on training you.

Meiya still didn't put out the fire, she was still waiting for the rest to arrive. Was she staring at me? Quickly averting her gaze, but was looking just now. Seems like she did finish the food.

"So, how were they?"

"Better than I expected. Thanks again for sharing it." She nods at me, sounding relaxed for once.

"Think the others will arrive tonight?" I get close to the fire, feeling its warmth on my palms.

"I don't know. We did make good time, but they might take a bit longer."

"Say Mitsurugi, how do you think things will go in the way to the evac point?" She seems to be surprised at my words, a hand of hers going to one of her elbows.

"Huh? How… Why are you asking such a thing?" Why did she got so defensive?

"We saw quite a lot of traps today, surely there will be even more on the way to it. There's also the little paper."

"Right. Well, there will surely be more sonic mines on the way, maybe two or three tough obstacles. As for the paper, I have no idea

what W could mean." She shrugs as she rests her hands on her leaf bed, stretching her legs forward.

"Me neither. So you think the sonic mines are going to be the greatest obstacle?"

"Well, that was the case last time. Unless we count our discussion as the problem." She averts her gaze again.

"Are you worried the same will happen this time?"

"Yes. I know Ayamine doesn't follow Sakaki's orders when she doesn't agree with them. And now you're here too. I don't think she'll take kindly to your suggestions." At least you're a bit less hostile now.

"I get it. Don't worry, I'll try to not provoke her. So, same shifts as yesterday?" She seemed worried for a second, but nodded at me.

I turned my back to her and curled on the floor after putting my blanket over me. Let's just hope I don't have another nightmare today.

"Shirogane?"

"Hmm? What's up?" I raise a bit and look at her, she still hasn't put out the fire.

"Where did you learn to do massages like that?" She can't seem to be able to look at me. She must be embarrassed to have enjoyed it, probably. Haha… It's so nice, hearing you without that layer of aggression again.

"We just got trained on how to relieve the strain on our partners' muscles, in case it ever became a necessity. I didn't hurt you, right?" I ask, staring at her, she doesn't look at me but still replies.

"No, it didn't hurt. But don't do it again. I won't forgive you if you lay a hand on me again without my permission."

"So… if I ask you before it's alright?" She looks at me the intensity of a thunder's roar behind her eyes and a tinge of red on her face. Teasing you is so much fun.

"Even if you ask I'll say no!"

"Such a shame… Your shoulders were really tense, you know?"

"… Thanks for worrying, but I'll deal with it until we pass the test. Anyways, that's all I wanted to ask. You can sleep now."

Sigh… She's still not entirely back to how I remember her, but she's cool with me now. That's a Gekishin off my shoulders. Let's hope we can keep being on good terms after I have to give her the sword back. Thinking about that…

"Say, can I ask you something?"

"I'm not letting you touch me again." An instant reply, huh?

"Not that. What do you think would happen to me if the Guard decided I have a Minaru Kamui illegally?" She takes a deep breath, leaving the silence hanging and faces me with clear eyes and a serious expression.

"You would either be deported, or in the worse case executed. But considering how they were with me all the times I talked with them about you, I believe you'll be fine. As I said yesterday, I think they might even ask you to formally take possession of it. I know you said you don't believe it would happen, but if they asked you… Would you accept?" She stared at me, unblinking.

"… I don't think that would happen, but I also wouldn't accept. I don't think I would be welcome in the Guard even if someone was interested in my skills."

"… I see. So that's what you think…" I thought I had angered her, but for some reason she looked troubled. Is she… biting her lips?

Is she wanting me to… become her fellow? Maybe… now that she saw I was being honest…

I'll see what happens once we're back at the base. I shouldn't get my hopes up, it'll only hurt more if she goes back to how she was all these days.

"Well, in any case, let's worry about that when we get back to the base." She nods and I curl up again, letting the stars lull me to sleep.

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**Near 6 AM.**

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The rays of the sun greet me as I was standing watch. Meiya's still asleep and nobody else got here yet. I had a dream about the time me and Sumika went to the amusement park together before Meiya woke me up for my shift. That was nuts, that roller coaster was really scary.

And how could I forget when Meiya interrupted the play of those colored rangers? Sumika and a boy got called to the stage and she thought it was real! Hahaha, she was so dumb to not realize that was just a performance. She even went and slashed the screen in half with her sword, poor support guys had to pull all the stops to fix the thing for the next scene.

Wait… How do I know that?

Stretching my arms as I raise from the floor, I glance around. What did I even do last time to kill time? I think me and Mikoto just talked about the time she was in the hospital and I joined the squad. Now, however… I don't see myself talking with Meiya for long, even if we kind of made a truce. I'm going to die of boredom, or bust my brain thinking on why I got here like last night.

"Uuugh." Meiya stirred around on her leaf bed. She looks so cute right now.

"Good morning, Mitsurugi." She seems startled as she looks at me with sleepy eyes. Her hair is a mess, now that she undid her ponytail it's all whirly down to her knees. I never asked her why she has it so long though.

"Yawn… G-Good morning, Tak-… Shirogane. Did anyone arrive?" Did she just… try to call me by my name?

"No, nobody's here yet. I'll go gather some leaves and mushrooms for breakfast, you stay watching over in case anyone arrives." She gives a faint nod as she yawns.

Now, time to put all the knowledge that Mikoto taught me to good use. These yellow mushrooms are poisonous, I gotta find the brown ones. And the bitter leaves too. After a little while I got back with some mushrooms and a few leaves. Meiya already did her ponytail and was eating her rations.

"So you even know about survival in the wild?" Sigh… Again with that surprised and dubious look?

"Hey, I asked Mikoto for some pointers that's all."

"Ah, I see."

"Well, here are your mushrooms."

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*November 18th. Second day of the CCSE. 8:43 PM.*

*(Ministry of Defense. Eiji's Office.)*

**[Yui]**

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"I can't believe you managed to convince those hard headed men by yourself. You've truly grow, Yui." Uncle says as he lits a cigarette.

"This is all for their sake, it's my duty as the survivor to honor the time we spent together. I won't let their efforts be in vain."

"I see. I only hope they are well rewarded. I'm also surprised you agreed to go to Yokohama as a UN officer, you really were against their involvement when you got assigned to Yukon."

"Well… Let's say I realized your words held some merit. It's not like all foreigners are our enemies, and also it's not like Nikkeis are traitors. There was… someone who helped me understand that."

"Forgive me for bringing those memories back. In any case, let me tell you why I called you here today." Uncle drops his smile as he takes some folders from his drawer.

"You said you had some important business to convey to me, what is this about?" For him to call me to his office at this hour, it must be something serious. Or completely silly.

"First, a word of warning. Be careful with the UN, they are really sensitive after the whole Korean fiasco. Your actions will reflect on the Empire's reputation. I'm sure you know, but it's never bad to remember that." Please Uncle, I'm not a kid anymore.

After what happened with Yuuya I know I have to try to be more open with people. I can't let my pride hold me back, much less now that the UN gave me this chance after my proposal got accepted by the Minister. With some luck, I may be able to get one Type-94-1C to Yokohama after I complete the railgun, to restart the XFJ Project.

"Duly noted. Is there anyone in particular you think I should be careful about?"

"Vice Commander Kouzuki. She moves all the threads in the base and it's a real genius, you don't want her angry at you. Keep her words close to you, as far as I know she thinks the same as you and me and doesn't want any more conflicts between the UN and the Empire. She can become a very important ally for you, if you still

wish to continue the XFJ Project." I'm glad to hear that. If I can get permanently assigned to Yokohama to continue the project that would do wonders. Especially if she is as much of a genius as the rumors say she is.

"Anyone else?" He hands me a profile. What's this? A boy? Takeru Shirogane? "Who is this boy, Uncle?"

"Kouzuki's special protegee. There's very little info about him, however he was stationed at Yukon during the incident."

"What?! He… But, I don't remember him. Was there another Japanese pilot on base at the time?" Well… I was focused almost entirely on the project. And when we came back from Kamchatka… Ugh, just remembering how Yifei flirted with him is enough to make me mad again. You two idiots… Why did you have to go and die?

"He was a Cadet being trained in a mixed unit. Apparently, part of the UN's plans to bring as many nations together as they could." So there were Cadet squads that worked like our Argos Test Flight? That's really interesting.

"How did a Cadet from Yukon become the Vice Commander's protegee?"

"Kouzuki saw great potential in him and decided to recruit Shirogane to train him to be her personal bodyguard, it seems. His scores on Yukon were apparently very good, and all his efforts in Yokohama are trampling over his Yukon data." I check the other page of his profile with his current records at Yokohama, to think such a recruit exist.

"Uncle, the reason you recommended me to choose Yokohama… It wasn't only because of Kouzuki's influence, right?"

"I liked you more when I could surprise you." He lowers his eyelids, his voice sounding low and creaking like old wood. Oh, Uncle! Be serious for once! "I got a call from a friend about this super recruit

that appeared in Yokohama. When I saw his data, I thought that if he were trained rigorously he could become a good enough pilot to be the tester of the Second."

"But he still hasn't taken the piloting test, right?" Uncle slowly squints his eyes as he entwines his fingers together.

"We have our reasons to believe he'll become a good pilot." So you can't tell me because it's some sort of secret.

Shirogane, I hope we can get along. If you can finish what Yuuya started, the relations with both the UN and America will surely improve greatly. Though, I wonder…

"Is this something I'll have to ask of the XO myself? She is his guardian after all. Or are you informing me of this 'pact' now?"

"No, Kouzuki won't reveal any info about the boy. I can only hope she'll agree to take the torch and continue the XFJ Project. That's why I said, keep her words close to you. She's the only person that might be interested in the project. Otherwise, you can forget about the Second ever being a reality again." He leans back on his seat as he sends a cloud of smoke to the roof.

"I understand. I'll do my best to show her the potential the Second has." I can't express how grateful I am. After this month of negotiations, I finally got another chance.

Everyone, all your efforts won't go to waste. I won't allow it. You can leave the Second you liked so much in my hands, Yuuya. I'll make it fly once more!

"Also a bit of advice, take some natto rolls with you when you go meet her." Uncle says as an uncharacteristic smile appears on his face.

"Natto rolls? Does Kouzuki like them?" I don't know many people that do, but geniuses can be peculiar in their tastes.

"You take some when you go there just in case. Now, onto the not so pleasant news. I'm afraid to tell you that you were used as a bargaining chip."

"What? For what purpose? What did the Empire ask?" I can't believe they had the gall to ask for something in return. We are the ones asking for a favor, can't you bow your heads for once? These developments could turn the tide of the war, they could get us the recognition you all so desire!

"We do not know who, but someone convinced the Defense Minister to accept your transfer to Yokohama as a UN officer. You know that they wanted you to be stationed there as a member of the Guard, right?" Sigh… Damn politicians. If I'm there as a Royal Guard, they won't let me near the UN's research hangars or any sensitive intel. How foolish can they be?

"So someone profited from my efforts? Do you know what they got in exchange?"

"It's a rumor as of now, but it seems that on the next session the Parliament will approve an increase in the budget for the production of the Type-94. A 46% increase compared to the current budget."

"What? That's… Where are they getting the funds from?" Uncle grimaces, closing his eyes.

"You can already guess, don't you?"

The civilian camps… Of course, lower the budgets for schools, hospitals, repairs and food centers, and you suddenly got the money to spend on TSFs. But this…

"Does Her Highness approve of this?"

"Of course she doesn't. But you know that her authority is restricted to military matters now, she can reject the budget increase but can't stop them from taking funds away from the social care system. It's

even worse when you take into account that they might have taken funds from the Kyoto Restoration Project."

"What?! But… That was a project ordered by the Emperor! How can they get away with that?"

"Yui, you know as well as I do that the Emperor has no real power nowadays. He's just a figurehead, to placate the people and give some politicians an excuse to do the 'hard things' without receiving much backlash. It's just like in the past, the Imperial family is allowed to keep living in luxury, trapped inside their palace, while the common people die of hunger and sickness. It's like nothing changed in this nation since the end of the Sengoku era." He looks down as his eyes darken, his fists and lips tighten, and he lets out a huge puff of smoke.

"Don't say that, Uncle! This situation can improve, even if I was used as a pawn in someone's board the chance I have now can bring us one step closer to our goal of mending our international relations. Do not despair, I'll do all I can in Yokohama to restart the XFJ Project, so you make sure I get the approval to remain there."

"You do know you might be branded as a traitor to the Empire for choosing to join the UN willingly?"

"Do not worry about me. I'm willing to lose my title if it means making all this a reality." He winces upon hearing my words

"I hope you know what that means. You'll be exiled from the Empire if that happens. I'm sure the UN will be more than happy to have someone of your skill in their ranks, I'm sure I can get you assigned there after a talk with the XO."

"Thanks, Uncle. I don't know what I would do without your support." He laughs again, then he hands me another profile.

"Now, that's the most problematic one of the bunch. I bet even you will be surprised about it." What is he smirking about? I'm not falling

for any tricks you may-

"Wh… The Shogun?!" Are my eyes deceiving me? What is Her Highness doing dressed in UN fatigues?!

"AHAHAHA! I knew you'd lose it!" With both hands in his stomach, Uncle starts laughing so much that it turned into coughing.

"Uncle, what is the meaning of this?!"

"Read the profile. By the by, this is top secret information. You'll have to be very careful around that girl."

Meiya Mitsurugi? She's a member of the Tozama, but why is she so similar to Her Highness? What is this? She's there under the Shogun's orders, as part of her training. There's a unit of the Royal Guards stationed at Yokohama Base to keep her safe for the time being. So she's one of the most important people of the Empire, if the Shogun arranged her training regime.

"Uncle, why are you showing me this? Wouldn't it be better if this was kept a secret?"

"Yes, it would. But, you see, my friend I told you about has a certain… reach, let's say, within the Shogun's palace. He came yesterday to deliver this letter in person. It's for you, from Her Highness Yuuhi Koubuin-sama herself."

"… Did I heard that right? Her Highness has sent a letter to me?" What is this about? Where did this come from?!

I take the letter and read it. Three times. A special mission, to watch over Meiya Mitsurugi after she gets commissioned. Apparently, the Guard's squad will have to leave Yokohama Base at the end of November so Her Highness wishes me to be her eyes and ears, to protect her protegee. But that's not all there is to it. My grip on the paper strengthens as a small veil of sweat starts covering my hands.

"Uncle… Is the last part true? About there being an accord between Vice Commander Kouzuki and the Shogun to develop new TSF technology?"

"I dunno. I didn't read the letter, if it says that it has to be true."

"This is…"

"Are you not feeling up to the task? You can always decline it, it's an unofficial order after all."

"No, I'm not scared or insecure. It's just… All I fought for this month alone, to see now so much support for me is frankly shocking. I can't wait to be in Yokohama. I'll gladly accept Her Highness' orders, tell your friend that I'll aid the XO in anything she needs from me and I'll keep watch over the Mitsurugi girl."

Finally, my prayers have been answered. I'll make the most out of this, for it is more than what I hoped to receive. I have Her Highness' trust on me, these new developments, the young pilot, I'm blessed to be given so many things. I can't fail this mission, there's too much in stake here.

"I see. I got the papers for your transfer here at the ready, let's get them done. Tomorrow I'll file them in, I expect that you'll be arriving at Yokohama on the 20th of this month. Take this time to rest, you'll be worked to the bone by Kouzuki when you're there."

"That's exactly what I want. I'll show them the results the railgun can provide and convince them to take the XFJ Project under them as well."

If I can make this accord progress our relations with the UN will dramatically improve, I may have an easier time than I thought in convincing them to take the XFJ Project. I don't know who moved the pieces to convince the Minister, but this has gone in my favor. I now know that I have the support from the Shogun, I need to gain

Kouzuki's support now. As well as keeping this girl safe. I won't let this go to waste, not after how everything ended last time.

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*November 19th. 2:25 PM. Third Day of the CCSE.*

*(Somewhere on the island.)*

**[Meiya]**

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Spotting another trap I stop in my tracks yet again. Cutting down yet another wire, I breath a sigh. I'm not making much progress here, with how many times I have to stop. This island is truly brimming with traps, more than I thought it would have.

I walk slowly through the vegetation, glancing carefully, almost like a madman, in all directions to spot anything out of place.

"Mitsurugi, is that side clear?" Sakaki calls out from behind me.

"Yes, I'm done."

"Mitsurugi-san, don't force yourself. We're all here together."

"Thanks Tamase, but I must also contribute here."

"Don't be so hard on yourself, Mitsurugi." Shirogane addressed me from the front. "You've been dealing with traps for half an hour, take it easy for a while."

"But I…"

"Rest rest, don't worry." Ayamine pats my back as she moves to take my place.

I move slowly to Tamase' side. Shirogane and Yoroi were on the front dealing with the most traps. He was still carrying the gun he

found. Sakaki and Ayamine each had a piece of a rifle Yoroi had found on her target.

We all met up around 1100 hours, with Tamase and Sakaki being the last ones to arrive. Ayamine found a paper similar to the one we found as well, it said 'Run away from the wasps', and combining it with the one we found we deduced something will pop up on our way to the evac point. Tamase and Sakaki had found the coordinates through a code.

And so, we started our march towards our coordinates on the west side of the island. We regularly switched our duties in the formation as we advanced, to give us all some rest under this heat, and now I was relegated to watching the back with Tamase.

Which means I'm alone with my thoughts again. Sigh… Why did I have this weird dream?

I saw myself with Shirogane, living together in some sort of luxurious mansion. The thing is… W-We were kissing. Quite passionately. Is a bit of physical contact all it takes to hamper my thoughts? I mean, it's not like I completely trust him, I still wish to see him hand over his sword myself before I can try to trust him again. So why did I dream of us being lovers? Makes no sense.

As I gaze at his back I feel my throat close shut again, as I recall what he told me yesterday. He doesn't even know if his family is alive. Forced to join the military, just to have a roof and a plate of food everyday. And yet he never complains, he's always doing his best.

Tsukuyomi said we were similar. We both don't have family, as Grandpa couldn't move out of our prior house when the BETA attacked. And… I was never wanted on my parent's house. He's the same, he doesn't have a place to call home. Maybe that's why he was so sad when we pushed him away?

In that sense, we both joined the UN to have somewhere to be. Even if I'm here by the Shogun's orders, someone gave him the Minaru Kamui. And he is terribly skilled in almost everything. If he became my fellow… Having him by my side sure is reassuring, however…

Sigh… Would he even forgive me? The way he spoke about the Guard these days made his apprehension palpable, he doesn't think he's welcome here. I don't think Tsukuyomi would make such a mistake, but still… He didn't know what the blade meant, what if he never came back to the Empire? Maybe he received the blade just before coming here?

Well, I can try to be more fair with him from now on. I also hope Tsukuyomi doesn't get angry about this. I shiver just thinking on what she'd say if he ends up rejecting an offer to join us because of how we were treating him and all I said these days.

We're making decent progress despite all the traps. As we keep advancing we reached a river, a large and deep ravine separating us from the other side.

"It's… pretty deep. Ayamine, take the rope you found, tie it to that tree and cross to the other side." Sakaki gives the order to which Ayamine complies without retort, to my surprise.

"Roger." And there she goes. It's always amazing to see her climb with such dexterity.

With some luck, we might be able to reach our destination well before dusk comes our… Huh? What was-

I felt a cold drop on my head, and as I looked up the sky had clouded and rain was starting to fall, quite strongly.

"Rain?!" Shirogane seemed surprised, not that I blame him.

"What bad timing." Sakaki clicked her tongue as we moved to take shelter from the downpour. "Squad, we'll cross from lighter to

heaviest. Tamase, Yoroi. Each of you take one part of the rifle with you as you cross." We all nodded, Tamase and Yoroi each grabbed one part and began to fasten it to their backs.

This really came with bad timing, it'll be harder to cross with such strong rain. There's no telling whether this will be just a squall or a storm. Sigh…

"Shirogane, Mitsurugi, how long do you think this will last?" Sakaki asks us as Ayamine ties the rope to a tree on the other side.

"I think it might be a squall, but some of those clouds look truly dark." It really looks like it won't stop for a while at the least.

"Shirogane, what about you?"

"… It might last for a few hours, probably." He says looking worriedly at the sky. Don't tell me he also knows about meteorology…

"Then, if it doesn't stop raining, should we leave the rope hanging? I think we could destroy the knot with the rifle."

"Sakaki, we would lose the only powerful weapon we have. Shirogane's gun only has rubber bullets, and it is not powerful enough to shoot the rope under this rain. In that same sense, it might come short if we ever need the anti-materiel rifle."

"How about we discuss this after crossing?" Shirogane is right yet again.

"Yes, that's true." Sakaki then looks at the other side of the cliff.

Ayamine gives the signal and Tamase starts crossing with one part of the rifle on her back. Yoroi got the other part on her back and got closer to the rope.

Hmm? Shirogane was looking towards the forest. He dropped his gun near some bushes.

"Is something the matter?"

"No, I thought I heard something. I must have mistaked the sound of the rain with something else." He starts moving his shoulders, he must certainly be tired after carrying the gun all day long.

"Don't worry. There are no big animals in the island." Sakaki says as she takes off her glasses and cleans the water they have with her shirt.

Tamase made it to the other side and gave us the okay. Yoroi starts to cross, taking the other part of the rifle with her.

I had hoped this would be a squall but it's not letting up, and those clouds look really dark. I don't think this rain will stop any-

**click**

"Mitsurugi! Down!" Shirogane pushed me away suddenly, sending me into the mud. What is wrong with him?!

"Oh man! You fucked up! Heh, point for me! You owe me a beer!"

"Oh shut it. Damn boy, how did he notice?!"

Barely recovering from the shock, I quickly stood up. Four soldiers in gray uniforms appeared from the forest, they were carrying an automatic machinegun. A real one.

"What is the meaning of this?! This island is under the jurisdiction of-" Sakaki's bark was drowned by one of their shouts.

"Shut the fuck up! Can't you tell who we are? We are playing the role of your chasers here, we are here to take you all down Cadets." Says one to my left.

"And to score some points with Jinguuji!" Said the other one to my left. Ugh, more depraved men. The UN truly is nothing more than a dumpster.

"We were not notified of this change!" The briefing said nothing about being actually chased by someone.

"Sorry babe, orders are… Hey, look! We took the boy down!" What are they… I could only gasp at what I saw lying on the mud.

"S-Shirogane!" His shoulder had a huge bruise, there was some blood coming out of it.

"Man, you're right. He really went down faster than I expected." Damn you, this wasn't in the briefing.

"Yoroi, hurry up and cross already!" Sakaki screamed towards the girl, that was trying her hardest to make haste.

"Oh, c'mon now! No need to rush, why don't you stay with us to chat for awhile?"

The four of them slowly closed in on us, pointing their guns straight at our faces, and at Shirogane as he tried to get up. This is bad, at this rate all of us will fail again. Why are you not running?! Ayamine and Tamase were looking nervously towards us from behind a tree. Wait, the rifle!

"Tamase! Mount the rifle and take down the tree!" She looked shocked on the other side, but gave a weak nod.

"Look at her! She wants to resist, that's how I liked 'em. Feisty girls are the best." I glare at the man, who simply snickers at us.

"No hard feelings, right? This is just how it goes. Now, stay put and nothing bad will-"

"SEI!" Shirogane rose up in a flash and kicked one of them. I follow his lead and send a punch at the one in front of me, sending him into the mud.

I sidestep and elbow another of them in the stomach, then grab his shoulder and throw him to the ground.

"Agh!" Sakaki! Damn them, the fired at her! I rush the one that attacked her with a punch and kick his lower parts when he tried to retaliate.

"Sakaki! Are you alright?!"

"Y-Yeah, they're rubber bullets… But they hurt a lot…" She had a giant purple circle on the side of her waist, but it wasn't bleeding.

I hear a loud splash, as I look towards Shirogane I see another two soldiers had appeared and were trying to restrain him.

The two I had thrown to the ground had gotten up and were now pointing their guns towards us.

"No more struggling! We have enough bullets to pacify you both, so stop resisting!" He wasn't lying, they will not hesitate to harm us. Who ordered this? Why does this happen to us?!

"Mitsurugi… This seems to be the end of the line for us."

"… Seems like it."

**BOOM!**

A deafening noise rumbled through the rain. Tamase shot down the tree, tumbling the rope down. The soldiers were startled, they didn't expect us to actually shoot down the tree.

"You have to escape! Run!" Yoroi shouted as she grabbed the rope, all three of them continued their march.

"Sakaki, now!" I grab her hand and start running to my left into the forest. Forgive me, Shirogane.

We need to lose them, so that we can cross and regroup with the rest. We can't… We won't fail this time! Even if I have to abandon you… Just when we had started to clear the air between us… Forgive me, please…

"Stop right there!" They start shooting at us, we barely manage to avoid their shots thanks to the trees and the fact that we are desperately running, not slowing down at all to avoid slipping with the mud.

"Mitsurugi, where are we going?!"

"No idea! We need to get some distance between us, or find a way to cross the river!"

We continue to run, bullets hit the trees we leave behind to let us know we had become the prey under the rain.

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*Some time after that.*

**[Wasps]**

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"This is Wasp 3 to Wasp 1, we're currently cornering the two girls. Over."

"Wasp 1 here, I'm retreating…"

"What is it, Captain? Oh, you're taking the boy back already?"

"No… the bastard got away."

"What?! But… you had him pinned down!"

"He broke free a short while after you all left. We tried to recapture him but he messed me up, and he injured Two quite gravely, he broke her arm. I'm taking her to the command post via boat. Seven, do you copy?"

"Wasp 7, loud and clear."

"The boy is going after the two girls, get him at all cost. Use the drug on him if you must. That bastard is really strong, don't think we could

subdue him in a fight."

"Seven, Wasp 3 here. The two girls are near to your position, according to the Pleiades. Can you and Eight set up an ambush?"

"Roger that. Leave it to us, we'll coordinate with your signals. By the way Captain, are Nine and Ten not here?"

"I told those two to stay behind, to let us handle this part of the 'test'. I doubt they'll listen. Let's complete the mission before they move."

"Understood. We'll ready the ambush and capture the girls, sir! Wasp 7, over and out."

"Good. Three, make sure you give Shirogane his well deserved payback!"

"Yes, Captain!"

# The Eye of the Storm

## Chapter 18: The Eye of the Storm

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*November 19th. Third Day of the CCSE. 3:37 PM.*

*(By the river.)*

**[Takeru]**

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"You have to escape! Run!" Mikoto shouted at the top of her lungs as the tree fell down.

To think Tama would score her shot in such a situation… Way to go, my dear. She saved our backs right now.

A second later after the rumbling sound echoed about within the rain, Meiya grabbed Chizuru and dashed into the forest. I can't blame them, not in this situation.

"Quiet!" A woman points her gun at me as I tried to struggle against the grip of the man that had me pinned.

"Wasps 3 to 6, chase after the girls!" The man in question says, and the first four rush after the girls. This works in my favor, if I only have to deal with two of them…

"Who are you?! Do you think you can get away with this?"

"Boy, the UN sent us. We are part of the CCSE, just that we're supposed to be a surprise." Yeah, right. If that's the case, Sensei better get ready to find a replacement because our partnership is fucking finished.

"Stop resisting! I'll shoot your legs if you don't stop!" The woman warned me.

I have one chance to get out of this shit. They didn't notice I left my rifle by the bushes over there. I gotta break free and then go for it. This dude isn't that strong.

"Alright… You win." I stop resisting and the man gets me up from the ground.

"Thanks for your collaboration, I rather not have to hurt you." Yeah, because the sting on my shoulder was there from the start.

The other four are too far away now. The man keeps me pinned down as the woman takes out a pair of binoculars and looks at the other side of the cliff.

"Looks like the other three really ran away."

"Well, it is what it is. Shirogane, please do not resist or we will have to harm you." Grabbing both of my hands and my right shoulder he slowly gets me up.

"I'll cuff him, Captain." The woman lowered her gun to take a pair of cuffs from her belt kit.

The man seems to be relaxed, his grip is still firm but with some strength… Okay, now or never!

"Graaaah!" I push myself backwards, smacking the back on my head into the man's face.

His grips falters and I release myself. I elbow him in the stomach causing him to fall. Before the woman could point her rifle at me I rushed and tackled her into the mud.

"Stop resisting! I'll have to-"

I pounce at him as I draw my knife from my belt kit and slash at his face.

"Whoa! The fu-" He falls backwards to avoid my slash. I kick the gun from his hands quickly.

"Stay still or I'll-" I quickly turn around and strike the female soldier with a kick, sending her gun away.

Before I could continue to attack the female, the male soldier got up and grabbed me from behind. I elbow his stomach again just in time to dodge a baton towards my face from the other.

I slash at her face as I move away from her. Of course, I didn't even hit her. She tries to hit me again but I dodge her strike and try to aim at her hand. She moves away and trips with a root.

"Desist from resisting! We will have to severely harm you if you don't!" The male one shouts as he got his gun again and pointed it at me.

Quickly throwing myself behind a tree, I don't need to worry for now. Sadly for him, I just picked up my rifle. Like hell I'll surrender.

"Who would surrender to the enemy?!"

"Look kid, we have authorization to rough you up quite badly, so if you don't wanna get hurt come out of that tree!" I don't care who gave you that authorization, I'm not failing this test nor letting any of you harm my girls! And if I have to bloody my own hands to do so… I will!

"You are the ones that are going to get hurt here!" The man's face contorts in fear as he sees the rifle in my hands. I feel again a pair of cold hands on my shoulders as I pull the trigger.

The female soldier that was getting close ducked as I opened fire on her. The male one took cover and also started shooting from behind

a tree.

"Where did you got that weapon?! I heard nothing of this!" The female one hissed from the ground.

"Shut up, you bitch!" I locked onto her again and she dashed to some bushes to avoid the bullets.

I don't have so many bullets, they might have spare magazines to use but I do not. Let's get the hell out of here. I fire one last round of bullets at them and start running. I need to go and help Meiya and Chizuru!

"Stop! We'll open fire if you do not!" A short while after that I heard the sound of wood being splintered by bullets.

I keep dashing through the traps, jumping from the trip wires, sidestepping away from the pitfalls. These guys are real soldiers, I can't lose them despite my current physical state.

Damn this! Why is this happening?! Who are they?! Are they really with the UN? Sensei, did you betray me? Or are they sleeper agents of the Shogunate? Dammit, we don't have time for this shit. Everything was going alright, and you dared to try to harm them.

I couldn't see a wire and I fall face first into the mud. Damn it! I get up and keep running, their footsteps are getting closer. The rain relentlessly falls on me, making my left shoulder ache.

I can't lose them. From time to time they take a shot at me or start screaming at me. A bullet hits the tree in front of me and I duck to my left. I trip again and hit my head against a tree. I get up hastily and resume my escape, as more shouts and bullets roar behind me.

Why is this happening to me? What did I do to deserve this?! I just… wanted to live in peace, to be able to save some of them. To keep fighting until the Earth was safe from the BETA, to protect my world from this madness. And yet this world is constantly trying to get in

the way. Do I really want to help Sensei if she knew of this and didn't tell me?

I jump over a trip wire and as I keep rushing through the vegetation I seem to have triggered some more machineguns. I pick up my pace to dodge the bullets, throwing myself to the ground when I see I won't be able to dodge them all.

"Captain! I found him!" The female had sighted me and locked her rifle onto me. She… was aiming at my face. I roll to a side as she opened fire, and grab my gun in a rush and return the aggression. I quickly stand up and resume my escape, but I stop as bullets hit the trees in front of me.

"We have authorization to use lethal force! Get out in sight or we'll shoot at you until you're unconscious!" The male voice tried to sound composed, but I could feel the anger in him.

I answer with more rubber and he has to hide behind a tree. Fuck you, damn soldiers! Who do you-

**Rustle**

I move away from where I was as the baton hits my left shoulder instead of my head.

"ARGH!" Damn her! She hit me with all her might. The pain spreads the cold sensation over all of my body as the hands are now gently stroking my cheeks.

"Don't think you'll get away with some scratches, you went too far boy!" She says as she prepares another strike.

"Come and get some!" I take out my knife and lunge at her. My speed takes her by surprise as she has trouble dodging my attacks.

I throw a kick at her and she stumbles backwards, I use the opening to give her a strong punch to the stomach.

"Stay still!" The male one was pointing his rifle at me. "Takeru Shirogane, sixth member of the Cadet Squad 207, desist on these futile actions. Surrender now or-"

"Or what?" I had grabbed the female to continue to punch her, but now I bend one of her arms behind her back as I put her in front of me. "C'mon! What's the problem? Shoot already, you bastard!" They aimed at my face, they're here for my blood. I don't care anymore, you might be with the UN, the Shogunate or the Americans for all I care. I won't forget this, whoever plotted this will pay!

"Grrr… You call yourself a soldier?! Hiding behind another? Fight me head on! What is it? You scared, kid?" He tries to taunt me while he laughs and flips me off.

"Shut up! You want me to hurt her some more?!" I bend her arm with more strength.

"Aaah! Stop that! It hurts!" Poor you, your cries are falling on deaf ears. You two were seriously trying to kill me, why should I hold back?!

"Cadet Shirogane, stop right now! You're hurting a comrade!"

"You're not my allies! You were trying to kill me, why should I care?!" I use my free hand to point my knife to the throat of the woman, who starts shivering upon feeling the metal on her neck.

"Stop! We were sent by the UN as your pursuers! This is also part of the CCSE!" The man seemed to have lost his cool act.

"You think I'm dumb? The UN wouldn't send armed squads against Cadets in this way. This bitch here was aiming her gun at my face!"

"Sorry kid, but it is what it is." The man said, grimacing a bit. "We were ordered to not give you an easy time during the test, that's all there is to this." If I were a greenhorn, I would have believed you. But that sharpened glint in your eyes… I can't ignore that.

"Then, is shooting at us without warning part of the exercise? If I hadn't shielded my comrade, you would have hit her in the head!"

"Those are the rules we live by, kid. Welcome to the military, Shirogane."

Don't give me that shit… These rules… That's all wrong, this is too messed up. Like hell I'll accept something like that!

"And? Even if you're telling the truth, do you think I'll just give up?! If you come at me, then I will go at you. Get ready to bleed if you wanna take me out." And anyways, almost everybody in the UN hates me.

I wouldn't be surprised if you decided to 'take your liberties' when restraining me. 'Oh sir, he just tripped and fell on top of the bullets! That's why his eyes are gone! Totally not on purpose!' I can see that happening in this messed up world. That's assuming you're not a double agent of the Shogunate, of course.

"I… Alright, we will not chase you anymore." He lowers his gun to the ground, he's clearly lying though. What is he- Ouch!

The woman stepped hard on my feet as she used her free hand to elbow me in the stomach. Bitch, you're gonna pay for that! I quickly reacted and grabbed her from behind before she got away and, while firmly planting my feet on the ground, got her close to me to used her as a shield from the incoming bullets the male shot at me after quickly picking up his rifle. I feel no pain, she covered me perfectly.

"Zanama! Forgive me!" The man seemed heart-broken about this outcome.

"Aaaauugh…" She wailed as tears seem to start coming from her eyes, not that anyone could notice under this rain. I strengthen my grip on her to restrict her movements.

"You bastard! Shirogane! Release her at once!"

"Why would I?! Go eat a dick, you cunt!" He popped a vein right now, this girl must be important for him.

"Damn you… I'll report this to your Instructor!"

"Say whatever you want, if you raise your gun at me you're my enemy. Even if you are from the UN." I press my knife against the throat of the woman again, this time placing my feet away from hers and strongly bending her arm.

"Aaauu… Pleeaase, I surrender. Don't hurt meeee." She was actually crying. How cute, she thinks I'll fall for this?

"If you don't wanna die, shut up. You're distracting!"

"But… It hurts. Please, I yield. I won't do- Augh!" I hit her on the head with the handle of the knife. She's pissing me off.

"HEY! That was uncalled for! She's defenseless! She already surrendered, let her-" He stops talking as I press my knife against her cheeks. It seems she isn't bleeding out, so they must be using rubber bullets or she has a bulletproof vest.

"I'm going to ask you to do something for me. Use that gun you have to shoot yourself on the foot. Do that, and I'll release her. And take off your boots while you're at it."

"What?! Like hell I'll shoot myself, I'll never walk again! Even if they're rubber bullets these things still harm people!"

"Then… I guess you leave me no choice." I put the tip of my knife against her throat. If I want to get away I need both of them to stop chasing me. Even if the woman truly surrendered, the man still wants to come after me. So I have to make him go away or to not chase me.

"I don't think you'll harm her more, you have been trained by our same teachings. Drop the tough act and surrender already!" He was trying to sound tough as he got closer gun at the ready. Heh, are you sure you should get so close, buddy?

In a quick movement I throw the woman onto him. This catches him by surprise and he stumbles as he drops his gun to grab her. Sadly for them, he should have aimed his gun at me, like I'm doing now at them. The horror in his eyes is truly beautiful for some reason. He moves the woman behind him as I open fire, it's a shame I was almost out of bullets.

He drops to his knees while holding back a scream of pain. Dropping the now useless machinegun I move swiftly and send the rifle away with a sweep of my feet, I then kick him in the head, sending him into the mud. I keep kicking him all around his body. If he covers his stomach I aim at his head. If he covers his head, I aim at his shoulders. And so, I continue to kick him with all my strength.

"How does that feel, mister chaser?!"

Being blamed for being 'an American', having to endure eating half rations everyday, being insulted for no reason, having Yuuhi send people to murder me. I can deal with that, it's my problem. I can take that.

But, do you think I'll let you harm my squad?! Sure, Chizuru and Kei hate my guts, but Mikoto and Tama were always nice to me, and Meiya seemed to finally be willing to give me a second chance. No one… No one lays a hand on my beloved ones and gets away with it! You were aiming at Meiya when you first shot at us. If I hadn't pushed her away… And you think I'll hold back now?!

"Augh… Sto- Ough! We're not.. Argh!… your ene- Aaagh!" Damn idiot, you think I'll let you off this easi- AAARGHH!

The woman! She slashed at my left shoulder with a knife! AAAGH! It hurts! You fucking bitch! With all the pent up rage I've been holding I

punch her in the face with my right hand. Despite the fact that I sent her flying against a tree, she gets up knife ready to attack.

"You're gonna regret that, bitch!" I howl with all my hatred towards this world flowing out of me.

"You monster! You're not even human!" She hisses as she charges at me.

I sidestep and aim at her hand. It may be a knife, but I can still fight using the Mugen Kidou. I do more quick attacks and she can barely dodge me, she doesn't seem to be very good at CQC. I take a step back as a feint and using the opening I kick her hand, sending her knife flying.

"Aaahh… No… No, m-mercy! I… wasn't…" Her wailing gets smaller and smaller as I get closer pointing my knife at her. Doesn't matter who sent you. Because you tried to harm them! As I was about to slash at her I'm tackled by the man. Stubborn bastard!

I plant my feet firmly and resist his struggles. He grabs the hand in which I have the knife to stop me from cutting him. Sadly for you I can also use my legs! I give him a knee to the stomach and his grip on me falters. I punch him with my left hand, making me grimace as the wound in my shoulder spreads pain through me. The cold hands start rubbing my chest as my anger starts to surge from beyond my consciousness.

He tries to get up, but I kick him again in the shoulder. Who the hell do you think you are?! Since when the UN allows Cadets to be shot at?! You all… fucking sons of an eldritch bitch… Just like during Operation Iceberg… You speak of humanity's cause, but all you truly are is a bunch of pigs feeding off the blood of the young soldiers you send to their deaths! You… You chasers are nothing but the dogs of those pigs!

"Stop! Leave the Captain alone!" The woman grabs me from behind. I try to elbow her, but she doesn't let go.

I elbow her more strongly and her grasp weakens. I turn around, grab her by the collar and shove her into a nearby tree.

"I'm so done with you!"

"How about you try me instead, boy?" The man had gotten up and was now on a fighting stance.

"Come on, then! Let's see how much you last!"

I pounce at him, knife at the ready. He moves to the right and tries to strike me with his baton. I dodge and aim at his arm. Blood dirties my blade, a scream is drowned by the rain.

As he moves away from me, I rush after. I do a feint, aiming at his wound. He obviously fell for it, giving me an opening to send a punch to his jaw with my left. A swift uppercut sent the man crashing into the mud.

"You, answer me. How many of you are here?" He spits as he tries in vain to get up.

"Fuck you, American." Oh, so that's how it is? I gather strength on my left leg and give him a kick straight in the face.

"Stop! Leave the Cap- Augh!" The woman tried to jump me, but I punched her on the face, making her drop to the ground grabbing her now bleeding nose.

"So, Captain. How many of you are here?"

"Fuck you, Shirogane."

"I want answers, and I want them now!" Grabbing him by the collar with my right hand after putting my knife on my belt, I start punching the man repeatedly with my left hand, which sends more pain into me which in turn makes me more angry. My knuckles are soon colored crimson.

"Leave the Captain alone!" The woman charged at me with her baton. I let go of the man and used both arms to block her. Damn, this hurts!

"You… I'm so done with you!" I put force into my feet and raise from the ground.

She attacks me again and gets blocked again, sending more pain through my left shoulder to my body. However, I no longer feel any heat from my wound. It's like when I got out of my TSF when I found the Shogun, I feel frozen. Yet I'm completely enraged, I didn't knew I could feel this bloodlust.

As she went for another swing I grabbed the baton and then her right arm. Fear spread through her face as I got close to her. I'm not letting you get in my way anymore! I put pressure on my grip, twisting her arm outwards. Yes, show me your pain. Scream, suffer, wail, cry, and bleed, just like I did when I lost everything. Maybe then you'll understand, maybe then you'll stop attacking your 'comrades' from behind. You did this to yourself, you awoke the wolf. And now you're gonna have to deal with its fangs.

"Aaaauuhg! Stooop! I yield! Forgive me, I surreeeeEEEEAAAAAHH-!" And with a loud enough sound to be heard through the rain, I broke her arm.

She falls to the ground screaming in pain holding her broken limb, that hangs like a piece of cloth off a wire. The wailing continues to drown even the rain, looking at her face, that had one of its sides sinking into the mud as she screamed, only made that cold sensation all over me more strong. Twitching as if she were a kitten hit by a car, she cannot even squirm away. Her mouth moves as if she were munching ice the more her screams seem to vanish. Her tears do not stop though, and she looks at me completely frozen. Unable to look away from my eyes, yet shivering and shaking her head.

I didn't knew breaking a person could be… so easy. Maybe all the shit I've seen has turned me into a coldhearted bastard, after all.

… Did I just break her arm? For real? I… did this to her, didn't I? Right now? She's in so much pain… completely terrified as if I were a BETA.

…

… What did I just do?

I broke her arm.

Why?

I didn't have to.

But she attacked me first.

But I could have just knocked her out.

But I had to incapacitate her.

But she was just trying to stop me from beating the man.

But they wouldn't hesitate to harm me like that.

She screams again, the lower end of her arm hanging limp like wet pasta in a puddle of muck and blood.

She was just ordered to act, she had no choice but to follow her orders.

… She didn't actually shoot at me when she had the chance, when she aimed at my face.

But I couldn't risk it.

Does that even matter?

I broke her arm, she won't stop screaming. She seems to again be munching ice cubes.

She's frozen in place, horrified of my gaze.

…

What did I just do? Why?

"Shiroganeeee!" The man tried to charge at me but I just moved sideways and punched him in the face. I then give him a strong kick in the waist and sent him to drink some mud.

Sigh… Calm down… I gotta do… what I gotta do. They attacked first. I just defended myself.

That's all there is to it.

I have to protect my squad, no matter what. Gotta focus on that, and do what I can.

I wasted too much time already. I want answers, and I want them now. And you're going to comply of course, unless you force me to inject more pain in your system.

"How many are you here? How are you communicating? Tell me, or you'll be in a world of pain!" Holding his neck tightly, I raise his body from the muck.

"We're… Ten… The… Pleiades…" The man says in a barely audible voice.

"What? You've got a Pleiades?"

He signals to his belt kit as I loosen my grip a tiny bit. There I find the thing, which does look like a Game Guy indeed. I see the dots moving some distance from here. Six of them.

"Is this the real deal?"

"Yes, that's what we used to coordinate our movements."

"Really?"

"It's the… truth…"

"… Maybe the girl will tell me if you're lying or not." Fear spreads through his eyes as I glance over to the crying figure of the woman.

"No, leave her alone! It's the truth, we're using the Pleiades!"

"Hmm… And what else do you have?"

"A… c-communicator."

"Is this it?" He nods as I grab the thing from his waist. As I turn it on, the sound of rain and a bunch of insults come out.

"Come here you little bitches! Stop running already!" I turn the thing off and throw it away towards a puddle of water.

"Looks like you weren't lying, Captain."

"Are you going to leave us? Or do you want more Japanese blood on your filthy hands, American?" Heh, your worthless life isn't worth my time. I have to help my squadmates.

"I'm going to leave now. But… if you follow me, I won't answer for what I'll do to you or her. Clear?" He scowls at me but nods all the same. I drop him to the ground with some force, quickly moving out.

I leave the groaning man and wailing woman behind, taking my knife, the woman's baton and the man's rifle and Pleiades with me. He is not following me, good for them.

After some time to make sure he didn't follow me, I take out the Pleiades. I make haste towards their position. Though I don't know what I'll find, I run again through the traps that are spread through the forest. I don't care if they're different, I can't lose my squad. Hate

me if you want for this, keep calling me an American all you like, but I need your help to save this damn world. I can't find a way to go back safely to my world if I can't defeat the BETA to bring some semblance of peace to the Empire first. And like hell I'll let you die.

I stop and move to my right to avoid another pitfall and resume my running, I jump over a tripwire, a gun shot a bullet at me but since I'm running it missed entirely. Damn it, I'm getting worn down. My breathing is rugged, my shoulder is killing me and my feet ache with burning pain. C'mon, I've been through worse things!

I'm almost there. They had stopped moving a short while ago, so I suppose they must be restraining them. I gotta hurry or-

"Aaaah!" A scream pierces the rain. It was Chizuru's voice.

I run towards where I thought the scream came from, looking at the Pleiades to figure out from where to approach the group. As I get closer I crouch and crawl on the muddy ground, their voices get louder. As I look up I spot some figures at around thirty meters diagonally to my right. As I slowly get closer I see that there's six of those soldiers in a circle. What the hell are they… No, you gotta be kidding me!

Meiya and Chizuru were collapsed in the mud as they kicked them nonstop.

"How you like that?! You dared to bruise my face, you rich girl! I wonder if the Prime Minister knows how rude his daughter is?!"

"C'mon feisty girl! Where is all your bravery from before?!"

I know those two. They're the usual two that pestered us when the Takemikazuchi arrived. I don't recognize the other four. They kept kicking them, despite the fact that both Meiya and Chizuru were curled without resisting. Despite the fact that the Captain said they were here only to restrain us.

"Please… Sto-Ouhg!" Chizuru's screams fills my ears as I move to a more advantageous position.

They're getting kicked over and over, these guys are not even being subtle. Meiya is also being kicked but she isn't… Wait… Meiya isn't even moving. She… isn't reacting to the kicks, not even the ones to her head.

As the thought of her being dead appears on my mind, a Takemikazuchi comes into my sight as it gets rammed into the XG. A woman looks crying at me, her face tainted with blood and tears.

Chizuru's screams as the Fort's acid dissolved her ring through my ears. The wings of fire come to me again as I was kneeling on the ground, useless as ever.

Those bastards… They're not restraining them. Are they trying to… kill them?

"Aaah.. Please… Augh! Ugh! Stop… I beg- Ough!" Chizuru's screams are getting faint. She… and Meiya might… die.

My fists claw at the handle of the gun. The sound of the rain vanishes and my vision grows narrow, focusing only on those six bastards. My heart's rhythm causes my whole body to overheat in rage, making my lungs to hold a cyclone in my chest, giving me a light pain on the back of my head.

No one… No one lays a hand on my Chizuru… on my Meiya… and gets away with it.

They already died for me many times, they gave me their support when I needed it the most. Now it's my time to dirty my hands for them! You're all gonna pay dearly for this! The cold hands entwine with mine, making me shiver with this duality of feelings. Being completely lost in anger, while also remaining strangely calm.

I aim the rifle towards them. You gray haired bastard… I sure hope you can live without one of your eyes! I shoot at his face, hitting his left eye. The man collapses screaming in pain as the rest of the soldiers look at him in shock. They start looking everywhere, pointing their guns, shooting randomly at the forest. I aim at one of the other men, slowly locking onto him I shoot. Straight to his face, the man drops to a side as he clutches his head in pain.

Two of them start coming towards my position, shooting randomly to try to scout me. Being in prone position behind some bushes, they still haven't seen me. Thanks to the rain they can't really hear well where the bullets come from since they weren't paying attention the first time.

I aim again towards the face of the last man of the team, since he was closer it was easier to get a hit. The other one finally notices me and opens fire but I started firing on her as well. Shit! Out of bullets. The woman was close, so I grab the baton and rush at her. She didn't expect my speed, and as I moved to my left to avoid her gun I drop the baton with my full force into her head. She falls to her knees and just to be sure I hit her head one more time.

A bullet hits the tree that was nearby. I duck and take cover as another one hit the place where I was standing. I peek towards their position but the red haired woman that usually was along the gray haired bastard was nowhere to be seen. No wait, she's hiding behind that tree. Near her was another man, that had brown hair.

Chizuru was still conscious, as she squirmed on the ground. Meiya was still not moving. Don't think this is all I'll do to you bastards, the wolf is in the forest and it wants to eat some rabbits.

I move slowly trying to get a vantage point to finish the ones I knocked out. They're not dead, the others start to stand up despite the pain, except the one hit in the head with the baton. Fuck this, I'll be fast then!

I take out my knife and rush the man that was close, he was still trying to get up as he was holding his face. I had broken his nose and a lot of blood was coming out of it.

My hands shivered as I approached him, but as soon as he saw me he aimed his rifle at me. Biting my lips, I speed up and kick the weapon away. As he hit the mud, I thrusted my knife in his neck. With some force I remove it and blood is spilled around.

Ducking as the red head opened fire, I crawl towards the dead's machinegun and return the fire from the ground. She stopped firing for a second so I use that window to move closer to her, throwing myself behind a tree when the brown haired man opened fire on me.

As I circled to their position, the second man I shot was trying to get up. He had a huge mark on one of his cheeks as he wailed in quiet sobs. I hesitated for a second, remembering the woman from before, but when he tried to grab his rifle I pulled the trigger. A flurry of bullets after, he drops cold as a fountain of blood pours from his now destroyed face. I switch my target to the red head as she also opened fire on me. Neither hit the other.

Sigh… I guess… it's do or die now. Can't hesitate… gotta shoot at 'em… Inhaling sharply through clenched teeth, I focus on their positions once more.

The gray haired bastard seemed to have regained his composure. He crawled behind the woman slowly. I move to the other side of the tree I was behind and shoot at him, he yelps and hurries behind some bushes as the woman and the other man fire at me. I return some heat before going behind the tree again.

I wait some seconds before rushing to another tree to my right. Bullets fly behind me but I made it safely. Now, I have a clear angle towards you.

"I don't know what's your game, but if you don't come out now I'll shoot at the two girls!" Damn bitch!

"Do that, and I'll put you to the worst death you can imagine!" Not even kidding.

"Oh really? What makes you think I'm scared?!" She's losing her cool.

I know for a fact they won't harm… Wait, how can I be sure they won't harm them? The Shogunate has many detractors in the UN, the Prime Minister is seen badly by almost all the 'Shogunist' side of the population according to Sensei. They were beating them senseless when I saw them. Then… if that's the case… I have to… eliminate them.

I peek towards their position. I couldn't see much before she opened fire again, but now I know where she is. The problem is the other dude, if he also fires at me I'll be at a disadvantage. There's also the woman I knocked out in the bushes, if she regains consciousness it'll be a three on one fight and I don't think I have that many bullets left on this thing. And the gray haired dude might also come at me. Alright, here goes nothing! I need to start taking them down!

I aim at the red head as I move from behind the tree to another and open fire. She goes back behind the tree and I use that chance to my favor.

"Chizuru! Grab Meiya and get here!" She looked at me and I saw that she wasn't wearing her glasses. Those bastards! You blinded her?!

"Shirogane?! Is that you? What are you-"

"No time for that! Get closer to me and hide behind some trees already!" Brown opens fire towards me, forcing me to hide again.

Chizuru still tries to grab Meiya's unconscious body despite not being able to see well, and once she has a hold on it she starts moving to my general position. As the woman tried to shoot at her, I opened fire again.

"Hurry up already, goddammit!" While shaking all over, Chizuru drags Meiya over a tree to my left. I open fire again towards the woman, and see that the gray haired bastard was moving from behind another tree. I open fire on him and he retreats.

"Shirogane… What… What are you doing?!" Chizuru sounded terrified, she had bruises all over and her face was a mess.

"Saving your heads, that's what!" I say as I take cover behind the tree again.

"You do know that these are UN soldiers, right?!"

"Doesn't matter! Anyone who raises their gun against you is my enemy!" I think I'm about to run out of bullets dammit, what do I do?!

"You can't harm them! We'll fail the test! We… We should surrender and-"

"And let you two get kicked to death?! Meiya is unconscious for fuck's sake! It doesn't matter where they're from, anyone who harms you is my enemy! We can't get away unless we dispose of them. I rather die than abandon any of you!"

"Dispose of… You can't be thinking about killing them, right?!"

"Killed two of them a few minutes ago, what's another stain for a tiger? And they were kicking you both quite strongly too." I open fire again towards the man. Damn, I'm not going to last much more.

"Are you… serious?" Chizuru fumbled with her belt kit and took out another pair of glasses from it. She stared at me with a stone cold gaze.

"Yes, when I saw you two getting pummeled like that and that Meiya was unconscious and that they didn't stop hitting her… I lost it. Hate me if you want, but we are passing this exam together. These bastards won't get in the way! I'll protect you two even if that gets me

expelled from the army." I stare into her eyes as they waver and she starts quivering.

"… You're not kidding? You killed… two soldiers?" She was in shock, hanging her head as her lips trembled.

"I don't have enough bullets. I'll rush and try to off them with the knife and the baton. Can you go and grab the rifle that's lying over there to cover me?" I point towards the man whose face I sicked the gun on. Her eyes went wide at my suggestion.

"You want me… to shoot at our comrades?!"

"Comrades? You can call them that after what they did to you?!"

The woman opens fire again after a while, she must have changed her magazine. Chizuru was wavering as she caressed one bruise on her left shoulder, eyes lost in the ripples of the rain.

"So, what's it gonna be?! If you want to surrender, just say so. I don't want to see any of you getting hurt, so I'm not leaving without you. What are you going to do, Squad Leader?!"

She trembles as she looks into my eyes, then after a short while she gives me a nod.

"Yes, I'll go get the rifle. Can you cover me?" I nod at her and she makes a three with her hand. She counts to three and I open fire towards the two soldiers. At the same time Chizuru rushed from the tree towards the rifle.

The men didn't see this coming and despite trying to fire at her, couldn't land a hit on as I forced him to go back behind the tree.

I swiftly circle behind the tree to the other side as I sick the rest of my ammo upon the red head, that has to back down again.

As the man was getting ready to shoot again, Chizuru took aim at him from behind a tree. Hitting his hand, making him drop his rifle,

the man quickly ducks behind a tree.

I use this chance to rush forward with the knife in my left hand and baton in the right, and as I got in range I took my Mugen stance. I flow onto the now scared shitless red head like an unending waterfall, aiming at her vitals. I kick her gun as she tried to fire and do a downwards slash towards her neck, she stumbles backwards to get away from me. I hit her sides with the baton making her fall to the ground. As she tried to stand up and charge at me, to my surprise, Chizuru opened fire on her, two hits to her lower body. The woman fell to the ground wailing in pain. I use this chance to give her a strong kick in the head as she tried to get up, sending her onto a puddle of water and mud.

"Damn you, punks!" Brownie came at me with his baton and one swollen arm.

This guy is good on CQC, goddammit. We trade blows trying to find an opening. Chizuru was shooting at the gray one, to prevent him from sniping me.

I take a step back as the brown haired one rushed at me, moved to his left and smacked my baton against his face. I step on his swollen arm, making him scream.

As I was about to drop my knife into him, a searing pain assaults my back.

"Aaaaauuughhh!" I fall to the mud as well, my back twisting in agony. The gray one must have shot at me…

"Shirogane! Are you alright?!" Chizuru circled behind the trees near me. What the hell… are you doing?

"You. Drop the rifle or I'll fill you with rubber too!" I could see Chizuru shivering from my position. I gotta stand… "You stay on the ground!" I can hear him near.

"Chizuru, shoot!"

"I… I…" Dammit, why are you not shooting?! You were being kicked mercilessly a second ago!

"C'mon! Drop the rifle where I can see it!" The gray one shoots at the tree were Chizuru was hiding. The other man is standing up.

"We're gonna tear you apart Shirogane." He said with a scowl on his face.

Dammit… Is this were I die? All my efforts for this?

"Do you call yourselves soldiers?!" Chizuru started screaming from behind the tree. You idiot, they don't care about words! "Have you no shame, attacking Cadets like this?!"

"Shut up! What do you know? You're just the spoiled little bitch of the Prime Minister. Drop that rifle if you don't want to-"

"None of you deserve to be in the military!" She quickly moved from behind the tree, but then threw herself to the ground in a flash, aiming at them.

Her first shot hit the gray one's leg, making him drop to his knees. The second didn't hit the other one, but forced him to move back.

Seeing an opening, I got up gritting my teeth. Grabbing my knife, I aimed at the brown haired one. Splashing through the puddles, he tried to put some space between us. But it was futile. I rushed after him, pushed forward by the adrenaline of the pain coming from my back, and once I got him in range I slashed at him.

He tried to shield himself, which made me cut one of his palms. Blood and screams came out pouring. Using what little strength I had left, unable to again send my knife at him, I instead kicked him hard in the stomach, making him fall backwards.

"Stay quiet!" Chizuru threatened the gray one, who didn't want to stop moving.

As Brownie tries to get up, I give him a strong kick to the face and he drops cold. Shit… I'm really spent. The pain is coming to me… I don't think I'll be able to stand for long…

"Ogun! Crouch!" A voice I wasn't expecting to hear reverberated through the rain.

The red head got her rifle and aimed at Chizuru. She barely managed to duck to dodge the bullets.

"Damn you bastards!" Fuck being tired! Just one more push!

I throw my knife at her, hitting her arm. I rush at the gray one, grabbing his rifle after kicking him.

"Away with you!" I shoot at the woman's legs as she tried to hide behind a tree. She falls and cries out in pain.

"You bastard!" For a second, I thought the man was coming after me. But he rushed past me, kneeling by the red head's side. "Damn you bastards! Ruri! Open your eyes!" The man sounded broken as he screamed at the woman, begging her to speak.

The woman squirmed in the ground trying to get up, but was met with waves of pain as she falls again onto the muck.

"Ruri! Are you alright? Talk to me, Ruri!" A sad howl came out of his lungs as he gently moved the woman to look at her face. To think they got a bandage on his eye and he went and wasted his chance like this.

He's wide open, what a fool. I gather my strength and give the man a hit with the baton to the back of his neck. He drops to the side of the red head, but slowly he makes an effort to get back up. I kick his

head and stomp on it. I'm not going to let you two walk this off. You're also going to-

"Shirogane!" Chizuru yells at me. "That's enough. They can't fight anymore. Please… Don't… D-Don't harm them." She was shaking all over.

"After what they did to you? They could have killed you with one of those kicks to the head, you know? They might come after us again, we have to kill them while we can." I mean, I did let that 'Captain' guy get away. I know what I'm talking about here, he might come back with the other two he said they had. He did said they were ten.

"Even so, please… Let's go. I… know I'm no position to ask anything of you. But please… I'm begging you." She looked pleadingly at me, quivering in place.

She wasn't even trying to threaten me with the rifle, she was just standing there begging me to stop. I just noticed that it had stopped raining at some point, so what was coming down her cheeks were tears.

"… Fine. Treating your wounds is more important, after all. Let's go." The things I do for you girls. I should kill them to avoid getting chased again. We don't have enough bullets to shake them off if they come back after us. I was really lucky to have found that machinegun yesterday.

I put my weapons in my belt, and as I do so I feel the Pleiades on it too. If I take this with me, they will track its signal. After throwing it away, I go towards the girls. I grab Meiya's left shoulder and Chizuru grabs her right. And slowly, we move towards the west. Looking back, the soldiers weren't coming to us. The gray one was cradling the red head on his arms, not even looking at us.

Hopefully the cliff will have a lower point somewhere on the island, we should be able to cross the river at some point. But for now, we have to put some distance between us. At least I saved them. I can

still feel warmth from Meiya's body, she isn't dead. We just need to patch them up, rest for a while, until we recover our energy to march again.

We won't fail this. I'll guide you all to victory, even if you end up seeing me as a monster by the end of this. That's one of the few things worth protecting in this world, at least for my own sanity's sake.

# Clouded Horizon

## Chapter 19: Clouded Horizon

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*November 19th. Third Day of the CCSE.*

*(Near the river. 0 9:37 PM.)*

**[Takeru]**

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"….Then I heard you screaming, and after seeing you being kicked so mercilessly I snapped. I won't make any excuses, I let my rage take control of me."

"….I see. I'm amazed you could fight in such a state." Chizuru was treating my shoulder's wound.

We walked a lot after we decided to get away from the soldiers, but luckily we weren't so far from the river. It was too dark to keep moving so we decided to rest for the day, Meiya was still unconscious. I'm completely spent after today, I can't even get up probably.

"So, what happened to you guys?" Her hands suddenly stop and I can sense her tense up.

"Well, we… tried to get away from them. But they quickly catched up to us. At one point I tripped and lost my glasses."

"And what then?"

"We kept running, as Mitsurugi held my hand tightly. They kept shooting at us, saying all kind of insults." She stops for a second and I felt a cold drop on my shoulder as her hands began to shake. "Hic… When they got close I tried fighting back, but I just fumbled

around. However… Sniff… when I actually hit one of them a man got really angry and… he pulled my hair so hard, smashed my face against a tree… They threw me to the ground a-and…. Hic…"

Tears flow down her cheeks as she remembers what happened, hands still shaking. She's trembling as if it were snowing, and that only makes me bite my lips. I coil my hands to restrain a howl. Her composure scattered away like pieces of a puzzle, the broken image left on her complexion put more anger in me.

"Then, Mitsurugi assaulted them but they all ganged up on her, a woman kept me pinned on the ground so I couldn't do a thing to help her. They beat her up with their batons until she collapsed, and then… they kicked at us while laughing, saying that we were never gonna graduate. That we would end up as 'comfort corporals' in the base." Wait, what the actual fuck does that even… It can't be what I'm imagining, right?

"And then I showed up, I guess." She nods as she finishes tying the bandage on my left shoulder.

"I can't… say that I approve your methods but…" She wipes her tears and slowly sits to my side. "I felt truly relieved when they stopped kicking me. I thought the Instructor might have come to help us, but even when I heard your voice I felt glad. To be honest, I didn't recognize you at first." She wraps her arms around her knees, the crows in her tone eased up. She looked at me for a moment, then she again digged her gaze into the ground. "After seeing how angry you were for us, how far you were willing to go to help us… I… I'm sorry, Shirogane. We ran away without you, we abandoned you." She bows deeply, almost hitting her head with the mud.

"Don't apologize, you did nothing wrong. The ones at fault are the bastards that ordered this thing."

"No, it's not that. I… Well, I didn't really… trust in you, at all. When we started running…" Her lips twist inwards, she hugs her sides. "I didn't even look back, I didn't even care. And yet you… You stained

your hands with blood for me… Sorry, for everything I've said. Forgive me."

"Sakaki, it's alright. I did what I wanted to do. You don't have to force yourself, I know you must hate this, being forced to cooperate with an American that killed your fellow Japanese soldiers."

"Huh? Well… I mean… If you could explain why you… No, I… I was in the wrong. You're not like the Americans! And those soldiers are the ones in the wrong!" Chizuru's eyes narrowed and turned into chainsaws, I've very rarely seen her this honestly angry. She slowly rose and punched the tree.

"H-Hey, calm down! You're still hurt, remember?" I pull at her pants a bit and she again sits down by my side.

"… I was just letting my frustration out. But you're not like the Americans, and those soldiers committed abuse against a defenseless opponent, they will get punished for it. Sure, you might have gone too far… But I don't think… what you did was wrong." She then remains quiet, looking at the ground.

A small smile makes it way into my face. I might have done something horrible in my fit of rage, but… They're safe. That's what matters. I'm too tired to scan her face to see if she's lying, but even if she is I don't care. She's alive. Though I really don't want to go through something like this again, the thought of losing them again tore my heart apart.

And yet it was that pain what gave me the strength to fight. This cold embrace gave me stalagmites far mightier than any sword I ever had.

A gale howls strong through the night, from somewhere on this island shadows are coming for me. The Captain and the other two members of the chasers. To survive these harsh nights, to do the necessary cruelty, to protect my beloved ones, shouldn't I rely on my

greatest power? Shouldn't I let these hands freeze me over? If it means being able to kill without remorse…

A cold winds blows, a faint moonlight covers me. My vision grows narrow, distorting the light as the shadows turn into a wall of pure dark. Like hell I'll let harm come to them again. My heart wouldn't endure seeing them die, even if they're not who I remember them as. And yet, the other three might…

I beg of you, frozen hands, give me a pair of ice wings, the strength to become a maverick, to face this mad world. I have to keep fighting, I have to keep tearing. Until the day I find a way to regain my life. Until I can leave this place forever, I'll try to keep them safe. However, Sensei didn't tell me of this. Can I… trust in her if she hid this from me?

Slowly, painfully so, the hands rub my back. I feel strangely better all of a sudden, the world around me recovered it's color. I gaze at the moon, it's so beautiful when it's full like this.

Did I use to look at it so much? Hmm… But from where? My house doesn't have a way to reach the roof, and… this memory feels different than the view at the tree on the hill. Who was I with? For a second I feel lightheaded and everything around me spins slowly but then it reaches my ears, a soft voice piercing through the sounds of the jungle.

*"Will you promise to look at it when it's full? That way our gazes will meet under the same sky looking at it. No matter how far away you are, we will always be connected through the moon!"*

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I look around me, scouring every shadow, every tree. I just heard Sumika's voice very clearly, as if she were right by my side. What the… We never had… a conversation like that as far as I know.

"Shirogane? What is it?" Chizuru was looking around too, apparently startled by my actions.

"I… thought I heard something. The nerves seem to have gotten to me."

"Oh yeah, I know what you mean. So… Um… How are you feeling?" Never thought I'd hear this soft, sweet voice from you.

"I'm feeling fine, despite everything. So, now that you know I killed those soldiers, you won't abandon me?" She dislikes me a lot, so I need confirmation on whether or not I can trust her.

"I… I swear I won't. I owe you my safety, even if Mitsurugi objects I'll take your side. I always repay my debts. I swear this on my mother's name, I won't betray you again Shirogane." She looked at me in the eye with a fire glowing in hers.

Wait… Her mother? I don't remember this Chizuru ever mentioning her mother at all. Weird, another difference to the list.

"Are you sure, though? Then, what are you planning to do when we get back? You're reporting my 'killing spree' to the Instructor, right?" She looks down as her hands start shaking.

"T-There was… no warning that we would get chased by armed soldiers. And they didn't… limit themselves to capture us. I think your actions can be explained, not justified, but I do not think you'll be punished. As you said, they kept kicking us when we were defenseless, they could have killed us with a strong enough kick to our heads. You saved our lives Shirogane, at the very least I will testify on your behalf on this matter if anything happens." She stares right at my eyes, with that slow glow Chizuru always has when she's serious. I'm glad to know that you're on my side, for now at least.

"Let's leave it at that then." I lean against a tree as I watch the stars again.

Tomorrow is gonna rain again, we gotta cross fast if we wanna get past this cliff. Otherwise… I feel that blood will be spilled in large

quantities. Those soldiers won't let us get away without trying to return the aggression.

"Shirogane… Can I ask you something?" Chizuru gets a bit closer as she slowly adjust her glasses.

"What is it?"

"Are you truly a Cadet?"

"Again with this?"

"Don't misunderstand. It's just… The way you defended us, what you said when I confronted you, it seemed as if you had already been deployed at some point." Ugh, whatever. I guess I can try to explain something to placate her curiosity, even if it'll confirm I come from America, according to the cover.

"I was… stationed at Alaska. I woke up one day in a hospital without any memories of my family or my life, and I got inducted into the UN army."

"Huh? Alaska? Wait, you lost your memories?!" I again explain the situation, according to what the records say.

"And that's the gist of it. This is classified so don't speak a word of it to anyone, but right now I couldn't care less. In my base, there was some program to train Cadets from all around the world. Everyone in my unit was from a different country." Half truth or not, I am an outsider in this world.

"Really? Wait… Could you have been stationed at Yukon Base?" Her voice turns into a whisper, perhaps realizing what I was about to tell her.

"Yeah, I was part of a Cadet Squad of the UN at Yukon. So I didn't belong to another army, I just got transferred to another UN base when my squad got wiped out."

"… During the Yukon Incident?" I try to remember what happened during the XM3 trials last time. Feeling my stomach turning, frowning instinctively as the memories come back to me.

"Yes. It was so sudden, BETA started appearing from the ground. The lasers burned the sky, everybody was screaming, TSFs were exploding left and right. It was… a massacre."

Chizuru has her eyes glued to the ground as she listens to me.

"My whole squad already had permission to pilot, so they were assigned to cover some ground. I was…. In a tank, providing support. But in the end all I could do was watch as the BETA killed them all."

"Shirogane that… wasn't your fault. You couldn't have done anything in such a situation."

"Yes, I could have. I could have killed one of those monsters before it was too late." Fucking Superior, I swear I'll erase you as fast as I can this time. No talking, no negotiations.

"Too late?" Chizuru stares at me, waiting for me to continue.

Meiya's last words come back to me again, I can't hold back the tears this time.

"There was someone… I liked a lot. I relied on her for almost everything I did. She always had the right word of advice for me when I needed it the most. She… got trapped by the BETA… and I had to shoot her TSF down. I killed her." Chizuru's eyes go wide as her lips tremble.

"You… Is this what you meant when you said that you got someone killed?"

"Yes, if I had not being a coward… I could have killed the BETA before she had to sacrifice herself to stop them. I will never forgive

myself for that. That's why… when I saw you two being harmed by those motherfuckers… I lost it. I will never let one of my squadmates die in front of me without putting up a fight. Never again!" I hit the ground with my right hand, splashing mud on my pants.

"Um… Shirogane, it wasn't… your fault, you know? I mean, you were…" Chizuru couldn't find words to say and simply remained quiet.

"That's why I trained so hard, to surpass myself. That's why I was so happy to be assigned to your squad. I guess… I just wanted a place to belong to, a place to call home. I didn't want to… be all alone again." Again, I shiver as those cold hands reach my shoulders. "Heh, guess that's just my destiny." I wipe the tears from my eyes. What a great savior you are Shirogane. Can't face your own mistakes without tearing up.

"… Sorry."

"Why are you apologizing? It's cool, I get it. You don't want to mix yourself with a foreigner, I won't get in the squad's way anymore. I'll just shut up from now on and when we get back I'll ask Sensei to take me out of the squad. Assuming I don't get kicked out of the army." Chizuru faces me with a conflicted expression as her mouth opens and closes, as if she didn't knew what to say first.

"No, you don't have… Tamase might have been right. We should… have talked things out with you from the start." I stare at her in disbelief and saw her holding back tears. Why is she… Chizuru never cries, unless she's feeling like shit. And I do not like it when she cries.

"Don't cry, Sakaki." I wipe the few runaway tears that betrayed her efforts, then I run a few fingers over her cheek to calm her down. I smile at her quivering face, leaning back again. "You chose what you thought was best, I'm not trying to make you feel guilty or anything."

"It's not that. It's just… I can relate… to what you went through. I feel awful because I know how horrible it is to have to live while carrying someone's death on your shoulders." She's trying real hard not to cry, she took her glasses off and rubbed her eyes quite strongly as her body quivered for a sec like jelly in front of a fan.

"You can relate? Did you have to fight the BETA at some point?" I don't recall that ever happening, but then again the list of differences grows bigger each day.

"What I meant was that… I also lost someone important without being able to do anything." Her voice cracked at the end there.

"Sorry, I shouldn't have asked. Let's leave it for today." I don't want to make her uncomfortable, last thing I want is to see her cry.

"No, you told me your story despite it being classified intel, all you had to endure to survive alone. It's only fair that I tell you my reason to fight, and it'll also work as an explanation of why I pushed you away." What does that mean?

"It has something to do with the fact everybody got super defensive when they learned I came from an American base?"

"Indeed. And since you've already seen the BETA I can tell you everything in detail." I gulp as she mentions them. So she already had an encounter with the BETA? "You see, my family was rather wealthy. We weren't nobles but we lived really well. My mother was a teacher at an important school in Kyoto, and my father was a member of the Capital's Congress. We never got along very well but…"

"Family is family." I smile wryly as I remember all the times I argued with my parents over the most stupidest things.

"Yeah, family is family." Chizuru smiles too, taking a breath before continuing. "I had always wanted to join a military school but they never allowed me, saying there was no reason for me to fight. All of

my friends had enlisted in the IJA Youth Training Program, I was the only one left out. My mother wanted me to follow her footsteps and become a teacher, she always kept reminding me of the importance of that role. In retrospect, she was only trying to keep me away from the horrors of war but I saw it as if she thought I didn't have what it takes to become a soldier. I always… kept saying hurtful words to her, my Father also opposed me quite harshly and pretty much blocked any chance I had to enlist with some contacts he had. I think he was more worried that I would be used as a bargaining tool by his political enemies." Right, her dad is the Prime Minister here so if she was to become a soldier, any decision he might take to favor the IJA could be taken out of context as him favoring his daughter.

"It must have been hard for you, being negated like that. Is that why you're so determined to prove your worth to the army?"

"Well, yes. When I first enlisted I was obsessed with doing everything perfectly, that only made my interactions with Ayamine much more worse." I can already imagine how much you two must have fought. "But that's not the point. Before I got accepted into the UN, we were living in Kyoto. W-When… the fall happened."

I remember the reports I read, the Capital fell in a single night like all the lands to the west. They couldn't put up a fight despite the Shogun's personal unit being out there as well, they still kept fighting for around a month to try to drive off the BETA but the city had already suffered a great harm by the first night after the BETA broke through their defense line.

"I frankly can't believe the capital's defenses fell in a single night. To think they couldn't stop the BETA from entering Kyoto with all the Royal Guard stationed at the frontlines." Well, they didn't have the Takemikazuchi back then so it's understandable. But they should have had many Shiranuis available at that point.

"There were many reasons for that. The most well known one is the retreat of American and UN troops." She frowns as a disgusted tone filled her voice again.

"I read that the Americans and the UN abandoned the mission because they tried to impose some orders to the Shogun."

"That's half the truth. This is secret intel so don't tell it to anyone, but my Father told me that the Americans could tell the mission was going to fail and proposed a tactical retreat to the Shogun to then nuke the BETA with napalms. Obviously, all the nobles refused and that turned into an argument. The Americans called us close-minded retards, the Shogun retorted with cowardly slavers. The discussion spiked and the American General that was stationed in the Empire due to the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation ordered all American and UN troops to retreat. This marked the end of our good relations with the Americans." Ah yes, the grudges and pride of the Empire. Why are they so prideful this time around?

"And that sealed the fate of Kyoto, right? That's why the foreigners are so hated?" She nods quite angrily, brows tensed into a sharp V.

"I can't say that what the prior Shogun did was right given the situation, but the Americans were also in the wrong. And that's not all that went wrong that day."

"You did say that it was only half the truth, what else got wrong?"

"First, you do know how many BETA attacked the Capital right?"

"I did read on it, they were close to 70000 if I'm not mistaken. I think they halted their advance for a week until they broke through and destroyed Kyoto in a single night."

"Correct. The Americans wanted to bomb them before they got too close during that first week, but since that would have killed all the remaining population to the west of the defense line set on Arashiyama, the Shogun vehemently refused. Fighting those numbers without powerful bombs was suicide, but the Shogun was confident that the land mines they had set up would be enough to deal with the smaller strains of BETA and that the new TSF they had would make a difference in battle."

"You mean the Shiranui?"

"Yes. The first part of the invasion went especially bad for us because the BETA decided to attack during a typhoon, so after gathering all the best troops the Empire had in the Capital, I think it's safe to assume that they got overconfident." She makes some circles in the air with her finger as a sad sigh escapes her lips.

"Ugh, this sounds like the best possible train wreck had a child with the best possible natural disaster." I spit on the ground, an awful taste like the one I had when I woke up to a destroyed base last loop again flooding my mouth.

"However, the Empire had little experience fighting the BETA and the Americans didn't want to put up with our goals. While the plan to hold out the larger strains did work, without the American and with the UN's troops caught in the crossfire, the plan fell apart when… w-when…" She starts trembling, unable to finish her sentence.

"Hey… If it's painful you don't have to-"

"When the Warriors pierced the final defense line."

"Huh? The Warriors? Not the Tanks or Destroyers?" I haven't fought a Warrior in any of my loops as far as I recall, not that I want to be close to one of those outside of a TSF cockpit.

"You see, our troops weren't well trained in the use of canister ammo, so they couldn't perform area control or area denial tactics as the situation demanded according to my Father. While the larger strains were more obvious targets, many Warrior-Class slipped through the TSF fighting at the frontlines and reached the last perimeter around the city. From the start we didn't have enough TSFs to fend off the BETA, so when the city requested aid the battle got worse. The defenses were meant as a last effort to save some time, and as far as I know they only had a bunch of tanks and the rest were foot-soldiers with machineguns."

"Wait a second… They didn't leave a single TSF in the rear?!"

"No, that would have been a disgrace to any pilot, noble or not. To be sitting doing nothing while their peers are out there risking their flesh and blood for our nation would have been a punishment worse than death for them. The UN was sent to guard Osaka after the mess with the Americans, so they said they had their hands full. As far as what my Father told me, Arashiyama Base was the official last defense line since no one thought the BETA would reach the perimeter around Kyoto in a single night." That's bullshit, it has nothing to do with honor. Throwing your life away and not consider all possibilities is just madness. That's no honor, that's just blind ego.

"No wonder the mission failed. Nothing could have gone worse." Chizuru grimaces as she lowers her head. "Don't tell me there's more."

"Yes, there is. Considering how well our forces were holding out during that week, the Shogun was so sure of his victory that he didn't order the evacuation of the Capital's citizens, not even after the Americans retreated." Didn't evacuate? So when the Warriors attacked…

As if a hammer had hit my stomach, as if I had tried to swallow too much water and some of it went down my lungs, I could do nothing but grimace at the thought of it. Again feeling cold all over, nothing but tightening my fist could clear this feelings.

"You have got to be kidding me. How could the Shogun decide something like that? Looking at the numbers it would have been obvious that the city would have become a battlefield. To not evacuate the civilians… That's madness."

"There was a broadcast a few days before the fighting began, you see. The Shogun proudly announced that all Battalions from the 3rd to the 18th of the IJA along the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 15th and 16th Battalions of the Royal Guard were stationed at the capital and its surrounding areas, forming a wide defense line from Osaka and the

bay to Kyoto's outer rims. He proudly showed in TV the near two thousand TSFs that would take place in the battle. Almost a thousand Type-94, around five hundred Type-89, and the rest were Gekishins and Zuikakus. The Empire brought its best soldiers together to protect the capital at all costs, that's why after we lost we had to retreat all the way to Tokyo. We still haven't recovered from that, we still seem to have a shortage of Type-94 to this day."

"So they were confident that they could win with their aces fighting side by side, but forgot about the infantry types and when they had to send reinforcements to the city they couldn't deal with all the BETA. Sigh…" Chizuru sighs with me.

"Exactly, as far as I know everything started going downhill when the Laser-Class got too close and took out three important field commanders of the IJA that were on the frontlines, and then they teared our vanguard apart. As you can imagine by now, most people in the Empire won't admit that what they did was a mistake because that would be like shaming the pilots that gave their life for us, we wouldn't be honoring their sacrifice if we blamed them for the fall. So instead we placed all the blame on the foreigners, that got easier after Operation Lucifer when they dropped two G-Bombs on us without warning, killing around half of our frontliners in the blast. It was a scandal all over the news, some people were even saying that we had to 'recover' our land from the UN. The attitude of some foreigners I've met hasn't done much to change the prejudices I held towards them. They're always talking about aiming for the result, regardless of the methods they use. They don't doubt to abandon a comrade if it becomes 'dead weight'."

Guess that explains why everybody treated me like shit. It wasn't documented anywhere but that kind of thing was 'common sense' in this place, so a Japanese that joins hands with the foreigners is seen as a traitor because the Empire blames them for all its problems instead of admitting that it did wrong things too. But I suppose criticizing the Shogun is a crime here.

"So when the last defense line got breached around a thousand Warrior-Class swarmed into Kyoto. In the middle of the night, while we were all confident that the Shogun was going to deliver victory, sirens boomed throughout the city." She buries her face into her arms, retracting her legs close to her body. "I remember that my Father came with a soldier and ordered me and my Mother to evacuate. B-But obviously nobody had prepared vehicles to transport the people, so the only transportation available was given to the nobles. The rest of us had to escape on foot."

I love how here they always say that people have to give their life for their nation, but when things get rough the nobles pull an 'F this shit I'm out' card and get themselves to safety without sparing a single thought for their civilians. According to the records, only the Royal Guard managed to survive the Battle of Kyoto with more than half its crew alive. Exhaling through gritted teeth, I hold back on hitting the ground.

"Chizuru, it's fine. I already know why everybody hates my guts, don't force yourself to continue." She might be a different person, but I still don't like to see her face stained with tears.

"Please let me finish."

Raising her face again, she wipes her tears and, after taking a deep breath, she continues. It does look like she wants to let this out, so I'll listen without interrupting her anymore.

"I… We had to escape towards the eastern exit. As we moved, some soldier squads came to escort us to a group. We were many people quickly marching through the streets, I could hear the explosions at the distance, the sound of guns all over the city. We were near the exit, I could see the gates to the highway already. I thought we had made it out safely, but…. Some Warrior-Class appeared from the rear, they got close to the group in the blink of an eye… T-They started rampaging through the people, they tore them apart in mere seconds. The soldiers tried to fight back but ended up getting killed. In just a few seconds… hic… everyone got…"

Imagining how that happened… being chased by those monsters… the city being blown up… More and more hammers strike at my stomach, something seems to be clogging the base of my throat.

I wait in silence, waiting for her to calm down. After rubbing her eyes again, she continues.

"I was trying to get away desperately when one Warrior started charging at me. I froze, I thought I was going to die there. But my Mother pushed me away, and I… I could only see as that m-monster cut her in half."

Neither of us said a word for a long while. Only Chizuru's quiet sobbing could be heard in the night. What the hell is wrong with this world? Why did things turn out like this here? I thought things were bad in my past loops but… Sighing, some tears also leave my eyes. It makes me feel so… empty, so frustrated. Always because of those idiots up above who don't give a shit about lives so long as they're alive after the mission. I just can't understand why something like this had to happen.

A hand quivering, I hit the ground. Leaning back onto the tree, I again look at the stars as I frown and bite my lips, Chizuru keeps sobbing.

"I thought I was going to be next… but then some Zuikakus appeared on the sky. They had no problem killing the Warriors, even if they had to mercy kill some people along them. I was saved by a few seconds, had they arrived half a minute later everybody would have gotten killed."

She takes a second to wipe the waterfalls that dropped from her eyes, and after a short while she keeps talking, this time without tears tainting her face.

"Some days after I got to the shelter and calmed down a bit, I thought of what could have been done to prevent that tragedy. That's when I decided that I wanted to become a surface pilot, to

understand about the battle protocols and someday become a General in the IJA. Someone who can guide our soldiers to the best course of action. If we had more experienced or knowledgeable commanders such a failure would never have happened, someone had to bring more options to the Shogun but no one had the valor to do so. We need to get stronger before the BETA strike again, without the help of the foreigners. The Empire needs to regain it's strength before it's too late!" Her devotion was apparent in her tone, and her eyes sparked to life with burning determination.

"But… why did you join the UN and not the IJA?"

"Because that's the only army my Father allowed me to join, I was still a minor back then so I didn't have a say in it. He was not pleased with my decision and it took me months to convince him to let me enlist. Of course, when I saw the UN's logo on the papers he brought me we had a fight over it. I can understand why he did that, but still…"

"Well… I can understand your hate towards the Americans, but why the UN? It's not like all the foreigners are your enemies. The troops that were here back in the '98 weren't all under the American's army, they also fought during the invasion."

"Even so they're the same. The UN didn't come to Kyoto's aid, just like the Americans, and from then on gave very little support to the Empire until Operation Lucifer. I remember the news back then, the UN kept insisting on moving our defense lines more and more, and thanks to that the MDF and the Royal Guard were left alone to protect the lands beyond those imaginary lines they decided without consulting us. I'll never forgive them, they ran away to safety without sparing a thought for us. They could have fought with us to protect the civilians, but they ran to Yokohama and Saitama. They abandoned us, you do what they want you to do or they throw you away. They're despicable, who wants allies like that?! They only fight when it's convenient for them, if it's not they run away like cowards without a care about their allies' situation." Her voice was brimming with venom. I mean, it's not like I don't understand.

If the UN had left some troops on the last defense line of Kyoto the evacuation would have gone without a problem, nobody would have died. Warriors cannot do a thing to a TSF, leaving ten or so would have prevented that accident. Then, the rest of the invasion would have gone differently. Of course, the UN had to protect Alt. IV and its HQ too, so maybe they did help, especially with the STF, but they couldn't risk the project, so they probably were forced to divide their resources between halting the BETA and making a solid defense for Alt. IV, even if it meant retreating all the way back to Tokyo. And obviously, no one could tell the media the real reason behind their actions.

That's why everyone gives the stink eye to the foreigners on the base. But to put everyone on the same bag? They're isolating themselves, the Empire will end up alone if this continues. And with Yuuhi coming after my neck, I can see she probably agrees on these feelings and is only using the UN for her own benefit. But what will she do when she doesn't need them anymore?

… That was a stupid question, I can already imagine it.

"I don't think it's right to put all foreigners in the same bag for the mistake some made in the past, but I can see why you all hate them so much. It's a mess."

"Sorry. I assumed you were like them. I didn't try to hear you out, as a leader and a comrade I'm a failure. I was sure that since you are so much better, when you thought we were bringing you down you would abandon us, like those bastards. But, despite being outnumbered and injured, you didn't run away and fought with all you had for us. I do not have words to describe how grateful I am. Shirogane, w-would you be willing to give me another chance? To prove you I deserve your trust?" She looks so guilty right now, shaking as she holds her elbows softly.

"It's alright, don't feel guilty about it. The rest wouldn't accept me now, after all I did kill those Japanese soldiers." I pretty much shot myself in the foot this time.

"That's… They were the ones who abused their power first. And I saw for myself that our suspicions about you were mistaken. You didn't abandon us, even when I doubted. You could have chosen to save yourself then, and yet because of me… You got hurt once more." Her gaze drops as she hugs her knees. "Yoroi and Tamase were always friendly with you, and I think Mitsurugi will change her mind after we explain to her what happened."

"You think they would want to work alongside a murdered?"

"Even if you did kill them, no one can ignore what you did for us! I'm sure we can explain this to the Instructor. Those soldiers were going to kill us and you saved us." My heart beats a bit more slowly as I relax onto the tree. Even if it's just for today… I'm glad I could see this side of Chizuru once more.

"I hope you're right. So what do think we should do?"

"Go to the evac point as fast as we can. We don't know when the soldiers will come for us, so we need to get out of here ASAP. Like you said before they went too far, something's very wrong here. I don't know if they are actually part of the CCSE, but given our encounters with them we should treat them as enemies. It pains me to say this but… if we encounter them we will have to incapacitate them, and if they resist… We might need to gravely harm them." She nods with her eyes closed and trembling fists.

"I agree. The first two that I fought with went as far as to point a gun to my face. They weren't trying to capture me in one piece, that's for sure." Even if I did went too far back then.

"We have to advance with utmost caution, I don't think I could run at all if we get spotted."

"Same. I think I overdid it today, my legs feel like jelly. And my back is killing me right now."

"In any case, let's rest until dawn. I'll take the first watch, you can sleep for now."

"Got it. Though, I don't know if I'll be able to sleep at all." Not when I still feel this cold all over me.

"I get what you mean. With the threat of the soldiers so close it'll be a miracle if we get any shuteye tonight." She sighs again as she relaxes onto the tree.

We remained quietly watching the night sky as the moon moved over the treetops. What a beautiful night, if it weren't for the looming danger of being found I would have fallen asleep a long time ago.

Now that I've calmed down a bit I should think on what I'll do from tomorrow on.

It seems that these soldiers weren't sent to take care of me specifically since they went after the others, so they aren't men from the Shogunate. There's no reason for Yuuhi to attack Meiya, unless she's paranoid that she'll betray her or something. I can understand some people might want the girls to remain as political hostages, but they went too far. They could have killed them if it weren't for my intervention. Maybe they were ordered to do that? Or were these soldiers caught up in their power over the 'special girls' and got lost in their emotions?

I know that what I did was awful, being generous, and that there will be consequences for my actions, but let's say I told Tsukuyomi-san about this. What would happen? The Empire would definitely lose it, so I have a card to use. If I get threatened to be kicked out of the army, I'll answer by saying I'll talk to the Empire about their 'offense' against Meiya. Maybe this was part of the CCSE but the soldiers were 'convinced' to be more aggressive during their mission. I wonder what they got in return for this? Money, a promotion, a house?

I have to find a way to surpass this hurdle. And I won't let them touch the girls again. Not because I want them to love me, not because of the ones that I met before, but because I want them to live. I don't want to see them suffer, even if they do end up hating me for killing these soldiers. My heart won't be able to take it.

Now then… What was that voice I heard before? It was clearly Sumika, but I don't remember ever talking with her about the moon. Well, my memory regarding my childhood isn't exactly clear. I did mistake Meiya's promise and thought I did it with Sumika instead, so I might be forgetting something here.

I rub my left shoulder slowly. It hurts way less now, I hope it doesn't get infected. I still feel those hands in my back, this feels completely different than how it was when the power plant blew up. Back then, when I turned off the lights of my room I felt a shiver all over me, as if a pair of cold hands were on my shoulders. They were… How to say it? Small? Like, it wasn't like the feeling when your Dad or Uncle grabbed your shoulders when you were little, it was as if a friend tapped my shoulder while joking. Yet the hands now feel more… strong? Unlike before I haven't stopped feeling them at all, as if they didn't want to let go. What is this feeling?

"Uuugh…"

Meiya groans as she slowly moves her arms. Looks like she's regained consciousness, she slowly opens her eyes but she can't raise her head from the ground as she stirs under her blanket.

"Where… am I?"

"Good morning, Meiya."

"Eh? Who… Shirogane?!" Her eyes went from barely open, sleepy and glazed, to fully open and shocked.

"Shh! Don't raise your voice." Chizuru scolded her as she crouched besides the leaf bed.

"Sa… kaki? What happened? Where are- Augh!" She holds her sides as she tried to get up.

"Don't push yourself. You took quite a beating so you have bruises and scars all over. Take it easy and stay lying, yes? You'll need all the energy you can muster for tomorrow." Chizuru put the blanket over her again, Meiya lies down with a pained expression.

"My body is aching all over and my head hurts with intense pain. What happened? How did Shirogane get here?" She throws a soft gaze at me. She looks so weak… *I should have killed that gray haired bastard* .

"I went and got a red paintjob on my hands." I say jokingly at her which makes her tilt her head in confusion.

"What… does that mean?"

"Let me explain, please stay quiet and let me finish." Chizuru starts telling her of what happened starting at when they got surrounded. Meiya seemed to be feeling horrible about not being able to protect her, but when she told her I disposed of the soldiers she looked horrified. Her expression didn't change when Chizuru told her we both carried her unconscious body to safety.

"You killed… two of them… and harmed the rest? Wait, how did you find us?"

"I struggled against the two soldiers that restrained me when they found us. After I broke free, I escaped towards the west from the hill and tried to lose them, but I had to fight them in the end. So after I finished dealing with them, I grabbed the Pleiades they were using and started running towards the direction of the dots on the map, using my compass as a guide to make sure I didn't get lost. Then, when I got close, I heard Chizuru's screaming and took care of the other soldiers."

"What did you do to the first soldiers? Did you kill them?" Her voice was very small, but her eyes were again full of fire. Really? You'll take those soldiers' side?

"No, I broke one's arm and beat up the other one." She bites her lip. It looks like she's holding a scream.

"Can you tell me… why did you have to kill them?"

"Mitsurugi, Shirogane saved us from them. Those soldiers were-"

"Sakaki, I know that. But he still killed two Japanese soldiers. Do you have an explanation, Shirogane? Why didn't you restrain them?" She's too noble. She isn't even considering that those guys weren't going to just lay down and give up.

"Mitsurugi, you and me know that those men went too far." Chizuru was talking like when she was Class Rep, waving a finger in the air and with that aura of a pissed off mom. "The UN's code is very clear on this, to never abuse your strength in front of a defenseless adversary. Shirogane could have abandoned us when he saw himself outnumbered, yet he risked his life and militar record to save us. He will probably be punished for the deed of saving his comrades from a clear case of abuse."

"It's alright, Sakaki. Meiya, I killed them because I saw how you two were getting beaten up. You in particular weren't moving and they kept kicking you, even on the head. I rather die than watch and do nothing when my squad is in danger." She bites her lip again, clouds covering her face as she squirms in the leaf bad.

"Because of us? You… You did it for- Augh!" She rubs her shoulders as pain assaults her. She shouldn't have tried to get up. "Why did you took their lives? You didn't have to stain your-" I move closer to her putting my face a few inches away from hers. She flinches backwards but doesn't break eye contact.

"Because they were going to kill you both. I don't care if they got sent by the UN, the Shogunate, or another army, anyone who harms my squad is my enemy. If they try to kill you, I'll answer with the same force. I mean, can you put yourself in my shoes for a sec? When I found you there was the possibility that you were already dead. How do you think I felt when I saw you lying still, not reacting to the kicks?" She starts shaking and breaks eye contact. I grab her chin and force her to look at me again. "Tell me Meiya, how do you think I felt?"

"I-I… suppose you were truly adusted. But why did you have to…" She can't continue as her mouth closes shut. She did sympathize with the rebels' cause last loop.

"Look, I know I must look like a monster to you. But they were harming you and Sakaki. I… don't want to lose anyone again. I'm not putting up excuses. I just wanted to protect you two."

"But… Why didn't they stop? Surely they… they wouldn't have…" She's shaking all over and I see tears well up in her eyes. I had tightened my grip on her face without realizing.

"Sorry. Please don't cry, it's alright now. I won't let anyone harm you, so you just rest." I let go of her chin and slowly wipe the tears of her face. She looks so weak right now.

"No, forgive me. You're right, you saved my life. Thank you Shirogane. Truly, I… don't know what could have been of us if not for your help." She bows slowly with an apologetic look on her face.

"That's fine. Now, stay lying. You're hurt all over so don't force yourself." I gently grab her shoulders and push her into the ground slowly. I pet her head as she tries to raise again. "Stay quiet Meiya, you need to rest."

"I am fine. And… I told you not to call me by my name." She looks so cute when she's annoyed like that. I keep petting her slowly.

"Sorry about that. But you need to rest, we need to march at dawn break so don't force yourself." She stops trying to get up, then nods and lets out a sigh.

"I won't. I understand already. I'll rest for tonight, I won't cause you two more problems." She seems honest. She stays in place looking at me in the eye, with a light blush on her face. "Um… Thanks again. Really, I… truly appreciate you looking out for me."

"I told you it's fine. I know that what I did isn't praise worthy, you just rest for now."

"Shirogane… Forgive me, for leaving you behind."

"Don't worry, Sakaki already apologized. It's alright, I don't resent you or anything." She looks at me incredulous.

"Are you serious? You're not upset?"

"Come on, now. What could you have done? If we had stayed in that open area they would have sicked their guns on us, and thanks to you two leaving I could break free."

"Really? You do not resent me? Despite that I ran away?" She must be troubled about her honor since running away is seen as a disgrace, if I remember correctly from what she taught me when we got together on the other world.

"I don't. The question is, can you work with me despite what I did?" I get closer to her again and she moves her head to the side. She gazes at me as her hands fumble with the blanket.

"You won't… kill anyone else, right?"

"Unless they try to harm any of you, no. If it's to protect someone I'll do it, but I don't like harming people." As much as I might hate them, I need them for the Kashgar raid. And as angry as I got, I can't say the taste it left in my mouth is a pleasant one.

"So… You'll work with us? You won't leave us behind?" Why is she being so timid? This isn't like her at all.

"Of course, you're my squadmates after all. Can we work together for these few nights, Meiya?" She pouts slightly at me. Hehe, I know you're not her but I'm so glad to see you're alright Meiya. You're alive and kicking, that's good news.

"Of course, we're in this together. But, why are you using my name again?"

"Because I want to. Don't worry, I'll go back to calling you Mitsurugi once I'm rested up." I move back slowly towards the tree. I wince as my back makes contact with the bark.

"Are you hurt?" Her gaze on me, Meiya spoke softly.

"Yeah, but I'm already patched up. It shouldn't be a problem, I think."

"I see. I don't think I can fight much in my current state." She admits as shame appears in her eyes.

"Mitsurugi, neither me or Shirogane are much better. All three of us are in horrible shape, so we need to work together to pass this." Chizuru reassures her, giving her a smile.

"You heard her, Meiya. So whether you like it or not we're working together." I smile at her and she finally relaxes a bit.

"But… what we did… Are you really okay with this? We abandoned you."

"Come on, I'm to blame for lowering my guard too."

"But…"

"What, you want us to give up?" I teasingly take out one radio and immediately her eyes light up with purple flames.

"Never! But… You know, I thought you would snap at us, since we left you to your misery."

"You couldn't have done anything in that situation. Really, it's fine. So, can I count on you to cover my back?" I stare at her and she nods at me.

"Yes, of course. I don't know what I can do right now, but you can count on me." Chizuru breaths a sigh of relief after hearing her answer.

"Say Shirogane, can't you tell her what you told me?"

"I did kinda tell her parts of it, and honestly I don't think she needs this right now." Meiya seems to have taken offense at my words as she shot inquisitive glares at both of us.

"What are you talking about?"

"Mitsurugi, Shirogane told me about his past and made me realize I was misjudging him. Can you hear what he had to go through?"

"I already know he lost his memory before he joined the UN and that he doesn't know where his family is."

"No, that's not it." Chizuru starts making circles in the air again as she speaks. "I'm talking about how he got inducted into a special squad, and had to endure a horrible incident. Could you please listen to his story?" I'm touched that Chizuru is trying to clear the air between us. I guess… I can finally drop my guard with her. Meiya is glancing at me with fire in her eyes again.

"Inducted into a special squad? Shirogane, why didn't you tell me of this before?"

"Because you didn't ask. Anyways, do you want to hear it?" She nods quickly. She looks like a child waiting for a tale before going to

bed. I know she admires my swordsmanship but, is that the only reason she's so curious about me?

I told her what I told Chizuru. How I failed to save someone and had to kill her, how I joined a special squad, how after the Yukon Incident I had nowhere to go since my squad and Instructor died and Yuuko-sensei scouted me to arrive at Yokohama.

"All of this is classified intel, so don't tell this to anyone." Meiya nods as she strokes her bangs slowly.

"You do not need to tell so, I understand. So you were there during the incident… You were part of a special squad… I cannot imagine the severity of the situation you had to go through. So when your unit was wiped out you got a proposal to join our base, and since the authorities at Yukon didn't have a place for you they agreed to transfer you? Is this the truth?" She looks at me intently, a weird glow in her eyes.

"I'm sure Sensei pressured someone to get the deal done. Supposedly, she was interested in having such a promising recruit on her base. I also used the chance to come back here, to see if I could find out who I was." I let out a sigh as I relax onto the tree.

"I see. Now that you mention this… Does this has anything to do with that badge?"

"Badge?" Chizuru tilts her head, looking at me.

"Sigh… Yeah, you can say that."

"Shirogane, what is Mitsurugi talking about?"

"I got a badge when I arrived here, as a formality for having fought on Yukon. I don't think anyone else got it, so please don't mention it again Meiya."

"Sorry… But it did say 'Champion', so I suppose the XO sees you as a great asset." You don't know how right you are. "Is this also related to your special missions, perchance?"

"… Yeah, it is." I close my eyes, putting my hands behind my head.

"Um, Shirogane?" Chizuru's voice softly says. "Why were you assigned as the tester of those machines? Are they truly a Japanese invention?"

"Yes, I said as much before."

"But they're… If they are, why are they being tested in the UN?" Chizuru was folding her arms. Meiya's eyes were fixated onto me. Sigh…

"Well… Can you keep a secret?" Both of them nod. "The machines have so many English terms and are in the UN… because I'm the one who made them."

"Huh?! Is this true?" Meiya was in whatever state comes after shocked, Chizuru was silently staring with her mouth slightly open.

"I came up with the concept back in Yukon and had done a prototype build of them and had a very rough version of some programs we used. They're like a pet project of mine, you could say. When I came here, I mentioned them once to Sensei and she was interested in the idea. That's how those prototypes were made and why I was in charge of testing them. That's what I was doing with Kasumi when she came to look for me, she was helping me out with the tests and fixes the sims needed." Both of them look away for some reason. They remained quiet for a while.

"… But you arrived in late October, were those machines made in… The UN's engineers must be top notch." Chizuru says, tapping her glasses.

"Yeah, they are. But you know, not a word of this to anyone. The sims are Top Secret stuff for now, so keep this to yourselves please." They both nod, I can see in their stares that they won't break this promise. I wonder if I could get to use those things after the CCSE if they can look at them differently…

"Say Shirogane…" Meiya says, gripping the edge of her blanket. "Would you let me assist you in your search of your family? With my resources, I'm sure I could find them." Thanks, but don't. I do not want to imagine what would you do if you find out I'm a 'dead man'.

"It's alright. Sensei tried to look into it, but it seems all my data was wiped out. Without that, you won't be able to find anything." I let out a sigh. Meiya drops her gaze as her hands grip the blanket tightly again.

And anyways, I may actually never see them again. I can't even go back to my home world for more than a day without dooming everybody to a horrible death. So, my parents might be gone from my life forever.

"Um… Forgive me, Shirogane. I shouldn't have brought that up."

"Don't worry. Let's rest, we need all the energy we can get for tomorrow." Both of them nod.

"Well, how do you two wish to take shifts for sleeping?" Straight to business, as usual for our blue haired girl.

"I'll take the first as we agreed before. Shirogane, I'll wake you up in four hours or so. Mitsurugi you just rest, you got it the worst from all of us."

"Understood. Forgive me for pushing this burden onto you two."

"Don't sweat it Meiya, you're the one who needs it the most." She avoids my eyes as she slowly gets under her blanket. She's so cute when she gets all bashful.

"Yes, I will need all the energy I can get for tomorrow. Good night, you two." And she gets completely under her blanket. I do wonder what got into her, to have her be this embarrassed all of a sudden.

"Sakaki, remember to have the gun nearby just in case. If you hear anything wake me up." She nods at my words grabbing the rifle tighter.

I need to sleep. In just a few hours we have to run, once we make it to the first evac point if we are not being tailed… We can escape with the boat. One or two days, that's all I need. Every second counts here, the sooner I get back to the base the sooner I can talk with Sensei about this. About the sword, the soldiers. She better have a good explanation for this. But I'll cross that bridge when I get there, for now… I need to rest.

I put the blanket over me, it smells bad. Considering how much it rained and all I ran it's not surprising. I can only hope everything goes alright. And after taking one last look at the moon, I let sleep's spell take over me.

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**[Musou]**

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My breathing is still rugged. They're getting close. I grab my sword tightly, and feel the weight of the 9mm gun on my waist. I never thought… they would go so far. The smell of burnt wood has long since filled the hallways, the sound of gunshots coming from the gardens have not yet ceased. I can expect no backup.

I look at her frail figure lying on the futon. Forgive me Koubuin-sama, for I have failed you. The gash on her back is drilling at me, one second too late and her life might have faded. No, it still wasn't safe to assume she'll survive.

I heard voices getting closer. I jump onto the wall and climb unto the small air vent. I peek towards the hallway after nudging myself into

the small space, I see three black-cladded figures. Enemies.

I return to her room, they will enter from the front door and that'll give me an opening to assault them from above. As the door opens forcefully and the men enter the room I fall from my hiding place on the roof, sword at the ready. I slash one's neck as I fall, launching myself forward as I land driving my sword into another's stomach from behind.

Quickly sending a kick to the last one, I managed to send his gun flying away.

"Damn you bastard!" The last remaining aggressor took out his blade and charged at me.

I side step to my left and slash at his shoulder, he blocks and sends a slash from my right. I move to pressure him from my right, he takes a step back and launches a downward slash from my left. I stay still as I deflect his strike with my blade using all my might, no matter how skilled I might be fighting a bigger opponent is never an easy task. Then putting force into my feet I return the blow. His arms got yanked upwards, leaving his body wide open. I take my chance and take a step forward, slashing at his neck. The man falls to the ground with a groan, he drowns in his own blood.

I can't hear no more footsteps nearby. I'm starting to feel sick, I never thought… that killing could be so intoxicating. It's a horrible taste the one that fills my mouth. For the sake of my duty, I can do anything. Or so I thought.

The sound of footsteps resonate again on the hallway, approaching quite fast. I won't have time to hide, I grab my gun and point it at the door from a blank point. However, the figures I see are not those of the aggressors.

"1st Lt. Tsukuyomi!" I greet her as she arrives with four members of the guard behind her.

"You… what are you doing here?" Her cold eyes through the glasses make me flinch.

"I… I am protecting-"

"Do you call this protecting?! You useless fool!" She grabs me by the collar, almost choking me.

"I… There were…" I cannot form a sentence under their spiteful glares. I know the guards don't exactly like me… but still…

"Ichimonji, take Yuuhi-sama to safety. Fuudo, Juutsuya, Tayama. You three secure the area. Understood?!"

"Yes, Ma'am!" All of them answer in unison and get on her orders immediately.

"You… follow me, we will open a path for Ichimonji to take Yuuhi-sama to safety." She addressed me coldly, and I follow closely behind as we make our way to the right side of the hallway. "Tell me what happened. How many were they?"

"Five. They ambushed us, I'm the only one left of the guards here. I had trouble dealing with one of them, and another knocked Koubuin-sama before trying to kill her. I barely managed to attack him to make him fail on his deadly intent. But…"

"You still failed. Is this all you can do? All the time we spent on you, for this? You disappoint me, where are all those brave words you spoke before?"

"My apologies." I bow as we walk, I have nothing to retort with. Because of my weakness…

"Hmph, that way of speech does not suit you. I hope you're ready to keep fighting, it seems someone leaked our patrol's data and our weaponry to these terrorists."

"You mean… someone of the Regent-"

"Do not utter another word." Her cold eyes stop me from finishing. I sometimes forget how scary she can be.

"But then who-"

"Do not ask. You need not know, you're a blade. A blade asks no questions. Focus on your mission, slaughter all who would harm Yuuhi-sama. I'll say it one more time, lose that little humanity you still have within. Let loose, have no moderation in your strikes. You are a member of the Royal Guard, we do not hold back in front of our enemies. Was I clear?"

"Yes, Ma'am." This intel could only be leaked by someone of the Regent Houses. This Empire is rotten, how dare they point their blades towards their fellows? And sending terrorists to do their dirty work no less.

"Perfect. Now make haste, our comrades won't hold out for long. Let me remind you, being inducted into the Royal Guard is one of the greatest honors a Japanese citizen can ever hope to receive. Maybe my words are falling on deaf ears, but I still have high hopes placed on you."

"I'll do my best to answer to them." I feel so out of place here. I much rather go back to my old station. Working alone suits me best, and all this forced dignity is making me sick.

We're under attack and you bother with the honor speech? I already know what my role is. I already saw the consequences…

The sound of footsteps reverberates nearby. We both ready our guns and open fire at the soldiers that turned the corner. I won't hesitate… I can't hesitate… For her sake, I…

The hallway is painted in red. The 1st Lt. gives me a stern look as my knees started to shake. Can you blame me? I never had to kill anyone… And now…

"Make haste, time is of essence!" I resign myself to my fate as I follow her lead.

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**Some hours after that…**

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Standing guard outside of the room where Yuuhi-sama was brought after the incident was over, it feels as if I had a boombox beating inside my chest. My ears just won't stop ringing, and I can't stop one of my hands from shaking.

The damage we received was too severe. 1st Lt. Tsukuyomi didn't deny the possibility that another Regent House was the one who leaked the intel, but even so, how could they have gotten our data? Does that mean that… there's a traitor in our ranks?

Still… How many did I shoot today? I thought I was going to puke my insides out, yet despite the reflex nothing comes out. My stomach turning and turning, yet this sick sensation doesn't want to leave me for now. I guess that once my tension truly leaves me I'll be able to let it out, whatever it is that's brewing in there.

"Hey, attention!" The other guard that was keeping watch with me stood upright, three fellows in the red dress approached us.

The two different green tones of the Tsukuyomis' hair in the lead, and the boy that's always around them following right behind. They don't seem to be hurt, thankfully.

"Greetings, fellows. We have come to watch over Yuuhi-sama. Is Ichimonji-san within the room?" Grasping a strand of her emerald hair, she asked.

"Yes. Her wounds have already been treated."

"How are her injuries as of now?!" Narrowing her turquoise eyes, I couldn't help but to gulp hard and nod.

"… She is no risk, rest assured. Please, do go inside." Both of us bow to them, opening the door.

The two of them quickly walk inside, yet the boy delays his steps for a moment. Remaining in place as he looks down, he ruffles his chestnut hair as he sighs. Looking back at us, it takes a second for him to find his words.

"Um… How is the rest of house?"

"It has taken serious damage, especially the left wing." My comrade answers. "Thankfully, the inner structure wasn't compromised. Rest easy Shirogane, we have routed all of those terrorists."

"… I see. How are our fellows? Have the other guards… well…"

"… We did lose many comrades, yes." I say, and we both grimace. He seems to be wringing his fists. "However, everything has already been resolved. Please do go to Yuuhi-sama's presence, she should be awaiting you."

"Yeah… Um…"

"Yes?" It is odd, he rarely hesitates this much when asking something.

"… Is this how it is? To be at war?"

…

"… Not always." My comrade answers. "Sometimes it goes better, other times it goes worse. But it rarely comes down to such barbaric acts, for us to face off against other people."

"I agree. No one could have anticipated this turn of events. This is a limit situation, nothing more."

"So… everything will return to normal in a few days right? The others won't… be left as they are in the hall for long, right?" Biting his lips,

frowning clearly, we could do nothing but look down as we knew the supplies wouldn't magically appear overnight.

"… It might take some time. The available supplies have been sent to the higher echelons of our ranks, after all." My comrade says, sighing afterwards.

"… Is that so? So they won't receive anything else?" Hanging his head, eyes almost closing, it felt as if a crab was strangling my throat. "They won't send anything from our reserves?"

"Well… They were clear in their orders already."

Biting his lips, he winces. Coiled fists shake, a frown suddenly finds its way to his face.

"H-However, our Lady and the rest are working as hard as possible so that supplies arrive as quickly as possible. I believe Cpt. Amato had gone to the hall a moment ago to survey the situation over there?"

"Yes… Yes, he did." He looks down, seeming dejected at something. How odd. "Sorry to take your time." Giving us a bow that we return, he finally enters the room, and we close the door as he does.

Sighing as I lean on the wall, nothing but powerlessness fills me. Can't do much but to share his feelings, this was something that we weren't ready for. It is dejecting, seeing him so afflicted and worried about us commoners despite his standing. And to hear of how the rest of us inductees are being treated in the Main Hall.

"… I wish more of them were like him."

"Hey, don't say that out loud. I don't want to face a reprisal because of any loose words. Remember what just happened, Fukuha."

"I know… It's just, is it that much to ask for them to look after us commoners properly? He's right, they could have sent something

else to the hall."

"Look, I agree with you. But we can't let them hear us complaining, the Tsukuyomis won't let us off the hook like they do with him."

"Sigh… I know."

Still… I would like more of them to follow his example. Shirogane's completely right, sending just a few more supplies isn't out of our reach. Hopefully, he might just convince Amato and the Tsukuyomis with one of his ramblings again.

All I can do for now is stand guard and follow my orders. That's all us inductees are allowed to do in the Royal Guard.

# Towards the Downpour

## Chapter 20: Towards the Downpour

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*November 20th. Fourth Day of the CCSE.*

*(Near the river. 0 5:16 AM.)*

**[Takeru]**

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I stretch my arms towards the sky, the first signs of light beginning to appear up there along some small clouds going nowhere. Nothing but the rustle of the wind can be heard nearby, the humid smell of leaves and mud everywhere around us. I'll let them sleep for a few minutes more, I already found some mushrooms and leaves we can eat. They need their rest.

I think I reached an answer to my doubts, after debating with myself since the start of my shift. This is the BETA world I was in last time. Now, let's go back to the beginning.

After all my loops my original world, let's call it the Alpha world, became too close to the BETA world to the point that the exchange of information between both was much stronger than normal. Because of that I came to this place, to reverse the situation to its original balance. However, at first I thought I had arrived to a different world given the differences of this reality to the ones I experienced in the past. That was a mistake.

Let's talk about Alpha and Beta as trees.

Tree A is now too close to Tree B, their branches are all entangled. I thought that I jumped from A to B at the very beginning, and then I kept returning to B's roots every time I died. Therefore, I was trapped in a loop on Tree B.

Last time I managed to reach the end of a branch in B and I returned to Tree A. However, by that point B's branches were too close to A and got in the way. I tried returning to B to fix that, but I thought I ended up in another tree, Tree C. That is my current location.

I had no idea why I arrived at C, or why I got to C's roots when I wasn't trying to reach a tree's roots. Actually, it should have been impossible to do so. Tree C was similar to B, but it had many differences that made me think I was in another tree. That's what made me doubt.

But I think I figured out why this happened. Well, maybe not why exactly, but where I am and how I got here. There was never a third tree.

Yuuko-sensei referred to the alternate realities as worlds and during that fateful Christmas she said that all worlds are parallel to each other, but what if they're universes instead? Alpha is my home world within the Alpha Universe. That doesn't mean that my world is the only one where there are no BETA, there are many other similar worlds connected as branches to it. There might be a world out there where Yuuhi didn't die and Meiya didn't become the heir of the Mitsurugi Group, a world where I choose someone to be with, a world where I might not exist.

The worlds are the branches of the tree known as reality, and all those alternative realities exist within the forest that is that specific universe. In a similar way, all the different worlds I might have visited during the loops are still there, somewhere in the great forest that is the Beta Universe. A world where I married one of my squadmates, another where I got together with Yuuko-sensei, a world where I didn't survive Operation Iceberg, the world where I joined Operation Babylon, lost everyone, and ended up destroying the JFK Hive. The possibilities are unlimited.

It's kind of like the possible outcomes of Magorea's Mask. The 'big' events might be the same, but depending on how Lonk decides to help the people the lasting ripples will be different. Does he help the

monkey? Does the singer recovers her voice? Again, the possible outcomes are many. And in that same sense, this world is just like the other one I was in, part of the same forest I got lost in before, but with its own micro circumstances that are unique to it. So, a connection between me and this place could be made, under the right conditions.

So, how did I arrive to this world? It was actually quite simple when I thought about it without freaking myself out.

Parallel Universes A and B are too close, they start exchanging data between all their possible worlds within them more strongly than they should. My world got affected by this, probably more strongly due to the fact that I was the cause of the chaos.

Then, when I tried to move from A to B, I did so with one thought in my mind: To have the chance to save everyone, or as many people as I could, no matter the consequences. If there is a will, there is a way. The mind is at its peak when it comes to causal matters, so I willed myself to the branch within the Beta Universe where my wish could be granted.

Here in this mad world lies the possibility of a future where my squad survives, if I can turn that into causal data and use Sensei's theory, the one she said that allowed control of what information we leak to other worlds, to transfer it to the rest of the Beta Universe I can save all the branches from the BETA.

If I manage to survive and achieve my desired result and pass that data to the other conductors in the parallel worlds of the Betaverse, I will be saving the versions of everyone that I love so much. Or at the very least, stop the forced shared of data due to the ripples of my past loops to prevent the negative outcomes to screw us over.

I had thought that the 'roots' of the world, its starting point, was my arrival. Of course, from my point of view everything starts on that 22nd of October. But that is not the case, the world exists from much

before, and every little difference I made during all my loops takes me to a different branch.

Like for example, perhaps taking the boat or not didn't affect anything in the long run in my last loop, but the data was there. I didn't take two loops last time, I did only one. So I shouldn't remember the two outcomes, and yet when I got the fuel in my hands I doubted as I thought about which path I had taken.

That means that the data is there, just that I didn't take that branch. The same applies to what happens during Christmas, who did I get together with, whether or not I sent my lover in the Alt. V fleet, whether I survive Babylon or not. All those worlds are parallel branches of another branch.

And I believe that in that same sense, this world is another branch of a branch. The first BETA world I was stuck in was also another branch of the Betaverse. The general rules of this reality apply to both branches. BETA exist, humanity is on the brink of total annihilation, TSF are on the 3rd Generation, and the general political landscape is somewhat similar. However, many little differences exist between these branches but they're still part of the same tree.

Which means, if we're not careful, the data from the failed branches might begin to leak into this world, or towards others. Or even worse, towards my home worlds. Hell, that might be happening as of now over there.

Now, how did I time travel? Causal Pull, let's call it. What greater pull could exist in this world than the creation of its conductor? What stronger link to me, the Causality Nucleus, could possibly exist here? I mean, this is actually not the first time this happened to me when I thought about it. When the loop started I also got sent to the past. I had clear memories of a teen version of Meiya, who I hadn't met until that same day in my world and I also had forgotten about when we met as kids. The Takeru from the morning of October 22nd didn't knew who Meiya was, so only a Takeru from after that date could have had memories of her. So when the loop started, I got sent to

the past from my world into this universe. And the same happened during last loop as well as this time.

I can only wonder if there's another reason for me to be here. If I arrived here due to my willpower then that's that. But maybe there's something else? No point in overthinking it, when the time comes I will learn whatever that reason is or I may never know.

I need to be extra careful from now on though, regardless of whether my ideas are right or not. I have to try to not create negative data unnecessarily since it might be leaked to other conductors, I might not be able to keep my memories one day and if all the negativity my squad felt towards me and the suspicions I feel now towards the Royal Guard make their way into me that will be bad. I can't do anything about what's beyond my control, so I might have to one day fight against the Shogunate and I have no power over the feelings of the rest.

If both Tsukuyomis, Takamura, Yuuhi and Meiya come at me I'll have to fight them, and that data will exist and be leaked to the other worlds so long as I don't fix the ripples. And even if it doesn't affect me, it might affect the others through their interactions with me. Yuuhi and the Shogunate may become my enemies in all loops from now on, or even in other parallel loops where other Takerus are unknowingly receiving data from me, if I don't try to fix their suspicions.

Hell, I might be receiving data from either the future me of this timeline or from another parallel world. What if this paranoia is a premonition of the things to come? What if these frozen hands are trying to warn me to stay on my guard?

Well, I'll try my best to not interact towards anybody with hostility from now on. Meiya and Chizuru seem to be willing to start over, so that's a nice first step. The negativity already exist within their hearts so I have to be tactful with them. Sensei did say that it's difficult to… to…

Wait one second… Holy shit, how could I have forgotten about that?! So I DID affect them!

How was it? The more you focus on the bad things, the more you'll be affected by the data leaks of the negative futures? Then, when they started to have negative thoughts about me… When they interacted with me, they received negative causal information through the Conductor. Perhaps now that I'm a stronger Nucleus I can also pull more information related to me, making the transfer occur faster. Then… The more time I spent with them when they were suspicious of me, the more negative they got. Maybe that's why they reacted so badly after the Stallion's test. Sensei did say it's really hard to break a link to a data leak. I suppose… Chizuru might revert to how she was being until now if she grows suspicious of me again. Tama and Mikoto might also end up affected by the negativity once they learn I killed the soldiers.

"Hahaha… I fucked up, big time." Placing both of my hands behind my head and leaning back onto a tree, I chuckle as I watch the clouds as they flee.

Now that the data is here… Any and all parallel worlds might be affected by it. I don't want to think what effect I could have on Yuuhi or the Guards if I'm forced to interact with…

… Wait another second…

Oh shit, the coup! There's no way I will be able to avoid them if I let that happen! I gotta do my best to prevent it, especially since everybody is super sensitive about foreigners here. It wouldn't take much effort for Sagiri to rally the people and the army against the UN or Chizuru's dad now. So no making trouble, save the people of the villages yourself during the Mount Tengen incident instead of sending random UN soldiers, and stay out of the Guard's and Meiya's way.

No, wait… I have the Minaru Kamui with me. ***Goddammit!***

When Tsukuyomi-san learns that I have a Minaru Kamui… And if she tells Maya-san… or Yuuhi…

"I'm so dead, aren't I?" I hope I can loop again because it seems I'm headed towards a certain execution at the hands of the Royal Guard. Sigh… Whatever happens, happens.

Just like how some games lock their true ending behind Hard Mode, my desired world lies somewhere in here. I don't care what I have to do, I'll bring that hope to reality. Even if I become an enemy of the Empire and end up dead or somewhere else, so long as my beloved ones live in peace that's fine. Though I don't know if I'll be able to stay near them now, the negative causal leaks might very well turn them into my enemies suddenly.

That will be the biggest hurdle I have to overcome. The same applies to everybody else, if anyone gets suspicious of me that will turn into paranoia and later into blind hatred. I may have to fight alone most of the time, or I'll have to keep my identity hidden like during the Invasion of Niigata.

And I do have to talk this out with Sensei, as well as this matter of the chasers. But no getting depressed! I'll despair after I'm dead!

"Hmm… Yeah, I can do this. I just have to be careful from now on."

I don't know if I can fully trust Meiya and Chizuru, but I want them to live. I want to protect them, even if only to stop the memories from their deaths from resurfacing. Their reactions yesterday seemed honest and I think it's okay to trust in them for now, but the more time I spend with them…

… And I don't want to see them like that again. In the end, all this is my fault so I shouldn't be complaining. This is my cross to bear, no one forced me to come here this time after all, what happened in my world was my fault. And I did kill people, so they have… all the right reasons to grow hostile towards me once the test is over.

Hmm? It looks like Meiya woke up.

*"Yaaawn…* Uuugh…" She looks like she needs another day of sleep. Rubbing her shoulders slowly, she raises from the ground groaning a bit.

"Good morning Mitsurugi."

"Oh, good morning Ta-… Shirogane. What hour is it?"

"A bit past 0530, how are you feeling?" I did not miss that slight pause, she almost tried to call me Takeru again. This Meiya never called me by my name, is she receiving some memories from another world?

"If I had to say, four out of ten."

"Let me wake up Sakaki, I already gathered some stuff to have breakfast."

"Wait. Can we talk for a while before that?" She looked at me intensely, squarely in the eye as she put her ponytail in place, despite how she was trying to drown another yawn.

"I mean, we can talk while we eat."

"I wish to speak of something without Sakaki listening, it's important. Please?" I nod at her and she smiles as she gets up.

"Alright. What did you wanna talk about?" I sit by a tree that was a bit away from our spot, Meiya comes near and sits in front of me.

"First, allow me to thank you again. Despite how I abandoned you, you still found kindness in you to come to my aid. You were able to make a hard decision during a crisis, I had not the bravery to harm those soldiers even when they all attacked me. Your strong resolve shone through, allowing you to bloody your hands to protect us. Thank you kindly, Shirogane." She tries to bow but I extend a hand to stop her.

"Stop it. We already went through this yesterday, helping your comrades is the obvious thing to do." She nods at my words with a smile. "… And you shouldn't be thanking me for killing people." Grimacing, she nods once more, her hands gripping her pants a bit too tightly.

"… Indeed. I am merely glad that you can still consider me your comrade despite what I did, and that you were there to protect us." Coughing, she straightens up. "Well then, I wanted to ask for your forgiveness. I stained my honor as a samurai by running away, abandoning you, failing to protect Sakaki, and eventually forcing you to do what you did to aid us. Shirogane, could you spare some kindness to forgive me?" She bows to me again. I know how much your honor and traditions mean for you, but you don't have to be like this.

"There's nothing to forgive. You did your best, Mitsurugi. And I told you I acted on my own, my own decisons aren't your fault."

"That's not true. A samurai must never run away from danger. And that's what I did when I left you behind, and even then I couldn't do anything. It was mine own weakness that spawned this whole situation." Her shoulders drop again as her eyes almost close, as if they were filled with smoke, her voice becomes but a sliver of its usual.

"Look, don't punish yourself so much. No one can protect its life alone, right? You did what you could to protect Sakaki. And as I said, I did what I wanted to do *on my own* ."

"That might be so… However, I cannot leave this stain on me. I'm sorry. Please, Shirogane. Forgive me." She gets on her knees and brings her head to the ground. "As a samurai in training, I cannot live with such dishonor on me. Please, allow me to mend my mistake."

"You don't have to be like this. And I already forgave you." I know she won't take that as an answer. And not a second later, she looks

up with purple fire in her eyes once more. Haha, she truly looks like my Meiya now… even with her obnoxious stubbornness.

"That is not enough. I wish to earn your forgiveness. For me, my honor is all I have. Please Shirogane, allow me to mend my mistakes. I cannot simply leave this stain on me."

"There's no stain on you. You did-"

"I abandoned you and failed Sakaki. And that was what forced your hand. Please…" Entwining her fingers as if she were praying, a puppy would be left shocked at her stare. "Please, allow me to earn your forgiveness." And then, she bows again.

She's taking the honor code too seriously, as always for her. I'm not a noble or a fellow here. Actually, I'm your enemy since Yuuhi wants me dead. You'll probably come after me when it's revealed that my sword is a 'fake' one. I still have no idea how I'm going to explain this. Yuuhi must have a list of who have these swords, she will immediately know I shouldn't have this, add that to the fact that she knows I'm not this world's Takeru and you have a giant problem. Sigh…

"… For real, you're taking this too far. You don't have to do anything, it's fine."

"No, it isn't. I want… I have to earn it." She holds my gaze firmly. Always so stubborn.

"But I decided what to do on my own."

"However, my own shortcomings were what forced that scenario. You would not have… resorted to such a solution if an alternative had been available to you, right?" Looking right back at me, she stiffens up. Again, suspicion in her voice. "Surely, such methodology isn't how you prefer to operate."

"… No, I wouldn't have done that if I had the choice." Sighing, I close my eyes. "For real. I fought to kill because… they didn't leave me another choice."

Hunching over like I did during my very first full gear march, the pressure, the weight, the pain bending my back, twisting my stomach. Unlike before, I don't have an excuse.

I killed Meiya because we had no choice. And the situation forced me to fight in the coup. But this time… the choice was all mine. No orders forced me, no external fact pushed me. I broke that woman's arm, I shot to kill even if I hesitated.

"Look, I tried to incapacitate them. But even then, they still tried to fight. So… So I chose to do it. Yes, they were being aggressive, but… I could have shot at their hands or chest. And I didn't. So don't thank me."

"… Are you not regretting this outcome?"

"Sigh… I'm just, I don't know, depleted. I just…" The last looks those men gave me resurface, the horrified gaze of the woman comes back.… Meiya's bloodied face comes back. Gulping down acid, running a hand over my eyes, I lean back. "When the choice was in front me, I decided to protect you two. Do I regret it? Yeah. Would I do it again?… Yeah, probably. It's just… Didn't think doing it on my own would be so… simple. I guess I'm kind of surprised at how cold and ruthless I was when the bullets came knocking at my door."

"Huh? What do you mean by, doing it on your own?" Narrowing her eyes, her tone slowed down.

"I got someone killed before, remember?"

"But that is not the same as-"

"That's why."

"Huh?"

"When I had to…" Biting my lips, can't hold her gaze. "… kill her, I was destroyed. I just kept convincing myself that I just had to do it. I didn't do it right away, I doubted. But now? It took me a second. And, even if it saved our backs, I don't want to run away from what I chose to do on my own. I didn't show mercy, and this isn't how I wanna do things. So that's why… you shouldn't thank me. Pulling the trigger… shouldn't feel so light."

Again, I hunch over. As if my arms were dragging lots of heavy bags from the super, as if the plastic was sawing off at my palms, I can't muster any strength to move.

I don't want to accept that murder is this easy. I should be feeling guilty. But I'm not, it's as if I were resigned. 'Those are the rules we live by', I don't want to accept that it is so easy. Not because of a mission, not because of the situation. To resort to killing as the default isn't how I wanna do things.

… Because if I surrender to that, I feel like I'll just resign myself to the outcome of Ouka. I don't want to… keep spreading pain.

*"… Pull the trigger, Takeru."*

No, it shouldn't be my first choice. I didn't want to kill you… We can't fix our problems through gun shots. I shouldn't feel so little guilt.

*"… Pull the trigger, Takeru."*

Guh… I know, the perfect solution doesn't exist. I chose Meiya's and Chizuru's safety over their lives. But… But I don't want to take that road again. I came here… to save people… to not have you all die… If I just resign myself to killing and maiming everyone who is against me… Won't I just be like a BETA? Like the ones who used you as meat shields in Iceberg?

I don't want to be that kind of person. Bloodying my hands… shouldn't be… my first and only choice.

*"Pull the trigger, Takeru!"*

No! I'm… I can't… I shouldn't be… accepting this so easily.

*Killing should have purpose, because you're taking a life, something that's extremely precious. Murdering and hurting others without reason, just as the easy way out*…

*That's… the last resource. To be such a monster… But if it protect my beloved ones*…

I shiver in place, hugging my sides, again feeling that cold blanket over my back. Her cries as I hesitated to shoot the cannon keep repeating in my ears. Screwdrivers dive into my head, my throat closes up, it feels as if the ground were spinning.

"Takeru?" Her voice sounded closer.

Opening my eyes, taking a deep breath, she was looking at me, downcast eyes and a hand hesitating on whether to shake my shoulder or not. Taking a sec to calm my breathing, running a hand over my face, I manage to subdue the pain.

"S-Sorry, I… I'm still in shock, I guess."

"Forgive me. I knew of your burden, yet I still held doubts towards you." She gives me a bow. Her hands are shaking. "I should have known that you were under great duress after having to pull…" Suddenly stopping, she looks down as she clutches her shirt. "… after the ordeal."

"Don't apologize. I murdered them, that won't change."

"That may be so… But, precisely because of how this shall affect you after this, and how it is obvious that you are not even remotely

as well as you claim to be, I must ask you to forgive me. Twas mine own folly what has brought this pain to you."

No, that's wrong. I'm suffering for what I myself did, before and yesterday. But I can't keep being like this. I can't push my emotional burdens onto others. This is my problem, I'll deal with it on my own. So, I gotta make you get that you're free of guilt. That's gonna be hard, though.

"Look, I'm thankful that you're still nice to me after all that happened. It… means a lot, for real. But you did nothing wrong, Meiya. So, can you tell me why do you want to earn this instead of just accepting that I forgave you?"

"Because my offense can only be mended by doing something for you. Only you, who I have wronged, can lift the stain on my honor. I cannot move on until I've properly earned your forgiveness."

"Yes, you can. You do not need to do anything to earn my forgiveness. You can still become a samurai, because I was the one that made a mistake." Her gaze again falls to the ground, and she speaks up in a frail, slow tone.

"That's not true. Because I abandoned you and didn't protect Sakaki, you had to spill blood. That is the truth. I was warned to not make any more mistakes, or else she would report my misconduct. I'm sure 1st Lt. Tsukuyomi will learn of this, after all the soldiers are part of the CCSE." She stops for a while as she shivers slightly. "If you inform the 1st Lt. that I've earned your forgiveness, I am convinced she will still reprimand me yet again however, I won't lose my sword and mission. Please… Ask anything you desire of me, anything at all. Please let me clean my honor." She looks up to me with those shiny, puppy dog eyes my world's Meiya did during our last talk back in my world.

Squinting my eyes, I stopped breathing for a sec as my heartbeat began clashing against my chest from within. You can't do this to

me… Short of receding, she keeps staring while making those cute little groans she always makes whenever she does this.

Hauu… I can't deal with this… If it makes her happy I can play along, but what can I ask her? I can't ask her to speak with Tsukuyomi-san, since once she learns of this world's me our relation will crumble. So then, what can I… Oh, I think I know what I want.

"I'll forgive you on one condition."

"What would it be? State your terms, you can ask anything of me!" She moves closer quickly, looking at me with bathed breath.

"Anything at all?" I say in a teasing tone while cracking a smile and placing a finger on my cheek, she twitches as it seems her cheeks gain a reddish tint while she purses her lips.

"… Almost anything. So long as it's something I can do without going against my morals. I won't allow you to t-touch me again." She's still hung up on that? She can be so cute sometimes.

"Alright. I think I know what I want." I smirk at my sudden idea.

"Truly? Tell me, I'll do it!" She gets even closer to me, her eyes sparkling.

"You will do it, right?"

"If I can then I will. No matter what kind of task you ask me to perform for you, or what item you ask of me. I will comply to your orders." She is honest to a fault so she isn't lying.

"I want you to let me call you Meiya. No more complaining."

…

"… Shirogane, I seem to not have heard your order very well. What did you ask of me?"

"To let me call you Meiya as much as I want." For some reason her face is getting red, her mouth opens and closes and her eyes dart from me to the ground. She wasn't this easy to tease in the other worlds. And she got used to me calling her that in an instant too.

"Why… Why do you want that? I mean, you could… make me do any other-"

"No. I want you to stop complaining when I call you Meiya."

"But why?… If that's what you desire, I will allow you to call me by my name. However… Isn't there anything else you wish me to do? I could… look for your family or any friends you might have here." She seems to be real nervous, maybe it's a bigger deal in this world?

"I told you Sensei already tried and found nothing. I just want to call you by your name, and now you have no choice but to comply."

And I just like saying it, even if you're a different Meiya. It also might help in you not getting negative again, even if only for a brief time. I don't want to have you keep blaming yourself for my mistakes, and I also can't ask you anything without making the Shogunate suspicious of me. I can… have that, right? Calling you as always, despite what I did. Can I at least… ease up around you?

She folds her arms, groaning a bit. I sigh, hunching over and feeling empty. Of course she won't agree. I'm not someone… she would trust. Then, she coughed, yet averted her gaze when I looked her way.

"I… suppose can allow you to call me Meiya from now on. However, could you explain me why you desire to do so? You were quite adamant against me doing something for you just a second ago."

"It's a beautiful name, that's all. I just think it suits you well, and I rather use that than your surname. And I can tell this is important for you, so that's that. So… let's make peace and work together until the test is over, Meiya. Um… Meiya?" Her eyes and mouth remained

wide open as her face reddened, I could practically hear gears screeching within her head. "… Hey Meiya, you in there?" I wave my hand in front of her and she seems to have come to her senses.

"Huh? What is it, Shirogane?" She spoke slowly in a monotone voice with glazed eyes.

"Meiya, you look tilted. You okay?" She slowly nods.

"Til… ted?" She then tilted her head, raising a brow. She's broken, completely.

"Hey, you sure you're okay?" I might have overdone it with the teasing this time. Please tell me you're not mad.

"Eh… Yeah, it was just… shocking to hear you say that my name was…" She blushes and can't finish her sentence. So she was just embarrassed? "A-Anyways! We now have our accord so… Do you truly forgive my actions, Shirogane?"

"Yeah, you have been forgiven Meiya." She smiles widely at me, like the Meiya of my world used to do. As sweetly and shining, it's more than enough to clean all the shit I had clogging my chest.

"Thank you… Truly, you have my utmost gratitude. I swear that I won't give you more trouble. However, I still wish to be there when you hand over your blade."

"Yes, I know. Let's do peace for the remainder of the test. We can talk our problems at the base." She nods at my words, signing our deal.

"I'm glad we could reach an agreement. Now I must ask the same of Sakaki, since I did fail in protecting her." There is no stopping her when she gets like this, so no point in arguing.

After shaking the dirt off her pants, Meiya got up, woke up Chizuru, and, after repeating the same things, she asked Meiya to teach her

how to improve with a blade. Thankfully, we're back to normal. We started to eat breakfast as we shook off the stiffness, discussing what we should do from now on. In the middle of that our radios started making noise.

"A transmission?" Chizuru takes one out and presses some buttons. "Here Sakaki, over."

"Squad? Are you all alright?" The Instructor sounded as usual on the other side.

"Instructor! We got separated after we got attacked by some soldiers. What was that about?!" Mikoto's yelps rang through the speaker.

"So that's why I heard two voices. Which of you reached the evac point?"

"Me, Miki-san, and Kei-san did, Instructor." She sounds kinda out of breath, I wonder if they're alright.

"They're already at the evac point?!" Meiya was truly surprised. I mean, last time we did arrive early to it, now that they have better stamina and were probably running in fear of being found it's not so surprising.

"What was it with those two-"

"Silence!" Mikoto's complains were cut short by the Instructor's yell. "If you say a word about this test's trial you'll be disqualified. Sakaki's team still has to arrive at the evac point." Ouch, what got into her? Also two what? Don't tell me they put two gun batteries this time.

"Roger. But anyways, are the others alright?"

"Alive and kicking." I shout as I pack my weapons into my belt.

"Takeru?! Are you alright?! And Meiya-san and Chizuru-san?" Hearing her sound so worried about us is heartwarming, honestly.

Thanks Mikoto.

"We're both here and we're alright." Chizuru replied instantly.

"Yeah, alright is kinda pushing it right about now. But we're safe." I rub my left shoulder, that was now purple and hurt a bit.

"Cadets, you can talk after the test. Yoroi, there are instructions on how to proceed near the place where you found the fire signals. Follow the instructions to reach your new objective. Sakaki, your team must continue to the designated evac point and once you're there look for these new instructions. That is all." And she cut the connection, just like that.

I think Mikoto might have wanted to say something else, but if she tries to talk through the comms she'll get eliminated from the CCSE. Marimo-chan is nowhere to be found.

"Well, our objective hasn't changed. Shirogane, Mitsurugi, let's make haste to the evac point. It seems like we still have a long way to go to finish this CCSE."

"Roger." We both nod and finish the mushrooms and fruit I had gathered.

Obviously that's not the case because I still have the fuel with me. So long as the soldiers are taken care of, we can run away on the boat safely. And so, we start moving south along the cliff. I can only hope we find a bridge or something to be able to cross fast, before the soldiers catch up to us.

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*November 20th. 0 3:10 PM.*

*(Yuuko's Office.)*

**[Yuuko]**

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Pouring some coffee on my mug, I reread the paper that had come my way.

This morning I got a report from Marimo about the test on the island, she sounded quite distressed. That's par for the course for her, but this time she had a very good reason to sound so preoccupied.

I cannot believe him! Of all the things he could have done, he had to go and murder some of the soldiers. High Command was under great pressure this time, I couldn't do a thing to prevent them from sending a squad of soldiers as another challenge of the CCSE.

Three injured, two deaths. Not even I will be able to cover you this time, Shirogane. The Captain of the squad sent a very aggravating report on his encounter with him, considering he is seen as a foreigner here… I should take some measures before it's too late. You're too valuable to lose you now, especially after the readings stabilized once more since your departure.

That being said, if he chose to kill them… I suppose he did what he had to do at the time. It's an issue I will have to address later, but Marimo did say the soldiers had a… less than stellar attitude during their encounter. There is still the matter of the last two members of that squadron… I should begin the preparations, as quickly as possible.

A knock on my door snaps me from the distant island's problems.

"Come in." I unlock it and Pyatkh steps into the room, letting the man behind her enter as well, and with a bow she then leaves.

As I ordered, Isumi and Hayase were at the door too in case anything happened. Now that Shirogane is gone this is the most appropriate time for an attack, if he has any intention of doing so.

"Good afternoon, Professor. Beautiful as ever, I see."

"Chief Yoroi, take a seat. We have quite many matters to discuss." He tips his hat and sits down.

"I brought you some nice intel today. Did you know that a new restaurant opened in the golden district in Tokyo? Their sushi is simply marvelous." Why do you always have to do this? I am not falling to your misdirection again.

"Chief Yoroi, could you cut the crap today? I'm expecting important reports from you." This talk just started and I'm already losing my patience.

"Oh? I thought you liked sushi. And here I was thinking that we could have a pleasant talk about food." He fakes a puppy dog look, slowly raising a hand to wipe away a non-existent tear from his dry cheek. Sigh…

"Chief Yoroi…"

"There have been many movements in these weeks that have raised some alarms in my office." Joining his hands together, he takes his serious gaze. What is he talking about? Where are my reports on the deals?

"I thought you came here for the deal on the new parts for the Gekishin and to bring me some intel on Takamura. What is this about?"

"Well, you see…" After a moment of silence where he closed his eyes, he cleared his throat and adjusted his posture a little bit. "Let me start from the beginning. You do remember that you allowed the Blood squad to 'test' some of the new parts you had made? Her Highness was most pleased with the reports she received and would like to form an official joint project to develop new technology with the UN." Yes, I could see this coming from a week ago.

"And? How is that any different from the other projects they tried to do?"

"Because this time it won't be a joint operation between the UN and a branch of the IJA. The proposal is to make a joint project with the Ministry of Defense itself."

"Well, the Shogun does have control over the military matters here after all. But are you sure that the Minister will comply?" He smiles a bit as he relaxes onto the sofa.

"Of course not. She knows the project will be rejected by the Parliament." He raises his hands, his tone shows a hint of disgust at the last word despite the never changing smile.

"Then, why are you mentioning this to me?"

"Because we won't be making a new project. Her Highness' idea is to restart a project that has already been approved but was-"

"The XFJ Project, right?"

"And here I was, trying to make a shocking reveal. These days I seem to have lost my edge." He says with a deadpan tone as he sighs, shaking his head slowly as if he were truly sad.

"Chief Yoroi, you have yet to explain anything. Could you please?" Sheesh, I'm getting so pissed off at him right now. What are they playing at?

"You see, the Shogun wishes to make an accord with you."

"First a joint project, now it's an accord. Could you stop with the wordplay and tell me what is this about?"

"I will get to it in due time. But as it may be, I have heard some… unsightly rumors as of late." You seem determined to ignore me today. "Some people are waiting for a spark, to lit the torch of war once again."

"I see. Does this have anything to do with next year's elections?" Testing my loyalty, perhaps?

"Yes, we have confirmed that some people have been coming and going very secretly from the Diet Building to the IJA's HQ. There seems to be someone important pulling some strings. Today at night a new budget increase for the production of the Shiranui will be passed on the Parliament, and a deal to send some Type-1Cs to certain elite squads of the IJA has been made as well."

"And how does this ties with me? I don't remember asking for this intel." He frowns at my words. Is this all a lie? Show me your cards already.

"Some of these actions have already involved you, Professor. While Takamura-dono's proposal to continue the development of the Type-99X-EML Railgun was accepted thanks to her own efforts, two people directed her towards you. One is Eiji Iwaya, an important man in the Weapon Research Department of the Ministry of Defense. I had a talk with him, he knew that you would be the most fitting person to put in charge of this since it was the intel you gave them what allowed the railgun to even exist." Yes, I remember that. One of the first 'favors' the Empire asked of me to prove my loyalty.

"So the first one was nothing more than good intentions. What about the second?"

"The second one… We still don't know who it was, but all leads me to think this person's influence was used in some sort of deal. Some connections were used to send Takamura-dono here as a UN officer, which gave the UN a nice new toy to play around with, and probably managed to convince the right people to gather the amount of votes needed to pass this new budget. And I think you know already what they asked of the UN."

"To keep Squad 207B as Cadets? Yeah, I know. I already took my measures to get what I want without making problems for the UN." He briefly smiles before continuing.

"Takamura-dono was most joyful when she knew she'd be arriving here, I can assure you she has no harmful intentions. Since she was

in charge of the XFJ project since its conception, we were hoping you could restart it if you deemed it worthwhile. The Shogun wishes you to take charge of it to restore the relations of the UN and the Empire." So Takamura is an ally, huh? However, he is hiding something. Yoroi never reveals so much intel without his speech devolving into some jokes along the way. This is way too suspicious.

"Are you sure this is a good idea? To have a noble bow her head to the UN like that?" I cross a leg over my lap, resting my chin onto my palm. I slowly lower my eyelids, he doesn't even react. Instead, he smiles at me.

"Why, yes, of course. She might have been captivated by your beauty, though. I, too, sometimes wish I could work under such a pretty face." Damn you, Yoroi. I press forward and now you start joking. Sigh…

"Chief Yoroi, if you do not take me seriously this conversation will be over. Why is the Shogunate sending a member of the Fudai here?" I play with my bangs as I stare at him, you're pissing me off. Stop with the lies and the false praise already. Damn dog of the Shogunate.

"No need to raise your voice. I told you that these were her own efforts, Takamura-dono insisted on continuing the development of the railgun and the only possible ally that could help was the UN, and there's no better place than this base to assign the project to."

"So this is all just a coincidence?"

"A favorable coincidence, yes. Regardless of the strings that were pulled and the deals behind our backs, both you and Her Highness need allies to brave the storms that will come. Which is the reason she desires your help in this rekindling of the XFJ Project. I'm sure you know that her influence is dwindling every day in the MDF, and the Diet is taking more and more liberties with every law they pass to shoulder the burdens of the war, even if that comes with its fair share of drawbacks." More things that are not my problem, does he think I

care about all this? I can't allow myself to be so deeply involved in these ploys, or else Alt. IV might suffer the consequences.

"And yet she sends someone who was at Yukon, immediately after the favor I asked you, and is putting more pressure on me to take even more projects under my wing? Why can't she send this project to the Imperial Research Department?"

"You know that Japan does not have the funds necessary to restart the project by itself. The Shogun knows that all the politicians and members of the Guard would rather lock the project down than hand it over to anyone again, but she knows that we as a nation need to start contributing to the UN. America is close to finishing the F-35, Europe has developed many quality crafts and weaponry under Prominence and is holding the BETA alongside the African Union, even COSEAN is developing a new type of ammunition despite all their setbacks. The Empire needs to appeal to the world or it will be secluded." I know that, that's why I'm trying to develop the Yellow Dust to gain me more support. All the data Shirogane has given me has produced quite the useful tools to that end, too.

"And what do I get in return?"

"The monopoly on the project. You can use it in any mission or side project you wish, so long as the Empire gets part of the royalties of it when the final products eventually get licensed by the UN. Also, the Empire would be more than willing to be the producer of the new tech you made, so that you don't have to wait until America passes the project through their Senate."

"You're telling me the Shogun will give me control of the railgun and the Shiranui Second? Isn't that really nice of her! But why would she go so far?"

"Well, you're the one and only Professor Kouzuki. Who wouldn't want to be on your good side? Hahaha." Sigh… I swear to God…
"Ahem… I did mention that Her Highness needs an ally in these dire times. We need to renovate our military forces before the BETA

attack again with their full force like in 1998. We won't be able to resist another invasion when more than half of our MDF units use Gekishins or Kagerous. The Shiranuis are still not as widespread as we want them to due to the continued casualties our men at the frontlines suffer, and only the best squadrons have them. If the BETA were to attack from Cheorwon and Sadogashima at the same time, we won't be able to hold the line if they break into the mainland."

"But didn't you say a new budget was already approved? With that they could get almost all the MDF to use Shiranuis and replace all the older models in the rear." They could do it faster if they allow the Fubuki to be deployed in battle too, like Shirogane mentioned once in passing while we tested the XM3.

"This will come at the cost of the civilians' quality of life. Her Highness is not pleased with this turn of events. If you aid her she will be in your debt, I'm sure you can use her influence to gain more time for your research. She does not want to keep pushing more burdens onto the people. Her Highness knows that the power struggle won't end soon and decided to ask for your aid. You both need a strong ally, and the Empire has risked much in its support to Alt. IV since the '98. I do not need to remind you of all that had to-"

"No, I remember *very vividly* what had to be done. The Empire alone didn't shoulder the burden of the war during those years. I was the one calling the shots back then, don't forget."

"… My apologies, I didn't mean-"

"It's fine. So you're saying that my wishes and those of Her Highness are still in alignment?"

"As aligned as the hearts of two lovebirds in spring. Speaking of birds, I found another dodo plushie that-"

"Then, let me be frank with you." I raise my voice a bit, before he starts to go into another rambling of those damn birds. "The UN doesn't need to take the XFJ Project to have an upgrade for our

TSFs, with my recent tests and the results I've obtained the Empire only needs to buy the license to mass produce the parts. And we may have another surprise ready for all of you." He won't be able to contain his curiosity, I know he'll ask.

"Oh? What could it be? Is this related to Takeru Shirogane in any way?" Finally got you to talk about him.… But it is surprising that he would mention it. Was all the rest just a lead-in to this?

"I don't know. But now that you mention it, did you find anything about him? You did say before that you found nothing, are you losing your touch Chief?" I try to taunt him into talking.

But then his expression grows tense as if he had a gun pointed at him, as if he had drank coffee mixed with milk instead of black. Yoroi never gets this serious unless he absolutely has to. After clearing this throat once, he answers in a slow, dry as ice tone.

"I did find something… unexpected." He crosses one leg over the other, joining his hands as he leans back comfortably.

"What, exactly?"

"You see, I did a through investigation. I went to all the databases and registries I could while not arising suspicion. I couldn't find a trace of his life in Japan, but what I did find was rather interesting. I believe Takeru Shirogane was involved in some… unsavory matters. I think it would be for the best that you handed him over to the Empire."

"… Chief, what is the meaning of this?" Is this a threat? Handing him over… They want Shirogane. I squinted my eyes at him, he remained as he was.

"Do not take this as a threat, consider it a warning from a friend. You should tread carefully around Takeru Shirogane, assuming that's his real name of course." What on earth is he talking about? What did he find? Or, is this all a ploy to execute the 'fake Guard'?

"Explain yourself." He nods as he slowly strokes his chin.

"Haha, please don't look so angry. You'll ruin your beauty."

"Chief, you have ten seconds to explain yourself before I call for the Valkyries."

"Please don't shoot the messenger, I am merely doing my best to protect you."

Protect me? This time he wasn't lying or playing around, his eyes didn't wander and his smile vanished. He's… being serious?

"You see, I couldn't find why, how, or when he lost his memory, there were no records of anything regarding his life. I also couldn't find any data on when or why he left the Empire. There is the chance that he was a traitor, otherwise I cannot explain why the online databases of the Ministry of Information were wiped clean. However, since we lack so much intel, there is a possibility that this Cadet is merely impersonating Takeru Shirogane. In any case, I believe it would be in your best interests to either hand over Shirogane to the authorities or send him to the Capital to resolve this matter of the missing info in the databases."

All the while he spoke with the same quiet but harsh voice, his complexion unfaltering like a wall of ice or the results of my failed equations. He's not lying, to make Yoroi look like this… What did he find?

"You make it sound as if his presence here could somehow work against me. What did you find?"

"I am merely saying it would be for the best if he were questioned about his iden-"

"As his current legal tutor, I wish to know about these matters that might trouble the life of my protegee." He squinted his eyes for a

second, plucking his lips as if his code had ran into a large snowballing pile of errors.

"I suppose I could tell you, if you insist so much." Taking a second to shift in his seat, he delayed his answer as he exhaled and crossed his arms. "During my search in a certain archive, I found some papers with details of Shirogane's… works. It seems he started working for the Shogunate at some point between the terrorist attack on the old Capital and the Battle of Kyoto, during the rule of Hidekatsu Saionji-sama, as a bodyguard of sorts. He later was officially recruited into the Royal Guard, and continued to serve even after the late Shogun's death, and was assigned to a Royal Guard squadron as a permanent member after the coronation of Koubuin-sama as the next Shogun."

He took a moment to gauge my reaction, seeing that I remained unfazed he slowly continued.

"However, all leads me to believe he was already working as a soldier or as an escort since an early age, he was merely sixteen at the time. To be recruited by the Shogunate despite his age, there is no way he was a rookie in his line of work." Makes sense, the Shogunate wouldn't recruit a complete beginner when it has access to all workers in the Empire at its disposal.

This is just what I wanted to hear. But it's not what I expected to hear. What exactly did he do? Of course, Yoroi might think Shirogane is an infiltrator because he's supposed to be dead, yet he's here working for the UN. He also said he could have been a traitor since his data was wiped out like when someone is exiled from the Empire. But this world's Shirogane probably died during Lucifer, so that isn't the case. However, he did say that I should hand him over. I suppose this is the Shogun's way of dealing with Shirogane without clashing with me. While this proves I do have her support, this doesn't explain why his data is gone or who this world's Shirogane truly was, however.

What if… he was a heretic Royal Guard? If that is the case… I might need to prepare a different set of measures. I need that intel.

"What kind of works did he do?" Yoroi, to my surprise, shakes his head as an answer.

"I think I'm not allowed to say."

"You think? Can you stop being cryptic for once?"

"Well, this comes from a… hard to approach source. I fear my neck might be snapped if I talk too much." So this came from the Guards' archive… Probably one I cannot hack into. The only place where records of Shirogane still exists, where he supposedly engaged in 'unsavory' matters.

"Nothing you say here will leave these four walls. Are you implying you don't trust in me, Chief?"

"No, of course not. I am just saying knowing of this might put you in a difficult position. I believe the best course of action is to send Shirogane to the Capital so that he can solve this situation of the databases."

"As I said before, as his legal tutor I will be handling this matter personally until he returns from the CCSE, and will continue to assist him afterwards. And if it is such a delicate matter, as the leader of Alt. IV I must know of whatever this is. Chief Yoroi, as his tutor, I ask for the details. And don't worry, not a word leaves this office." I narrow my eyes and cross my hands, letting a cobra dwell in my words.

Yoroi, however, doesn't return his usual smile. He closes his eyes, pondering his move. This whole conversation has been off, I suppose he either found something truly serious in the Guard's archive or the Shogun sent him with certain orders regarding the 'dead' Royal Guard stationed here.

And I won't allow them to take Shirogane away from me.

"Hmm… I'll tell you the most basic info, but do not tell him anything of this. He may be a spy in disguise, after all. Let's see then…" Entwining his fingers, he leans closer and speaks up in an almost inaudible voice. "Takeru Shirogane was officially inducted into the Royal Guard during the mass recruitment after the Battle of Kyoto, however it seems he took part of it in a Zuikaku Type-C as a member of the Wolf Squad led by the, at the time, Colonel Daizaburou Guren. The fact that he piloted a TSF and survived the fall at age sixteen is already a great feat in and of itself. There wasn't much data about his duties or missions, but what I think you should know is that he was assigned to a squad serving directly under the Koubuin House's command."

"The Koubuin House? He served the Shogun?"

"Yes, before she was chosen as the next Shogun. He was later transferred to the Imperial Palace when Her Highness took her new role, so he served the Shogun until he left the Empire, whenever that was. I cannot tell you of his missions, I'm sure you know why." I nod as I entwine my fingers.

So he was a direct servant of the Shogun, no wonder they got suspicious of him in no time at all. Then, why is his data gone? It makes no sense. If he was a close fellow of them, what made them erase so much of his data? What are these 'unsavory' matters he was involved with?

"… I suppose you won't tell me anything else regarding his missions?"

"As far as the records go, his last known deployment was during Lucifer. He was part of the rear working under express orders of General Guren, and that's the last mission he did for the Shogunate as far as I know. If I may, what do his records say about his past?"

"… That's classified. I'll deal with that myself, Chief."

"… Is that so? Well, there was next to no data about him where I looked. I think he may have had an accident during Lucifer or he may have committed many offenses up until that point, and after the mission someone decided to send him away to the UN in hopes of him never returning, in a form of payment for his efforts in the capture of the Yokohama Hive." He stops, entwines his fingers, smiles again, and looks back at me as he squints his eyes ever so slightly. "That is, if he didn't die that day. Someone might be replacing him, trying to impair your relations with the Empire. He cannot be trusted until this has been clarified. I do not know how he approached you nor what his records say of his past, but you should send him to the Capital as soon as you can, so that we can confirm whether or not he truly is who he claims to be."

"Have you forgotten I have Yashiro with me? She already has confirmed he is no threat to me."

"Well, he might be under hypnosis or mind control. He might not even be aware of it himself, like the people the cyborg took care of during his time here."

So now you're saying Shirogane works for those bastards… Going so far, all to have me send him to the Capital… I inhale deeply, meeting his gaze as he continues.

"Even if he is indeed Takeru Shirogane, the works he did for the Shogunate… were not your usual tasks. Again, I believe sending him back to the Royal Guard would be the best for both of you. If he truly is who he says, he might even recall some memories of his past. It would be most troublesome for you if any relatives were to press charges against you for 'keeping him' from the truth, don't you agree?"

So he came here to pressure me with this. A Royal Guard who worked for the current General of the Royal Guard and the Shogun, who was involved in 'unsavory missions'… And obviously, the Empire wants to know whether this man is their Shirogane, who somehow is alive after two years, or a spy that came from abroad.

Great, this just had to come out when he went and killed two people. Worst timing, even worse situation. If word of this reaches the wrong ears… The Shogun already knows he's here. That's why she's sending Yoroi to tell me all of this intel. She's testing my loyalty again, with her support on the line. But I can't lose Shirogane, I won't let them lay a finger on him. If they take him to the Capital, they'll assume he's a spy. The fate he'll suffer then… and considering those readings… I'll have to take some hits, but I won't allow them to take him away from me.

"Shirogane is too valuable to lose, I did scout him as my personal bodyguard after all. And don't worry, I have him under control. I can assure you he is who he says he is, and even if he might have been a dangerous person in the past, Shirogane now follows my orders to the letter." A brow twitched for a second. "Considering his recent experience in Yukon, I believe forcing him to return to the Guard is not advisable. If he ever remembers anything, I will tell him the truth. However, until that day comes, I will have him continue living here while assisting him in clearing this matter of the databases."

"… Is he truly Takeru Shirogane? Or is he merely bidding his time? I was notified he had many discussions with Meiya Mitsurugi-sama. Do you know happen to know why?"

"No, they were arguing like they usually do. She does challenge him to many fights, due to how good his swordplay is. And I told you Yashiro already confirmed he is not a dangerous element."

"Even so, this error in the databases has to be addressed." He deadpans me as he closes his eyes.

"When the time comes, I will be monitoring this matter closely. Or, what is it? Are you implying you do not trust in my judgment?"

"No, of course not. If he really is Takeru Shirogane, then it would be for the better that he learns of his real identity sooner rather than later."

"You do know you could just tell me something about who he was, right? What kind of works did Shirogane do while he was in the Guard?"

"Sorry, but my lips must remain sealed. I cannot risk my standing to be compromised, I only delved into that archive because of the risks that come with a spy being so close to you. If you are sure he truly is Takeru Shirogane, then I suggest you don't take too much time before dealing with this matter, in whichever way you deem appropriate."

He won't talk. And he already insisted on sending him to the Capital, to either clear this 'error' in the data or to officially return him to the Guard. Of course, with some concern towards whether he's really Shirogane or not. He already made his part crystal clear, so let's see how you react to my answer.

"Then, I suppose I want to keep him away from the Guard and under my control at all times, just in case any painful memories resurface. Don't worry, he won't do anything against the Shogun or the Empire. I don't know who he was, but as of now he's working for me. And you know my pawns don't ever disobey me."

For a mere second, his lips plucked again.

"Then, let me give you my answer towards the proposal you mentioned before." His hands tensed up as he meets my eyes. "I won't continue the XFJ Project, I already have too many projects on my hands. The railgun is one thing, but to develop a new TSF from the ground up? That's not happening, I still need to finish my research and my many other projects. Also, I will order Takamura to be demoted to 1st Lieutenant and I will restrict her clearance level to S2. I do not trust her as much as I trust Isumi for her to be a Captain in my base. I'll keep the deal with the current tech, the Empire will have priority for the licensing but that's all. I don't need more political problems on my head."

"Professor, if I may, I think you're making a mistake. Her Highness would be more than willing to send one Type-94-1C for testing. There's also no reason to distrust Takamura-dono, her experience in Yukon seems to have changed her. She isn't like the rest of the nobility. I ask you to reconsider." That's nice, you being serious. So let's keep pushing, to get as much intel as I can from your reactions.

"There is nothing to reconsider. The UN cannot shoulder all the burdens the Empire can't deal with. Otherwise, the other nations will start to ask for the same treatment. If Her Highness wants my support then Takamura better be ready to serve me well. Even if she is a noble I expect her to obey the UN's code and to perform as if she were just another grunt. If nothing out of the ordinary happens, I might change my mind." He narrow his eyes at me.

"It sounds as if you suspected the Empire of something, Professor." He sharpens his gaze and tone as I see his breathing slightly change.

"Well… Let's just ponder the following questions. What's going to happen when I do complete the railgun? Or the parts? These will be recognized as Japanese inventions, but will belong to the UN. If you give me the XFJ Project, the Second will become a patent of the UN too. Do you think the nobles or the loyalists within the IJA will be happy about that?"

"I'm sure you could pull some strings to make them a shared property."

Oh, the nerve! I cannot stand them! Do you even know how difficult it is to draw so many diagrams? To check so many different pieces and programs? Yashiro has been sleeping six hours for weeks now. I spend hours, literal hours, just checking reports and mails to make sure no mistakes are made in any of all the projects we are tackling here. And you want half of the royalties?

"Why should I? I'll have to rebuild the railgun entirely using my funds and resources, a weapon that wouldn't exist if not for the intel I gave

you. You want royalties from the parts I made with funds from the UN? What did the Empire do to help in their development, other than two weeks of low intensity testing?"

He closes his eyes and rubs his chin. I wait for a while but he doesn't respond.

"Tell me, Yoroi. What do I gain from this? You already know I can upgrade all 2nd Gen and lower TSFs on base and give them stealth capabilities, right? What do I get from this deal?" I speak bluntly to force him to talk, with how loyal he is to the Shogun he'll either snap and show me his true intentions or will give me the real prize for this favors the Shogun is asking of me.

"You seem to be unnecessarily wary of us. The Shogun does not bear ill will towards you, Professor."

"But she might towards my guardian. It feels really weird, having you insist so much on how I should send Shirogane to the Capital. You should know better than to aim your gun at my pawns. Angering me is not something you want to do, Chief." I narrow my eyes at him, smirking as poison drips away from every letter I uttered. He closes his eyes and after a deep breath he finally replies, tipping his hat.

"I see, forgive me for not expressing myself well enough. You should know I am on your side, despite my position." He says as he looks at me with a smile. I return to my poker face as I put a hand on my chin, leaning back into my seat. "I do not know how the Royal Guard will react to Shirogane, given the missions he performed while he worked there, but I believe you shouldn't worry about a lone soldier when you can obtain many other bodyguards. Surely you don't plan on getting into a fight with the Royal Guard over a single soldier?" He says, the small smile still painted in his face. When I didn't melt my poker face, his smile did. "However, do let me tell you Her Highness has some interesting projects she-"

"If this is about more projects we would have to take care of and end up receiving half of the royalties don't bother. If all the Empire is

going to do is ask for favors without actually contributing anything and demand to get around half of the profits you can consider this talk over. Should I call Pyatkh now?" He returns a glare and takes a folder out of his coat.

"I do not know why you're on your guard, however, Her Highness does see you as her ally. Perhaps this matter with Shirogane has put you in a bad mood? It isn't like you to be sour at these things, hahaha." I couldn't help but to frown, he raised both of his hand in apology. "However, let me tell you that if you're interested in this, Her Highness is ready to sign this transfer at a moment's notice." He then hands me the folder.

Let's see… Authorization for testing of export models? I won't even bother to read this. She just wants to use the UN to test some new tech to profit with it. Nobles, they never change. I press the button of the comms.

"2nd Lt. Pyatkh, please come escort Chief Yoroi back to the entrance."

"Professor, you're not interested in the Takemikazuchi?"

"Why would I… What did you just say?" I heard it clearly. He said Takemikazuchi.

"Then, next time I visit I shall bring you some Takesushi instead, I think that will surely please you. Hmm… I hope I can get some octopus ones or a golden roll, otherwise you'll get mad at me ahaha!" He takes the folder and gets up with a smile, and starts walking towards the door.

"Hold it! What is this about the Type-00?"

"Oh? Did you not read the papers? The Shogun is willing to give this base around ten Type-00C for your personal use, under the excuse that they're being used for an export trial. I believe that Squad A-01

would greatly benefit from this upgrade in performance. But if you're not interested in-"

"Sit down, it seems we still have a lot to talk about. But first, are the Royal Guards on board with this decision?" He raises his hands in a comical fashion.

"Hahaha, of course not. The machines and their maintenance crew, as well as any needed spare parts, will come straight from the Koubuin House. You could say it's a personal offering from the Shogun, to show how much she wants you on her side." If this is true… Ten Type-00C, all for me?

"Then, I suppose nobody will try to harm Shirogane or to forcefully take credit for my developments?"

"… I cannot guarantee that Takeru Shirogane will be left alone for much longer, it's a matter of time until Her Highness decides to act on his circumstances. However, all of your inventions will be yours and nobody will lay a hand on them. You know that these are turbulent times, I'm sure that as a fellow Japanese you do not wish to return to those days of 1999." Ugh, please no. Anything but that, we don't need more political problems.

"Fine, I'll hear you out earnestly from now on. But I expect this deal to go as you're saying. If Takamura does anything to harm my research or personnel, the deal is canceled. Same goes for the unit stationed here." Let's see how you react to this.

"But… The reports about him from the Guards here were mostly positive. He was reported as a gifted individual with a good conduct. Were they just lying in case the data got leaked? Are they aware of who he is?" I can't read him. Is he going along to hide his real intentions? Or, is he truly surprised?

"That's what I want to know. Can I really trust you when the Guards here are prying for his info and watching over his movements all day long? Let me remind you that I called him here, Shirogane is here to

protect me. If the Shogun wants him gone, should I take that as an offense against my person?" I don't know if it's wise to treat him like this, but I need to somehow make them reluctant to harm him. I can't lose Shirogane, as risky as this is for both of us. There will be little I could do if Her Purpleness truly asks for his head.

"Do you truly want to keep him by your side?"

"Obviously. He is my bodyguard, regardless of what he did in the past he's useful to me now. Shirogane won't be making a move without me knowing of it." He shakes his head as he adjust his position on the chair.

"I don't think that's a wise decision. But I am no one to comment on your judgment. It is possible that these years without his memory have changed him, after all." He doesn't sound convinced of it.

"If anyone from the Empire harms him, I'll cancel the deal for the parts and I'll stop working on the railgun. I might reconsider taking the XFJ project if you can confirm to me that he isn't being targeted by the Royal Guard." Even if this is a trap, they already have their sights on us.

Probably this is the Empire's last ditch effort, they either get the support of the UN for this or they go maverick. Might as well try to probe for intel before they come against us. I don't believe one bit this thing about the Type-00C, but if I can actually get my hands on those…

"Give and take, huh? Shirogane's safety in exchange of taking the project? I'll try, but I promise no results. It will take some time, and I'll need to be careful since I've been coming here quite frequently as of late. I also don't know if Her Highness already has plans for him, and I fear I might be overstepping my boundaries if I ask her about it. Give me some weeks, I'll get you an answer."

"Fair enough. I assume you could forward my plan for an eventual strike at Sadogashima to Her Highness, so that everything can be

arranged ahead of time?"

"Oho… So you're preparing for that already?"

"Of course I am. This Christmas will be a good one for us, if you all cooperate with me."

"… Very well, I'll do my part. I assure you Her Highness will be more than pleased to speak with the right people to prepare the board you desire, if nothing odd happens."

I suppose she won't stop insisting on taking Shirogane away from here. While I can use their need to restart the XFJ Project to make sure Sadogashima goes perfectly, I doubt many will like that. Add that to their insistence to survey the possible spy, and I'm left with little choice but to clash with them until we get demolishing results. Her Purpleness won't be placated easily if she wants Shirogane out of commission, but she underestimates me if she thinks I'll bend so easily. Neither she nor the Guard can be so foolish to try to spark up a political conflict at this stage of the game.

"Alright, let's hear what this document is about."

"Sure enough, should I tell you all about that delicious Takesushi?"

"Chief Yoroi, for the last time, be serious!"

"Do not frown so, your face is one of the Empire's seven wonders. What would we do without such beauty?" Again with that smile. Dealing with you is so exasperating.

"Sigh… Just talk already."

# Isolated Rains

## Chapter 21: Isolated Rains

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*November 20th. 0 9:27 AM. Fourth Day of the CCSE.*

*(Near the Evacuation Point.)*

**[Captain Nanase]**

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"How are Ogun and Ito, Tachibana?"

"Stable. We could prevent an infection, thankfully. Ogun needs surgery and one of those expensive cyborg eyes, but he sustained no further injuries. Ito's hand is fine, but he won't be able to move for a while. Shirogane did harm his eye too with one of his kicks."

"Thank God. I'm more surprised you got out of there without no injuries to speak of. Which of the girls was the one who stopped him?"

"I think it was the one with glasses. I was kinda out of it so I might be wrong, but she was the one that shot me, so…"

"Captain, what are going to do now?" Yanuo looks terribly distressed, her small figure trembles despite the unbearable heat. "I.. I don't think we can win against that monster. The look in his eyes… H-He's not human."

"He is human. We drove him into a corner and he fought with all he had, that doesn't mean that what he did was right. Shirogane went too far. Zanama's arm is broken, the medics here can't determine whether she will heal or not. She might have to undergo surgery." Both of them wince as fear and hatred fill their eyes.

"What the hell is even that boy?" Tachibana says, ruffling her red hair as she grits her teeth. "This was supposed to be an easy job. Scare the kids with some shots, capture them, mission complete. We got a whole load of offers here. The Diet, the Shogunate, even the UN! This was some life changing opportunity, with how much money they put on the table. Why didn't they tell us the boy was like that?!"

I can understand you very well. It's true that accepting bribes is a crime, but we have a responsibility to our families here. I couldn't care less about the political struggles or who is the current Shogun. This chance was a one in a lifetime deal, the amount of money we will be paid if we succeed looks more like a telephone number than a payment check.

All of us frontliners know that eventually we will die, so we must leave as much as we can behind for those we abandon. Rin, I know you wouldn't forgive me if you knew of this, but I wanted to buy you a draft exemption. If I could save you from this living hell, I don't care how I'm called or if lose my 'honor'.

"Captain, I ask of you to continue the pursuit!" Ruri Tachibana, you're completely crazy.

"We barely got to you in the jungle before you collapsed, Ogun, Ito and Zanama can't join us, we lost both Nikaido and Shijima already. What exactly do you want to do with just the three of us?"

"Huh? Three? Where is the pair the Shogunate sent?" Yanuo looked around and was surprised that they weren't anywhere nearby.

"I don't know honestly. As soon as they heard of Shirogane, they asked about his whereabouts and then departed without a word."

"So they're after the bounty that's placed on his head too?"

"I don't know, Yanuo. What I know is that we should steer clear of them. Tachibana, can you tell me how you plan to keep pursuing the Cadets?"

"We can intercept the ones that ran away first, then we can move to the first evac point with a boat, and ambush the other three before those dogs of the Shogun get them. It's the least we can do for our partners!"

"I agree with Tachibana. If we let them get away, that Shirogane will be allowed to ride a TSF. Who knows what horrible things a monster like that will do with such a weapon? He killed them when they couldn't even fight back."

"You say that, but why exactly did he do that? You both have been very vague on your encounter with him. He didn't kill me when he had me completely defeated, and he looked absolutely livid then. I don't think he would have killed them without a good reason. What were you doing when he found you?"

Both of them fall silent. I think I already know what happened, Ogun must have gotten pissed off for some reason and you all went along with him. Why do you always listen to him?

"And? What did you do?"

"We defended ourselves from the girls… And we had to rough them up a bit." Tachibana is looking slightly to my left, not meeting my eyes.

"A bit? How so?"

"Captain… what will happen to us if… if we kinda were beating them up?"

"Yanuo, you traitor!"

"Tachibana, the kids will talk. Think of who they are, of who they can talk to, of who will come after us. Captain, what do you think?"

"Hmm… How bad of a beating are we talking about here?"

"… Kicking them over and over as they were collapsed?"

"Oh… Oh, that's… You're both getting kicked out of the army, at the least. That's abuse of power against defenseless adversaries, the UN does not tolerate that kind of conduct." I wish the IJA did so too.

"We… also left the Mitsurugi girl unconscious." Tachibana finally admits with a bow.

"Sigh… Well, if you didn't overdid it then one could make a case of-"

"No, we kept kicking her. We… didn't even realize she was unconscious." She… isn't lying this time.

"… This isn't a lie?" They shake their heads. "Well, I think you're… No, we all are going to be in some deep shit after this. You must have seen her face, this offense won't be overlooked."

"Then, if that's the case… Shouldn't we focus on bringing down the other three and then go off Shirogane?" She lowers her tone as a dangerous look appears in her face.

"… So, since we're already deep in this there's no point in turning or holding back. That's what you're saying?" Both of them nod. Yanuo speaks up with a serious tone.

"I really don't care about politics or the nobles, but I need that money. My boyfriend suffered a grave injury in the battle of Niigata. The Shogunate said he should be glad to have had the honor of losing his flesh for the Empire, that there was no greater proof of his loyalty. Easy for them to say that, they're not the ones stuck in a wheelchair. Those mechanized legs are too expensive, there's no way we could pay for them with our wages. But if I got this payment… The Empire has driven my family into smaller and smaller houses every year. Those little cramped rooms cannot even be called homes anymore. I don't care if I have to kill a cousin of the Shogun, my family is what's most important to me."

Yanuo's long orange hair swayed in the air. She's usually reserved, but can occasionally say very serious words when she feels strongly

about something. The one reason I'm glad to be the Captain of this squad is not because of how skilled they are, but because we all agree on that feeling.

Only those with money can keep studying to have a better job and have the hope to someday own a house. Only those that can buy the draft exemption to keep living normally, go to college or get a job on the media. Of course, on the media they said that's given to 'gifted individuals' but that couldn't be further from the truth.

So… who cares if they brand us as traitors? We get nothing in return, more than a few little, empty words of praise. But a raise? Better housing conditions? More food tickets? Hell no, that's too much for us commoners to have.

Sigh… But even so…

"I do so too, Captain." Tachibana speaks up before I could muster an answer. "Me and Ogun wanted to buy a big apartment for our families, to get them out of the slums. But now we also need money to treat his eye, otherwise he might not be allowed to pilot anymore. He'll be demoted to a mere MP, and you know how much lower their wages are." Sigh… I know. I know all of us saw this as our chance to obtain what we wanted the most.

"We all need the money. So, if you two promise me to not harm the Mitsurugi girl, we'll go deal with the other three, and get the big reward for killing Shirogane if we're swift. He did us a great harm, let's return the favor." Both of them doubt for a second, and then they give me a nod.

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*Same Day. 12:14 AM.*

*(Somewhere in the jungle.)*

**[Kei]**

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And another pitfall over there. Really, how many traps are they going to put in this damn island?

At least Yoroi is taking care of the tough ones. While I keep the rear safe, Tamase helps by checking the sides for any cables Yoroi might have missed.

I almost got shot by those two gun batteries they put near the evac point, damn chopper ran away, and now they want us to go behind the batteries. We barely slept yesterday since we wanted to put as much distance as we could between us and those soldiers, so we're destroyed today. Between running in the rain, disabling all those traps and not being able to sleep much we're now in a horrible state.

Things don't look good, neither here nor there. I might stay quiet most of the time but I'm always looking at everyone. I can tell these two are in no condition to fight. Yoroi is trying to not use her left foot much as she walks, she strained herself as we ran yesterday. Tamase is already agitated, she never had much stamina to begin with. We've been slightly slowing down for the last half an hour.

And what the hell happened there? They joined forces with Shirogane? How did he find them? He's suspicious.

You can't fool me, Special-kun. The others might need an excuse like you being from overseas to suspect you, but you can't hide your game from me. I know you aren't a Cadet since the start of November.

All people have flaws and, no matter how much they train, they always have things that can be exploited. Habits, signs, patterns. By watching your opponent carefully, one can pinpoint their strengths and weaknesses. Then it's a choice on whether you can exploit that weakness or nullify their strength.

But you didn't let anything show. You keep switching your pace, you mix movements randomly, you even fake your glares. There's no way a Cadet learned to do that, it's terribly complicated to achieve

something like this. Even if you were a genius, you would show something. If I had a hat, I'd be tipping it to you. As a soldier, I hold nothing but respect for you.

Sadly, as a person it is a completely different thing. He's involved in the development of foreign technology, he's faking his rank, he has a lot of knowledge only someone that was throughly trained by foreigners could have. Bad Special-kun. I'd like to see his face when his cover gets blown up. It's so obvious his a soldier sent to keep us in check, acting all friendly and never complaining.

But why did those two agree to be with him? Weren't they also suspicious of him? Doesn't matter, I need to pass this thing. I won't let a foreigner screw with me, and I won't fall to that false friendship you propose. I can deal with this myself, not like I can rely on these two right now. Tamase is now barely walking, Yoroi is on her limit. We should rest here for a while.

"Hey, I'm hungry. Let's rest." They look at me and, without answering, they throw themselves onto the ground.

"Haah… Haaa… I don't think I can keep this up." Tamase said weakly as she chewed some mushroom Yoroi got for us last night.

"There's too many traps. Pitfalls, wires, hidden stuff on the trees, guns. This is insane…" Yoroi wiped the sweat off her face as she sat on the ground.

"Agree. Too much stuff in here."

We all then fall silent as we eat. Not that I mind, but those two surely do. Neither is a leader, so they follow whoever is the strongest. So far we managed because we had a clear goal but now both look worn down. Their minds might give up before their bodies do at this rate.

I can't really do much myself. I have no idea what's ahead and I'm not good at giving speeches. I'll have to lead them with my actions.

But if we run into more soldiers… I doubt I'll be enough to protect them if they enter into shock.

"Say guys, what do you think we'll see near the new evac point? Tamase asks barely raising her voice.

"Traps. Lots of." That's why I recommended to rest now.

"Yeah… Say Miki-san, what do you think happened with Takeru?"

"I don't know, he was being restrained when we abandoned him. I hope they can get to finish the test."

"That's assuming he's helping them." Both of them glare at me. "What?" Tamase held my gaze for a second before speaking.

"Ayamine-san, why do you always treat Shirogane-san so badly?"

"He's too suspicious. Can't risk it."

"But Kei-san… He's not a bad person. You have all been horrible with him."

"What about the sims then?" I can't believe someone so young could help in the development of those things. Why was he chosen as the tester out of all the people in the base?

But even if that could be explained, there's many other little things that make no sense about him. His records are locked, he's too close to the XO, and he is almost always on a special mission, his fighting quirks are all hidden, he fights like a pro in CQC, he's terribly skilled with a gun, and he has never missed a question wrong and all his assignments are always getting good scores. He is no mere Cadet, he has experience in this field. Why is he lying? Is he an undercover agent? How can we know he isn't on those soldiers' side? What a coincidence that he joined right before the CCSE, isn't it.

"… If it's suspicious people we are talking about, how about you?" Huh? I didn't expect Yoroi of all people to talk back.

"I'm suspicious?"

"You're always quiet, and you're always doing your own thing without a care. You're not thinking of getting rid of us later, aren't you?"

"I wouldn't do that." Foreigners are one thing, but I wouldn't betray my comrades!

They're… looking at me with those eyes again. The same eyes they made when they heard my surname for the first time.

Daughter of a pair of traitors, how many times have I been called that? And many more insulting and degrading names as well. I think Special-kun has been the only one who hasn't looked at me like that when he first met me, which is very weird. At the least, he must have heard about my Father's betrayal.

"Ayamine-san, you won't just storm off on your own?" Tamase moved away from me slowly on the ground.

"I can't pass the test alone. I wouldn't harm you, you're my squadmate."

"Takeru and Chizuru-san are part of your squad too, and you always treat them badly." Yoroi said, looking away from me.

"He's too weird. And the Leader is unbearable." I'll never rely on a foreigner, or anyone who I can't get a read on. I can't screw this up, if people get suspicious of me that's it. My life depends on whether or not I get commissioned, I can't involve myself with possible traitors or idiots.

"Oh, is that how this is? You don't like them so you're willing to leave them behind? Ayamine-san, I thought you were different."

"What's that supposed to mean?" She looks away before replying.

"… That you are how the rumors said you were."

… That hurt. A lot.

It's always the same, no matter where I go. Why even bother talking? Why bother trying to be nice? In the end, that's all they can see in me. The rumors are more important than my actions for them.

…

"I see."

"Is that all you have to say?" Tamase looked at me as if waiting for me to react somehow.

"Yeah, sure."

"Kei-san, you won't even try to explain yourself?" Yoroi didn't seem to agree with Tamase. She was looking really nervous now as she gripped her canteen.

"Why should I? I don't trust Special-kun or the Leader, that's it." I need no complex reason.

If he wasn't a foreigner and I saw that I could trust in him, I would do so. Even if everybody told me he was a criminal. Because I know that people say ugly lies when they want to bring down people they don't like, I know that very well. I can tell when someone's honest or not.

"Please, Kei-san you have to talk to us. How can we work together if you don't tell us what you're thinking?" Yoroi, it's all up to you two. If you don't believe me, nothing I say will convince you.

"We can just do the same we've been doing so far, right?"

"… What are we even going to do?" Tamase's worry was obvious from a mile away. Yoroi also looked in bad shape.

"Go to the evac point. I can disable the guns, we just gotta get there." I have to lead them, even if they don't trust in me. I can't do this alone.

"… I guess. We're still quite far away from it though." Yoroi said as she looked at the map while also taking glances towards the coast.

"We have been walking quite fast since dawn. We have a bit more stamina, so what do you guys think? Yoroi-san, think we can make it tonight?" Tamase asked as she rubbed her legs.

"Hmm… Maybe. We already covered more ground than I thought we did. But… well, if we encounter the soldiers, what should we do?"

"Fight, obviously."

"Ayamine-san, how are we even supposed to?!"

"We knock 'em out. We also have knives if they don't give up." She starts shaking.

"I can see what you mean. But Kei-san, do you really think things will be so easy?"

"Doesn't matter. We gotta pass. So, you coming with me?"

Yoroi looks at Tamase, who returned a troubled look. She stayed on the ground, shaking. I don't know what I even expected, it's always like this. I will never find people that accept me for who I am, as soon as they hear the rumors and learn of my parents…

"I'm rested. I'll be going in five." I get up and start stretching.

"Kei-san, there's no need to rush. We still have two days, right?"

"Better sooner than later."

"I mean, yeah… But with all the traps that are laid out, we could use just a bit more rest? We can then decide what we-"

"We're going to the evac point, and we're clearing anything in the way. Traps or people. That's my plan. You two coming?" I cannot falter. Even if I'm doubting, I must not show weakness. They need a leader and I'm the only one who can be that for them right now, regardless of how they see me.

"And… you won't abandon us? You won't ditch us?"

"It's up to you Tamase. You believe in me or not?" She's trembling again.

"I do want to believe you. So if you say you'll lead us, I'll believe in you."

"Fine by me."

Retreating is not an option, relying on them is also out of the question. I did like this squad quite a lot, despite Sakaki's presence. Mitsurugi was always calm, and was a serious person who we could rely on. She never lies and is always straightforward with everything. I can't say I agree with her most of the time, but I don't hate people like that.

Yoroi and Tamase were always the pacifists of the group. Yoroi's quirkiness made her be the only one I could joke around with without getting Sakaki's evil stare. As a fellow free spirit, I wish I could have her selective hearing. Silencing Sakaki would be a godsend. Tamase's kindness was a relief to have, I thought… I thought she would be the one I could call friend the fastest. She was always making conversation with me, always trying to stop Sakaki from annoying me. Looking so innocent yet being such a good comrade, she reminded me of myself when I first enlisted in the IJA's Training Program.

I really wanted to fit in this squad, that's the only reason I put up with the princess. Always so righteous, she always has a retort for everything. And she has to always be right, because she's the Squad Leader. Mitsurugi would make a better leader than you, you

have the position only because of your Father. She never listens, is always forcing her views on us, and can't lose an argument without picking a fight. As if she had a right to be here, she's no soldier. She's only Daddy's little girl trying to get to a position of power as soon as she can. What does she know of sacrifice? What does she know of the hollowness that follows you everywhere when you lose someone irreplaceable?

Unlike all of you, I have nowhere to go back to. Mitsurugi has a title of being a noble samurai, even if one didn't knew that the Mitsurugi are a family of samurai just by looking at her you could tell she's a noble. Tamase and Yoroi did talk sometimes about their houses so they have a lot of money, to own a house in this day and age you have to be rich. And the princess can run away to the safety of a mansion in the Capital whenever she wants. They can stop fighting whenever they want, they have people looking out for them. Someone out there is waiting for them to return safe, someone out there is thinking about them with a hole of worry in their chest.

But me? I have nothing. No home, no friends, no family. I can only fight, try to clean my name, and maybe hope I can at least afford an apartment for when I get my vacations from the army. Nobody would lend a hand to the daughter of a pair of traitors, nobody would even show some sympathy.

I'm no stranger to betrayal. How many times was I approached by some lecherous dude who just wanted to take advantage of me? How many times was I blamed for things I didn't do? Why bother talking if no one will listen? That's why I must have a perfect record. I can't put into words how thankful I am to our Instructor, she has never reported my fights with Sakaki. She only gave me lectures about it, no matter how many times we fought. That's why I can't get close to foreigners, who knows what kind of weird rumors people would start? I already have a lot of shit to deal with, I don't need more.

Even so, it makes me wonder. How did Special-kun got away? How did he find them? Why are they working with him? Or is he

threatening them? 'Do what I say or I kill you' kind of thing? I see Sakaki helping him though, results are all she cares about. Even if her plan involves sacrificing people, she would stick to it no matter what anyone says. I can see her backstabbing Mitsurugi if it meant reaching her desired result. Like a politician, today's your friend but tomorrow your enemy.

"Kei-san, we're ready. Should we go?" Yoroi broke my inner monologue as she tapped my shoulder.

"Sure."

The good thing of having her around is that I can follow her without thinking, she takes care of the traps with utmost effort. If only I could find a commander like that, someone who valued my efforts as much as I value their leadership. They say I treat the Leader badly, but she's looking for it. It's not like I always fought with Sakaki, I gave her many opportunities to prove to me that she had what it takes to be the one to lead me. But she disappointed me time and again. Sigh… Is wishing for one trustworthy person such a sin?

It's not like I enjoy being quiet and only answering with jokes and witty remarks all the time, I also have worries and need advice in a lot of things. But I have no one. Not yesterday, not today, and probably not tomorrow. Who could want to get close to someone like me?

To make matters worse, I'll have to keep dealing with Shirogane if he passes the test. And if he got dirt on Sakaki, I expect her to start covering him. If he takes her to the result she wants… She just might fall for him. She only cares about awards, numbers and reports. She lives for the opinion others have of her. She is thirsty for recognition and high ranks. And the money that comes with those, probably. I mean, she is the daughter of the Prime Minister that's leeching all the power from the Shogun.

I hate her. She gets praised for everything she does, everyone is nice and respectful to her. Yet I work twice as hard, my plans are

better than hers, I get better results in our trainings and all I get is side glances. I'm the only one that can keep up with Shirogane, I'm the only one that gives him trouble, and yet Sakaki is the one that gets praise and words of encouragement in the hallways and the PX. Only Kyouzuka-san can see all the effort I put everyday. And Shirogane, since he still gives me advice from time to time.

Sigh… Why did he have to be an American trainee? I was hoping we could be friends. Just remembering our first sparring sessions is enough to send shivers down my spine.

So talented, so calm, and yet so humble. To be praised by someone so skilled, I think my heart skipped a few beats the first time he complimented me, I could tell he was being honest by his body language. He wasn't trying to woo me and he wasn't lying either. He does… look really handsome when he's all sweaty. Sigh… All the people I put my sights on end up being liars or judging me by my parent's actions.

If he just was Americanized… I guess I could overlook it if he were willing to fight for the Empire alongside us, he is Japanese. And I deal with Sakaki on a daily basis, who's much more annoying than him. But he's too suspicious.

Shirogane is someone I cannot get close to. As much as I don't care about other's opinions, I have to lower my head and take their insults. Otherwise, I'll end up either on the street or serving as a common laborer, living in the slums. I rather give my life for my land than waste my days in those dirty buildings again. And moreover, no one would bat an eye if an 'unfortunate accident' were to happen to the daughter of a traitor. If rumors spread about me being friendly with him… people might assume I'm an American sympathizer.

Sakaki, if you're helping him… I'll never forgive you. You two better not lay a hand on Mitsurugi, she may not say it but she is a relative of the Shogun, not matter how distant. I'll kill you two myself, or I'll report it as soon as I can to the Guards stationed at the base.

The Royal Guard… Dad, if you adored them so much, why did you betray them? Why did you went along the plans of the Americans? Mom, if you always told me how important the Shogun was for us, how it was the only person with power who would spare a thought for the common people, why did you help the terrorists? Why did you treat their wounds?

Were they lying to me? Was all just an act so that I wouldn't talk? Why? Why did you abandon me? You two knew what you were doing, did you not care about my future? Why…

"Ayamine-san! Quiet! There's a cable in front of you!"

Oh… I always zone out when I think about my parents. I should know better by now.

Everyone I ever liked ends up abandoning me. Even you Naoya, I thought I could trust you. Yet when I was blamed at the IJA Training Program you negated knowing me. You knew I would never break gear or do anything against our army. And yet… It's thanks to that accident that I got kicked out of the IJA and had to go back to the slums. Because of that I had no choice but to join the UN to someday be able to fight for my country. And yet, you dare to send letters to me?! You damn liar, you also were nothing more than a power hungry son of a…

No, focus Kei. You have to pass this test, to be able to someday have my own house. To clean my name and be able to uphold the values I was raised with, even if the ones who raised me were just lying.

I cut the cable and rejoin the other two. I trust in you two, I know I can space out and you would still look after me. I… I'm… not very good at expressing myself without getting really nervous. That's why I'll protect them, I'll make sure we pass this thing. Even if it's only us three taking the piloting test, I'll… try to become someone you can trust. I'll be that someone that was never there for me. I'll be that

soldier who protects Japanese lives, instead of obeying comfy orders to suck up to High Command.

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*(Near the wooden bridge. 19:17 PM.)*

**[Miki]**

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"Hauu… What are we gonna do?" We reached a bridge to cross to the other island where the evac point is, but it's completely tattered. There is another bridge made out of steel on the other side, but we would have to cross the jungle again.

"We should repair the thing and cross." Ayamine-san was pretty adamant in her idea, to have her and Yoroi use the rope we had to fix the bridge. However, that would leave me here alone, and after both of them made it to the other way she can knock Yoroi-san unconscious and leave us here.

No, I shouldn't think like that. I… I'm no one to bear a grudge against her, I also didn't do anything to help Shirogane-san. I abandoned him as well. So much for helping your fellows, Miki. Papa would be disappointed in me.

"Hmm… I do think you're right Kei-san, but we should wait until tomorrow. There's barely any light right now."

"We could get ambushed by the soldiers in the night. We gotta get outta here yesterday."

"I do agree in that. But Ayamine-san, what if you have an accident?"

"Don't worry. I'll be fine." She says that but… Look at the state the bridge is in. Some of those logs might be rotten.

Sigh… I have no idea what is the better choice. We do need to make haste, but if we hurry too much the others won't be able to finish in

time. Hauu… What should we do?

"Even if we crossed right now, you won't be able to rig the batteries. It's too dark to risk it." Yoroi-san brought a counter.

"It's better to be there than here, in case the soldiers come at us. And no way we're going back to the jungle."

"I agree with Ayamine-san on the last part. I don't think I could walk much more with all the traps that are around here." I did get a bit more fit, but my feet are killing me. We are also short on water, we only have a few sips enough for one day more. Hauu…

Ayamine-san and Yoroi-san went to check the wooden bridge, seeing if we could use the rope and the tools they had brought to fix it. If only I could help with something…

**Rustle Rustle**

Hmm? What was that? I think I heard something… Nothing looks out of the ordinary. Was I just imagining it? Hmm? What the…

On the corner of my eye, some sixty meters into the forest, I saw something weird. A tree… was twitching. And moving towards us. And it has a gun. That's… no tree.

Wait a moment… EH?! T-They're here!

"Ayamine-san! Yoroi-san! T-The soldiers are here! Take cover!"

I hide behind a rock as I hear the sound of bullets boom through the night. Ayamine-san and Yoroi-san ducked and got behind another rock to my right. W-What are we gonna do?!

"You three! You have been found, come out with your arms raised or we will have to pacify you." A man's voice addressed us.

Ayamine-san makes a gesture with her hands. To… get near and attack them?! Are you crazy?! **Why are you nodding?!**

"I won't repeat myself. Come out on you own or we will shoot at you."

Ayamine-san looks at me again, first me, then her and finally Yoroi. Awawa, this is… No, I gotta trust in her. I'm no one to go doubting people when I'm the weakest link here.

I slowly come out of the rock I was hiding behind, the man had a rifle but I can't see if there are… No, there were other two soldiers hiding near the trees. They… don't have guns, going by their positions?

"Tamase, can you see them?" Ayamine-san had come out behind me and whispered to me.

"Two, behind the trees. They don't seem to have guns."

"Stop whispering! Come right here, no sudden movements or we'll shoot." We'll shoot. Yet he's the only one near with a gun, if they had guns they wouldn't be hiding.

On Ayamine-san's cue, we start getting closer. The man has his eyes locked onto us, the other two on the woods are not moving. Are they snipers? I don't think they have guns going by their silhouettes, but I might be wrong.

Then as we got to the place he told us to be, he got a bit closer. The other two were coming towards us. What are we-

In the blink of an eye, Ayamine-san moved forward and hit the man with a sudden kick. Doing a short hop back, the soldier dodged it but then she got closer in a flash and took the rifle from him, tossing it towards me, as she started to wrestle with the man.

"Quiet! Stop moving or I'll s-shoot!"

The man didn't stop, he didn't seem to care. He punched Ayamine-san in the stomach quite strongly, making her fall to her knees. I fire once to the air.

"That was your only warning, leave us o-or I'll shoot!" But then, he crouched and grabbed Ayamine-san. He was hiding behind her. With one hand pulling her hair and another bending her left arm backwards, Ayamine-san couldn't struggle.

"Go ahead, little girl. Shoot me. What is it?" He was grinning from ear to ear. Is this what a sadist looks like?

"Miki-san… You can do it, you can shoot at him without harming Kei-san." Yoroi-san was standing near me while she was looking at the other two soldiers.

Shoot? At another person? Kill… No, that's… That's not why I joined the army… I don't want… to be like them…

"Augh!" I lost my focus and before I could realize it the man had kicked the gun out of my hands. As I stumble backwards to not fall he punches me in the face.

"Heh, seems like he was the only one with guts in this squad!" What is he saying?

"Captain, we got this one too!" Ayamine-san was being pinned by two women, is this… the end for us?

"You three. Leave them alone." Yoroi-san's voice was… weird. Cold and angry, unlike anything I've heard of her. She had picked up the gun and was aiming it at the women.

"C'mon, you too? Stop resisting or-" The man's words were drowned by the sound of the rifle.

**RATATATATATA!**

She opened fire?! Both soldiers had to roll onto the ground to not be hit by the bullets. The man tried to assault her, but she tossed the rifle above him. It landed near me.

"Miki-san, shoot him!" She was grabbing the man as hard as she could, but obviously… she was no match for the him.

"I… I…" But… shooting at people… I'm not like… But if I don't…

I grab the rifle and, while remaining on the ground, aim it at his legs and shoot once to each. He screams in pain as he buckled down.

"Captain! You bitch, you won't get away in one piece!" One of the women screamed at me. Ayamine-san was having quite some trouble with both of them.

"Miki-san, shoot at them. We gotta cross the bridge now!" Yoroi-san's nose was bleeding, she swiped her hand to clean the red line from her face.

"I… They're moving too much. If I end up hitting their vitals…" The two women were moving quite fast around Ayamine-san, trying to hit her with some sort of baton.

"This has rubber bullets, they won't get killed by them!"

"But…"

Ayamine-san lost her balance as one of the women hit her shoulder from behind. The other used that opening to strike her face with the baton, sending her to the ground. I… I gotta…

I aim at them and open fire. The red haired one dove into the ground, but I hit the other one and she fell to the ground. I heard another noise close by, looking to my left I saw Yoroi-san hit the man in the head with a rock when he tried to get up. I didn't knew she could be so… aggressive.

"I'll go get Kei-san, you cover my back."

"… Y-Yes." Who are you and what did you do to our Yoroi-san?!

We get near them as I aim the gun at the soldier. The red head was leering at us so hard that returning her gaze was like having to swallow a bunch of thorny leaves. Ayamine-san was slowly getting up, one of her eyes was purple and blood was dripping from her mouth. She grabs one baton from the ground as she makes her way to us, wobbling as she gasps for air.

"Kei-san, lean on me. Let's get outta here."

"You bitches… Don't think we'll let you go like-"

"Quiet! If you don't leave I'll shoot you!" I know I can't do it. My knees are shaking, and I can barely hold her gaze.

"Miki-san, let's move towards the bridge again. I'll fix it while you cover us with the gun."

"Okay, let's- Augh!" My hand! That hurt!

The other soldier threw her baton at me, I thought she was collapsed. Yoroi-san! The red head had leaped as soon as I screamed, knocking Ayamine-san to the ground again. She was now choking Yoroi-san on the ground.

"You all… What do you know?! We gotta get this done, I don't care about the regulations or the honor. You're all going to come quietly with us!"

I tried to get up but found myself kissing the ground. The orange haired one kicked me as I was trying to get up, and started pulling my hair as I struggled to get up.

"It hurts! Stop!" She's scalping my hair! It hurts! I'm sorry, I'm sorry! Please stop!

"It hurts? Ooh, poor little girl. Those two bullets I got on the shoulder hurt much more! And he is in even more pain than you on that

wheelchair!" What is she talking about? She punches me in the face, and then throws me to the ground again.

"Hauu… Please… Sto- Augh!" My face burns with pain as she kicked me straight on the nose when I tried to get up. I can't see anything, there's a weird taste in my mouth.

"We gotta pacify you, you know? I don't know if you'll try to do something like that Shirogane did." Shirogane? Did he run into them?

Augh! She starts kicking me, really hard. Stop, please… Augh! Ough! Anyone… Help…

"Leave her alone." I couldn't see very well from the ground, but Ayamine-san assaulted the woman. She stopped kicking me as she moved away.

"What's this? They won't give up?!"

"Tamase, get up. We gotta fight."

"I can't…" I slowly raise from the ground. Yoroi-san was coughing some meters away, looks like Ayamine-san helped her too. The women were ready to pounce at us.

Ayamine-san sent a glare at me, pointing with her chin to something that was between us and the women, the rifle. Whoever got that was going to have the advantage. But… can I shoot it?

"Haah… Haah…" I can't even stand upright, my knees feel like jelly.

"You two think you can step up against real soldiers? You lot are a bunch of problem kids!" The red head was really mad, her words filled to the brim with venom.

"We can't mess this up, I don't care who you are. Surrender now or face the consequences!" The orange haired one's face twisted, it

looked like one of those animals called lions when they open their mouths.

"Tamase, on three." Huh?! You can't be… We can't win… We're gonna…

And after three seconds, Ayamine-san moved forward. The soldiers did so too. The red head threw herself onto Ayamine, trying to block her from messing with the other one. I'm not gonna make it, she's faster than me! If only I could…

And as the woman reached the rifle, I saw a stone big enough on the ground. Doubting for a second, I grabbed it and threw it towards the… Oh, that must have hurt a lot. As she raised after picking up the rifle, the stone impacted in the middle of her face. Blood splashed out of her nose as she collapsed.

Did I… just knock her out? I harmed… I… W-What did I just do?! I acted on impulse as the fear of them getting the rifle took hold of me! Awawawa…

"Tamase!" Ayamine-san screamed at me. She was having some trouble restraining the woman, who kept going for her left side. Right, with her eye like that she can't fight as well as she normally could.

I rush to the rifle, and see that the woman I hit with the rock was wailing on the ground. There was… a lot of blood coming out from her nose. She held it with both hands as she sobbed and quivered. I did this… This is my fault…

I slowly grab the rifle and put some distance between me and the woman with heavy steps, feeling as if I was trudging through mud, and take aim at the other soldier, that was parrying Ayamine-san's attacks with a knife.

"Stop that! I… I will…" I can't even finish my sentence. The soldier freezes for a second as she hears me, then her face contorts, her

brows arch up, it's as if she had become a monster when she sees her comrade.

"Yanuo! What happe- Ugh!" Ayamine-san used her distraction to hit her head with the baton, she quickly grabbed her and threw her into the ground hard enough to make an uncomfortable noise.

"Tamase, give me the gun. Go bring Yoroi."

"Eh? Oh… Yes, here." I get close to her and give her the rifle.

Yoroi-san was hunched just some meters away from us. She was holding her neck in pain with rivers of tears in her face.

"Yoroi-san, can you stand?"

"… Yeah, I'm fine." I lend her my hand and shoulder as she slowly gets up.

"Alright. You two, no more struggling. Move and I'll shoot you down." Ayamine-san threatened the soldiers with not an inch of doubt in her voice, walking backwards towards us while aiming the barrel at the women.

"Oho, really now?" Huh? Awawawa! I suddenly was lifted from the ground, a strong arm wrapped itself around my neck.

The man… was holding both me and Yoroi-san from behind. How did he get so close? I can't… breathe…

"Let them go!" Ayamine-san sounded enraged.

"Or what? Are you going to harm your fellow Japanese soldiers? But of course, what can I expect from the daughter of a traitor? Isn't that right, Cadet Ayamine?" They know of us? Uugh…

"Let them go now."

"You're free to shoot at me if you want. But I'd like you to stop this futile resistance. I don't wish to harm any of you further, I don't enjoy hurting my fellows like your pig of a father did." His grip on my neck gets softer, I try to let out a scream but I can't even… As his grips slightly loosens, I gasp for air. No more… please…

Looking at her, Ayamine-san was standing still. Which made the slight trembling of her hands all the more obvious.

"Look at you now, cowgirl." The other soldier was circling behind Ayamine-san. "Drop the rifle, do as the Captain says or you'll be in a world of pain. We gotta pay you for what you did to Yanuo." She didn't listen and remained in position, aiming at the man. Stop fighting, we already lost.

But then, in my blurry vision I could see it clearly. Ayamine-san was smiling, not a smile of joy but it's as if she were… resigned? She quickly took aim and-

**POW! BANG!**

Suddenly, the man released me. I could hear a scream, I don't know who or why. I gasp for air as I squirmed in the ground, trying to get up.

"Miki-san… Are you alright?"

"Yoroi-san… What…"

"We gotta move, c'mon!" She took my hand and moved me away. As I looked back, I saw a big figure with eyes full of fury coming at us. The man was limping, I guess Ayamine-san shot at his feet? He couldn't walk fast, tripped with a rock as he tried to make haste and fell.

"Where is Ayamine-san?"

"She's fighting with that other woman over there." Yoroi-san's breath was irregular like a kitty that got chased by a horde of dogs, she massaged her neck slowly.

I take a deep breath leaving my mouth open, and as I recover my calmness I look around trying to find her. She was still trying to fend off the soldiers, but she was being overwhelmed. Her swings were getting more slow, it seems she dropped the rifle at some point. What happened?

"Yoroi-san, what should we do?"

"We have to deal with that man, I don't like this any more than you do but we have no choice. If… If they're willing to harm us, then…" She takes out her knife with shaking hands. She closed her eyes shut, biting her lips.

"Yoroi-san… You don't mean…"

"I thought we could… You know, calm them down if we showed them how we fight. This is a test, so I thought that if we proved them that we have good teamwork… But they don't want to let us go, so we gotta… we gotta…" Of course, I'm not the only one conflicted right now. This is as hard for them too.

"Yoroi-san, let's… let's knock them down. One of us can distract them while the other hits their head with a rock or something."

"Yeah… Anyways, take out your knife. First, we have to deal with that man."

We both take our knives out and try to go towards Ayamine-san. The man had stood up and was coming towards us with his baton ready to attack us.

"You two… Surrender now or I'll have to hurt you." He was still keeping his cool, despite the pain he must be feeling. I'm sorry, for what we did and for what we'll do.

Yoroi-san moves quickly and tried to attack him from his left, I follow closely and try to attack his right. He dodged both attacks, and hit Yoroi-san with his baton. I tried to slash at him as he hit her, but he quickly sent his baton towards me. I almost got hit on the head, I stumble backwards to dodge his attack.

He directs his attention towards me and sends strike after strike. I can't even get close, with his size and weapon there's no way I'll be able to counter him!

*"And what can you do when you can't hit your opponent?"* Then, as if by chance, I remembered one conversation I had with Shirogane-san when I asked him for advice.

*"If you can't hit your enemy, then you just gotta wait until they attack you and hit their hands or something. They have to get close to attack you after all. So try to knock off their weapons from their hands if you can't retaliate normally. If you can only get one hit in, you have to win with that strike!"*

He told me this during our second match. I always had problems at CQC so I was always trying to improve. But Sakaki-san, Mitsurugi-san and Ayamine-san were always so far ahead, I could barely keep up with them. But… if I can knock their weapons off… I did improve my fights against Sakaki-san thanks to his advice…

The man swings are getting slower as he frowns when he comes after me. His feet must be wringing in pain, I can… I can use that to make him stop fighting!

Then, Yoroi-san moved from behind him and made him stumble forward as she slashed at him from behind, seeing him lose focus I put force into my feet, raising my knife at his hand as I moved. I feel the contact with his flesh as I stumble forward.

"A-Aaaahh!" The man falls backwards, holding his hand as blood poured from within his glove.

I move quickly and kick his feet, another scream leaves his mouth and he falls to the ground. Yoroi-san was just about to pounce on the man, but her eyes became wide as a cat's after smelling fish. Is she alright?

"Yoroi-san? Are you hurt?"

"No… I mean, Miki-san what was that?! Are… Are you possessed by Meiya-san's spirit or something?"

"Huh?"

"I mean… You knocked the guy's hand so gracefully… You just moved so swiftly…"

"Oh… I just… Oh, his hand! I…"

"Miki-san, let's leave that be. Go grab the rifle, I'll watch over him." She grabs the baton that the man dropped and…

**THWACK!**

Oh, she hit him on the head with all her might. Yoroi-san, you're scaring me.

"Okay, I'll go get the rifle!" Focus Miki! You have to help, I can do it! I won't be dead weight, and we can leave without harming them any more.

I look around and spot the rifle to my right, I run to it and after picking it up I look towards Ayamine-san, who was now barely dodging the soldier's attacks.

"What's up?! Is this all you have? Huh?!" The soldier barked, she looked completely insane.

"Don't move! We… We defeated your Captain! Desist or… or I'll shoot!" I felt my breath become irregular, my hands are shaking again.

"You… Captain?! What the…" In that instant where she looked at the man and froze, Ayamine hit her jaw with the baton and the soldier fell backwards.

Ayamine-san looked completely spent. She had bruises on her hands, most of them was purple. Her eyes looked dazed and she was wobbling as she slowly walked towards me.

"Good job… Tamase… Haah… Haaa…"

"Don't worry, Ayamine-san. We're safe, everything is over now. Let's move towards the bridge."

The red headed soldier seemed to have given up on us as she looked at me pointing the rifle at her, she then moved towards the one I hit on the face.

Yoroi-san comes up to us to help Ayamine-san walk as we retreat to the rocks where we hid when they appeared, the sky was now pitch black. But even so, we have to cross the bridge.

"Well, I'll go and fix the thing with the rope. You two wait here." Yoroi-san grabbed the rope and started to nimbly fix the bridge.

"Um… Ayamine-san?"

"Stay… on guard." Her voice was faint, she must be in a lot of pain.

"Um… I'm sorry, for what I said earlier. I shouldn't… have talked to you like that. I should have known how hard it's for you to deal with the rumors. Forgive me."

"… Fine."

"Huh?"

"You saved… me today, so you're forgiven." She was looking downwards so I don't know what kind of face she was making, but I could feel some emotion in her voice, which is rare for her.

Hauu… I'm so lucky to have squadmates like you all. If it were for me, we would have been captured. In the end… Maybe they were right… I don't have what it takes… to perform my duties.

After some minutes, Yoroi-san comes back to us.

"Okay, Kei-san you grab me tightly. We'll cross first. Miki-san, you stay on your guard with the rifle, and as we finish crossing you come too."

"Okay!" Ayamine-san pets my head before crossing.

"Don't… worry… You'll cross just fine." Hauu… Despite all the mean things I said to her, she still worries about me. If you can be so kind, why do you antagonize Sakaki-san so much? Why can't you trust Shirogane-san?

They slowly begin to cross, minding their steps on the wood. I take my spot near a rock, but none of them seem to want to get close to us. The man had made his way near the two women and they seemed to be talking, I can't see them well in this darkness at this distance but I don't think they'll come after us.

What felt like an eternity eventually passed and Yoroi-san gave me the okay to cross. I take a deep breath, I just don't have to look down.

Taking a first step, the whole bridge begins to sway from side to side. Awawawa, this is so wobbly! If I fall from here I'll be shark's food. No, don't say that. Slowly, don't panic… One step at a time.

Sigh… I made it. Oh God, I feel my heart pounding in my neck.

"Well, what do we do now?" I said, taking some distance from the bridge.

"Hmm…" Yoroi-san looked worriedly at logs, then at the other side of the cliff. "Should we take the bridge down? The soldier are still over

there."

"If we leave it like this, they may come after us. But then the rest will have to take a detour to the other one." I don't want to take the bridge down, but…

"Let's rest… for tonight. Once I'm feeling better, I'll go take care of the gun batteries. You two… take turns keeping watch with the rifle." Ayamine-san proposed her idea as she threw herself on the grass.

"Hmm… If we do that, then the others will still have a way to cross. Otherwise we would have to take down the bridge." And I don't want to do that.

"Sigh… Well, Miki-san do you want to take the first shift? Or should I?"

"No, let me do it. I… don't think I could go to sleep now."

"Okay, I'll take you up on that offer. But damn… We don't have much fruits left." She takes a yellow one and starts munching on it.

I also lay on the ground and aim my rifle to the other side of the bridge, I can't believe what just happened. It all happened so quickly, I was so scared through all of it. I can't believe… I hurt them so badly. I ended up burdening my comrades again too. If only I was better…

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**At the following dawn.**

---

"Uuugh…"

"Good morning, Miki-san. How are you feeling?"

"Yoroi-san? *Yaaaawn*… I'm fine. How's Ayamine-san?"

"She already went to destroy the batteries. I want to sleep for a while, can you keep watch?" She rubbed her eyes as she left her position near a rock.

"Sure, don't worry." I drink the last drips of my water and eat some leaves I had left. I get up and look to the other side, the soldiers were nowhere to be found. Well, they could be hiding behind some rocks or something. I can't let my guard down, I gotta do my part here!

…

Yet, there's nothing going on. It's so… quiet, almost as if yesterday's battle was nothing but a nightmare we had under the sky. A nice wind blows, refreshing me as I was starting to sweat under the sun. I wonder… How are those three? Will they be alright?

…

"Tamase." Ayamine-san calls out to me as I was yawning from boredom.

"Oh, good morning Ayamine-san." Her face looked like a mess. Her hands were all full of bruises, her left eye was swollen and she still looked weak.

"Batteries… Broken. Let's go."

"Yes, let me wake up Yoroi-san. Hey, Yoroi-san!"

" *Snore*… Mmgh… *Yaaawn*… Whut ish-"

"Yoroi, let's go."

"… Oh, Kei-san? Okay… Uuugh, let's go then." She slowly raises from the ground and we make our way to the evacuation point.

"Um, Ayamine-san? Thanks for… everything."

"No problem." Her tone was more like a whimper and she's still walking wobbly, she must be feeling horrible after the beating she took.

We slowly made our way up the hill, but there was no helicopter in sight. What is the meaning of this?

"Where is the helicopter?"

"I dunno… Wait, don't tell me we gotta go somewhere else now?!" Yoroi-san freaked out and started to shake as her eyes widened again, but what she said is totally possible. Knowing our Instructor, she might just say that there's actually a third evac point.

We reach the place on top of the hill, no sign of a helicopter.

"Congratulations, you three." That voice! The Instructor came over to us from the other side of the hill.

"Instructor, did we…"

"Yes, you three have reached the end of your CCSE."

"Oooh! Yes, we did it!" Yoroi-san jumped in happiness. Ayamine-san was also grinning faintly.

"Now, it's time for you to know your score."

"Huh?" Oh right, we do get a score. Just reaching the end doesn't guarantee passing the test after all.

"Well, you three dealt with your objectives quite fast. All of you did it at dawn break, so you got a perfect score on that. However…" I don't like her tone change right now. "Could you explain to me what happened when you first encountered the chasers?" Her eyes narrowed, sounding like an army of bees ready to swarm us, a hand playing with her hair slowly.

"Instructor… We… I told Tamase to shoot down the tree when she was doubting, and told them we should run." Ayamine stepped forward, ready to take the blame. "We had decided to give Mitsurugi and Sakaki a chance to escape, since Shirogane was being restrained."

"Oho… And what about you two?" She looks at us without changing her glare or tone.

"I… I didn't object. I was… too scared." I also abandoned Shirogane-san. I didn't have it in me to propose something else or to do another thing with the rifle.

"I… I prioritized my test, and also decided to run away."

"Do you all think that's enough to justify abandoning your comrades?"

"Eh? No, I don't-"

"But that matters not. There is no rule that says you can't abandon a member of the squad, for whatever reason it is." Huh? What is she saying? "That gave you plenty of time to lose your pursuers and reach the evac point in time. I did have a talk with the squad you faced yesterday, I was watching you from a vantage point here. They went too far and will be punished for their acts accordingly, but you all got passing grades. Swiftly dealt with your targets, managed to get away from your pursuers by leaving your teammates behind as bait, fought with bravery to finish off the last pursuers, broke both batteries efficiently and finished with one full day left of time. You all got a Ninety on your CCSE. The only reason I'm not giving you a hundred is because you did the stupid thing of using the anti-materiel rifle too early. You could have cut the rope and escaped on your own while keeping the weapon, and because you resorted to leaving your Leader behind. That is all."

"Eh? We got… a ninety?" Huh? Eh? Awhawhawha! She's kidding, right?

"Miki-san, you heard that too right?"

"Yeah."

"Me too." Ayamine was also shocked, she stood still with her mouth half open.

"Hm? What is it, you three?"

"We're sorta… uuhh…" I can't find the words. We scored a ninety? A nine with a zero behind it?

"Yoroi-san we… aren't dreaming, right?" She pinches her cheeks quite strongly, at least she isn't dreaming.

"Squad I don't know what got into you, but you've passed the CCSE with flying colors. Come along, we have set up a mobile command post near the shore, we have food and warm water ready for you."

We… We did it! We passed the- Oh, wait. Not yet, the others…

"Instructor, what will happen to the rest?"

"Oh? I'll contact them in a short while. They have twenty four hours to reach this place, otherwise they will fail the test." She says it in a matter of fact way as she continues walking towards the mobile post.

"I hope those three make it in time."

"Me too, Yoroi-san."

"… They're tough. Don't think they'll give up." Ayamine-san is right, those three are really stubborn. Plus, they have Shirogane-san with them.

I'm sure that by tomorrow we all will… But, what are we going to do? Will Shirogane-san resent us for abandoning him? Will we get punished for harming the soldiers? The Instructor said that they went too far, but we did so too.

Haau… Deep breaths Miki, for now just relax. I did it, I passed the CCSE. No matter what comes from now on, I have to improve. I just hope things don't get worse with the squad. And… I hope I get the chance to apologize to those soldiers, I know I hurt them very gravely.

Sigh… Let's leave that for when it happens. For now, I'm so hungry I could eat a fridge whole by myself.

# Rekindling Point

## Chapter 22: Rekindling Point

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*November 20th. Fourth Day of the CCSE.*

*(Within the Jungle. 04:52 PM.)*

**[Takeru]**

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"Done." I wave to the girls after cutting the wire.

Traps. Traps everywhere. The sheer amount of them is staggering, and with this rain we're having trouble spotting them all. We also have been walking really slow, to not trip with the mud and get more bruises.

As we slowly advance through the flora I take a peek backwards. We did use most of Meiya's and Chizuru's med kits to patch ourselves up, but it seems to not have been enough. Meiya is to my left, and she's been constantly slowing down. I have found her holding her sides with a pained expression a lot of times. Chizuru is to my right and her right leg seems to be troubling her, she's stopping every once in a while to rub it softly. My left shoulder and back are also hurting quite a bit.

The only good news here is that at our current pace we might end up reaching the evac point by dusk, which means that we could use the cover of the night to escape on the boat, so long as the soldiers don't have flashlights or a sniping rifle. Hopefully, we won't see any more sol-

**Click**

**RATATATATATATATA!**

We all dove to the ground as we heard the machinegun's roar. This is the third one today, I ended up triggering one by accident and the other was a well hidden trap.

"Sorry, I didn't see the cable." Meiya apologizes weakly as the bullets fly above us.

"Don't sweat it, Meiya. I did the same a while ago." As the barrage stops we slowly get up. We're now all covered in mud. Oh well, at least the rain will wash off most of it.

But… these two look to be in really bad shape, especially Meiya. We've been walking non-stop since we woke up after all. We had to walk for an hour until we found an old bridge to cross the cliff, but we ended up on the southernmost part of the island, and while continuing to march along the cliff would have been easier, if we were spotted by the soldiers they could snipe us from a distance. So we have been powering through the jungle for… around eight hours? Nine?

"Hey… Wanna take five to rest? We're already drenched, and we could all use a breather." Chizuru looked like she wanted to protest, but I signaled Meiya with my chin and she gave a nod.

"Yeah, let's take five. This… is harder than I thought it would be." She takes off her glasses and fixes her hair, breathing a sigh.

"Same. I did not expect so many traps to be here." I drink what little is left of my water.

"Umm… Thanks for taking care of most of the traps, Shirogane." Chizuru says bashfully as she munches a fruit, unable to look me in the eye.

"Don't mention it. How are you holding?"

"Fine, don't worry. Mitsurugi, how about you?"

"Don't worry. Haaa… I'm just a bit stiff, is all." Dude, why do you have to be like that? If it hurts, just say so.

"You sure you're okay Meiya?"

"Yes, thanks for worrying. But I am fine, no need to keep asking. And do not think of giving me another of those massages." She sends a firm glare my way as she takes out her canteen to drink.

"If you say so." I start eating a fruit I picked up on our march as I look up.

"Massages? What are you talking about?" Neither me nor Meiya wanted to answer Chizuru's question.

The rain should end in about an hour, I think. At least that will give us some relief, even if the mud remains. I wonder how are the other three… Hopefully they don't have to face off against the soldiers too. Tama and Mikoto would be at a severe disadvantage against them, unless they also managed to disable one of the machineguns on the jungle and got it for themselves like I did before. We still have one machinegun with most of its bullets, since one we had brought with us was already empty. If the soldiers appear we are not defenseless, but in our current state we cannot run away for long if we are faced with many of them.

"Well, let's go." Chizuru moves away from the tree and gets ready to move out.

"Alright, let's keep moving." I check my compass to confirm we're going in the right direction and we resume our march.

…

Sigh… And another trip wire here. That pitfall looks really dangerous, with all the water that must be at the bottom getting out of it would be an impossible ordeal.

"Let's tread carefully, this part seems to be full of pitfalls." Chizuru points to another spot to my left, where some sticks looked to be sinking into the ground.

"Yeah, we don't want to fall into one of those."

Hugging the trees, we move by jumping from one root to another. Rain is still coming down as hard as my history grades so this isn't exactly safe, but with how muddy the ground is we shouldn't get closer to the pitfalls.

And one last jump… I made it past all those pitfalls, Chizuru had already got through it. Meiya jumped behind me with rugged breath. Damn, this is wearing us down more than I thought.

Luckily, this next part doesn't seem to have many traps, as we advance I found only a few nets and some wires. Thank God, we can finally move a bit faster. If we can keep moving like this then… Wait a sec…

There's some wires to the side… that are all cut. Not by the wind, but with clear cuts. Someone cut this wires. And it shouldn't have been the others. Even if they were running away like mad they shouldn't have been here walking from their position, since they crossed at the northern part of the island.

"Shirogane? What is it?" Meiya seems to have noticed me being quiet and came near me.

"Meiya this wires all are cut."

"Oh, so that's what you were doing. Impressive as always, I didn't even-"

"No, I didn't do this. They were already cut."

"Huh?" Confusion apparent of her eyes she stood there looking at me, then at the wires, then back at me.

"You two, what are you doing?"

"Sakaki, I found some wires that were already cut cleanly with a knife." I move away to let her see them clearly.

"Huh? What the… I mean, the others could have-" Meiya interrupts her.

"No, Sakaki. We're marching through the jungle from the south, there's no way they would have been here. We're still around halfway to the evac point, coming from where they crossed would have meant a great detour for them." She slowly caressed her chin as she looked around.

As I did the same I could spot a number of nets hanging from some trees in the distance, someone passed through here and disabled all the traps. Me and Meiya nod at each other as we realize this, her face tensed up as she keeps looking around.

"Mitsurugi, Shirogane. If the others did not do this, there's only one other party that could have done this. Let's make haste. And silence." We both nod to her. The soldiers are close by. With some luck, we may have missed them for a few minutes and they're now marching south.

We keep marching, trying to make as little noise as possible. Since we have all those pitfalls behind us we can't really go back without putting us in danger of falling into one. There are next to no traps on our way, we change our direction but the traps are still all taken care off. I have a bad feeling about this, I began feeling the cold hands all over my back again.

As I get past a big bush, I spot another net that was disabled, and some more wires that were all cut. No matter where we go, it seems as if the traps have all been taken care of. Are we following their path by sheer coincidence? Under the rain, in such a wide area?

We change directions to our left again. We pass some trees that had their nets disabled, there were some trip wires cut and some pitfalls that were exposed. Maybe… we should turn back while we still can? Is there a path where there are still traps intact?

And as I was looking around for any traps that were not disabled… I saw them, in between some trees wearing the same gray uniform. In the distance, some thirty meters to the east of our current position. Despite the space between us I could feel something in their eyes, like a hawk glancing over prey. And as they moved from behind the trees and we made eye contact, the blizzard returned to my lungs.

"You two, run." Meiya looked surprised as she tried to speak up.

"Huh? Shirogane, what are you-"

"I said RUN! They're there and they have-"

**BANG! BANG!**

As I pushed them backwards the wood of the nearby tree was splintered. We run away as more gunshots chase after us. Damn it, since they disabled the traps all around here they have no problem chasing us.

"Shirogane, how many are they?" Chizuru asked as we ran.

"I saw two, dunno if there's more." I take out my rifle and shot at them, bastards hid behind the trees. If we are surrounded, that's it. Even if we are at our limits, we can't afford to fight them head on.

I shoot two more times as I saw them trying to shoot back and after that I ran again. Meiya is barely running, she won't be able to keep this up. As I thought that, a gunshot that hit a tree close to her made her trip. She hit her head against a root.

"Mitsurugi, give me your hand!" Chizuru helps her up and both start running again.

I stand my ground to return the fire towards the soldiers. However, they quickly duck behind some trees, making my attack pointless and a waste of bullets. Damn, this isn't going-

"A-Aaaaaahh!" W-What? What happened?!

As I look behind me I see Chizuru got trapped by a net. Oh those sons of an eldritch bitch! They left some traps to get us, once we got the feeling of being 'safe' in this area we started running without checking for traps. Meiya was trying to get her out, but without much success.

Gotta go help her break that net. Damn, we don't have time for-

"Quiet!" A female voice yells at us.

Both soldiers were getting closer, guns pointed at us. Reacting quickly, I was also pointing my rifle at them, so we were at an impasse. As they got closer slowly, I could see their faces clea…

Wait… What? Is that… Tsukuyomi-san? No, she isn't that young. But…

The two female soldiers in front of me looked really similar to Tsukuyomi-san and Maya-san. One with green, long hair with a high ponytail, emerald eyes, a firm, tense, and menacing glare, the other with turquoise eyes and hair, that was long and cascading to her waist, this one's eyes were as piercing as Maya-san's. But they looked to be around my age, perhaps just a year older.

"You, drop your rifle." Ponytail addresses me.

"How about no?" I maintain my posture aiming my gun at them.

"Oho, you're outnumbered yet you still wish to fight?" Turquoise says in a mocking tone. They should have taken their chance to shoot me when they could.

**BANG! BANG!**

Damn bitches, they're quick. They threw themselves behind some trees. If they're apart from each other I'm at a disadvantage.

"Meiya, how's the net?"

"Almost, just buy me a minute."

"Guys, it's okay. Run away, leave me here." Chizuru's voice was almost a wail.

"Sakaki, shut up and let Meiya take care of the-"

**BANG! BANG!**

I ducked as I saw them move from behind a tree, Meiya was hidden in a blind spot so she could keep cutting the net. I return some fire and make one of them hides again, but the other is still firing at me. I can't even move now, dammit.

I keep sending some volleys irregularly towards the one that keeps shooting at me, until I heard the sound of the net being ripped. Chizuru came out of it and with Meiya's help she got up and both were ready to run. However…

One of the females soldiers, the one with the ponytail that I could not see from where I was, had circled around to our position and was pointing her barrel at Chizuru's face.

"You, Shirogane. Drop the rifle or the girl gets hurt." You fucking bitch. "Mitsurugi, you get slowly away too. Any sudden movement and I fill her eyes with rubber." Meiya glared at the woman with fury, and biting her lips she slowly crawled away from Chizuru.

**BANG!**

A gunshot reminded me of the other soldier, that was now getting closer pointing her gun at me.

"Are you deaf, Shirogane? Drop the gun, now." She said with a wicked grin on her face. The other one teasingly poked Chizuru's glasses with the tip of her rifle. Dammit, dammit, dammit!

Sigh… I'm surrounded, and I can't turn around without them shooting at me and Chizuru. Meiya stared at me, begging me to drop the rifle. She's obviously in no condition to struggle against an opponent with a gun.

… I throw the rifle away, and the other woman gets closer now that she's safe. Looking at her closely, she really does remind me of Maya-san, except for the smile. Her eyes have this deep piercing feeling to them. Who are these people?

"Alright, you three." Ponytail said, "You shall follow us closely, without resisting. You, Sakaki. You'll walk with me, if any of you two do anything stupid I fill her with rubber. Mitsurugi, Shirogane, you will walk behind me and in front of the other soldier. We'll move to a clearing that's west of here. Resist and we will take you to a world of pain. Are we clear?" We all nod. Dammit, am I going to fail this?

"Look at them, being all obedient! Think we can make them walk on all fours?" The one near me talks as if she were messing with some friends.

"Hahaha, they might. But that would be a waste of time. Let's get this done already."

"Tch, Mion you're no fun." Mion?

"Shut it. Now you three, walk. No talking, no whispering, no signaling, no nothing." This Mion talks with a sense of authority and composure that reminds me of Tsukuyomi-san. Her ponytail is almost as long as Meiya's.

Shit… What can I do? Are we being taken to some sort of losers' prison, or are these girls here to harm us? I take a glance at Meiya,

who was gazing sharply at the woman in front of us. Does she know her? Are these two actually related to Tsukuyomi-san?

After a few minutes of walking, we reach a clearing in the jungle. There were some big puddles of muddy water, the base of a tree that was long gone and nothing else. Unlike the rest of the jungle, we had quite some free space here to move around. But the weird thing is… That's all there is here. No other soldiers, no building or anything of the sort. What are these two planning?

"Alright, you three. On your knees by the remains of that tree. C'mon, move along." Mion pushed our back with her rifle.

We all knee by the base of the tree facing our green captors. Both of them were still, gunning at us under the rain.

"We're going to ask you some questions, and we would like you to answer them quickly and honestly. If you take too long we'll shoot someone else, maybe their shrieks of pain will motivate you to speak." Mion made her terms clear, and we all gave a nod.

"Then, first question." The other one asks, pointing a finger upwards. "Who was the one that broke the arm of a soldier?"

"Me." I answer looking at them in the eye. The yet nameless woman returns my gaze and smirks evilly, then continues to ask me questions.

"Were you the one who killed the other two soldiers?"

"Yes, that's right."

"And you also took the eye of the gray haired one?" Her grin gets wider with each question, as her eyes curve upwards as she stares at me.

"Yes."

"Hmm… What could have driven you to such actions, I wonder?"

"Because they were maiming my comrades." Her face twitches at my answer.

"What do you mean by that, Shirogane?" This time Mion addresses me.

"I broke the woman's arm because she kept resisting and trying to harm my shoulder." I move my bandaged shoulder upwards as I said it. "As for the others, they were kicking these two mercilessly on the ground, one of them was unconscious, so I snapped and retaliated with all my strength."

"Who was the unconscious one?"

"I was. They kept harming me despite being knocked out." Meiya answers before me.

"Hmm… Is that so? Then, do you believe his actions to be justified, Mitsurugi?" Mion stares into Meiya's eyes, undaunted and inexpressive as the rain continues to fall.

"While I think he used excessive force, he stopped them from harming me further. They were the ones who committed a fault first, and considering that they were kicking my head one could say Shirogane saved my life. I believe… he did the right thing." Meiya took a brief side glance at me before looking towards the ground.

All we had to go through, to end up captured by these two. Dammit…

"Then, Sakaki. Could you tell us of how you saw the incident?" Chizuru tells them what she told me, and when she reached the part of my involvement she also took my side, saying that I saved them from a clear case of abuse.

"I also think Shirogane did the right thing. I know you are upset about him harming your partners, however they were the ones in the wrong."

"Partners? Sorry, but we have nothing to do with those men." Mion answers as she frowns, her voice harsh as she quietly lashed out to Chizuru.

"Wait… If you're not with them, then-" The other woman cuts me as she answers.

"We are also part of the Wasp Squad that was assigned to be your chasers in the CCSE, but we come from somewhere else, and we have our own set of orders." Somewhere… Their look, their methods… Are they…

"Regardless, we took it upon ourselves to give you a proper test. So, here's what we'll do. You all will fight against us in CQC, if you win you can continue your test."

"Huh?! Are… Are you serious?!" Meiya voiced our surprise. They can't be serious, this has got to be a trap.

"Of course we are. In the name of the Tsukuyomi family I, Mion Tsukuyomi, swear to uphold these words." So she is a relative of Tsukuyomi-san. So they are from the Shogunate… Meaning… They're my enemies… No, don't think like that. No negativity.

"I, Shion Tsukuyomi, vow to do the same." So this one's name is… Wait a second. Mana and Maya, Mion and Shion. Do the Tsukuyomis always name their children with similar names?

"Uuhhh… Why are you two here?" Meiya seemed distressed about them revealing their identity as she hid her eyes behind her fringe. Chizuru was surprised, I'm sure she knows who they are by their surname.

"We are here as part of the CCSE, didn't we say so just a while ago Meiya-sama?" Shion retorts playfully with a wide smile at Meiya, who just sighs in clear exasperation.

"You do not seem surprised, Takeru Shirogane. Do you not know who the Tsukuyomi Family are?" Mion glares at me with a carnivorous stare.

"I do, and I don't care. Doesn't matter if the Shogunate sent you, if you're my enemy I'll take you down."

"Shirogane! Don't talk like that to-" However, Meiya's scolding was stopped as she looked at Mion.

She was slowly inching closer to me, she crouched near me and our eyes met. Unlike both Tsukuyomis I know in this world, I could feel the killing intent in her eyes devoid of light. As the rain fell on us and she continued to stare at me, a wicked grin formed on her face.

"Heh heh heh heh heh heh, aren't you something? You look almost like the real deal." What does she… Ooooh, shit. She knows this world's Takeru, doesn't she?

"What do you mean by that?" She cackles at my question.

"I wonder. Who were you again?"

"Takeru Shirogane, it's a pleasure." I smile at her, making her tense up and her eyes lose even more light. Her face twists itself, letting the inner anger show for a second.

"… I don't like liars."

We keep staring at each other. I feel the cold hands reaching my own, they're beckoning me to punch this woman. Yet again, I feel the bloodlust seep from within. I start inhaling deeply from my nose to stop those thoughts. I'm not like that, I'm not so aggressive.

"Mion, isn't that enough? Staring at him won't solve things, you know."

"I suppose. Well you three, I think you do have knives and some batons on you? We'll fight using those." Her demeanor changed as

she rose, she spun around and dropped her gun to the ground with a splash.

"Mion, what… what was the meaning of your words to Shirogane?"

"Apologies, Meiya-sama. But we cannot answer, we are in the middle of a test after all. If you wish to know, please ask Sister for information. I'm sure she knows of… him." She throws a hateful glare at me. But what did she mean by sister? Is she… Tsukuyomi-san's younger sister?

"I have already asked Tsukuyomi about it but she-"

"Then that's that, right? Let's not waste more time and start this test." Shion replied playfully at Meiya again, she also dropped her gun and took out a baton.

What the hell? No, this just confirms my suspicions. Tsukuyomi-san did know of me not being this world's Takeru and was playing dumb, and if I had to guess maybe Takamura was used as a smoke screen. I was so focused on her being our next threat that I didn't think Yuuhi would send people after me during the CCSE. And if they're related to the Tsukuyomis… These two must be Royal Guards. Sensei, did you knew of this?

I stand up and take out my baton, last thing I want is to get angry again and end up harming them with the knife, I don't need more blood on my hands. It's not like I can't harm them with the baton, but at least I won't end up cutting their arms or neck with it.

Chizuru also gets up and takes out her knife. She quickly brushes her hair off her face, she stomps on the ground as she takes her stance, but I can see her hands twitching slightly. She's completely tensed up, clearly intimidated by the two soldiers in front of us. Meiya, however, stands upright with a knife pointed to her back. Her eyes look sharp, and even if her hands are also shaking a bit one could see in her face a lion about to pounce onto prey. I suppose that's the fruit of all her mental training as a samurai.

"Alright, you can come at us whenever you're ready. These shall be the rules, if one is pinned on the ground unable to move, loses its weapon or falls unconscious and doesn't get up by the count of ten, loses. Any of you who lose will fail the CCSE, even if we are later defeated by any other of you. If we lose, we will let any of you remaining to keep going and won't chase after you. Clear?" Mion looks at us for confirmation, we all acknowledge her terms with a nod.

We stand looking at one another under the rain as the wind swirls around us. Then, as a thunder lighted up the sky… We all stepped forward.

I quickly went after Mion, who was also charging at me, and taking my Mugen rhythm I started attacking her with a flurry of blows. First a mid-blow to her right side, she dodges doing a sidestep and tries to hit me in my shoulder. I block her attack and take a step forward, splashing mud and water around us, and try a downward blow at her.

She parries it and tries to kick me in my privates, I quickly move to my left and throw a punch at her from the side. I hit her cheek, sending her away and also giving me more pain on my left shoulder. Yet again, I feel the anger welling up in me. She returns a wicked grin at me and charges at me, she… She's also using the Mugen Kidou, I can barely keep up with her steps and attacks. This is… like when I trained with Maya-sensei. I recognize her patterns, she is using Mana's style. She might be more well-versed in the art of the sword, but all my battle experience and superior strength should put me on even ground with her, I hope.

As she takes a few but well placed swings at me, I keep moving backwards. Taking one long step back, feeling ground that was not too muddy on my feet, I spring forward and clash my baton with hers. I have more strength so she flinches backwards, I use this chance to press her. One swing to her left shoulder, one towards her left leg, an upwards swing towards her right hand, but it's a feint to try to hit her face. She stops my feint, and since I got too close I took

a punch to my shoulder. The pain spreads again as I bite back a scream. These bitches… fucking Royal Guards…

She is now on the offensive, she seems to have changed her approach. She's being reactive despite being the one pressuring me, she gets close quickly forcing me to attack her to keep my distance, only for her to either parry me or dodge me gracefully and then land a hit on me. This bitch… she's hitting my left shoulder exclusively… Calm down, gotta focus.

She comes again from my right, running through puddles of muck and liquid, looking like a hyena. I move fast as I try to attack her, but then I take a step back as I was about to attack. She fell for it and lost her balance when her parry was met with the air. Now, grabbing the baton with both hands, with the back of my feet firmly planted on the ground and tensing my back, I hit her face as if it were the winning ball of a baseball game.

**THWACK!**

Blood is splashed onto the baton as she's sent towards a puddle, that also gets dirty with her blood. Payback is a bitter treat, Mion Tsukuyomi.

However, she gets up and doesn't even try to clean the blood that's coming out from her nose. And she starts cackling again.

"Heheheh

and sanity.

"… You think you can take his face and name? You think you can soil his memory?! Oooh, how I'm going to enjoy killing you. The UN might have to pay a great price for this, but we can't lose their support yet. So I'll have you disappear in the mud today, faker."

"Come at me then!" Shit, she's moving even faster. Her swings are also much more stronger.

"C'mon! Whatever is the matter, Takeru?! Why are you not attacking?!" She's… She's crazy. What the hell is wrong with her?! I keep parrying her attacks but… They're getting stronger with every swing.

She makes a feint, I fell for it and with a step forward she got a clear swing to my right side and follows it with a hit to my right shoulder. I throw a kick at her, forcing her to stop her assault and try to regain the upper hand with some quick swings as I zigzag to throw her off.

"Die already! You damn pest, you'll pay for this offense!" She's keeping up with my speed, no problem. Dammit, I'm at my limits here. I can't parry all her attacks, she dodges my swing and in a fluid downwards swing- Ough, my left shoulder again! It hurts! Oh, shi-

**THWACK!**

Oooouuughh… She got a clear hit to my jaw. I still have my baton on my hand, but… Ugh, it's so hard to stand up.

" *Wheeze*… Haaah… Haaah…"

"Oooh… Poor you, you must be wanting to return home to your friends and family, do you not? It is truly such a shame, you even copied our techniques quite well, truth be told. However… We do not take kindly to those like you… So, could you please die without making a mess?"

As I looked up at her, a thunder rang through the sky. It covered her face with a deep shadow, highlighting her eyes. Those emerald, angry, and void of light eyes. Staring at me coldly, those sharpened eyes told me all I needed to know. She was not kidding, and she wanted to end this quick.

I can't lose here. I have to… I have to fix the negativity… I gotta… at the least… See the results the second theory can bring about… Just a few more days…

"It's time to die, pest. Don't worry, even if you're a monster I'll show you some mercy. I won't kill you while you're conscious, you did fight quite well. You earned a tiny speck of respect from me for that."

Pest… Monster… How dare you… It's not like I wanted… I just wished… To save as many as I…

I try to get up but she kicks me in the head. She then steps on it and grinds her foot on me, I can't even breathe now.

Uuugh… My head… hurts… It's going to be split apart… Aaaaugh! Stop… This… hurts too much. Gotta stand up…

"Hmm? What is it, faker? Did I not hit you with enough strength, perhaps? Oh, whatever. Might as well!"

Ough! She kicked me in the stomach quite hard. My lungs burn as I gasp for air. But then she steps on my back, preventing me from getting up, making my wound flare up in pain. She keeps stomping on my back with much force. Ouuuuh…

"You took his face and name, for what reason I don't know or care. We will investigate this throughly, but you… You must die. A monster like you, who impersonates others and ploys against Yuuhi-sama, should-"

The rain fades away, Mion's voice fades away. The smell of mud fades away. My sight gets blurry and my ears stop ringing. The

coldness envelops me whole, and I feel no more nothing.

…

What is this? Where am I? Why do I feel no more pain?

*"Hmph. Royal Guards, nobles or not, deep down you're all the same."*

Who… Who said that?

*"Despite your graceful act in front of the people, you're all nothing but hypocrites."*

Who is speaking to me? It sounds… familiar, for some reason.

*"And you still have the gall to insult me?! You call me a monster? You all made me like this!"*

That energetic shout… That's… my voice. It's so weird hearing your voice from somewhere that isn't from within yourself. But I can tell… that's my voice.

What is he, or rather me, saying? What is he doing? To who am I saying these things?

I feel… a great deal of sadness. Someone took something from me, someone hurt me gravely. Who?

I can't see anything, I can no longer hear anything. But… I can feel the frozen hands pulling at me, trying to get me up. This feeling… This is… Like when I recovered my memories during the Valgern-On test, like when the power plant blew up and I clearly remembered all the deaths and even some things that happened on the world after Babylon.

Wait… Sensei did say that when I recovered my memories… Since I hadn't experienced anything as traumatic as that I went into shock.

Then, are these hands that I feel my nervous system going out of whack right now?

Is that voice… This world's Takeru's voice? But…

I feel a deep sadness. Similar to how I felt after Babylon, to the moments after Ouka. Despair, dread, hopelessness. But there's also hatred, not towards the BETA… But… Towards the Royal Guard.

Figments of words come to me. You… saw yourself as a lone wolf, alone in the Guard. No one shared your views? You… felt betrayed? What did they do to you? What did they took from you?

Did you went through something similar to what happened to me during your life here? Did you… lost all of your friends? Anger. Hatred. Fury. I think he wanted… his peace back. I can't see or hear anything, but I can feel it. This animosity I've been feeling towards the Shogunate, this wrath that took over me when I fought those soldiers and now too. This was your heaviest data flowing into me.

Because… You also wanted to live in peace, like I do? A clear image appears to me. It's the view from the hill with the tree. But this isn't my Hiiragi district, it's a more old fashioned one. With only a few big, 'western' buildings, the commercial part was filled with some green apartments I think, it looks more 'traditional' than my world's Hiiragi, that's for sure. Was this your home too? He did live until he was twelve here, if I remember correctly.

You, just like me when I triggered the transfer, wanted to save people. As many as you could. But what happened? Why do you resent the Shogunate so much?

I can't feel nothing no more. But just before returning to the island, I could hear him one last time…

*"I will become the wolf that lurks in the night, watching over all of you. I will become the sword that smites evil!"*

With such youthful passion, just like when I thought I could be a hero. Before Marimo-chan died twice because of me. Yeah, you were younger than me. And they made you go through so much more shit than me, all alone. Man… You're making me cry, goddammit.

Don't worry, my parallel twin brother. Your feelings… have not fallen on deaf ears. I might not hold the same love you had for this Japan, but at least… I'll try to do my part in your stead. Give me some strength, lend me some of that passion I've lost somewhere along the way.

Let's flow onto our enemies… *with the might of an unending waterfall!* To save as many as we can!

Light returns to my eyes and I rise from the ground. Despite the resistance I was feeling on top of me, I manage to get Mion off me. She staggers backwards as she sends a glare my way.

"Tch, I thought you had fainted for a second. You think you can deceive me? Who do think you are, huh?!"

Her hateful tone was now leaking madness. Her eyes looked at me full of wrath, brows furrowed and her upper face with visible wrinkles. She looked like a wolf just about to attack. A wolf, huh?

"I am… the wolf that lurks in the night." Slowly, the hands melt. I feel a bit better for some weird reason.

"… Huh?"

"I am the sword that smites all evil." The cold fades within me as I take a deep breath. For my Hiiragi… For your Hiiragi… To bring some peace to both worlds.

"What… did you just say?"

"I am… Takeru Shirogane. And you… You're going down!" I rush at her with unleashed vigor.

I take a swing at her right hand, she dodges me but I keep pressuring her. Keeping up the offense, taking a step back occasionally, I can't pierce her defense. Gotta knock her out before I collapse, in no way can I go for a long fight.

"M-Mion?! Are you alright?!" Shion shouted from somewhere.

"Shut up! He's… He's mine! I will take- Ough!"

Maybe you should focus on your opponent instead of looking somewhere else. I got a nice punch to her face. My right hand is dirty with her blood, ew.

I take a step back, to avoid her flailing as she tried to regain her footing, and after she seemed to have stopped I resume my attack. We rush through the puddles as the thunders roar above us, I try to make her trip or to force an opening but it's futile. She tries to counter my moves but doesn't find enough space to do so without exposing herself.

Throwing a left swing towards her torso, she blocks it and tries to hit my hands. I follow up my swing with a downwards strike at her, our batons are parried again. Ugh… Fucking Royal Guard… No, don't lose it. I throw a kick at her as our batons remained locked, making her bounce backwards. She comes at me again, I retreat circling around a puddle and try to go for her hands after hitting the ground strongly with my heels.

Mion spins on herself, dodging me as I charged at her. She hits my left shoulder again, but this time I bite down the pain and throw a punch at her. Landing another hit to her face again, she almost fell to the ground but rolled to a side as I was about to smack her head with the baton. I take a step backwards to avoid Mion's incoming rush as she gets up. She's coming at me blindly, this is my chance to knock her out!

I lower my stance and pounce at her from below, seeing the fear in her eyes as my baton clashes with hers. I'm stronger than her, so she ends up falling backwards into the mud. I get on top of her, landing with my right knee in her stomach with all of my weight.

"A-Aaaauughhh!"

Quickly grabbing her baton, I throw it into the trees. As she tried to grab me I smacked her head with my baton. Grabbing one of her hands with my right hand, I bring my baton to her chin.

"I think this is my win, don't you agree?"

"… Who are you? Why do know those words?!" She looks enraged as she howls, squirming under me. She keeps trying to grab me with her free hand, I move her body to a side to prevent her from struggling.

"I told you already, I'm Takeru Shirogane. Now, give up. Or I'll have to knock you out."

"Takeru? No… You're lying! He… Takeru is dead!"

"Do I look like a corpse to you?"

"LIES!" She almost broke free from my grasp as she struggled violently. Her free hand reaches my face in a swift motion, and before I could react she starts pulling and clawing at me.

"Ouch! Stop that- Dammit!" I hit the back of her head with the baton, forcing her to ease her grip on my face.

"Aauuhh! You… You don't… have a mask…"

"Of course I don't! Let go of me! According to your words I won the du-" She starts struggling again, but this time her hand does not harm me.

Her sudden change left me in shock for a second. Her face stared at me in wonder as her hand slowly caressed my cheek. What the hell… is she… No, don't fall for it! I knock her hand away, aiming my baton upwards.

"Surrender now or I'll have to knock you down. What are you going to do?!"

"But… You… Then… How… When…" She doesn't seem to be listening to me, she's just staring at me with wide eyes.

"Hey. Do you surrender or not?"

"No… This… This is a lie! Takeru… Takeru is gone! You're not… You can't be…" She starts struggling again, I bend the arm I had grabbed with some force and change my position on top of her to restrain her legs.

"I don't care about what you're saying. But I am Takeru Shirogane, for real. I'm no dead man." I stare into her eyes as she stops resisting. Light returned to her eyes, all killing intent gone from her body.

"But… Those eyes… This can't…"

"Mion Tsukuyomi, I won our duel. Give up or be knocked unconscious. It's your choice." I grab her hand a bit more strongly but… Why is she looking at me like that?

"Takeru? Is that… You're alive?"

"No more wasting time. Choose." I raise my baton and she makes a panicked expression.

"WAIT! Wait, wait, time out!"

"Now what? If you're buying time for the other to attack me…" I look for the others…

Meiya seems to be distracting Shion as Chizuru tries to strike at her, but the turquoise head dodges without much trouble. I know those two are in bad shape but… She's holding up quite well against them. Meiya seems to be having trouble with her. Chizuru is trying to jump on her from a blind spot, but then Shion dances away.

"… Takeru? Is it really you?" Mion's voice lost all anger and tension, now being more of a sweet whisper. Nice try, jackass. I'm not lowering my guard for some simple trick like that.

"I said no more of that attitude. You're not going to uphold your word?"

"Oh, screw that! Are… Are you really you?! You're alive, you're not… some sort of spy?"

"I'm so done with you. Go to sleep already, good night." I tense my grip on the baton as I raise it. This world's me saw you Royal Guards as his enemies, he was alone. All of you…

"Wait! I surrender! You win!" Her face panicked and she brought her free hand to the back of her head.

"… For real?"

"Yes, truly."

"You're not tripping me, are you?"

"N-No! I surrender. No more struggles. L-Like when we played in the gardens, remember? Takeru?" Why is she making that weak voice?

"You better not be lying." I slowly get off her. Watching her carefully, she slowly rises from the ground. But her body language is totally different, was she… a friend of yours?

"So… Um…" Mion cleans the mud off her arms, avoiding my eyes, her tone as relaxed as a cat eating fish. "Forgive me for… jumping to conclusions. We heard your name, and we… Well, I kinda…

snapped." Grabbing one of her elbows, she sways a bit as she shivers a bit under the rain. "I didn't knew what to think, and when I saw you I… assumed you were a spy using a mask. Can I… Um… make sure you're not using a mask?" She makes a low bow as she gazes at me timidly, slowly tapping the tip of her index fingers together as she stares at me. Who… Who are you? Where did the menacing Tsukuyomi in you go?

"You just want to get close to attack me, don't you?" I take a defensive stance, but she fumbles her hands in the air.

"No! If it is really you, then… Um…" Who were you for this world's me? I never met her, not even in my world, so I have no idea what kind of person she is. Going by her reactions when we fought… Hmm…

"Do anything suspicious and I'll knock you down, no sudden movements. Got it?" She nods and slowly gets closer, I feel no hostility from her gaze now.

She gently touches my cheeks and neck, tapping and poking me. Her hands run through my face, down to my neck and chest softly, her emerald eyes staring right into mine. She pinches me and tries to pull my neck's skin, but her eyes widen as she seems to realize I have no mask on.

"You're not a cyborg going by the feel of the skin, you don't have a mask. Are you… really you, Takeru?"

"I do not remember when I allowed you to call me by my name, Tsukuyomi." She pouts at me as she grabs my clothes.

"What? You… You really are you! Why must you be this contrarian whenever you get upset?! I… I already apologized! Can you blame me? It's been two years! Two fucking years! You didn't say anything when you left, Yuuhi-sama forbid us from speaking about you, Mana-nee and Maya-nee also refused to say anything! And then suddenly

you appear out of nowhere! Whatever did you want me to do?! I thought you were dead!" And you were right, until a month ago.

I can feel her anger as she spoke fast and complained at me, but not an 'I'm gonna kill you' angry, more like a… sibling kind of anger? Kinda like how Sumika used to get angry at me?

"Uuhh… I'm afraid I have no idea what you're talking about. If you're done, get off me please." She blushes for some reason, her eyes dart around as she releases her grip on my clothes.

"I… But… Yeah, I mean… Are you… No, of course you're on a mission. Forgive me." She nods to herself as she moves away.

"Just to clarify, I still have no idea what you're talking about." Sincerity first, just so they don't say I'm trying to deceive them.

"Of course you don't. Yes, you don't. We… never saw each other, no sir. Um… Don't tell Mana-nee about this, please? I don't want to get scolded again." Mana-nee, huh?

"So… I am free to continue with the CCSE? You won't come after me?" I doubt she's being serious, she's trying to deceive me. But instead her shoulders drop, her head lowers slightly as her eyelids almost close.

"Hey, there is no need for such words, Takeru. I am sorry, truly. I… Please understand, I trulylost it when I thought someone could be impersonating you. I didn't… mean what I said. We haven't seen each other since two years ago, surely you know how shocked we were when we heard about you? But I'm truly sorry, Takeru. Forgive me for hurting you." She keeps calling me by my name and she looks really sorry. Who are you really, Mion?

"Whatever. I have no idea what you're talking about, or who you are actually. So you better leave me alone or I'll knock you out." I'm not, I'm so tired I could faint right here if I wasn't high on adrenaline.

"Huh? You… Wait, Takeru. Do you… not remember me?" I turn around, moving a shoulder up and down, wiping the mud off my arms with the falling rain. "Takeru? Takeru! Hey, what happened in these two years? What happened to you?"

"… None of your business." You Royal Guards probably had a hand in his death, and the actions of the Shogun have proved me that she also wants me dead. You might have seen him as a friend but, what about the rest of the Shogunate?

"… What? Hey… Hey, Takeru… Wait…" She tried to grab my shoulder but I shake her hand off, which makes her twitch.

"I have a test to pass, soldier. Please do not go back on your word." I turn my back to her and look for the others.

I see Meiya knocking Shion's baton away, as Chizuru had… Did she threw a mudball at her face? Shion's hair and upper body were full of mud as Chizuru struck her with another mudball. Holy shit, Chizuru you're such a savage this time arou… That roundhouse kick was totally not necessary. Shion was already staggering, Chizuru that right there was overkill. The mud-stained one laid on the ground covered in mud as Chizuru restrained her, Meiya then pointed her knife at her face. I approach them as I rub my sides.

"Yo, looks like you're done too."

"Shirogane, are you alright? Forgive me for leaving you alone with Mion. I… I tried to go to your aid when I saw you on the ground but Shion did not let up." She then did a small bow in apology.

"It's alright. We won, that's what matters. She will uphold her part too, right?"

"Yeah, yeah. I will, no worries. It is truly surprising to see you in one piece, however. Aren't you lucky, Takeru Shirogane?" Her voice is full of the venom I'm so used to hearing since some weeks ago.

"Well, shall we go? Or do you two want to rest?"

"I rather rest away from these soldiers." Chizuru said as she got off the muddy one. Meiya nodded as she spoke up.

"I agree. We also took quite a detour from our path. It will take some time until we reach the evac point now." Remembering that I check my waist, luckily I had put the oil inside my beltkit so it didn't get opened or anything, going by it's feel to the touch.

"Congratulations, you three. Good luck reaching the evacuation point in one piece!" Shion gave us a mean grin as she waved at us weirdly once she got up. What the hell is wrong with these two Tsukuyomis?

"Shion, don't be like that. We lost, fair and square." Mion walks up to us, wiping the blood on her face with a cloth.

"I lost against two opponents and they played dirty. And by dirty I mean it, look at me. I'm full of mud and grass. You just had to deal with Takeru Shirogane, what's up with that? You couldn't win." Midway through her speech, her eyes turned into those of a hawk, light vanished from them. Her tone also got malicious as she shot a glance at me.

"Shion, come here for a second and keep quiet. *Whisper… Whisper…* " Mion put one hand over Shion's shoulders as she whispered on her ear. Shion's eyes looked conflicted, then they turn into fried eggs, and finally as Mion finished speaking to her she looked like a goldfish.

"Um… Mion, we will take our leave. I hope you uphold your-"

"Meiya-sama, please. We live for our honor, it was a pleasure to be able to cross strikes with all of you. Do be careful, and best of luck in your last push." She gives us a salute that we return before going our way.

Meiya and Mion share a nod, she then briefly looks at me and seems to hold back on waving at me and just gives me a smile. What were you for this world's me? We turn our backs to them and, after looking at our compasses, move into the jungle. After walking some steps, we could hear Shion screaming something at the top of her lungs despite the rain.

"What are those two arguing about now?" Meiya looks worriedly at them. Mion was grabbing Shion from behind as she was trying to shake her off for some reason. Let's get the F out of here.

"Meiya, let's move it."

"Shirogane is right, better safe than sorry."

We then resumed our march into the jungle, leaving the two new Tsukuyomis behind.

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**Some minutes after that.**

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As the rain stopped we crashed onto the trees. All of us were completely spent, no one could take another step.

"Uuugh… I'm so hungry" Chizuru fumbled with her belt kit to take out the last fruit she had.

"I did not… expect to run into those two. Haah… Twas a nice challenge, but… Haah…" Meiya looked exhausted as she gasped with her mouth wide open for air.

"Meiya, do you know them?"

"Hm? Yes, they're… members of the Royal Guard. They're relatives of the 1st Lt. that's in our base. But what about you? They seemed to know you as well." She stares at me with sharp eyes as she strokes her hair. A little light waved behind her eyes, awaiting my answer.

"No, they were probably paranoid about the foreigner that was too close to Meiya-sama."

"Hmm… You have a point. That was probably it. Sigh… However, you never cease to amaze me. Despite your exhaustion, you managed to hold out against Mion. You're truly impressive." She's praising me honestly as she smiles at me. But… that's weird, coming from you Meiya.

"Why do you say that? You can't win against her?"

"I always have problems with them. You see, they already were trained by the Master of my style, so they have an edge over me. Even so, today I think I broke my limits. Despite how much my muscles ached, I couldn't stop fighting." She then rubs her forearms slowly, wincing a bit.

"Yeah, we had a lot of trouble with that Shion." Looking insulted to no end, she munched on her fruit."She was just playing around with us. She was shouting 'Dodge!' every time she dodged my attacks. She wasn't attacking us seriously either, it looked like she just wanted to wear us down."

"That's why you spammed Mudslap?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Something like that. I did kinda let the anger get hold of me for a second." She scratches her head in embarrassment.

"Nonsense. That roundhouse kick was marvelous, Sakaki!" Meiya beams at her, which only makes Chizuru blush. I still think it was overkill.

"Ugh… Well, we made it out of that. Let's hope we don't run into anybody else." They nod as we all sit on some roots.

I enjoy the cold raindrops that fall on me from the trees. I take a deep breath as I relax my muscles. My head does hurt a bit and I can't

even find the strength to get up, but I gotta. I have to find some fruits or something to eat, because I'm starving.

"Shirogane? Where are you going?" Chizuru speaks to me as I got up after resting some minutes.

"Looking for food, all of us are starving."

"Then let me go with you." She gets up, while putting her glasses on again.

"Wait, shouldn't we all-"

"Meiya, you're completely spent. Take it easy, will you?" I smile at her and she nods timidly with a soft gaze, relaxing while rubbing her shoulders.

Well, let's look for something to eat. We move into the nearby trees, minding our steps and with our eyes peeled. Hmm… Nothing over there… Nothing here…

"Say, Shirogane."

"Hm? What's up?"

"Are you alright?" Her serious tone startled me.

"Huh?"

"I saw how that Mion was stomping on your back. Are you alright? Does it hurt?" She stopped looking for food and faced me, taking a few steps towards me.

"Yeah, I'm fine. It does hurt a bit but it's not that big of a deal."

"Is that so?" She doesn't seem to believe me, I am bluffing right now after all.

"Yeah, I'm okay. But it hurt a lot at the time, she was really fierce when she faced me. She thought I was an American trying to take advantage of Meiya, so she fought seriously against me. Boy, did those swings hurt." I rub my sides slowly as I look around for food.

"I see. That must have been hard. Are you really okay?"

"Don't worry, I'm fine. I won't do anything to get in your way, I'll be careful."

"That's not it, I'm really worried, you know? When Shion threw me to the ground once, I could see how that Mion was pressuring you. It was truly a horrible sight, I didn't think you could lose so badly." She looks genuinely worried, going by those glances she's taking at me. Thanks Chizuru.

"Well, I'm not invincible. Someone out there is better than me at something, I have been telling you all that I'm not perfect for a while now."

"Yeah, and you were right."

"So, how are you holding?"

"I'm fine. Mitsurugi was the one who took most of the hits, to be honest. Oh, aren't those the brown mushrooms we can eat?" She points to her left. Lucky us, we found quite some mushrooms for tonight.

"Nice catch, we'll roast them before nightfall and rest early to recover as much strength as we can." We pick them up together, and while making small talk about our fights we made our way back to Meiya.

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**The next day. Around 8 AM.**

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"Shirogane… Shirogane, wake up." Meiya's voice casts me away from sleep as I open my eyes.

" *Yaaaawn*… Good morning, Meiya." I rub my eyes as I look around.

"Morning. Sakaki is already up, eat some mushrooms so that we can start marching as soon as we can. We all ended up sleeping quite more time than we should have." I look at my watch, we're already on the fifth day. So, it's around eight in the morning.

"Wait… Wasn't your shift the last one? Why didn't you wake us up earlier?"

She fumbles with her hair as she curves her lips and looks away, hiding her sight behind her fringe.

"… I fell asleep."

"Pfft! Ahahaha!"

"What? Mmgh, do not laugh!" Can't help it, you looked so cute right now. Just like the other Meiya used to be.

"Sorry, sorry. I'll get up now, let's eat."

I stretch and go sit with them on the ground. We used the last of my curry powder on the mushrooms and they ended up quite nice, if I say so myself. Luckily, the Tsukuyomis kept their promise and didn't chase after us. My shift went by without nothing happening, and the girls' one seem to have also ended without a problem.

A noise from the radios startle us as we were finishing our breakfast. Chizuru grabs one and answers it.

"Sakaki here. Over."

"Oh, good morning Sakaki. I'm informing you that you all have less than twenty four hours remaining to clear the test, just a few minutes

ago the other three reached the evac point. I expect you all to arrive here as soon as possible. That is all. Over and out."

"Huh, neat. So they already finished." I munch the last mushroom I had. So those three made it, that's one problem less to worry about.

"Those three are amazing. We must also get going, Shirogane, Sakaki." She quickly got up and extinguished the fire.

"Yes, let's. We still don't know how far away we are from the final evac point." Tapping her glasses as she got up, she then checked her beltkit was in place.

"Alright. You two are ready?"

They nod and we begin our march again. Time to bust more traps, dammit.

…

"So… What do you think happened here?" Meiya asked us as she glanced at the helipad that was completely destroyed.

"Gun battery, maybe?" That's what happened last time, even if it was nowhere near this level of damage.

"You think so?" She cocks her head sideways while poking one of her cheeks with a finger.

"I dunno, it was just a thought."

I slowly approach the helipad, but nothing happens. I move around it, but nothing. Meiya goes to the opposite side of it, but nothing happened.

"Whatever it was, it was disabled I think." I know they did, otherwise they wouldn't have been able to reach the evac point.

"So those three neutralized it? This will play in our favor for sure." We share a smirk as we move away from the helipad.

"Guys, I found the directions." Chizuru called to us. She had found another box with a paper hidden near the box with the smoke signals.

It was a map that showed our current location, the location of both gun batteries, the evac point, both bridges and the boat. Thank God, now I don't have to go looking suspicious to ride the boat.

"So there's a boat nearby, huh?" Now all we gotta do is fill it with the fuel and-

"Shirogane, using a boat during daylight would cost us several points." Meiya you can't be serious.

"What if we run into more soldiers?"

"Ah… That is true, we may not be able to fight off more pursuers. Sakaki, what do you think?"

"Hmm… While normally using the boat would be a bad call, given our current situation it's the best method we have. Shirogane does still have the fuel with him if the boat has not enough of it, we need to get away as soon as possible to avoid being ambushed and to reach the evac point in time. Since the batteries have been taken care of by our allies we won't lose so many points, I think. We also might not have enough time to reach the bridges, going by how many traps are in the jungle waiting for us and how exhausted we all are. I approve of it." Thanks Chizuru!

"So, what do you think Meiya?"

"I also approve the idea then. I probably cannot fight in my current state, so if we did encounter more enemies I would be a sitting duck. However, I propose to wait until nightfall. Let's hide here between the rocks, and after the sun has set we can safely travel with the cover

of the night on our side. We still have a full day to finish this and we need all the points we can get since we're already behind schedule."

That's true. We no longer have guns with us, so if any other soldier finds us we are so done for. But we need to get enough points to pass the test, and this time us three are technically holding our team back. And, if this memory isn't wrong, we would have to climb a cliff to reach the evac point. I almost forgot about that.

"Yeah, you're right. Let's lay low until the night."

"Alright, if you agree with her then let's look for a good hiding spot." Chizuru moved towards the rocks with us following her closely.

There was a small platform of rocks under the cliff, we hid there and after I went back up and tried to scout our location from above we concluded we were safe. Now we just have to wait until night. Meiya had taken out her blanket and laid on the floor while Chizuru was sitting close to the sea.

"We've been through a lot these days. Can't believe everything will end in just a few hours." Chizuru said as she stared at the waves.

"Yeah, this test was nuts. Was your last one like this?"

"Of course not." Meiya answered without even moving from her spot, someone is comfy there. "There were many traps, but not as many as the ones here. And there were no pursuers obviously."

"So we got screwed this time." Chizuru tries to hold the laughter, but gives up eventually.

"Ahahaha, you're right. Well, it's still around four in the afternoon. We should rest too, do you want me to keep watch?"

"Nah, I'm good. If you're still tired you can rest."

"No, I'm fine. I do want to just lie down, my feet are killing me today." Chizuru stretches her arms upwards as she sighs.

"We all did went through some tough battles these days." Meiya brought her blanket closer and laid on her belly, looking at the sea.

I did the same, staring at the rocking waves as the sea breeze came our way. It is odd to see something so peaceful in this world. If only a time could come where most people could get a chance to experience something as soothing as this. At least this mad CCSE is done with.

"Say, Shirogane."

"What is it, Sakaki?"

"Thanks. For being with us, for not abandoning me when I got caught on the net." She then gives me a small bow.

"Don't mention it, that's what comrades do, right?"

"Yes, but… with how I've been treating you…"Her gaze gets shot down as she hugs her elbows.

"That's on the past now. We did promise to get along for the test."

"And… what about after it?" Meiya asks me with an intense stare.

"Huh?"

"Would you consider… starting over with us?" She looks at me pleadingly as she sits up.

"Are you sure the rest won't mind? I am a murdered now, remember?" Both of them make a pained expression. Chizuru clears her throat and speaks up.

"Well, maybe Ayamine will. But I believe the rest won't. You have made it clear you are nothing like the Americans. You've done more than enough to gain our trust. So… Can we start over, Shirogane?"

"Sure, if you don't mind."

"Really?!" Their eyes sparked up.

"Yeah, it's not like… I enjoy being alone." I don't. So even if we might end up as enemies… Just for a few days, let me remember my old friends through you.

"Oh, of course. Well… Let's keep doing our best from now on together. Yes?" Meiya extends her hand and we share a handshake. Chizuru puts her hand above ours.

"So… Thanks, Shirogane. Let's clear this last push, and do our best in our piloting training. I'll do my best as a Leader to recover your trust, so please keep supporting all of us like you did these days." She gives me a smile, the same warm smile my Chizuru always gave me back in my world. Uuuhhh… Don't make me remember them when I'm so tired. I don't wanna cry in front of you two.

"Thanks, let's leave all that behind us." Both of them nod at me as the release my hand.

Even if it's only for a few days, I'm glad I could get past all that negativity in them. Sadly, they might revert once they get suspicious of my piloting skills or when Yuuhi comes after me.

We then threw ourselves to the ground, and just laid there looking at the sea. No need to rush, Takeru. In just a few hours, this hellish CCSE will be over. I don't know how but I did it.

But from now on… I will have to speak with Tsukuyomi-san about my sword, these new Tsukuyomis might also become a problem for me, and now that I know how this world's Takeru felt about the Empire I can understand why Yuuhi wants my head. Maybe he really was a traitor after all. Though, maybe that Mion was someone who saw his good intentions? And that's why she was friendly with me when she saw that I am Takeru Shirogane?

Sigh… I'll deal with that starting tomorrow. I also need to have a talk with Sensei about the chasers. I need to stop the negativity from

spreading even more, but with the Shogunate coming after me that will be a tough ordeal. Restarting the loop might be my best choice here. Oh well, no point in complicating myself. Just for a few hours, let's rest. I'll have my fair share of shit to deal with starting tomorrow.

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A/N: Mion and Shion are physically the same as the characters I based them on from the VN Higurashi When They Cry, only with muscle because training. So that you all can have an accurate mental image of them. Their personalities will be different, as I'll make them into their own thing even if I give them some traits the originals have, so people that have read Higurashi rest assured, no nails will be present in this fic.

# The End of the Storm

## Chapter 23: The End of the Storm, The Start of the Tempest

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*November 20th. Fourth Day of the CCSE.*

*(A boat near the shore. Around 10 PM.)*

**[Mion]**

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How pretty is the sky tonight. It is truly saddening to think the moon is completely overrun by BETA, despite such pristine, beautiful brightness coming to us now. As I finish typing the command, the computer starts preparing the encryption. Leaving my empty glass on the table near the laptop, I descend from the boat and throw myself on the sand, continuing to stare at the night sky.

Sigh… I simply am at an absolute lack of words to describe my feelings after the events of the fight. What would I have done had I killed him? What excuse would I… No, forget about that. How could I have lived with it?

Takeru is alive. We were never given answers about his whereabouts, we didn't even knew he was sent to participate in Lucifer. It was only natural we would assume he was dead, after we were forbidden of speaking his name.

Yet, he's somewhere on this island watching over Meiya-sama. Why were we not informed of this?! Did they think we were going to maintain our composure when meeting up with him, after not seeing each other for two years?

He has improved much, that's for sure. I could tell he was exhausted yet he kept up with me in that crazed state for quite some time. I rub my nose, it still hurts. He must have been truly adusted at me, I

almost blew his cover in front of Meiya-sama, I treated him like I would a traitor, I harmed his back severely. And yet, he chose to restrain me instead of knocking me out or worse. Despite everything that has happened, despite all this time… You're still kind to a fault deep down, hehehe.

"What could you be smiling about, my dear cousin?" Shion speaks to me as she placed her face above mine, twirling her hair. With a small grin and rising one eyebrow, she stares at me from above.

"Nothing. I was just remembering our encounter with Takeru, that's all."

"Oh, yes. You do like it when he gets on top of you. Must have missed that a lot these two years." Her grin gets wider, letting me see her teeth.

"Shion! That's not it at all! W-We were never like that!" Summoning a little strength I raise from the ground. Shion just laughs at me as she sits down.

"Hahaha, sorry, sorry! Couldn't resist. But it is odd, you know." Her grin disappears as she hugs her knees.

"What is?"

"Takeru. Why were we not notified of his presence?"

"To avoid a leak, of course."

"Are you absolutely certain that person is truly Takeru?" Meeting my gaze, she falls silent. She slowly narrows her eyes and caresses her hair before continuing. "We have been trained to recognize a cyborg when we see one. We were forbidden from speaking about him, all his information got deleted again. Are you sure that it was truly him?"

"Shion, there was no mask. And cyborgs are not so advanced to be able to perform like a human without being controlled. Even if one

could be trained in the Mugen Kidou, the words he said… Only Takeru could have known them. That, and no robot could replicate a person's mannerisms perfectly. His tone, his eyes, his annoyed face. That was him, no doubts."

"However, if that is true then… Why did Yuuhi-sama kept that intel from us when she assigned us this mission?! It's one thing to be sent to keep tabs on the UN and watch over Meiya-sama, but it's a completely different matter if he is here as well. What was the need to send us if he was with her?" She raises one finger at me before relaxing again.

She does bring up a good point. When Her Highness was notified of the new training regime that was implemented at the start of October, she asked of us to start investigating the reasoning behind the sudden change. We found out that the UN was planning to send a squad as a hazard during the CCSE, along other details about the new regime through Mana-nee. Then, Yuuhi-sama used her influence to propose us as members of said chaser squad, under the guise of cooperation.

Of course, the real reason was to watch over Meiya-sama in case these chasers tried anything suspicious. Thankfully, the UN accepted the proposal without much resistance and we were allowed to be here. Thanks to this arrangement we could also test how much Meiya-sama has improved during the time she has been in the UN. But to think Takeru would be here watching over her as well. However, in light of what transpired behind our backs…

"Look at what happened today, Shion. Do you think it was truly pointless for us to be here? They got scattered by those dastards, they even tried to hurt Meiya-sama. He alone was not enough, and yet… I know it is futile to fret over it now, however our leniency could have costed us much." Never did we ponder the idea that they could dare to harm Meiya-sama with deadly intent.

The plan was for some soldiers to appear during their travel to the first evac point, two or three at a time, to force them to not take the

shortest route. Then, after they triggered the gun batteries and were preparing to leave, we would appear from the jungle and confront them. A frontal duel is the only way we can properly test their resolve, after all. Will they run away? Or, will they face us? Meiya-sama's training is still not finished, she still needs to face Master as we did before being admitted into the Royal Guard. If she ever hopes to join us and take her rightful place by the Shogun's side, she had to cleave through us.

We were supposed to be your last test in this CCSE, but the soldiers truly fooled us by acting so unassuming during the briefing that Sergeant gave us. And if Takeru hadn't been here, they might have severely… No, they certainly could have killed Meiya-sama. This offense will not be overlooked, we'll have a long talk with that Sergeant when we get back to the command post. In that light, Takeru's actions are perfectly justified. He protected Meiya-sama from those traitors, by any means necessary. However, if he hadn't been here we would have stained our honor by letting harm befall her person. We should have gone to keep watch on her as soon as we reached the island, we were too foolish to trust in that Sergeant's words. Something is wrong here, all that's left to confirm is whether this was an accident or if someone staged this.

Shion brushes her hair and, after drinking some water from her canteen, continues the conversation.

"I understand that well enough. But when we got the notice at the end of October that we would be loaned to the UN for this mission, that's when we should have been informed of Takeru's position. I can't believe Yuuhi-sama kept us in the dark like that! Are we so unreliable? Do we seem like the type that would slip up vital intel so easily? She knows how much he-"

"That's enough. We'll get our explanation when we report this to Her Highness. And I guarantee you, he really is him. Though, I cannot fathom why she sent both Takeru and Meiya-sama to the UN."

I understand having him watching over her, but if she wanted to train Meiya-sama, shouldn't she have been trained by him in the Capital? Considering her mission, she is being trained to eventually be the Kagemusha of the Shogun, so she and him will have to work in the same squad, so to say.

"That's the worst of it!" She frowns, her tone rising in annoyance as fast as leaves after a gale. "We were supposed to be his partners, yet they separate us, don't tell us a thing about him for two years, and send him to be Meiya-sama's retainer? Since when was he with her and why didn't Yuuhi-sama sent us alongside him? Why is Mana-nee's squad in that base then? If we can't trust the UN, to the point we need so many bodyguards to keep her safe, why did she sent Meiya-sama there in the first place?!" Shion hits the sand with her feet, after dropping her canteen she holds her elbows in each palm and throws herself onto the sand. Letting the moonlight shower her face, her wrinkles relax slowly as she finally breathes a long sigh.

"You know of it already, we're in no position to demand anything." She groans, frowning. "Japan is in life support right now, it's getting worse by the day. We both saw how much damage the BETA did during the Niigata Invasion, despite the support the UN sent. Meiya-sama is there as a hostage, even if officially she's a trainee loaned to the UN." She closes her eyes as she purses her lips, still groaning in rejection.

While the last invasion was repelled, we are being attacked by one or two Regiment-sized herds each week. Their landing points are all scattered, so we have no idea where they could go next. We had to sortie quite some times, it truly is surprising that we're still managing to keep them at bay. That's thanks to the UN's support, as much as we may have disagreements with their ways from time to time, they're the only ones actually helping us now.

COSEAN cannot send much support to us, the TUF and the rest of Asia gave their backs to us, the Soviets isolated themselves, and America only fights when it's convenient for them. Australia and

Canada might support us on the media, but I have yet to see a single Australian or Canadian pilot on the frontlines here under their own colors instead of being sent as UN fodder. Yet, we can't ignore all that the UN does against our interests and independence. They tried to keep Meiya-sama as a hostage during the last CCSE, today they acted against her life, they keep asking to move the 2nd Defense Line even more. And that's despite the importance of the Empire, of Yokohama Base, in the board that is the war.

I believe that Yuuhi-sama wants to know who is her ally in the UN, since the tensions with those who would rather have the Americans take the reins within the UN seem to be at an all-time high, from what little we can infer. That was one of the reasons why she agreed to have Meiya-sama join the UN as a political gesture.

If Meiya-sama returns after serving in the UN, she will have ample knowledge of their methods and will have forged connections with many pilots and personnel. It's a shame that she has to do this to prove her loyalty, to clean a stain she never had. Only if she returns to serve after being in the UN, those old crooks will accept her.

Taboos be damned, Meiya-sama is more loyal than any of you! Nobody, except Takeru and the Grand Chamberlain, is more devoted than her to Yuuhi-sama. I'm convinced she will find out whether there are worthy people in the UN or if they have all become nothing more than a bunch of leeches.

Though if it's the latter, I suppose Takeru is going to bloody his sword again. Or not, he did seem more calm today than how he used to be. Shion's groaning snaps me out of my inner monologue as she continued to speak, frown getting bigger and with her nose full of wrinkles.

"I know that. I know we're here as a safety measure, to see whether we can trust them or not, and to report anything we see or hear. But I think that what happened was more than what we expected, they actually tried to harm Meiya-sama. That right there is enough of an

offense to break relations with-" I look at her and she stops flailing her arms in the air. Biting her lip, she punches the sand.

"We both know it, Shion. Nothing will happen, because Meiya-sama is not officially recognized as who she really is. The Mitsurugi Family is of Tozama rank after all, until Meiya-sama has proven her value she will not be recognized as a samurai and will be treated as another civilian. To file a claim against the UN for this would be like admitting that Meiya-sama is not who she says she is. That's why we are here, to be Yuuhi-sama's eyes and ears. Also, due to his position, Takeru probably has no contact with Her Highness either so we need to report his status to her as well." She nods at my words, but keeps punching the sands with her eyes half open.

"This is the worst. I didn't even get to talk with him, how are we going to report his status if we can't approach him?"

"We can leave the details to Mana-nee, we just need to report those two passed the CCSE and how Takeru performed his duties in protecting Meiya-sama."

"Do you think that's his mission?" She stops punching the ground and looks at me. "I mean, shouldn't he remain by Yuuhi-sama's side at all times?"

"Meiya-sama is truly important for Her Highness, I don't doubt she would take any measures to ensure she is safe at all times. Takeru did refer to her by her name so I suppose they're on good terms." Shion pouts, not satisfied with my answer, and throws herself onto the sand again.

"Still… You sure that was him? No doubts?"

"If you want to know so badly, go and hug him before he takes the helicopter." I tease her back, but…

"Oh! You're right! I just have to confirm it myself!" Shion raised fists to the sky, convincing herself with a deep tone.

"Shion, are you serious?"

"Hmm? Yeah, we do have to make sure you didn't get caught up in the moment. And I have a duty to confirm whether it's him or not. Since you already screwed up." She raises one eyebrow and flashes me an evil grin. Ugh, I hate you.

"Well, the ambush was not my idea at the least." I smile back at her, bringing one finger to my chin.

"What, are you saying it was my fault we lost?" I raise a hand to pacify her, we do not need to start arguing again now.

"Come on, after we heard from that soldier that there was someone going by the name of Takeru Shirogane I didn't knew what to do either, but setting such a large ambush only for it to fail was nothing short of a crude astonishment. To think we weren't able to trap or separate him from those two…" My shoulders drop as I sigh. Shion does the same.

"Yeah, that was a surprise. It was like we were really fighting against Takeru, he would never abandon a comrade. Though he did mature a bit, his old self would have started shooting instead of dropping the rifle."

"That's true, it was time he matured." We share a small laugh as we both look at the sky. "He did seem… calmer than before, you know. He did try to restrain me instead of knocking me out."

"Well… Maybe now that he's had a respite from the war he left those… views behind him?" She asks, almost as if edging me to agree. I sigh, hugging my knees.

"I do not know. He left being truly cold as he used to do before, so I have no idea how he took our presence."

"… Do you think he's upset?"

"Was that even in question? Even if he was calmer, he said nothing to me even when we were alone and away. Sigh…" She sighs as well, and we both throw ourselves to the sands once more. "Also… he did use those odd eccentric words when we were talking."

"… Really?" She grimaces, I nod.

"I know our plan was perhaps too much, yet he didn't ease up even after I repeatedly apologized. I think he's truly mad at us." She looks down, biting her lips and falling completely silent. I look up, sighing.

We had planned the ambush to capture him at all costs, even if it meant to let Meiya-sama get away from us. We had to ascertain who this Shirogane was, was the name just a coincidence? Was he impersonating Takeru? Yet his voice and face, his body and eyes, everything was the same. If we couldn't capture him… We couldn't risk the UN coming after us with a claim of abuse against a defenseless opponent, since there could be microphones hidden anywhere on the island, so we had decided to use our duel idea to have an unfortunate accident happen. We couldn't let someone like that live, the damage a foreigner passing as Takeru could do is gigantic. I had no doubts Yuuhi-sama would break down if she saw him, who knows what did he want to make her do?

But that was all needless worry, it was no faker. It was him, the one and only Takeru. Though, pondering our fight, I can't help but to think his swordplay was… How to say it? A little bit different than how I remember. Less aggressive but more faster, he also used his fists and feet more. But in any case, where were you all this time?

Also, I can't believe I snapped like that. When he kept saying he was Takeru I could feel my blood boil, he acted truly similarly to how he was so I thought the spy was mocking us. I completely lost it during our fight.

I look up, drawing circles on the sand, arching my brows. I mean, he could have said something about it when he saw me like that. Why didn't he stop me? What would I have done if I had hurt him? How

am I going to face Yuuhi-sama now? I bet Shion will say that I went berserk on Takeru, I can already hear her snickering. Yet… You didn't harm me, not even when I was clawing at your throat. But… Those words you said at the end… Was that an act, in case there were mics near?

"Shion, why do you think he's been away these two years?"

"Who said he was away?" Huh? What is… Does she know something?! "Don't look at me like that, I'm just saying that we were never told anything. He could have been coming and going around without nobody noticing him. Do you truly think he would stay away from Yuuhi-sama for two years?"

"Point taken. Maybe they were being careful, since the political landscape changed after Lucifer?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. We'll get our answers when we give our report."

"Yeah, you're right."

A sound from the PC reaches my ears, going back to the boat I see that the encryption has been done. The data is ready… Should we send the report now or wait until tomorrow? Thanks to our comms we know the soldiers have been taken out by the other members of the squad so there should be no worries about Meiya-sama's safety.

"Mion, is the data ready?"

"Yeah, just got done a few seconds ago. Should we report what we know now?" Shion flashes me a wide evil grin as she gets close to the computer.

"Of course we do! I want my answers about Takeru, and we should report the behavior of the soldiers as soon as possible. So, if the data is ready let's prepare the private channel."

"Sigh… One day won't make such a difference, and we still need to have a talk with that Sergeant again. But if you wish to do so, this will be on you."

"Yeah, lay the blame on me. I'm still not convinced he is Takeru so Yuuhi-sama better be ready to give me an explanation!" She sits near the PC and starts up the video call program.

"You do know she may just say it's confidential intel, right?" She freezes in place. Slowly, her head turns to me as she stares at me with hawkish eyes.

"… Mion, I swear, if she says that I'll cut that ponytail of yours with my teeth." I raise one eyebrow and smile at her lightless eyes.

"So scary. Don't forget to speak formally, though. Yuuhi-sama might not want to reveal any intel unless we are on her private room back in the palace, so don't get your hopes up. That's all I'm saying." I wave at her to calm her down, she must be a mess trying to sort out her feelings in this matter. Not that I'm any different.

"Whatever. I'll start the preparations, can you bring a lantern?"

"Sure, sure."

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*Same Day. 09:14 PM.*

*(Yokohama Base. Briefing Room N° 4.)*

**[Yui]**

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"Here are all the reports regarding the development, Ma'am." I hand the folders to Professor Kouzuki, she makes a noise to acknowledge them as she starts reading.

I arrived here just an hour ago, I already finished signing the preliminary papers and got a small tour around the base. It's just been ten minutes since this talk started but I'm feeling most anxious. Not only she has a striking gaze, firm enough to crack a rock with just a blink, but she also has a very frightening way of speaking. Not that I was trying to deceive her, but I suppose she is still suspicious of me since I'm a member of the fudai.

"A truly amazing piece of weaponry, he was right it was worth it." Huh? He?

"Excuse me Vice Commander, who are you referring to?"

"I was merely talking to myself. I'd like it if you only replied when addressed, 1st Lt. Takamura." I nod at her while gulping.

A true alpha woman, it is no wonder to me why no one wants to make her upset. I honestly do not mind the demotion, I do not desire to have others thinking I have privileges for being a noble.

She has been truly cold towards me during my introduction and cut to the chase in no time when this talk started. I now understand why you disliked me so much Yuuya, it is hard to have a conversation when one side is doing an iceberg impression. However, going by her squinted eyes and how much time she spends reading each page, I believe she took a serious interest on the railgun. That's a good start, even if I am not allowed access to the floor it will be built to oversee that until I gain her approval.

"This data is more impressing than I thought it would be, to be perfectly honest. However, some parts will be hard to procure. Even some of the replacement and second options are very expensive materials, it will cost at least double of what I thought originally."

"Huh? Is that so? I… When we were at Yukon the engineers did mention that it used valuable materials, but I never expected them to be so expensive. The budget I proposed is already quite high, after all."

"Yes, but you have to look at it from a different point of view." With half closed eyes, looking at nowhere in particular, she spoke as if she were bored. "Materials and parts that are made in America will be cheaper in America. Here we have to import them, and, since we can't import large quantities of them, their price in our market is much higher since the demand is high, and ordering them through the UN comes with the added cost of the logistics required for the delivery. Of course, we cannot use third grade materials on such a project. Its maintenance will be quite the problem too, according to the data here. You only used it twice, but it was estimated it would take weeks to get it in working condition again, due to how worn down the barrel was thanks to the heat it generates when firing." She hits the papers laid on the table with two fingers, resting her chin in the palm of her other hand.

This is bad, I can't deny that the railgun does take quite some time to be ready for use after a mission, even if we only used it twice. Add how much funds are needed to build it… If I can't get them past the planning stage all my efforts will be for nothing.

"It's true, I won't deny that. However, if you compare how much it costs to repair, resupply, and recalibrate a fleet of TSF after an encounter with a Regiment of BETA, without mentioning the damage they do to other facilities, I think you'll see that the railgun is a much cheaper alternative. And one that does not involve any risk whatsoever, we can destroy the BETA as soon as they appear on the shore before they do anything. Our encounter with them proved that as much, a railgun can eliminate around three thousand BETA with a single shot and a full backpack. How much more money will one have to spend to fix the damage those same BETA would cause us after the battle? And that's without considering the irreplaceable value the lives of our pilots have, any life lost in the fight carries a much heavier weight than a bag full of gold ingots." I spoke slowly, pointing to the pages that had the relevant information and comparisons I prepared for this. I know the railgun is not perfect, I know it goes against our honor code to fight in this way. But Yuuya

proved to the world how useful it can be, and it's up to me to bring it back to life.

"All of your points are valid, so long as it doesn't fail. Here says that a third barrage was supposed to be fired, but it overheated. If that is the case, the railgun will require quite some time in R&D before we can actually use it, and if it explodes we will have to face the costs of the fight with the BETA as well as those of the destroyed railgun." She ruffles her hair as she leans back on her chair, again staring right into my eyes.

"It was only its first test, now that we have that data we can make a more efficient cooling mechanism for it. While it will need time to reach its full potential, I believe it will bring more plusses than negatives. The presence of the railgun could give the Empire the breath of relief it so desperately needs, a single of this could take care of any of the Regiment or lower herds that assault our shores weekly. That will eventually pay for itself, letting us conserve resources and prepare our surface pilots without a need for an unfortunate accident to take their lives." I relax my face as I look into her eyes. Violet, just like mine, but as she narrows them I feel a cold shiver down my back.

"Again, that's only if it works. So 1st Lt. Takamura, did you plan anything in case we had to cut our budget? Or were you expecting to have the same resources as you did in Yukon?" I did not intend to upset her. She entwines her fingers as her gaze drills into me, sizing me up as she waits for my answer.

"I do have some adjustments if such a case presented itself, they're on the twenty ninth page of the report. Basically, we lower the amount of bullets it can fire and make the sub-arm more similar to one of the add-on pylons we already had. Of course, this would lower its performance quite a bit but it would be preferable to not having the railgun at all." I brush my hair off my face as I watch with bated breath as she reads through the report.

"Most interesting. Say, do you mind if I… modify the project a bit?"

"Modify? What would you be liking to do?" She grins widely and something stirs in her eyes.

"I would like to make it bigger."

"What? B-But… You just said it would be impractical due to its cost, making it bigger would only-"

"That's only if you look at our current configuration. Given its current form, the railgun makes any TSF that uses it into nothing more than a turret, due to the weight and the backpack one must carry with it. It's also a BETA magnet, due to its black box and computing systems. However, let's say that those problems are solved if we can make this thing bigger."

"Excuse me, but I do not understand how. That would only make the TSF using it even more slower, also, wouldn't that have a much bigger cost than what I proposed as well?"

"Yes, but this would be worth it. So, here's my deal. I want to make a small and big version of it. The small will be tested on a TSF like it's meant to, the other will be tested by my Research Team. Is that alright for you?"

"If those are your terms, I'll agree to them. I thank you for this chance Vice Commander, I swear I'll do my best to bring you the results you desire!" I bow at her, but going by her frown it only made her more uncomfortable.

"No need for formalities. You will be assigned under my command in the Research Team, I want a daily report at 7 PM. Tomorrow I'll introduce you to the engineers and the floor where you'll spend most of your time."

"Yes, Ma'am. I do have a request to make, if it's alright with you." Her bored gaze became firm as she focused on me. Lightly brushing her bangs to a side, she straightened her posture and gestured me to speak.

"What is it you want?"

"I would like you to consider my permanent transfer to this base, as we discussed before."

"Why? After the railgun is finished, do you have any other business here? Out with it, don't be shy!" Her childish tone startled me, however after looking at her narrowed eyes I could tell she's merely testing me.

"Well, if you deem the railgun worthwhile I would like to request you to consider taking the XFJ Project under you. I know resources are scarce, but the railgun and the Shiranui Second complement each other quite well. While the railgun can take care of many enemies from long range, the Second is a great machine when it comes to mid and close range. I believe it would be a great addition to our military force."

"I know of it already. While I admit the Second is an amazing machine, we do not have anything to pick up their development and would need to make an engine according to its specs. That's without mentioning the fact that the Type-94-1C is an exclusive unit of the Shogunate. I believe that we're better off upgrading all our 2nd Gen TSFs, instead of spend our funds trying to build from scratch a completely new TSF." She briskly disregarded my proposal as she looked into me again with those fierce eyes. It almost feels as if I were once again clashing against Mother when she opposed me joining the training program to become a surface pilot, cold and unwavering as a a horde of BETA.

Closing my eyes, I inhale slowly as I ponder my next words. Again facing her gaze, that oh so piercing gaze, I rub my ankles together as I speak up.

"I understand that it would put a truly large dent in your budget, and that it also would be a large time eater. But its performance cannot be compared to that of any 2nd Gen TSF, even if they are upgraded. I know that the relations between the UN and the Empire are more

tense than they ever were before now, but if you provided them with such a powerful 3rd Gen machine the waters would surely return to how they were at the start of the year. While its initial cost will be quite high, once we manage to iron out its specs it should become a very easy to mass produce TSF. If you would be wishing to see them, I have the reports with me." She raises a hand, signaling me to give her the report, which I do without delay.

"Let's see here… Hmm…" She again slowly reads the papers.

I can't believe how nervous I am. My palms are all covered by a faint sweat and I can't keep my feet quiet. I move my eyes from her to the walls, but I can't calm down. No matter how many deep breaths I take, my heart is beating quite strongly near my neck. Peace, I still have time to convince her.

"1st Lt. Takamura, compared to a Takemikazuchi, how does the Second fare?"

"To a Type-00? It depends on the model. The Second is still not as powerful as the Type-00C since it has a better engine on both its jump units and inner structure, however the Second could have a comparable performance for a much lower cost. However, the types A, F and R are without a doubt superior to it in every way. Of course, in the end it's up to the pilot to bring the full potential of the machine to life, but going by the cold numbers the Second could achieve a similar performance to the Type-00C in general. The Takemikazuchi will always be better in close range and long lasting missions, but for a more generalist approach, improved maneuverability, and for its lower cost of fabrication and maintenance, the Second is the superior choice in my opinion." With how easy it would be to produce and upgrade we could replace all of our old TSF while not forcing the Guard to develop another machine out of pride, like when the Shiranui was deployed.

"I see, makes perfect sense. Question, did you bring your Type-00 with you to the base?"

"Huh? Yes, I did. But I do not have authorization to allow you to tinker with it or to borrow its components." She brings a hand to her forehead as she sighs audibly, then she ruffles her hair again.

"I wasn't going to ask you that. You said we couldn't make 2nd Gen TSFs as strong as the Second, and that your Type-00F is better than it. Could you do me a favor and perform a test run for me?" She asks me as she curves her lips, handing me a paper. A dark blue TSF's data, what is… This has got to be a joke.

"Vice Commander, if you forgive my rudeness, there is no way a Kagerou could achieve these numbers."

"Are you calling me a liar, by any chance?"

"N-No, Ma'am. But these statistics, these results… Can you tell me more of this?" She looks to the wall, hiding her mouth with her entwined hands.

"Only if you agree to do this test for me. What do you say? Your Type-00F against this Kagerou. I'll give you a hint, it's based on the Active Eagle design of Prominence. I believe you are familiar with it."

"Yes, one member of my past squad used one actually. Its performance was nowhere near this good, however." Is this the result of the accord with the Shogun to make new TSF tech? First we rake in funds with these new little upgrades, and once we fill our box we start the development of our big guns? So there was no need for me to worry, she is just being careful and timing her projects.

"So, what do you say?"

"I accept your orders, Ma'am. I'll gladly spar against this TSF if that is your wish."

"Obedient one, aren't you? Alright, I'll arrange the test for a few days in the future. Here are some more papers on it, so that you know what to expect. Even if this is a test, I'd like you to take it seriously.

*… Not like you have a chance against him anyways.* " Her tone got lower at the end and I couldn't hear her well, but going by her wide smile she is expecting me to deliver good results to her. And that I will.

"Understood, Ma'am."

"Now then. Your room is on the third hallway of the right side in the barracks. Just to avoid any misunderstanding, I'd like you to not involve yourself with the Cadets that are still being trained here."

"Huh? Um… Alright, however could I… Ahem, could you allow me to watch over Cadet Mitsurugi, if it's possible?"

"Mitsurugi? Oh, are you here as another bodyguard?"

"Sort of. This isn't an official arrangement so I would watch over her until she's done with her service in the UN or until I receive further orders regarding her safety, so if you allow me to keep tabs on her activities and can send me along her squad when she is deployed to a mission I would be truly thankful. And she will too." I hand her a small paper, with the symbol of the Koubuin House in a strong shade of purple. She frowns at the sight of it, tightening her grip on the paper. "I know that imposing more things onto you is quite rude, since we are only asking without giving. But I'm allowed to move out in my Takemikazuchi, I'm sure I will be useful to you. Please, think of me as another soldier under your command."

"That was the plan, however let me ask you one question. I want a serious, honest answer. Is that the only reason you wish to be near Mitsurugi's squad?" Again she narrows her eyes, entwines her hands and stares into me.

"Yes, that's all there is to this." I can't say I didn't expect her to doubt me.

"Really? Then… Do you not know of someone called Shirogane?" Huh? I didn't expect her to mention him at all.

"Err… Yes, I do."

"Oh?" She opens her eyes wide as she smiles. Why is she so surprised? "So you know of Shirogane, can you tell me what you know of him?"

"Um… He's a cadet in Mitsurugi's squad, he was stationed at Yukon during the Incident, I think he was transferred here by your orders, and he's something like your protegee, I believe?"

"Yes, all that is true. But why do you know of him?" Her eyes light up as she leans forward. Her piercing gaze fills my view, I didn't have any reason to lie but anyone would be left struggling under such a strong glare.

"I was told his records were very good, so if he were commissioned I… I'll be honest, I would like him to be the test pilot of the Second."

"Huh? The test pilot?"

"Yes, I was told his efforts were marvelous. So, if he also produces similar results in his training course as a surface pilot I wanted to ask you to make him into the test pilot of the Second, if he also agreed of course." There is no point in lying, honesty is the best policy. If I want them to accept me as their ally I must reveal my hand to them first, I do want to meet him if I could.

"Hmm… That… Well, it's not impossible. But is that all there is to it?"

"Yes, that's all. I would like to speak with him, to see what kind of person he is, but that can wait until you allow me to do so."

"So you hold no grudges towards him for being a Japanese that was trained abroad?" So that's what she wanted to ask. I know that my old reputation is still haunting me, but still…

"I am no longer who I used to be. I realized that holding onto such grudges and prejudices is nothing more than a waste of time. I no

longer have animosity towards foreigners in me, I will judge people for how they are and not by their birth place. He is my comrade first and foremost." I speak firmly, staring right at her eyes. Crossing my arms, I await her answer. She gives me back a small smile.

"Alright. Then I'll see what I can do. However, please refrain from approaching him for the time being, he is my protegee and he has a… very short temper for people of the Royal Guard."

"Eh? Why?"

"Let's just say that… He had a few bad experiences with them. By the way, I've heard you were the Leader of your squad back in Yukon and that you fought quite bravely to protect the base and city from the BETA. Aside from the test I proposed you before, would you be willing to assist me in some tests and mock battles?"

"Of course, it will be a pleasure to serve you. If there's anything you need of me, do not hesitate to ask and I will do my best to deliver."

I truly want to be here, if I can help you finish these new parts and use them to revive the Second that will bring a swift end to the tension between the Empire and the UN. If I can watch over Mitsurugi while getting closer to Shirogane, I'd be killing two BETAs with one slash. I'll do any and all the tests and battles you order me to, and I'll help as much as I can during the development of the railgun. I'm prepared to sleep only four hours a day to finally bring the XFJ Project back to life.

"Good answer. Now, let's go over some details of your enlistment here. You'll have S2 level of clearance, and aside from the railgun documents you won't have access to any other documents above your rank."

"Understood."

"Let's move back to the railgun, there are some questions I want to ask regarding its cooling system and the backpack."

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*November 21st. Fifth Day of the CCSE.*

*(Evacuation Point. 09:48 PM.)*

**[Marimo]**

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Almost 2200 hours, huh? They're still not here, what happened to them? All the members of the Wasp Squad are already here so they should have no more problems to reach this place. Are they so hurt that they can't get past the traps? After all that happened, that would be an awful ending to this CCSE.

Captain Nanase admitted that he was bribed after I put him on the phone with Yuuko, I don't know the details but Yuuko confirmed that she will start pulling some strings to find out who did it and why, even if she probably already has an inkling. The three of them got really beaten up, honestly I expected as much from Ayamine, but Tamase's and Yoroi's performance that night surprised me.

Their figures as they ate after coming back filled me with happiness. Their small, creaking voices could barely hold back the tears once the realization came to them. Tamase started crying in the middle of lunch, Yoroi bit her tongue twice trying to not cry, and Ayamine didn't say anything but the fact that she was openly smiling is proof enough that she was overjoyed.

Yet, not everything is good news. Those two Royal Guards that came back today are seriously giving me the creeps. Their eyes are completely void of light, they kept asking about the soldiers' actions and about Shirogane. They've come every hour to check whether he arrived. I could understand if they were asking about Mitsurugi, but Shirogane? What did you do this time to upset the Guards?

I can tell they have no good intentions, I've seen those eyes before. The eyes of a murderer, cold, wide open, void of life and mercy. Do they think Shirogane is involved with Nanase? No matter what I said

to them, they would give me this big, wide grin showing me their teeth, and then they would go away laughing quietly. That laughter sent chills down my spine, I've met plenty of Royal Guards that had quite a few screws loose, or rather missing altogether.

Sigh… In any case, they did went above my expectations, all of them. Maybe… For once, I can have a squad that doesn't die after their first two missions.

When I was assigned as the Instructor of the 207th Cadet Training School in Hakuryo Base, I thought it was weird. People coming from all over the country to join our program, soon I learned of the real purpose of the Base. To prepare Cadets to serve as part of our elite force, the A-01 Special Task Force, that would become the backbone for a top secret project. Little did I know that Yuuko was behind it, that she had asked for me to be the Instructor. Back then I couldn't see straight, I kept running away from my pain. The pain of losing my crush after he confessed to me he was in love with someone else, the pain of losing all my comrades time and again no matter what tactics I employed. I was not strong enough, I was still clinging to the idea of nobility, of a war where we could all survive, I was so naive. I kept charging ahead, only to return alone.

When did I snap? When did I become Marimo 'Reaper' Jinguuji? I no longer remember.

What I do remember is that I was one of the few survivors of the troops that were sent in the first collaboration of the Empire with COSEAN to defend mainland Asia. That's why I went double hard on all my Cadets, I wanted them to experience just a tiny bit of the hell that would befall Japan, so that those who had the guts to fight would come out stronger, and those who didn't could avoid wasting their or their comrades' lives.

Looking back on it, I was a monster. How many children did I break during those days? Just remembering what I did to Isumi is enough to make me wanna hit myself. But… It was all pointless. My freshly commissioned students would soon die on the missions Yuuko sent

them to on Korea, but we still managed to 'offset' our losses with the fresh officers coming out of the 207th Training School. Until that fateful year that was 1998.

Half of the STF was then killed during the first days of the Invasion of the '98, more died during the Battles of Kyoto, Yokohama and Honshu. After we got relocated, the numbers just kept going down and down, after Lucifer only two squads with ten members each remained.

Back in the day, I trained squads until the letter M a year, with four members each. From all of those only three are still alive. All of the rest are dead. From the ones I trained on the '99 and 2000, only one from each generation remains. I thought that… Maybe I had the wrong idea. Maybe we didn't need a calm Marimo, maybe we needed the Reaper to come back. That's why this year I returned to how I used to be. We need more Isumis, more Hayases. I can't… I don't want to keep seeing my squads get decimated only a few months after being commissioned. The BETA probably can spawn thousands of them a day, but we need so much more time and resources to bring a couple of people to the basic level of aptitude. I can't keep being so lenient. My goal is to make them survive, not to turn them into blind killing machines.

That's why I was so glad when Shirogane arrived, someone who could take my training regiments, someone who could keep up with the Reaper. He's the best, he's my star Cadet. No one could ever compare, not Narumi, not Hayase, not Sakuma, not Isumi. If he could show the rest that he could do it, all of them would start trying their hardest to keep up. If only he had arrived at the start of the year…

This generation of Cadets is much more skilled than the last ones. Mitsurugi, Ayamine, Tamase, Suzumiya, Takahara. All of you have the making of great pilots, so long as you survive long enough to leave a mark. And yet, I had to bear with these stupid political ploys. All of them should have graduated already, but if that's how you wanna play fine by me. I gave them the hardest training I could ever

come up with, and they endured it. Sure, they weren't doing it like Shirogane but he's an outlier, I can't even see where his limits may lie. But all of you should be proud, I gave you hell and you braved through it. The fact that you fought against commissioned soldiers and won is enough to prove my point. We don't need a gentle Marimo, we need the Reaper.

However, to think you'll leave him behind. Abandoning Shirogane, despite how much he tried to fit in, despite how much he ignored your insults and kept smiling through the trainings, despite the fact that he shielded Mitsurugi from their first shot? If he had failed because of this, I would have made you all fail as well. I thought that, just like me and Arai became better after clashing with each other for so long, letting you all clash and flare up a rivalry between you and him would make you all grow more. But it seems that when push came to shove, you forgot all about what I taught you about teamwork and fighting in adverse situations. And yet going by the mics Shirogane forgave them and is traveling with alongside those two. That boy is too kind for his own good, though it's hard to blame him. Going by what little I could see of his records, he lost everything he had twice and is just looking for a place to be.

He had the bravery to fatally wound the soldiers, it's true that he overdid it but, if we go by the book, he fulfilled his mission perfectly. He took care of his enemies without giving them a chance to retaliate. Honestly, I cringe just to think how these people got trained. To abuse their power against those girls, when I confronted them they started blabbering about how poor they are, how they deserve better, and a lot of crap. Hmph, they made a grave mistake and paid for it. If Mitsurugi and Sakaki had chosen to fight back during their first encounter, we could have avoided this whole mess.

I yawn, rubbing my eyes. For a moment, my heads sways backwards, wishing to meet a soft surface. Inhaling sharply, I shudder the cold away and blink fast in quick succession. I truly would like to just lay down for a moment…

Sigh… Still, I can't go to sleep yet. Where are you three?! The others are already sleeping after a good dinner, we won't have enough time to properly heal your wounds if you take too long. Stop making me worry and get here already!

… Hm? What's that?

I heard a sound, then it happened again. And then I heard it clearly, a voice through the night.

"C'mon guys, it's… just… right… there!" Shirogane's voice echoed through the air as I saw him climbing his way into the island.

Instead of throwing himself into the grass, he went back near the edge and helped Mitsurugi up as Sakaki finished climbing her way as well. So they used the boat, huh?

"Congratulations you three, you have finished your CCSE." I say as I approach them.

Mitsurugi looks like she just took a dip in the sea, she slowly wipes the sweat of her face. Sakaki's eyes look dim as she rubs her right leg with a frown on her face. Shirogane is bending forward holding his knees.

"Instructor… We have arrived." Sakaki gives me a salute as she regained her composure. Mitsurugi does the same, meanwhile Shirogane is still hunched over.

"What is it, Shirogane? Ran out of energy?" I try to taunt him but he remains in the same position, breathing heavily.

"I think… I'm gonna keel over and faint any minute now. Fucking cliff…" Mitsurugi and Sakaki nod to his words instead of scolding him. They must be exhausted, let's get this over with so that they can get their well earned rest.

"Alright, I'll announce your score." Shirogane slowly stands upright in attention as he hears my words. "All of you dealt with your first targets quite admirably, wasted no time and got to the point immediately. However, from then on you have different scores for what you did." All of them grimace. Sakaki holds one elbow with her palm, Mitsurugi grabs the edge of her pants quite strongly, and Shirogane is biting his lips. "Mitsurugi, Sakaki. You abandoned one of your squadmates when you met the chasers. While there is no rule that states that this can't be done, I'd like to tell you something. When I enlisted, no more than ten years ago, to pass the CCSE all members of the squad had to survive. However your bet didn't work and you got captured, you should have had to pay the ultimate price for it. Ironically, you were saved by the one you abandoned, you couldn't even protect yourselves. We don't need soldiers like you in our army, you're just dead weight." Their faces twist upon hearing my words, their eyes are open wide, their mouths open and close as their lips tremble.

"Instructor, if I may, at the time we-"

"Sakaki, I already heard enough pitiful excuses from Ayamine. That is not the worst of it at all, not only Shirogane had to go save your sorry asses but he also had to take care of everything himself. We have mics on the island scattered around and we know he got in charge of the fight with your captors and took care of most of the traps afterwards. What were you two doing exactly? Were you too busy staring at his abs to do jack shit?!"

Their faces contort again, lips twisted and eyes almost closing. They look to the ground, Shirogane is staring right back at me with hints of a frown in his face. He's holding a retort for now, it seems.

"Then, during the second chase he was the one who noticed the ambush, the one who told you to run and the one who fought back. Honestly, what did you do? Did you do anything? At all? So much time and resources wasted on two useless fucktards that can't even save their own asses when it counts. You only brought Shirogane down in this test, but I suppose that's an achievement in and of

itself." Despite the low light I can tell their faces are growing pale, Mitsurugi can't even look up from the ground as she quivers in place, Sakaki is trying to stare back but keeps looking elsewhere as soon as we make eye contact.

"Instructor, they did help me. I did not do all the work."

"Shirogane, I do not remember giving you permission to-"

"And I don't remember when trash talking my squad became part of our evaluation, with due respect. They were not useless, they helped me with many traps that I couldn't have dealt with, they shared their medical supplies with me to heal my wounds, and most importantly kept one of our chasers at bay when we had to fight them. There was no way I could have dealt with both at the same time. You also shouldn't leave out of your judgment that fact that we did not know of the chasers presence, nor that four of them assaulted my squadmates, while I had the advantage of ambushing them while they were distracted. So, even if I totally understand your anger, could you please stop badmouthing them?"

You got balls, Shirogane. You're the first that talks back when I'm the Reaper with actual arguments since Isumi, without faltering as well. It's not like I didn't knew what you just said, I was going to mention it, but let's roll with it. I can see why Yuuko holds you in such high regard.

"Alright, let's move on then. You caused more trouble than you're worth, but one could say that you mended it by regrouping with Shirogane and cooperating with him from then on. Sakaki, Mitsurugi, you both get a Seventy in your CCSE." Their eyes light up, they got a passing grade. Mitsurugi's knees betray her and she falls to the ground. Sakaki hugs her sides as she struggles to not cry. "Now then, Shirogane…"

"Yes?"

"You killed two of your pursuers, gravely harmed another three. We lost five pilots because of you. You also made the foolish choice of trusting in those that had abandoned you once." He frowns at me but doesn't retort. "They could have abandoned you while you were asleep and you would have failed the test, you also should have prioritized your own security during the chase instead of staying back with them, since they were nothing but a hindrance to you at that point. That could have costed you the CCSE. However, you defended yourself admirably, dealt with most traps by yourself, neutralized your enemies with fast and lethal force, and guided your team to victory. It's clear that you're the biggest reason you three are here right now. However, you did get captured when you first encountered the chasers and barely managed to escape. You also had luck on your side, you escaped by a hair from your first pursuers without serious injuries, you got lucky that the girls didn't betray you twice, you also got lucky that the second chasers didn't immediately capture you and forced you to use your radios to give up. You made many mistakes, add that to the blood you spilled… And you can imagine what your score is, right?"

"Instructor, if we passed the test then he should-"

"Silence, Mitsurugi."

"But he saved our lives! I was unconscious when he found me, they could-"

"Do you have any proof of that?"

"Eh?" Eyes wide open she struggles to retort. You're so naive, do you really think people will believe your words all the time?

"Where is the proof that you were unconscious? Or in any danger?" I know she's telling the truth, but I have to pressure them. So that they know what will happen when they screw up once they get commissioned.

"Proof? I… My scars would-"

"That only implies there was a fight, nothing about some bruises says mortal danger." She sharpens her eyes and takes a step forward.

"However, if you had microphones all over you should-"

"Meiya, it's fine. Let it go. Please continue, Instructor." I thought he would be the most angry one, yet he calmed Mitsurugi down with only a gaze. She stares at him for a second, lowers her gaze while wringing her hands, and takes a step back.

"Cadet Shirogane, you have scored a Sixty Five on your CCSE. That is the lowest score one can get while also passing the test, you managed to arrive here before dawn so that worked in your favor. You avoided climbing the cliff during daylight, that was your saving grace. Congratulations, you all barely passed the CCSE maggots!"

I thought he would scream in joy, drop to his knees or something, but he kept standing in place with his ice stare. Only then I noticed he was not staring at me, but rather at the two green haired figures that were some meters behind me. They were staring at him with those hawkish eyes. After I noticed them, they turned around and made their way to the command post.

"Instructor… About those two soldiers…"

"Mitsurugi, there will be a time to discuss that. For now, let us go to the command post. You all have earned a long shower and a plentiful dinner. Tomorrow at two in the afternoon we're leaving, just so you know. That is all." I march towards the command post, but I take a glance at them after some steps.

The girls were trying to cheer Shirogane up, smiling at him and probably saying some cheesy lines since he did pass the test. Whatever happened in these days seems to have changed the opinion they had of him, or they're just pretending.

However, Shirogane does not smile. I don't know if he's tired but he looks dead inside. His eyes are unfocused as he walks, his lips are pursed tightly into a bitter expression. I suppose it has to do with those two Guards.

During dinner he did not change his attitude and went to sleep without uttering a word, more than a few thanks towards the girls when they spoke to him. They seemed worried about him, and Mitsurugi went to talk with the Guards but they didn't even answer the door.

Now that I finally got this squad to pass their CCSE I won't allow anyone to harm them, I should call Yuuko for advice on how to deal with these Guards.

# Conflict

***3 rd Arc: His Chains***

***Chapter 24: Conflict***

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*(Koubuin House. Head's Room.)*

**[Raiko]**

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One could not imagine the dire situation we were facing by merely looking at what was within this room.

Yohime-sama and her Chamberlain were in the customary position, behind the scrolls and tapestry of our House, candle lighting their surroundings. Standing by the door, Mana diligently remained on guard.

The rest of us, sitting on the tatami, merely awaited her words as we drank some tea, her decision regarding the coming peril.

To her right, Daizaburou-sama, Seiten-sama, and Gekka-sama, all of our warriors from the Guren House, and to the left me and Masahide in representation of the Amato House, as well as my fellow Kaori-san, who hails from the Kisaragi House. All of those present here being those of the highest echelons within the Koubuin faction, all of us shared a singular wish.

However…

"I shan't leave. Not until our fellows have done so." Yohime-sama answered, bringing forth an ailing taste to my mouth, as well as to those of my fellows.

"Milady, please reconsider." Daizaburou-sama, the only one old enough to speak out of turn, couldn't muster enough composure to hide the frown that soared high into his face. "Should the worst case scenario come to pass, we cannot guarantee your safety."

"And should I leave, most of our guards would do so with me. So long as I am here, my servants shall be safer. I shan't leave until an evacuation is called for. That shall be final."

"Even so… For the future of our faction, you should-" His words drowned by her frown, he bowed down in silence.

"The one who holds the future of this House is Yuuhi, not me. Therefore, you all should only concern yourselves with her wellbeing."

I look down, unable to counter these asphyxiating feelings on my throat. Yohime-sama's safety is of paramount importance for us, however we cannot go against her wishes. Those outside the succession branch have taken preemptive measures and moved out to a secure location already. Were something to occur… I do not doubt they may try something against Yuuhi-sama.

Trusting in His Highness' plan is all we can do at the moment, however. As enraging a state of affairs this is, reiterating the matter will do us no good.

"Masahide, have the preparations for the trainees been finished?" She inquires.

"Yes, milady." He gives a short bow, a hand on his shoulder. "Should the worst come to pass, all young noble heirs shall be sent to Tokyo. We are cooperating with the Kujo House in this endeavor to also accommodate those that survived the invasion. Worry not milady, our fellows have their safety guaranteed."

"Sigh… That is good to hear."

"Milady, if I may," With a bow, I look at her awaiting her approval. Once she nods, I cough and continue, "On that note, has Yuuhi-sama agreed to remain in the Castle?"

"Yes, thanks to Takeru's insistence." She smiles with clear cheer, however, for as a great relief it is to learn that Yuuhi-sama shall not be fighting, to hear it was due to that baseborn's meddling makes my insides be riveted by most foul acids. "She should be preparing her belongings as of now. Mana, how would that be coming along?"

Upon hearing the inquiry, she took a step forward and stood in attention, then bowing to our Lady before answering her query.

"Yuuhi-sama should be almost done with the selection of which items she would be wishing to take with her, milady. I estimate that in less than an hour our fellows will be done with the task."

"… And she hasn't risen any further objections?" She inquired, Mana shook her head.

"No, milady. Had she done so, I would have been notified of it by now."

"I see… Well, that is one burden off our shoulders." Smiling yet again, she nodded and allowed Mana to return to her prior position. "Now then, have we received confirmation from the UN regarding their plans?"

"Ahem…" Gekka-sama bowed, Yohime-sama nodded her way, and she then sighed before speaking up. "After the last meeting where the Americans disclosed the termination of the treaty, it seems they have not received the authorization to mobilize near the Capital. We have received a petition from His Highness for us to cooperate with the UN forces, to allow them to participate in the defense of Osaka actively."

"Hmm… What are the opinions of the other Regents? Why have they refused the aid for the Capital?" She asked, taking a strand of

her lily hair on her hands.

I cough, nodding her way before speaking up.

"We've received their answers moments ago, they were partly negative, milady." She gestures me to continue. "It seems they have only refused the TSFs participation, milady." Taking a moment to breathe in, as she focused on me and those kind eyes turned most abrasive, I gulped to avoid any stuttering to clog my report. "Artillery and infantry units have been allowed to guard the last defense line in the perimeter of the Capital, to avoid a debacle with their HC Council. Of course, their own chain of command is in an uproar after those traitorous Americans decided to run away." Accursed viles rising through my throat, I cough as I place a hand on my chest to dispel such bindings from my report. "As such, while they are restructuring their own organization, there is still ample pressure coming from them to take over the operation."

"Have they not realized their words holds no weight in this land no more?" Seiten-sama asked, a hand in those coffee colored horns on the side of his head.

"Be as it may, the UN can, and most assuredly will, punish the Empire should we refuse their deployment." Kaori-san says, nodding my way. "Despite the agreements with some men from the IJA, the UN does not seem to believe our armies to be able to halt this invasion on their own."

"Which is a valid concern." Masahide said, as the only one who could maintain his habitual tone, seeming unaffected by this tension. "Should the Capital fall, no one knows the damage that would inflict in our people. And should we triumph… those who are against their intervention might spread wings towards their bases."

"That is something we cannot allow." Yohime-sama agreed, subduing a frown. "Raiko, Kaori, I assume some sort of proposition for shared command has been issued?"

"Indeed, milady." Kaori-san answered, her brows arching down. "As Yuuhi-sama desired, we have proceeded with the negotiations with a peaceful outcome in mind. However, many are those who do not wish to cooperate with the UN. Also, their insistence in taking over the operation, despite their clear desire to employ nuclear warheads, has been doing us no favors."

"As sickening as it is, we are left with no choice but to continue with this farce of cooperation despite their now obvious intent. And in turn, that clear stance has only worsened the atmosphere surrounding the other Regent Houses' forces." For if we call them out in their true intentions, they shall use their laws to take over our nation. With the excuse of 'safeguarding' the wishes of humanity.

Pah! The wishes of the Americans, they should say. I know it is futile to remain in such obstinacy, yet I cannot simply entrust those foreigners with the duty that is guarding our Capital.

"Raiko, please. I believe Yuuhi made her wishes clear already-" Yohime-sama narrowed her eyes, I bowed in apology. "If His Highness requires our aid, then we should allow the UN's TSF units to be part of the Defense of Osaka. That being said, we shall not allow them to take control of our units, not unless they desist in their desire to employ the warheads. Daizaburou-sama, may I ask you to handle the discussions with their representatives?"

"But of course, milady." He bows down, quickly returning himself upright. "I assume Yuuhi-sama shall be relaying the order before dusk?"

"Yes, I shall inform her so that she can form her own report. Please keep your comms open, she might require your assistance to reach a final conclusion." He nods, she smiles. "Now then, to ascertain nothing is out of order. Daizaburou-sama and Gekka shall be handling the UN in these days." Both of them nod. "Seiten and Kaori will be in charge of the joint preparations with the IJA." They also nod. "And finally, Masahide and Raiko shall be overseeing our own fellows' preparations." We nod, and so, she sighs. "Very well, I shan't

take more time from you. Should you require anything, please waste no time in contacting me. May the tailwinds remain in your backs, my fellows." She stands up, we also do and bow to her as she leaves with Mana to attend to the House's defenses and preemptive evacuation efforts.

And once she does, all of us sigh in unison.

"I cannot believe she refuses to evacuate…"

"It is how she is, Raiko." Daizaburou-sama says, folding his arms and nodding. "Our Lady wouldn't abandon her servants, no matter how dire the future seems to be."

"However, should we surrender so easily to these orders, Father?" Gekka asked, a clear trail of hesitation left in her words.

"It is what it is. His Highness has accepted the proposition of the Ikaruga House for this mission, and as such, we should contribute our share to defend our Capital." He then put his hands behind his back and rose his chin, staring down at all of us. As imposing, as stalwart as the tallest mountain. "And I expect you all to keep any sparks quite away from the surface. This is a turning point in the invasion, we cannot risk our disagreements to bring forth failure to this operation."

"Are we truly left with no other choice, Daizaburou-sama?" I ask, twinges of pain reaching my palms as I coiled my hands.

"… We shall gain valuable time once this horde is repelled. For now, we must all come together for this fight. Else…" He breathes in deeply, giving his back to us. "Now, we are all busy. Let us waste no more time." And with no further words, he leaves.

…

I am appalled. Is this all we can do? Bow down to the Ikarugas, cooperate with the UN after what the US has done… Repining of this

is futile, I know. And yet, I cannot seem to be able to rein in my breathing nor my fists.

"Well, we should all be on our way." Seiten-san says, "Let's all remain with our comms open, in case any sudden developments occur."

"Indeed, so should we do." We all nod in agreement to one another. "Well then, godspeed my fellows."

We all salute each other, departing for where we are needed in.

Exiting the meeting room, the ensuing chaos in the hallways was but a cicada's cry in comparison to what bile I had to restrain on myself. Now that I no longer am in Yohime-sama's presence, I am free to bite my lips with gusto, to release the combustion that my eyes had to drown before.

To demand to take over the operation… To wish to make us genuflect in such a way… And for us to be left with no choice but to follow the plans of the Ikaruga House, all thanks to the ineptitude of the Shogun… Such arrogance… Unacceptable!

"Sister, please do not frown so. There is much yet to be done today."

"I am clearly astonished that you aren't displaying any signs of anger, Masahide. Those vermin just ran away, plunging a colossal gash into our strategy, and yet they dare to demand control over our forces!"

"Sigh… Remember that the UN and the US are not one and the same. Also, we weren't present in the meeting where the discussion occurred, and Yohime-sama did say both parties were to blame." He smiles, placing a hand on my shoulder. "Our duty hasn't changed, has it? Be it with the UN or the US, we have only one goal ahead of us."

"I know, I know you speak the truth, however… Why has His Highness decided to not alter the plans, then? Why not evacuate the people?" He closes his eyes and begins to walk again, I follow closely. He rearranges his red dress' neck as his steps began to slow down.

"… It would seem Ikaruga-sama's proposal fed into his pride. And, since they had the backing of the Takatsukasa House, that makes three to two. Considering the Kujo House lost their lands to this invasion, and the damage that is ongoing to the lands of the Saionji House, I do not doubt the Shogun is most anxious to halt this invasion."

"… And is that an excuse for placing the people at risk? They're only shaming their station by displaying such a fragile veneer. To cling onto, to glorify a last stand when we have vast options at hand… Such uselessness, to think we have to cooperate with these sniveling fools…"

"Sigh… Sister, please. After the sacrifice General Makabe did to buy us time to prepare, it was obvious Saionji-sama would favor Ikaruga-sama's views." He then looks back, smiling as he sends a hand to that spike in his forehead. "However, I do not recall ever saying we were submitting to his orders."

"Then, what are you planning to do? Time is against us as of now."

"Well, you heard her wishes. Yohime-sama desires to maintain the peace in the Royal Guard, until the threat is nullified. And we shall abide by her orders."

"However, that would-"

"Yes, we cannot simply remain idly by. Yet, we cannot show our fangs either." He stops, looking out the window.

As I do, seeing the incoming sunshine peering through the clouds, almost timidly so, as if it were painful for it to see the state our House

was in.

Out there, beyond the walls of the Main House, soldiers are assuredly scurrying about, forming trenches and arranging supplies. Support Vehicles filling the roads, preparing our machines, both TSFs, artillery units, and infantry backup for the coming attack. The serenity of our beautiful Kyoto, the peace of our Osaka, tarnished by the stench of oil, the smoke overflowing on the streets as if it were snow during the harshest winter in Hokkaido, no vestige of our beloved peace is left on the streets.

"I heard His Highness was planning to make a grand announcement out of this operation tomorrow, is it true?" I look at him, he nods as he sighs.

"Indeed. Regardless, we have our own set of goals to achieve."

"And… what would your orders be, milord?"

"… There isn't much to do." He smiles, chuckling for a moment. "Nothing more than to go sightseeing."

"Huh? Are you planning on patrolling the city?"

"No, that won't be necessary. We shall simply lay low for now, and prepare for the battle as best as time allows. I require to make some calls, can I leave our fellows in your hands for a moment?"

"Of course! However, are you truly certain you wish us to remain quiet? Why are you resigning yourself to following Ikaruga's lead?"

"… You simply trust in me." He again smiles as he leaves the window, going towards a set of stairs to our left. "Do make sure everybody is ready before I return, in case anything comes up."

"Yes, sir!" I salute him, he sighs when he sees me, and then proceeds to ascend the stairs.

… Sigh. Why would you wish to remain still, Masahide? To go sightseeing… Whatever could you be thinking, and why won't you speak of it with me. Moreover, what has compelled Yohime-sama to remain quiet?

Perhaps is the need to remain united after the news that America has broken the treaty, and they do not wish to instigate any further discussions in the Regency Council. Yet…

… No, if Masahide has chosen this path, I shall trust in him. Focusing on my orders should be my priority.

Returning to our offices, everyone seemed to be, understandably, most preoccupied with our situation. Relaying the orders, our fellows returned to their machines to double check them, making sure they were readied if the need arose shortly.

Sending the batches of deliveries, checking the reports that confirmed the distribution of our supplies and the positions of our men, the clock tickled the minutes away. Sharing mails and directives with my Fudai fellows, it seems the queue of orders has been done already. Now, all I have to do is await the reports in case anything out of order occurs.

Taking a moment to make me some coffee, surveying the mails we had received, I prepared the agenda for the remainder of the day, adjusting it to fit the progress done so far. It does seem as if our true adversary was time as of now. And yet, to not send evacuation orders? Hmph, Ikaruga-dono is far more prideful and arrogant than I was led to believe. I simply cannot understand how Maya manages to serve under him.

The door to the office opens, Masahide enters with a few folders under his arm and his assistant following right behind him.

"How are the preparations coming along, Sister?"

"As fast as we're able. Do I have your agreement to rearrange the patrols and infantry positions?"

"Haha, you would know better than me." He sits down, I hand him a cup filled with coffee. "Saki-san, could you detail the reports to Sister?"

"Yes, Masahide-sama." She gives him a bow, opening the folders. Placing some of her brown hair behind her ear, those yellow amber eyes looked my way as she straightened her black dress.

I nodded at her, slightly narrowing my eyes. I certainly appreciate her devotion to my lord brother, however, by goodness do I not understand why he chose you as his personal assistant. A mere baseborn, being in our personal office as we discuss such grave matters… What have you done to deserve such an honor? Standing stiff, she bows down before speaking up.

"It seems that Daizaburou-sama shall be commanding the troops in the HQ. He won't be deployed to the field during the mission."

"What? Why not send our most experienced leader?"

"Well, there are concerns over his age, after all." Masahide says, placing the cup on the table. "Also, it seems His Highness wishes to promote him, to fill in the spots left by the losses we suffered before."

"I see… Nothing we should concern ourselves over, then." If Daizaburou-sama is chosen as a General, then we shall reap many benefits from that. Even if Yuuhi-sama's relatives aren't in agreement with her wishes. "What else, Saki?"

She nods, turns the page, coughs and yet again plays with her hair, and finally sends a gaze my way as she continues.

"Seiten-sama will take care of the Wolves on the field, Masahide-sama shall lead the Lupines as usual, and it seems that you have

been chosen as the leader of the Chains for the time being, Raiko-sama."

"Eh?! However… I believed the Chains had been wiped out during the last defense operation."

"… Indeed." He takes a sip, his eyes crashing down as shooting stars. "We're just adopting the name. Some of our men that have lost their units shall form a new squadron under you. Precarious as it may be, it is all we could muster in such short notice."

"Please do not burden yourself so. However, how did you convince our superiors to allow me to lead a squadron so suddenly?" No matter what we did, we never managed to convince those hardheaded men to give me a promotion. Truth be told, I was resigned to such achievements.

"Well… The situation has forced their hands."

"So, if I'm not with you, who shall be your second-in-command? Kaori-san will be returning to Arashiyama by dusk, if I'm not wrong."

"Indeed, she won't stay with us. However you should not worry Sister, for Kobayashi and Onda are still with me."

Ugh… Tozamas. Both low ones, even. Why is it that we cannot procure trustworthy Fudais in this faction? To leave our backs to the Tozamas and inductees… What has the Guard come to be?

"So, who will my fellows be?"

"Um, here are the details, Ma'am." Saki hands me the folder, bowing down. I take it from her, giving her the thanks she earned, then handing her a cup so that she can serve herself some coffee.

I open the folder… and feel what fragile veil remained holding my frown melting away.

Picking up the pages, the emblem of the Koubuin House engraved on all pieces, the new formation of the Chain Squadron under the Wolf Battalion with me as the leader, even when they still refuse to promote me.

Sigh… What foolhardy way of being. Had I been married, they would have presented the promotion without delay, I am sure. No matter, focus on what's important.

The marks in the report… I pass over the first pages in quick succession… only to see the majority of the members of the squadron are nothing but inductees. Grr… It is no surprise those fools allowed me to lead this cavalcade of peasants. It is as if I were a peasant leading a squadron of the IJA. Such humiliation…

No. Focus, I have to protect our House. My pride matters not. They shall regret making me a leader, for I shall use this chance to further climb my way to them. And it is a good chance to reform these inductees, to make sure they become loyal to our faction.

"… Are you displeased, Sister?" He asks, leaning forward.

"… I suppose I cannot deny it. Yet, I shan't complain. I won't let this hamper our efforts."

"You still won't recognize the inductees as your fellows?"

"… Forgive me, but I cannot see how you would." I know it has been a long time, and I know some have proved their loyalty to you, as they should, however… I cannot bring myself to place my whole trust in the commoners as you do.

"Sigh… Fine, it shall suffice. I suppose Ichimonji shall be working as your second-in-command, all things considered."

"… Well, at least there is a known face in the squadron."

Reading the profiles, I am pleased to see that at least I recognize most of them. It is disheartening to see only Amanohara has noble blood in the whole squadron, yet I suppose that shall suffice so long as they obey. And Ichimonji is a competent man, despite his origins. In any case, I know all of them are truly skilled, and loyal to us, so I've no reason to repine about-

… Huh?

"… Masahide, who was the one who suggested the members for the formation of this squadron?"

"I was, I chose the members that I believed you would be most comfortable with, that would also convince HQ to assign you as their leader. Whatever is the matter, Sister?" He tilts his head, smiling. Saki seems to quiver as she sees our exchange, choosing to go sit in a corner, as she should. "Surely you are not going to repine about why I placed Takeru-kun under you, are you?"

"But of course I am!" I slam a hand onto the table, unable to rein in my frown. "Whatever are you thinking, placing that baseborn in my-"

"Sister, you do know of his standing, and I won't allow you to speak ill of him." Frowning much, his vocal sheathe began to be emptied.

"W-What? Even if he's recognized as a fellow… he still is-"

"Sigh… He has been doing all he can to be of use to us. What is the problem with having him working with you?"

"Just about everything."

"Oh, please Sister. I assume you have not forgotten the debt we owe him for his aid. He did convince Yuuhi-sama to stay away from the battlefield, and that is something no one other than him could do." Leaning on his palm, he gives me a small smile, that, sadly, I cannot return.

"Utter no further balderdash, you cannot be serious. Why do you continue to support him? What do you even see in that… kid?"

"Well, he surpassed Daizaburou-sama's training along both Mion and Shion, after that incident no less, and he has displayed an excellent aptitude in his piloting training course. And he has been a good fellow to me, more so than many of our noble peers. Clipping his wings is not wise, not when leaving him behind would do no good to anyone."

"… Sigh. I cannot convince you to remove him from the formation?"

"I am the Head of our House, so no, you can't." He chuckles, I groan as I ruffle my hair, the spikes that lay on my sides. "Please don't take it so hard, Sister. I merely believe… he needs to be on the field."

"… Needs to?"

"Yes. And I believe you to be the best limiter to his usual… recklessness. You are the one who knows best how to restrain one's inner wrath, after all. And he, just as you, faces much disdain from our peers."

"… How many times must I tell you that we are not similar? I am a Shinpan, he is a commoner."

"Sister, if Yohime-sama hears you, even I won't be able to shield you from her wrath." Placing a hand on his chin, he stares squarely at me. The low rumbling in his voice allowed me to see it, even if he used our Lady as the deterrent he is truly adusted at me.

"… Why must you insist in comparing me to that baseborn?" I look down, feeling as if under that frozen waterfall in the mountain where Daizaburou-sama trained us.

All I've done… All my efforts… And you always compare me with him. I do admit my initial views were… mistaken at the time. I recognize he has talent, for he also triumphed in that mountain. And

I do see his loyalty to us, to you more importantly, however… it is an insult to our traditions to simply accept Shirogane as he is now.

"… To accept the way in which he mingles with Yuuhi-sama, to treat him as a fellow despite his lacking manners and meager rrsults, what example will we be setting?"

"… And yet, he has always come with good suggestions to us. And, despite how you treat him, he still finds it in him to be polite to you."

"I am a noble, I deserve the reverence. However, my views of him aside, why send a young child to fight? He has not finished his training as of now, has he?"

I may not favor Shirogane, that is true. That does not equal not seeing his good points. For he truly has aided my lord brother many times, and it is thanks to him that Yuuhi-sama has agreed to not fight. A negative view I may have of him, yet I see no point in sending the boy to his death in this way.

"You see, I merely believe that…" He closes his eyes, leaning back. "For what shall come after this, it is necessary that he fights during this coming battle." No signs of hesitation, his frontal conviction would leave the incoming sunshine in shambles. As usual for him, he grips tightly onto his line, never wavering even when faced with a closed curve. "So, can I leave him in your hands?"

"Sigh… So you say he's necessary? To what end?"

"Please, Sister. You know who he truly is."

"A mere baseborn." I refuse to acknowledge him as anything else. He hasn't done anything to be deserving of the privileges he enjoys.

"… 1st Lieutenant, please do look after your fellows. No matter their origins." He frowns, leaning back.

"… My apologies, milord." I bow to him, yet again feeling a dagger on my neck. "I did not meant to clash against your wishes."

"Then, you'll accept him as your fellow?"

"… Only if he begins to behave."

"… You do know you're being as stubborn as he is, right?" He chuckles as I groan, widening my eyes at the atrocious comparison. "Haha, peace. I was merely jesting."

"Mmgh… I shall try to remain composed. However, if he challenges my authority, I shall remove him from the mission. Is that alright with you?"

"… Yes, that is acceptable. Do try to not spark up a conflict with him."

"I shall not. You made your wishes clear enough, milord. If you deem him necessary… I will make sure he answers to your expectations." He grimaces as he sighs, shaking his head slightly.

"Please do not go overboard with Takeru-kun. Now, I believe you should head to meet your squadron, time is of essence after all. We shall handle the office work from now on."

"Yes, so I shall. Um… Thanks for letting me lead a squadron on my own, milord."

"Please, you always were the most suited for the role. And, for what shall come, it is necessary you gain the recognition." He smiled, yet this time he showed me his teeth as he did.

Something laid buried in his words, that most odd melody that echoes whenever he… asks me to crush someone's fangs.

"… I see. Well then, I'll take my leave here."

Standing up, I salute him. Smiling, he simply waves at me as I leave, as relaxed as always. I nod towards Saki, who stands up and bows

to me before going to Masahide's side.

Walking through the hallways, the Tozamas and Fudais making way for me to pass through once they clearly see the burgundy tint of my dress, I begin to ponder his words, a hand on my chin.

He requires me to finally lead. Despite how reticent he always was to allow me to move on my own. And yet, he placed that accursed boy on my squad. What is the need to further test me so? I have already devoted myself to you, all these years… are they not enough to please you, brother? Why do you harbor such doubts towards me? I only desire to aid you…

Yet, why do you hold him in such high regards? Why must you insist in treating inductees and commoners as fellows? They're already a majority in our force, how many more privileges do you wish to give them? Why should we, members of the Shinpan, have to bow down to…

Sigh… Peace. My wishes matters not. I exist to serve my lord, and his wishes are what I should be focusing on, for they are what shall bring us victory. We have a critical battle coming our way. Precarious and rushed as it might be, there is a vital role for me to play now. The through briefing with the rest of the Koubuin Fellowship is yet to come, however, my very first role as a leader, after losing my project all those years ago… And at such an important time, to boot. Even if most of our army is made out of commoners now, I am still the leader of this squadron.

Relax, and remember the code. There is nothing to fear. Simply trust in your Lady and fellows. Sigh… Within the warrior, fear must not make nest…

"Oh? Good afternoon, Raiko-san!" A voice snaps me out from my inner meditation. Immediately recognizing the unkempt chestnut hair, I could only grimace at his greetings.

"Shirogane, it is Raiko- *sama* to you."

"… Why are you always pissed off at me?" He narrows his eyes, ballooning one cheek. He shakes his head, making his brown and orange trainee dress sway as he does.

"Because your manners are as lacking as always. A Royal Guard should not act as crass as you do."

"Mmgh… My apologies." You do not look apologetic, in the slightest. "So… I was told I could join your squadron, right?"

"Sigh… First, yes, that is the case. Second, where are your manners? Surely you would not be planning to continue to address me in such way."

"Huh? What did I do wrong now?" Widening his eyes, he truly seems flabbergasted.

"You have yet to address me properly, for one."

"… I did use an honorific this time." The nerve! What do they see in you?! "So, um, how can I help out?"

… Well, at least he now seems willing to listen. Stiffly standing before me, he awaits my orders. However… His usual cheer is lacking from his complexion. Abnormally tense, his brows seem to be lowering more and more. How odd. No, on the contrary, it is good to see him react accordingly to the situation.

"Um, Raiko-san?"

"… I was merely pondering something. Also, I said it was Raiko-sama." He groans, I shake my head. "In any case, weren't you ordered to go to the briefing room?"

"No, I was pesteri- I mean, *cough,* offering my help to Seiten-san, and then Masahide-san told me that I could join your team. Yohime-san also gave me her permission a while ago." And you also must

tarnish our Lady with your vulgar manners… "So, after I finished helping out in the kitchen, I came looking for you."

"… So you took valuable time out of his schedule to force yourself into the fight? You even went as far as to inconvenience Yohime-sama? Do you even know what we have on our hands here?!"

"O-Of course I do! But I only wish to help out. Even the Pickles are getting out to fight…" Wringing his hands and locking his gaze with mine, he manages to hold it for a moment.

"I believe you should not refer to them with such a term." I cannot believe it… Why do the Tsukuyomi allow you to do so? After all this time… I am reiterating myself but, what lies within you that they hold so dearly?

"Guh… A-Anyways, I know that… we are in danger. I know that everyone is on edge. But especially because of that I want to lend a hand. So please, let me fight with you." And then, he gives me a deep bow, and remains in that posture.

Hmm… There is a thin line separating bravery from idiocy, that is true. Yet, it seems he isn't blunt enough to not see what's around him.

"So, I take it you shall obey my orders in the field?"

"… Yes, Ma'am."

"Hmm… I assume you shall address me as you should, then?"

"Guh… Can I just use the rank instead?"

"Why must you refuse to use the proper honorific?" I cover my eyes with a hand, unable to restrain a frown from forming.

"… I'm just being friendly with you since we're fellows, but you're always mad at me." Looking slightly to the left, he plucks his lips

while folding his arms. "Also, Masahide-san did tell me to be patient with you."

"Siiigh… Firstly, I assume you do know what you have become part of? This won't be a mere fight. The Capital is at risk here." He looks down, arching his brows, seeming to be biting the inner side of his lips.

"… I know. I want to defend our home, with everyone else. I don't know what I can do… But I believe I can at least be of use with my speed, even if only to deliver supplies to the rest." Hmm… Point taken, that is a simple role he could fulfill.

"I suppose, you have finished your piloting training?"

"Well… Technically, I'm still a trainee…"

"Yet it seems Masahide and Yohime-sama allowed you to deploy with the main force, unlike most other trainees in our faction. Why have you not accepted to be sent with the rest?"

Slowly, he returns my gaze. The fixation, the arching brows, the small quivering in his lips… It is odd, unlike anything I've seen from him all these years.

"… I don't want to run away. I want to help in protecting our home, whatever it is I can do. I don't want to… stand around like during the attack last year."

Losing his smile, a frown began to surface. Yet, what surprised me the most were his eyes. I had believed Masahide to be merely jesting, and yet… that same hollow crest, that same copse collapsing into a sea of smoke, that same all-encompassing tidal wave I see in my reflection after my courting meetings, all that fire… was now within him as well.… It seems Daizaburou-sama trained you well.

"… I want to be there for my fellows. Please, would you accept me in your team?"

He then remains silently awaiting my words, his hands ever so slightly shaking like a humming bird's wings. And yet, there is no hesitation, not a single speck of doubt in his eyes. However… I wonder if his veneer shall endure the flames of a real battle.

"… You do know you might be marching to your death, right?"

"… Y-Yes."

"People will perish, assuredly. We shall be going to the frontlines."

"I-I know."

"And furthermore, all the Royal Guard's best men shall be present. The reputation of the Koubuin House rides on our shoulders."

"Yes, Masahide-san told me that too."

"… Do you still desire to accompany us? I am sure Yuuhi-sama would prefer for you to stay by her side." As much as it makes me sick, to see you mingling with her.

"… I know that… those monsters are coming here. I know what that means." Closing his eyes, biting his lips, his voice was filled to the brim with ripples. "But, precisely because of that is that I wish to fight. I want to prove myself useful, to protect our home together." He looks at me, unfaltering. And even when I narrow my eyes, as if I were seeing something left to rot, he does not flinch. "Inexperienced as I am, I wish to help. Please, would you allow me to be part of your team?" He then bows down again, enduring the silence.

And, no matter how much I wait, he doesn't return himself upright. Could it be that he has finally learned his place? Hmm…

"Hmm. I shall allow you to join me, on one condition."

"Really?!" He immediately bolts up, getting closer, far closer than I'd like, his eyes wide as he smiles, both yet again as shining as the sun. At least motivation isn't something he lacks.

"Shirogane, kindly give me some space."

"Eh? Oh, sorry." He takes a singular step back. Just that. Urgh…

"Sigh… I expect you to follow any and all orders I issue, no matter what they entail. I will not tolerate you speaking out of turn. And you are to address me respectfully, as you should always have done. Now, do you believe yourself able to perform as I require you to?"

"Yeah, I got this Raiko-sama!" Smiling and doing something I believe he refers to as a 'fist pump', he nods twice at me.

"… Sigh. Why must you… No, matters not. You give me your word that you'll do as you're told?"

"Yes, I'll do my best!" He stands upright, giving me a salute. After looking into his eyes for a moment, I return the gesture.

"So, did Masahide mention anything regarding your placement in my squadron?"

"Hm? No, he only told me that he would ask you to let me be part of the fight." Ask me, huh. "He said you would decide if I could fight, and that I had to do what you said."

"Is that so? Why do you think he asked such of me?"

"… Well, since Yuuhi can't fight, you need someone to take her place, right?"

"… That is true." I hadn't pondered that. I wonder, did you force her to stay back so that you could have your chance to shine? How much of your motives are truly honorable? "By the by… I heard you convinced her to remain behind. What compelled such insistence from you?"

…

He didn't answer.

Looking down, he winced as if in pain.

"Shirogane?"

"… I don't want to see her in danger. So… I think she shouldn't fight."

"… Do you think yourself better than her, perchance?" The insolence… How dare he…

"… No, it's not that. It's just…" He scratches his head, looking upwards as his lips twist.

"… And? Whatever is the matter?"

"… Shouldn't we protect her wellbeing? She shouldn't fight, she's too important." Looking away, he furrows his brows.

Is he doubting our capabilities to protect her? The gall… How dare he… Wait, could it be that… Scratching his head and looking up… I see, he was being sincere. He truly does not wish to see harm befall her. I do welcome how she agreed to not participate, yet… It is clear, in those quivering hands, in how his words were swayed into a low tone as he spoke just now. Fear has made nest within him.

"Are you certain you are in the right mindset to partake in this battle? If fear resides in you, it would be for the best that you abstain from joining us."

"Wha… I-I'm not scared!" An instant reaction, an unnatural arching of his shoulders, hands coiled and an abundance of falsehood in his frowning complexion. "I am ready to fight for our House, and protect all of our fellows."

Nothing but a wounded animal's wail, showing his fangs to deter possible hunters from advancing. Yet, the cub has not learned how

to properly manage intimidation.

"… Do not be thinking yourself capable of beguiling me. Do you think yourself able of standing by the side of tried and tested Royal Guards? You, a mere baseborn?"

"Ah… W-Well, I just want to-"

"Speak louder! Do you think yourself worthy of such an honor? To hold the wellbeing of our fellows on your shoulders?"

Closing his eyes, his posture lowering like a flower under a downpour, he bites his lips. Without even hiding his inner turmoil, without even hesitating. Such weakness… Do you not see that such gestures will only make others look down on you? Be resolute, lift your face, and rebuke my words! Let your resolve ignite your passion, and prove to me your devotion to our House! Otherwise… What has them placing such hopes onto your so small shoulders?

"Answer me. Why do you think yourself able enough to stand with us?"

"… I know I'm not the best trainee." Still looking down, his voice sounding as if it were coming from underwater. "Compared to the rest, I'm always lagging behind, and my manners aren't as proper as they should. I barely passed the test at the mountain, too. But… But even so…"

Finally looking my way, his eyes didn't waver. In image of a blade just polished, an armor in complete luster under the sun, he held my gaze as he inhaled through his nose, once more standing in attention.

"I do not wish to lose anything else, simply resigning myself to not being able to do more than just stand back at the last line. It is true, I am not fit to stand by you or Masahide-san now… But I rather be here, for anything you might need me for. So, I once again ask to

you Raiko-sama… Would you allow me the honor of joining your squadron?"

"… And why would I prefer to have you instead of someone as well trained as Yuuhi-sama?"

"Because if she dies our House will face a lot of hardships. But if you lose me… well, you just lose a… baseborn trainee." It seems as if he were biting the inner side of his lower lip once more, yet again looking down in a futile attempt to hide his grimacing. "And thanks to, well, my place here… I can fill her slot without much trouble for anyone. I know I'll probably just get in the way… But… this is all I can do help now."

… I see. He merely desires to safeguard Yuuhi-sama, despite his limits. If we had to call for any reinforcements, with how short staffed we already are, that would indeed be a setback to our plans, no matter how small. It is true that, by using someone who is already in the fellowship, we save that valuable time that would have been sorely wasted negotiating a last minute transfer by merely granting him the opportunity to deploy under an emergency procedure. Furthermore… It is true the rest of the Koubuin family wouldn't mind to send him to his death, so it also would be easy to gain the permission to have him fight.

By placing himself in danger, he protects Yuuhi-sama and saves us the need to look for someone to take the slot she would have to fill. Using himself as a shield, knowing the odds he would have to face.

… I suppose such feelings would be welcomed. If he keeps her so closely in his heart… And, he never was one to lie much. While having a commoner so close to her isn't something I support, if he venerates her as he should… I find no further reason to object.

"… I see." I place a hand on his shoulder, he looks up. "I suppose, you are prepared to work to prove you're worthy of being here in her stead?"

"Of course, Ma'am. I… I truly want to help, I'm ready to fight."

"Then, you claim to be a warrior?" I squint my eyes, bringing my face closer to his. "Are you saying you're resolute enough to allow me to wield you as a blade? To cleave through the adversity until our Empire's enemies lay wasted on the soil?"

"Yes, Ma'am!"

A small, minuscule shiver on his frame. Petrified as if he had gazed right into a medusa. Holding his breath as if under a harsh waterfall. And yet, despite my frown, my unrestrained combustion, he remains still, returning my gaze.

I suppose I could give him the benefit of the doubt. At the very least, his presence shall spare Yuuhi-sama from this battlefield.

"… Very well. I shan't object further." I release him, restoring the much needed space between us. "We are halting the BETA's advance. No one shall breach our city, Shirogane"

"Yes!" He nods, vigor replenished in his stare.

"Good enough. You may join my squad." Smiling widely, he seems to catch himself before he raises a fist towards the ceiling. "We're wasting time. Come, our fellows are waiting."

"Um…" He looks down for a moment, before offering me a handshake. "I know we haven't gotten along well, but let's do our best together, Raiko-sama!"

"… Indeed, for a fruitful battle." I tightly shake his hand, he closes one eye as I do. "Now, let us go."

"… Y-Yes."

"Hm? Is something the matter?"

"No… It's just, Masahide-san wasn't kidding when he said you were stronger than him." He rubs the palm of the hand I shook, brows furrowed.

"… Hmph. It is on you for thinking me weak." And Masahide as well. Both of you should redouble your kendo efforts. Especially you, I still cannot not believe you passed Daizaburou-sama's test to become a Mugen Kidou user. "Now, come along." I hastily walk down the hallway. He follows closely behind.

He seems to be have enough drive, enough to not react against me as he used to do. Yet, I still am opposed to having him sortie. He hasn't finished his training, it is outrageous to send him to battle. Regardless of his own safety… he would compromise my formation, it would be akin to marching with a tickling bomb. He could put us at risk, even after medication is applied to him.

… I wonder how was he even allowed to take part of the mission. Merely insisting wouldn't have been enough. Frustrating and shaming as it is, Yohime-sama cherishes him much and so does Yuuhi-sama. Masahide did say that he thought he was necessary. I look back at him, he raises a brow when I remain staring.

What could you have to do to make him give you his blessing? A commoner you may be, yet you have endured our ways of life. I shan't ignore the efforts you've done, nor the sincere adherence to our faction you harbor, however, why would they allow you to go to the frontlines? And for milord to have chosen me as your limiter, when he would assuredly fare better in the role.

I continue walking, he no longer is stiff or tense. Crude he might be, yet he truly is loyal to us. I suppose… that if he mends his manners, I could begin to consider accepting him as a fellow. However, that leaves a question open. Masahide said Shirogane 'needs to' fight now. In the same way I am required to lead, and while being his very first commander as well. Whatever could be your plan…

Sightseeing, he said. The Capital might be in true peril, yet Masahide is the only one in our faction who hasn't submitted to the dread that is so palpable in the, he wouldn't agree to send the boy to his death only to protect Yuuhi-sama. I cannot see what he is planning.

In any case… I suppose it is up to me to bring out his best potential. Hands are required, and he won't be the only trainee sent to fight, if Kaori-san's report is to be believed.

… Sigh. Well, there isn't much I can infer for now. Let us focus on my first briefing, and then I shall go to meet with my Shinpan fellows.

All I hope is that he truly remains obedient and doesn't give me trouble… or gets himself or another killed.

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*November 22nd. 06:39 AM.*

*(Command Post. Girls' Room.)*

**[Chizuru]**

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I slowly open my eyes, sunlight is coming into our room from the window. It's so rare, how long has it been since I could enjoy the sunlight as I woke up? Sleeping in the top bunk is really nice. I stretch slowly within the sheets. My untied hair is all messy, my back is still stiff from all the things we had to go through.

As I raise from my bunk I see Mitsurugi sitting near the window, looking at the ocean as she stroked her hair that was not done in the usual ponytail yet. I get out of bed and approach her.

"Good morning, Mitsurugi."

"Uwa! Sakaki… Do not surprise me like that." She caressed the top of her head as she looked at me, she clearly just woke up too.

"Sorry, I wasn't trying to scare you. Are you okay? You don't look so good." Considering all we went through I think it possible she could be in much pain, especially after climbing that cliff.

"I am fine. There is no need for you to worry." She brushes her hair to a side, since she always has it on a ponytail she must not be used to having it so close to her face.

"Are you sure? After how much we had to climb yesterday it wouldn't be weird that-"

"Sakaki, I am fine. Please do not worry, I was just… lost in thought." She returns her gaze to the sea. It really looks beautiful.

"It's a really nice sight, right?"

"Indeed. It would be nice if one day all the people of the Empire could enjoy such a beautiful sunrise like this."

"Yes. With some luck we can make it to that day and enjoy a peaceful life too." Like how it was before the BETA, before most of our budget was reallocated to the army. When… I still had you by my side, Mom.

"Peaceful…" Mitsurugi repeated the word a few times as she rested her chin on both palms as she continued to look at the ocean.

I grab my fatigues and start changing. Hopefully we can talk things out with the girls before going for breakfast, I only hope they're willing to listen. I know that convincing them that Shirogane isn't a cold blooded murdered is a tall ordeal, but I must try. I'm sure they'll understand once I tell them he did it to save us.

" *Yaaaawn*… Uuugh… Huh? Chizuru-san?!" Yoroi woke up, and since I was standing next to her bed she saw me as soon as she opened her eyes. Her messy hair pointing in all directions, she sprung upwards in her bed in shock.

"Good morning Yoroi, we made it back yesterday at night."

"Oh, so that's what that was. That's a relief, I thought you wouldn't… Eh? Who are you?" Yoroi's eyes turned wide as she gazed at Mitsurugi. She rubbed them for a while and looked at her again, mouth hanging open.

"Hm? Oh, forgive me. I was lost in thought again. Good morning Yoroi." She smiled at her, but that only made Yoroi's mouth and eyes to widen even further.

"Meiya-san?! But… You look completely different!"

"Yes, it is me. Do I look so different without my hair tied?" Mitsurugi seemed puzzled, resting her face on one of her palms.

"Yeah, you look… more normal, I guess? Your face also looks more relaxed than usual."

"I see. More relaxed, huh?"

"So… You three passed the test?" Yoroi got out of her bed, fixing her hair.

"Yes, it was a hard ordeal but we managed to arrive just in time." I say as I fix my glasses.

"And are you all alright? Did you get hurt?" Her tone shifted as she got into her pants, cracks painted in her complexion.

"Don't worry, we're alright. Mitsurugi got treated when we got back so her bruises should heal up soon. Shirogane also got treated, he's the one that got it the worst but he should be alright."

"What happened to Takeru?"

"He got hit by rubber bullets, twice. And after that he got in a tight fight with one of the chasers. He was the one that spent the longest time on the infirmary."

"Will he be alright?" Yoroi says as she finished getting in her fatigues.

"Of course. He is in no danger." Mitsurugi answers as I put my pants on. "Do not worry Yoroi, he just needs some rest."

"Well, if you say so. Did you know? The food here is delicious! I hope we can eat some more before leaving!" I'm envious of how easily she recovers her smile.

"So quick to change moods as always. Did you three have any troubles during the last part of the test?"

"Man, lemme tell you about the sushi here, it's just the best! Those octopus rolls were like nothing I've ever eaten!" She completely ignored me. Ugh, she never changes.

"Yoroi, please listen to us. We wish to know how-" Mitsurugi also got ignored.

"But the orange juice is totally the highlight here, it's so refreshing! I wish we could have real food back on the base too." Her shoulders drop as she sighs.

"We also ate a bit when we arrived, so did you all have any-" Ignored again, Yoroi listen for once!

"I'm gonna miss the food, really. So anyways, the Instructor gave us a ninety. Can you believe it?!"

"Huh? You all got… Of course, you arrived much earlier than us."

"Tis only natural that you would get such a score. Congratulations, Yoroi. Me and Sakaki scored a seventy." Mitsurugi gives a nod, but then looks down as she rests one hand on the back of her head. Right, we really didn't deserve to score more than him at all.

"Oh, not a bad score! And Takeru?"

"Shirogane scored a sixty five." Mitsurugi folds her arms and answers her. "He took the blame for many mistakes we made, I believe it was quite unfair."

"Eh?! He almost failed it! Why? Hey, why was he blamed?!" I raise my hand at her to calm her down before speaking.

"Don't raise your voice, the Instructor just did what she wanted as usual. Mitsurugi did try to speak up but she didn't listen. The important part is that we all passed." At some point I had started to make circles in the air with one finger. When did I get this weird habit?

"Hmmm… And what about now?"

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"About Takeru. Are you going to keep leaving him out of everything?" I can't blame her. I deserve that evil stare since I was very harsh to him all this time.

"Yoroi, do not look at Sakaki like that. We both had a talk with Shirogane and cleared many misunderstandings we had about him. We no longer see him as an outsider. He's one of us."

"Huh, really now? So, no more hostility? Can we all start, you know, being friendly with him? You're not lying, right?" Mitsurugi sighs as she looks down again.

"Yoroi, as your Squad Leader, it was my fault that things got like this, so don't look at Mitsurugi like that. I won't exclude Shirogane anymore, not because of his skills but because I saw that he is not who I thought he was." Or more like I got my head out of the ground and started to see him and not the whole mess of prejudices that was inside of me.

I knew from the first day that he got someone killed, that he was just like me. But I forgot about… No, I ignored that. I justified myself

saying that he was just a foreigner, that he got involved in that terrorist attack, that the one who died was also a dirty foreigner, that he was going to abandon us like those Americans abandoned Kyoto and all its people. Yet, I was the once who acted like the Americans. I acted like a piece of shit, and I deserve all the blame they throw at me.

Because Shirogane didn't, he had the mental strength to not snap at me. I'm sure he must have felt horrible when he saw us running away, leaving him behind. And yet, he came to our rescue and didn't abandon us, not when I doubted to fight back or when I got stuck in that net. I do not deserve his kindness. I may not be made to lead, I'm sure Mitsurugi would make a better leader than me, Ayamine might have been right all along. Shirogane-kun is too kind for his own good, to forgive me without even screaming at me or punching me once.

… Wait, Shirogane-kun? When did I… Why am I calling him… Huh, I feel like I'm forgetting something here. Did we… No, I never called him like that. Ugh, maybe the food here is making me feel bad. Well, I am exhausted. I'll go back to normal once we're back at the base, I'm sure.

"Yoroi, Sakaki speaks the truth. We do not wish to keep splitting the squad apart. My conduct towards him was most unproper as well, please forgive me for making both you and Tamase uncomfortable all these days." She gets off the chair she was in and bowed to Yoroi, making her flinch and start waving her hands in the air.

"Meiya-san, please don't! You don't have to do that. I mean I'm just… You're… Someone like you shouldn't…"

"I am nothing more than your squadmate. And I troubled you and could have caused the squad to fall apart because of my jealousy. It was my weakness that caused all this, if you must blame someone let me shoulder all of it. Please Yoroi, forgive me."

Mitsurugi's righteousness and sense of honor are met with a shivering Yoroi, whose eyes are back to be white dots as she fumbles her arms in the air.

"Don't say that! You don't have to be like that, just… You promise you won't do that anymore? You won't assume things without speaking with him first? Chizuru-san, you promise too?"

"Of course, as a leader I will use this failure to learn from it. I won't make the same mistake twice."

"I also bow to never judge Ta-… Ahem, Shirogane again." Did Mitsurugi just stutter when she tried to say Shirogane's name?

"Then let's leave this whole thing behind us! Phew, I'm so glad we can all finally-"

" *Groooooaaaannn… Screeeeeech…* "

An otherworldly sound startled us, Ayamine raised from the top bunk she was in. Eyes still closed she opened her mouth wide, letting out another of those howls. Her hair was a mess, it looked like one of those hedgehogs I've seen on some books.

"Kei-san, good morning!"

"… Bad morning." She swayed from side to side as she slowly opened her eyes. Or one actually, her left eye is swollen and she can't open it well. "… Oh, you're here?" She gazed at me, twisting her lips downwards.

I won't react to it. No, I won't. I have to start acting like a leader should, no more of that childish attitude.

"Good morning Ayamine, we arrived yesterday. We managed to pass the CCSE as well."

"… Oh goddammit." What?! What's her problem now?!

"Ayamine, what do you mean by that?"

"What do I mean by… *YAAAAWN* ."

"Cover your mouth when you yawn like that. It's rude."

"Shut it, you're too loud." The nerve! Why do you have to be like this?!

"And what did you mean? Are you dissatisfied that we passed the test?"

"… Kinda." She gives me side glance as she gets out of bed.

"Sakaki, do not start a fight please. We do not need another scolding." Mitsurugi spoke in a soft voice as she was in the middle of doing her ponytail.

"I know, Mitsurugi. I know that I shouldn't. It's just…"

"You okay, Mitsurugi?"

"Hm? Yes, thanks for asking Ayamine. We all made it in one piece. We all got beaten up by the soldiers we had to face, but we are fine. How are you? That eye of yours… Are you alright?"

"I'm good. And Special-kun?"

"He passed as well. He protected me when I was in danger, he's nothing like the Americans. So please don't treat him coldly anymore, he is the reason we made it here. He was there for us when we needed him the most."

"What do you mean, Meiya-san?"

"Eh? Special-kun protected you? But…" Ayamine always listens to Mitsurugi with quite some attention, but when I speak she reverts to her usual self so I'll remain quiet for now and let Mitsurugi do the explaining.

She tells them about how the soldiers chased us, about how Shirogane saved us, about how he had to kill them to stop them from harming her when she was unconscious, how he kept helping us after that and how he didn't abandon us during the second chase when he had the chance.

"All Shirogane did, he did it with us in his mind. He took care of most traps himself, he even helped me many times as we were climbing, he lent me his strength so that I wouldn't fall when I thought I could no longer move. I'm not telling you to change your mind overnight but could you give him another chance?"

"… If you say so." She closes her eyes as she strokes her chin.

"I'm so glad you agreed Kei-san! Miki-san will be very happy to hear these news!" Yoroi beamed at her as Ayamine finished changing into her fatigues.

"Oh right, shouldn't we wake up Tamase?" Mitsurugi said, looking at the bed where the last one was still sleeping as she purred.

"You're right Mitsurugi. Tamase… Tamase wake up." I got to the side of her bed and spoke to her, shaking her shoulder slowly.

"Hmmm… Uughh… *Yaaawn*… W-Whu… Huh?" Her half asleep eyes looked around, her hair was more of a mess than Ayamine's. How does she even get this thing in place every morning?

"Miki-san good morning!" Yoroi also came to her side and greeted her with a charming smile.

" *Yaaaawn*… Uwawha… Morning… *Snore*… *Snore*… Zzz…"

"Is she… still asleep?" Mitsurugi stared at her as she tilted her head.

Tamase looked to be awake, but was still in the bed and her upper body was swaying back and forth slowly with her eyes half open.

"Tamase, are you awake?" I grab and move her shoulder which makes her twitch.

"Huh? Eh? What… Sakaki-san?"

"Yes, that's me. Good morning, are you finally awake?"

"Huh? Yeah, I'm… Eh? Eh? Sakaki-san?! When did you- Mitsurugi-san too?!" Her eyes became white dots too as she made small squeaky sounds as she saw us.

"Good morning Tamase. We arrived yesterday night, we managed to pass the CCSE too."

"Oh, is that so? And… Um… Are you all alright?"

"Yes, Mitsurugi and Shirogane got roughed up quite badly, but we're fine now."

"So you did nothing." Ugh, Ayamine smirks at me as she fixes her hair.

"Ayamine, what was that?"

"You two, stop it. Don't ruin our day of victory. Tamase, we owe you an apology." Mitsurugi bows to her and I follow suit.

"Eh? What's this about?"

"Due to my weakness, I ended up causing you and Yoroi quite some trouble. I didn't meant to make you feel bad, I apologize for how I uncomfortable you must have felt these last weeks. I do not ask you to forgive me now, but please give me a chance to mend my mistakes."

"I also ask you the same. I know I said many harmful things to you, but please give me another chance to prove you that I am worthy of being your leader. Forgive me, Tamase."

"Eh?! Awhawha… No, I mean, yes, no wait… I mean, don't bow like that! So… Um… Can you tell me what happened? Why are you apologizing?"

This time I tell Tamase what happened. Her face resembled that of a cat after hearing lightning roar in the sky, her eyes shrinking and clouding over as if she had seen a ghost behind me as I told her that Shirogane killed some soldiers, and even more when I told her how we were chased.

"It was all thanks to him, really. Without his help we would have failed the test, but we also would have gotten harmed quite gravely." Mitsurugi nods at my words.

"So you're no longer suspicious of him? And what about Shirogane-san? Does he… resent us for leaving him behind?" Ayamine, who was gazing at the ocean, turned to look at us as she heard Tamase's question. Yoroi also had her eyes light up in interest.

"He did say he didn't want to be alone but… If charges are pressed against him we have no proof to prove his innocence. Shirogane will surely be blamed for killing those two soldiers, despite doing so to protect us." I should do something as his Squad Leader, but what can I do? Can I convince them to come with me to speak with the Instructor? I don't know what they think of him now that he killed two soldiers. What if-

"What's up with that shit?!" Ayamine talked suddenly making me jump a little. Her frown was growing by the second.

"What Sakaki meant was that we have no proof to prove we were in danger. The Instructor didn't believe me when I said I was knocked out unconscious, and my words are just that. Empty words without backbone. So even if he is willing to let this offense slide, he… he might be kicked out of the army. Or executed." Mitsurugi closed her eyes as she held her elbows tightly.

"Eh? But… But that's not fair! He… He saved you, and yet he's gonna…" Yoroi trembled as she grabbed her sides quite strongly.

"Of course it's not fair, but it is what it is. We have no proof, so there's not much we can do."

"Hmph, of course you'd say that."

"Ayamine, what do you mean?" I do not like her tone or that side glance she's giving me.

"What else would you say? You used him to get the result you wanted and now you're putting the blame on him to save yourself. Wasn't it your fault that happened? Why didn't you help Mitsurugi fight?"

"Ayamine, stop. Sakaki was-"

"I was also getting beaten up, didn't you hear us?" She raises one hand with her palm facing the upwards before resting it on her chin, looking at me with sharpened eyes.

"And where's the proof? You said she got knocked badly while you were just restrained, isn't that weird?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"She was unconscious, how do we know you weren't cooperating with the soldiers? Where's your proof?" Her eyes drill into me as she takes a step towards me.

"Ayamine, that's rude. Sakaki was also-"

"I was there, I know they don't prove anything but I still have all the bruises I got. Or perhaps you would like to see the cut I got on my right leg when I did try to fight back? Or maybe you could ask Shirogane, since he was the one who saved us? C'mon speak up, what is it now?!"

"… You got a cut on your leg?" Ugh, I'm so done with her! I raise my pants a bit and show her the large cut I got, almost up to the knee.

"Sakaki, when did you… No, why did you say nothing?!" Mitsurugi was outraged.

"I did treat it, but we didn't have enough bandages. Had I used them on my leg we wouldn't have been able to patch you up. Shirogane got harmed on his shoulder and his back so I used most of my bandages on him."

"Huh? Special-kun… on his shoulder…" Ayamine repeated my words with her eyes closed.

"Sakaki, we must go get this treated at once!"

"Mitsurugi, calm down. I already got treated yesterday when we arrived here, after eating. Don't worry, I'm fine now. So, is this proof enough for you Ayamine?"

I know it isn't, I know you were right. I'm a failure as a leader. Dad was right, I'm too emotional to be a soldier. No matter how much I try to hide under a shell, I'm just… I'll never…

"… Sorry."

"Eh?"

"Sorry. I take it back." Ayamine gave me a very small bow, eyes down looking to a side.

Did she just apologize? To me? After I screamed at her?

"Ahem… Then, did that explain all we went through?" Mitsurugi asks them, they all nod.

"So… Ayamine, what happened to your eye?" She pouts and looks away. Hey, I'm just worried you know? We may not get along but you're still my squadmate.

"… I took a hard one to the face."

"Huh?"

"Yeah, that was hard to watch. I never thought you would drop to your knees so easily." Yoroi nodded at her words. Tamase shivered while giving Ayamine a sad look.

"Um… You three, what does that mean?" Mitsurugi asked as a light blush appeared on her face.

"What I said. I got hit by a baton when I was wrestling with those damn soldiers. They could have aimed at my shoulder or the top of my head, but fuck no, they had to go for the eye. It didn't help that the thing was hard and thick as hell. Fucking assholes, shame I couldn't pay them back." It's so weird to see her so openly emotional, cursing like that.

"Luckily Miki-san returned the favor later. She totally saved us back then. You should have seen that slash! Man, just remembering that is making me shiver!" Yoroi hugs her sides as she shakes comically a little, making Tamase blush as she hides part of her face under her blanket.

"Yoroi-san! You promised you wouldn't talk about that!"

"Tamase, can you explain to me exactly what did you do?" Mitsurugi got interested in this and approached them.

"Meiya-san, don't let Miki-san deceive you! When he was grabbing us from behind she was the one who endured the most, she's a real wild one despite her cute looks. And then she went on him so fast. Really, you did him in so hard I thought you were actually Meiya-san for a sec there!"

"Yoroi-san stop it! You're making me feel bad!" She covers her whole face with her sheet.

"Tamase, what did you do? Please, do tell me about this fight." Mitsurugi asked her with stars on her eyes. Tamase gets out from her bed, fidgeting a bit.

"It wasn't so amazing really. I mean yeah, I roughed him up quite badly but just because they wanted to harm us. The women that fought with that man were really rough on me and Yoroi-san, so Ayamine-san had to step in and take both of them at the same time. I just wanted to do something to help." Ayamine got close and petted Tamase softly.

"Those two bitches were too rowdy for my taste. But I got to see the man on his knees, so I'm satisfied. And Tamase here was the one who spotted them and got shit done. Good girl." She gave us a thumbs up as she kept petting her. What… What did these three do?

"So… Exactly what happened?" Mitsurugi asked with clear stars in her eyes.

They tell us of how they got to a bridge and took some time deciding what to do, and then the soldiers found them. Then they struggled, but the soldiers didn't want to just let them go and got aggressive against them. So it wasn't just us, they wanted to harm us. Dad… Did you have anything to do with this?

"That fight with that man was really scary, I was shaking in my boots the whole time. Right, Miki-san?"

"Yeah, I could barely hold my knife at the time. Ayamine-san got really hurt, and it was so scary, I thought we were gonna get so hurt." Tamase hugs her sides as she quivers.

"Damn soldiers." Ayamine threw a punch to the air while frowning.

"So, how was your fight with the soldiers?" Tamase asks us as she also gets out of bed, looking for her uniform.

We tell her of all that happened, with Mitsurugi telling her of what occurred yesterday.

"And after they captured us, they forced us to fight against them. Sakaki was helping me and even then we took quite some time to defeat our opponent. Despite her support, we had to rely on underhanded tactics to defeat her." All of them go 'Whoa' at her words.

"Even with you two fighting together… What about Takeru?" I fix my hair into my usual ponytails as I answer her.

"He dealt with his fight quite nicely if I say so myself. I did saw him get kicked to the ground once, but he seemed to have regained the upper hand at some point."

"Ooh… That's our Shirogane-san for sure." Tamase smiles as she changes into her fatigues.

"Stubborn bastard, that he is." Ayamine, are you insulting or complimenting him?

"Anyways, Shirogane got the worst beating in that fight. And yet he finished before us." We might start our piloting tests, but after taking such a beating I've seen that I need to polish my CQC skill in case it ever becomes necessary. Thankfully, Mitsurugi agreed to lend me a hand with that.

"Hm? Sakaki, how do you know that? Did he not approach us as soon as we finished restraining our opponent? Did he not finish his fight at the same time as us?"

"No, just a while before that I got thrown to the ground, remember? And then I saw him restraining the other one. She surrendered apparently. Though I still don't know why she had to go and stomp on his back like that before, even if she suspected him of having a mask."

"They… Sakaki, what do you mean?" Mitsurugi stares firmly at me. I tell her of what I saw and what Shirogane told me when I asked him about it.

"Maybe they suspected him of being a spy since he came from abroad?" Tamase said timidly as she fixed her hair in place.

"He said the same and insisted that he was fine. Those two girls are really weird that's for sure." I can't stand them. Maybe because they were playing with us?

"Special-kun is suspicious. But what you said is even more, you think they had a story with him?" Ayamine said as she put a patch over her swollen eye.

"We really don't know much about him." And he lost his memory, too. "We should just ask him about it, but yesterday he was really tired. Maybe we should just let this be?" I need to think of his mental health. Shirogane was under a great deal of stress and he will have to face a trial now, we should give him some space.

"Yeah, let's give Takeru a rest for today. We gotta go talk with the Instructor to stop him from being kicked out!" Yoroi proposed with glee. I'm so glad to see you all still think of him as your partner.

"Shirogane-san was always trying to help us, so we have to make it clear that he didn't do anything wrong. Those soldiers did treat us really badly too, so we should talk too!"

"True that. Those three were really weird, and they hurt us badly." Even Ayamine?!

"Good to know we all agree on this, right Mitsurugi?… Mitsurugi?" Her eyes were closed as she was clawing at her elbows for some reason.

"… A story with him? What does that…"

"Meiya-san?"

"Eh? What is it?"

"Mitsurugi, are you alright? You've been lost in thought a lot since you woke up." She brushes her hair off her face and straightens her posture on the chair, crossing her legs.

"Yes, I was just… debating with myself."

"Well, we should all go have a talk with the Instructor. It might be useless, but we gotta try. Wanna go now or after breakfast?"

"I say we go now!" Tamase said as she finished tying her hair.

"Same." Ayamine gave a nod as she put on her boots.

"Me too. The sooner the better." Yoroi said as she also finished putting on her boots.

"Alright, let me put on my boots too and we can be on our way."

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*Same Day. 06:03 AM.*

*(Near the Shore.)*

**[Takeru]**

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And here's another one. With this I have the two seashells I wanted to give them, one for Kasumi and one for Sumika.

I couldn't sleep at all. Worst part is, I know I had kind of a bad dream, but I can't clearly remember what it was. It felt like… I was lost in some sort of hallway, and something real bad was about to happen. Nobody was letting me out for some reason, but then I saw something kinda… sharp. Like some… I dunno, as if someone were

scolding me. And then I woke up, drenched in sweat and groggy as hell.

"Is that all, Shirogane?"

"Yes. Please give these two to Kasumi when you get back to the base. And thanks for everything you've done for me, Instructor." I salute her and she returns the gesture.

"Do not mention it. Forgive me for giving you the news on such a short notice, I got the orders as soon as I woke up. Well, you're ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be. Let's go." We make our way to the helicopter that had just arrived.

I'll be going back to the base alone to be interrogated, and probably punished, for the murders I committed. I may end up getting kicked out of the army, Sensei might not be able to cover me this time. All I give her is trouble, no matter what I do. Why do I always screw things up? No, I can't have one loop in peace without some horrible accident sending everything to hell.

Takamura must be on the base already, so Tsukuyomi-san will start being hostile to me if I make it out from this. Those two Tsukuyomis must have surely reported my killing spree to Maya-san, or worse, to Yuuhi, so I can kiss my safety goodbye. Just when I started getting along with the girls. Universal middle fingering at it's best, this is one big mess. Well, what did I expect? You can't spell wreckage without AGE.

I had a brief talk with Sensei a few minutes ago. Apparently she got a call yesterday from someone important, she didn't mention who, that requested her to take me off the army. She was cold and went straight to business, so I'm sure she's under quite a lot of pressure. Considering my encounter with the Tsukuyomis I bet that someone was Yuuhi. That purple bitch, I'm sure she's threatening Sensei. Do as I say or I'll stop supporting Alt. IV or something along those lines.

But I got into this mess and I'll deal with it alone. Worst case I kill myself and see if I get another chance. If I don't, at least I'll stop creating negative causal data.

All because I got caught by those two… Fucking Royal Guards, not only you ruined this world's Takeru's life, you also want mine as well. This is a clear case of Takerucide, not that anyone cares about it here. As soon as the Shogun brands me as a traitor the girls will again start treating me like shit. Or worse. Even if I live, what can I do in this situation? I can't save this world alone. I'm no hero.

This is all Yuuhi's fault. She's the head of the Empire, she's the head of the Royal Guard and going by the words of the Tsukuyomis she's the one that wants me dead. I know that this world's me wasn't a bad guy, his feelings are similar to mine. He just wanted to live in peace, but you all didn't let him. He also was probably branded a traitor before dying. That was two years ago, just when Yuuhi became the Shogun. She's clearly the biggest enemy I have in this world no matter how many times I loop. As soon as she learns about me she'll come for my head no matter what I do.

If only I hadn't met those damn overgrown pickles… Pickles? Who am I talking about? The Tsukuyomis? I mean, if they let their hair loose… Since it's green one could call them pickles.

"Pfft!" Ahahaha… Is this one of his memories? So he also had a weird taste for lame jokes, just like me. The Pickle Cousins, huh? That sounds so fitting for some reason.

The door to the helicopter opens, two MP come down from it and restrain my hands. I do not resist, I don't want to make more enemies. I'm here to help, even if I'm spit on the face. My world is on the line here, I have to endure this.

I still don't know if I can trust in Sensei. First she doesn't tell me of the chasers, now she sends for me to be interrogated without giving me any sort of reassurance. I know she can't let anything get in the way of her plan, but I thought we could trust each other. She better

have a good explanation for this. I need to get a clear answer from her about this, either to devise a new path forward or as key intel for when I have to loop back.

I don't care what is coming after me, be it the UN or the Shogunate, I'll cleave through you. I have my world and his world to protect, as the sword that smites evil. Because he was alone, just like me. And nobody heard his screams for help.

I'll do all I can. Even if I'm met with another disaster. I ride the copter, the Instructor gives me one last salute before the door is closed. The chopper takes off.

I close my eyes. There is nothing to be done now. No hard feelings, no regrets. All I can do is stop being so negative, to cut my losses as best as I can. I never thought that marching to a sure death would feel so hollow, so meaningless.

Just when we had got to understand each other… Just when I thought I could have just a few days in peace… I want to rest. I want my peace back.

But I need allies if I want to reach my goal. And without Sensei, there's no way my plan will work. I may be kicked out of the UN, the Shogunate is after my head…

I do have some cards left to play… But if Sensei doesn't want me on her side because I'm more trouble than I'm worth… I may need to start looking for a new ally when I get the chance. But first, I gotta make sure I stay on the base, or alive for that matter, until I can see the 00 Unit being activated and how the second theory works in action.

I don't think that threatening them will do me much good in this situation. What can I do to convince them to not kick me out?

# Into the Undercurrents

## Chapter 25: Into the Undercurrents

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*November 22nd. 0 7:23 PM.*

*(Yokohama Base. Interrogation Room.)*

**[Takeru]**

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"Please take a seat, Cadet Shirogane."

I'll be damned. I can't believe this is happening. Kawazoe-san, my old PE teacher, is apparently a Major in the IJA and Mooroka-san, the headmaster of Hakuryo High, is some sort of secretary in the UN. Ugh, this does not look good. I know how these two do things, I still remember how many times I got called to the detention office back in school.

Zoe-san… No, Major Kawazoe stares at me with knives in his eyes, crossing his arms on his chest. Unlike the Zoe-san of my world he has a really big scar on the right side of his face going from his eye to his forehead.

"Sit down already!" Sigh, his attitude hasn't changed though.

I sit down slowly, my hands are still restrained.

I didn't get a chance to speak with anyone when I arrived here, they brought me to this room immediately. Sensei and Kasumi were nowhere to be found when I got back, though that's for the best maybe. Last thing they need is to get involved with me right now. C'mon Takeru, let's roll that dice. No intimidating them, no blackmailing them. I know I won't be able to dodge the blame but I gotta stay here. And I have an idea of how I can do that. Even if they

throw the 'no proof' card like the Instructor did. I need to make them say it outright and clearly, that I'm getting kicked out. Only then my plan will work. Or so I hope.

"I suppose you already know the reason why you have been brought here, Cadet?" Mooroka-san speaks in his usual slow, uninterested tone as he takes a sip from his tea.

"Yes, sir. Because of my actions against members of the chaser squad that took part of the CCSE, correct?"

"Indeed. But before that let us ask you a few questions, is that alright?"

"Of course, sir."

"Well then, Cadet Shirogane, is it true that you were stationed at Yukon for two years?"

"Yes, sir." So they don't believe my cover… Go figure.

"Can you tell us the name of the squad you were part of?"

"It was the Daedalus Squad, sir. My callsign was Daedalus Seven." Major Zoe seems displeased about my answer. I don't know if they knew anyone from Yukon, but at this point I just gotta keep faking it.

"Oh? So you were part of the Daedalus Squad, huh? Give us some details on your training regime."

"That's classified, Major." And here it comes, Zoe-san's patented loud screams from hell. He gets up from his chair, moves to the side of the table and slams it with his palm. So he's the same here, huh? He has no chill.

"Huh?! What was that?! Classified my ass, you're being questioned here! You don't need to talk about confidential stuff, you retarded piece of shit! We're asking you for some routines, schedules, tangible things that are commonplace in a training program." My

ears hurt just from hearing him, can't we send him to scream at the BETA? I'm sure they'll get so scared they'll fly off the planet. Or the solar system.

"I was forbidden from speaking about my time in Yukon by Vice Commander Kouzuki, so I cannot comply to your order, sir."

"If that's the case then, take a look at this." Mooroka-san put a paper in front of me. A declaration from High Command?

"What is this?"

"Ugh, this is why I hate dealing with idiots like you. This is an order from High Command, to you Cadet Shirogane, ordering you to answer all our questions truthfully. If you are found lying… Not only you'll be kicked out of the army, you'll also be taken to have a more… through questioning session." The Major licks his lips as he makes his knuckles crack.

"Please Major, there is no need for such hostility. Cadet Shirogane, can you tell us about your training regime now?"

Shit, I did not see this coming. I did read up a bit on the Blue Flag and what Prominence did… But will it be enough? Heh, whatever. At this point I'm so done all I can do is smile through it and wait for my chance to strike.

"Well, we did around the same amount of physical training I did here during November. The schedules were more tight, we barely had free time. Our shooting and sparring sessions were mixed with different fighting methods from all around the world. The lectures were the same as here."

"Aren't you being very vague, Cadet. What is it? Thinking up some excuses? Huh?!" Sigh… God, what are your vocal chords made of? Steel? Are you related to a certain red haired attorney, by any chance?

"Major, please. Let's move on to the next question, you could not take part of the CCSE with your squad, why was that?" Mooroka-san's ears must also be made of steel or diamond. He's just there sipping his tea like nothing's wrong here.

"I got into an accident with someone from the Russian side of Yukon. That got me a penalty, and my punishment was to not be part of the CCSE."

"Hmm… Yes, there were many incidents with the Soviets during this year. When did this happen? What did you do?"

… Think, anything will do. What did I… Wait, I did get into an 'accident' during my past loops. Let's use that to spew more half truths. But…

"Speak up! What did you do?! When did this 'accident' happen?!"

They're onto me, I think they know I'm lying. I'm screwed, doesn't matter how I lie, if they have a database about these incidents… Deep breaths, I can do this. I'll just spell more half truths and keep going. After all… I'll probably have to reset this loop anyways.

"I hit a 2nd Lieutenant, some of us got lost as we were walking around and then some Soviet soldiers spotted us as we were trying to go back to base. We tried to speak with them in English, to ask for directions, but they started screaming at us, trying to detain us." I got punched by the gray haired soldier during the past loops, so let's just reverse that and say that I did it. That should work. "I couldn't stand seeing that, so I punched one guy so hard I knocked him out, and we ran away. After we got back to base and notified this to my Instructor, I was sent to the detention barracks. I was told the incident didn't escalate because it happened in the border of both camps. However, since I did something very stupid I was punished accordingly. Is that clear enough for you?"

"Don't talk back, you bastard!"

"Major." Mooroka-san glares at the him as he takes another sip of tea. "That was clear enough, Cadet. Now let's move onto the main topic." Gulping what clogged my mouth, feeling again a cold shiver down my back at the slow narrowing of his eyes, my stomach coated itself for the coming cross examination. "You assaulted 2nd Lt. Sora Zanama, breaking her arm. She will need surgery to cure the wound you inflicted on her. Care to explain what happened?"

"I was under a great deal of stress during-"

"Don't put any excuses! Say what you did!" And of course, he keeps shouting, veins pouring into his widening eyes as if someone just found an oil reserve, seeming to be just about to pop from his face.

"Major, stop interrupting him. Please, continue." He's completely chill, though. As if the screams didn't affect him at all.

"I was under a lot of pressure, they had aimed at my face with a gun when they chased after me. We were not notified of their involvement, so I doubted their words. That woman kept trying to harm me gravely, she kept aiming at my wounded shoulder. During one of those struggles, when she tried to smack my head with her baton, I grabbed her arm and bent it, to make sure she would stop attacking me."

Grimacing, all the plating in my stomach begins to melt from inside, again feeling as if I had acid eating me up from within. Gulping again to try to ease up the burning sensation on the back of my throat, I veer my eyes from theirs for a sec.

… Actually, to be perfectly honest, I don't know what came over me at the time. Saying that I was enraged is an understatement. I never… thought myself able to do something like that, to trespass that limit of violence. The same for what came after that. I know that, when shit hits the fan, I will be forced to retaliate with full force, and yet… Licking the inner side of my teeth, I can't really say my hand was forced to that extreme. I could have incapacitated them, as I did to the red head at the end.

But I didn't. I killed them, barely hesitating. And at the end… All I could think of was that I *had* to kill them all, just to make sure nothing went wrong. I wasn't even thinking on the consequences after the CCSE.

I wonder, was that his fury? Did this world's me go through something similar, perhaps? And that triggered a leak of his heaviest info into me due to my strong negative emotions at the time?

If so… and considering what I heard before… of how *they* made him a monster…

"So you consciously tried to break her arm?" He takes out a small notepad and starts writing something on it.

Taking a second to cough and refocus on the matter at hand, returning their stares, my mind burrows a poker face from Sensei, to hide the disquiet that came from what I was thinking about.

"… As I said, I was under stress. I probably was affected by a strong violent emotion when she attacked me. I… I truly don't know what came over me." If I admit I did it consciously it's all over.

"Hmm… Why did you not knock out Captain Ryoutarou Nanase?"

"I had no need to do so, he had already surrendered. He was not a threat to me anymore." That is not a lie.

"Fair enough. Then let's move on, when you found the rest of the Wasp Squad, what motivated you to kill them?"

"… When I spotted them they were kicking my squadmates vigorously. I thought about scaring them or shooting at their feet, but then I noticed one of them was unconscious. When I saw that-"

"Wait, unconscious?" Their expressions get tense, alert, hostile as if the 991 had just blasted on the speakers. Mooroka-san is narrowing

his eyes as he takes some more notes, the Major's hands are tightening onto his forearms.

"Yes, sir. Cadet Mitsurugi was unconscious when I found them. She was not reacting to the kicks, not even those that were aimed at her head."

**BAM!**

Pain spreads through my face as Major Zoe punched me, way too fast in his motion for me to even brace for the attack. Damn bastard… so this was their plan all along. They have no intention of listening to me. Well, as expected.

"Shut your fucking mouth, you son of a bitch! There's no way that's true!"

"Major! I will not tolerate another outburst."

"However, sir, he's clearly lying. I knew those guys, they were good people. They would never harm anyone like that. This damn foreigner is lying through his teeth, soiling the honor of my comrades!"

Heh… No wonder those bastards did what they did, with you backing them up from the shadows. *This place… The UN… This Empire… is rotten.*

"Even so, you have no right to harm him. This is an interrogation, do not take actions that will bring shame to the IJA." Zoe-san grimaces and, after sending another glare my way, returns to his chair.

"… Sir, I am not lying. They were kicking her while she was unconscious."

"Then, where is your proof Cadet?" Leaning forward while readying his notepad, he stared back at me, right in the eye.

Oh shit, here we go. Can't say I didn't see this coming. Half way there, just some more words and I'll have 'em where I want 'em.

"How am I supposed to prove something like that?"

"The burden of proof lies with you, you claimed that they were harming Cadet Mitsurugi. I now am asking you to present proof to back such a statement." He you sound just like Yuuko-sensei.

He also ruffles his hair, that uninterested gaze and tone are really similar. I think he was Sensei's Sensei back in my world so maybe they have a similar relation here as well.

Regardless, he's a son of a bitch. What can I say to prove that?! How am I even-… No, don't lose it. There is something I can do to keep the flow going.

"While I have no proof myself, you can question the gray haired soldier and the woman named Ruri. They were the ones that were kicking them more strongly." Major Zoe stared blades at me again, but managed to stop himself before he shouted.

"I see. So you have no proof, huh? Then, you just killed them because you felt like it?"

"I never said that, sir. Why don't you interrogate them about this?"

"Because you cannot prove that your squadmates were in any danger and we already received the Wasps' report, and in it they painted a very different situation to the one you describe. Your actions have no justification, it looks like you're trying to shift the blame onto someone else. And before you ask, your squadmates cannot testify on this matter since they're involved in this too. We can't count on their impartiality." And then, he drinks some more tea.

Of course, they can't admit that they actually harmed Meiya. That would be getting in a fight with the Shogun, so they have to keep that

from reaching the light. I thought this would happen, so I'm on the right track for now.

"Then, if there were no witnesses, how can you determine what happened?"

"Because you killed two people unnecessarily and harmed gravely three another three, while the Wasps did no such harm to the people you say they harmed. We received no report about these injuries Cadet Mitsurugi should have sustained according to you, and Cadet Sakaki was also unscathed according to the report Instructor Jinguuji sent us."

… So Marimo-chan really took their side, huh?… No, don't be an idiot. She's not Marimo-chan. She's someone else. Just like during my first loop, I know nothing about these people. Chances are, she's also another mad loyalist who hates foreigners.… She did push me around a lot during the trainings, and not even once did she try to stop the girls when they were being pricks to me. Yeah… I should have seen this coming.

… I already knew they were different. They're not my comrades. I'm an outsider from their point of view. Sigh… I'll just… focus on my own goals, and try to make peace with them. That's all… all I can do. They're… gone. They're different… and with all that has happened thus far, it's obvious how they see me.

Mooroka-san coughs after noting something down, then taps his glasses as he speaks up again.

"Also, our soldiers have more credibility than you. They have served our nation for years while you were in America. In this situation, who do you think we will believe?"

So basically I'm screwed because I acted first? I had to wait until they got a broken bone? Until they died? What the hell is wrong with this shit?! *The UN really is a shithole, if this is how they operate.*

"… It was not an unnecessary action, they still committed abuse against-"

"Cadet Shirogane, you have no proof to back up your claims. Since we need to ascertain whether this outburst is an exception or something you do regularly, can you tell us of your life before enlisting? About your friends or family?"

Ugh, this is going how they want it to go. And I can't speak up without Zoe snapping at me again. Gotta find an opening somehow. But so far so good, if this keeps up I'll be kicked out. Just a little more…

"I do not remember any of it, sir. I don't know where my parents are, or even if they're still alive." He again notes that down in his little notepad.

"Oh, really? So… We don't know who you are, and you have no one to vouch for you. That's such a shame." Your bored tone hints otherwise. "Well then, do you have any contacts left in America?"

"No, sir."

"Hmm… Alright, let's leave that topic behind. Next question, why did you force your squad to separate?" He entwines his fingers and narrows his eyes at me.

"Huh? I did no such thing, sir."

"Then why was your squad split during the CCSE?"

"We had to separate when the chasers appeared. Three had crossed the river and shot down the tree that we had tied the rope to. Mitsurugi and Sakaki ran away after that, leaving me behind."

"Isn't that most odd, right Major?"

"Indeed, why would they abandon one of their comrades?" They narrow their eyes at me, they have already decided how this is

gonna end.

"They probably didn't see me as their comrade at the time, for them I was a foreigner that was going to betray them at some point. That's why they left me behind." Despite telling the truth this time they don't seem to believe me. Mooroka-san shakes his head slowly while Zoe-san is tightening his fists.

"Hmph, to think you'd try to taint the honor of your squadmates. Makes me sick." Major Zoe looked like he was smelling a corpse.

"Cadet Shirogane, let me be frank with you. As soon as the report from Captain Nanase reached High Command, your punishment had already been decided. The possibility of executing you was what was being debated on."

Well shit, that escalated quickly. If they do want me dead I'm screwed.

"However, the fact that you then teamed up with your comrades and somehow managed to finish the CCSE in time was a very impressive feat. The short but concise report from the volunteers from the Guard showed us that your talents were perhaps more impressive than we thought."

The report from the Pickles, huh? Going by how they were glaring at me I was sure their words would have been hostile towards me. Mion was back to the lightless, hawkish eyes after all. They must have reported my identity somehow and then confirmed that 'I' am dead. But then, why did they give a good report on me instead of contacting the authorities? Or maybe…

"However, we lost five surface pilots because of you." He drinks some tea, taking a breath before continuing. "There is no feasible way in which you can make amends for such an offense, no matter what punishment is given to you. And you have no proof to back up your claims, you have no one to vouch for your conduct. Given the answers you've given us, and the answers we received from the

Wasp Squad, I have reached the conclusion that you were conscious of your actions and decided to kill knowing what that entailed. You could have harmed their legs, but instead you chose to kill. We also could find no one who knew about you in Yukon, though it is possible they all died during the Incident. Sadly, we have no idea who you are or what was your conduct like before, so we must act with our safety in mind. I'm sorry, but we have decided to take you off the UN army. You will be deported to America shortly."

Yes, F-ing finally. Let's push some more buttons, just to make sure.

"… And there is no way for me to prove that I'm not some psychotic murderer as you seem to think? Seems to me like you're just rushing the verdict in favor of the chasers, for some reason."

"I told you to not talk back!" In a flash he gets up from his chair and comes at me, fists tightened. I tense up, bracing for the coming hits.

**THWACK!**

**BAM!**

**POW!**

" *Cough… Cough…* " That son of a bitch… There was no need… to beat me up like that… *Damn corrupt bastard, even the IJA is full of shit, it seems.*

"Major, that is more than enough. Cadet Shirogane, during your short stay in this base you had numerous fights with your squad. I was told you were seen twice arguing with Cadet Mitsurugi on the days after the Niigata Invasion, is that true?"

"How… Yes sir, that's true." Shit, that's coming out now of all times?!

"After you kept fighting with her, despite her strong resemblance to Her Highness, you want me to believe you went to her rescue like

some sort of hero?" He frowns as he adjust his glasses. Sigh… Hero, huh?

"I'm no hero. If I see a comrade in danger, even if they're someone I don't get along with, I'll do all I can to help them." Returning their glare head on, holding it without doubt, since this is not a lie. But my gaze is lost as he closes his eyes and shakes his head again.

"All I care about is the truth, and all I see in you is someone with no credibility whatsoever. Cadet Shirogane, your skills might be truly something else but your attitude leaves much to be desired. You may find greener pastures in the US Army, I do not wish to see such a promising soldier either dead or in prison for the rest of his life. Be grateful you will get out alive, many were asking to make an example out of you."… Checkmate.

"… So that's how it is, huh? If you had already made the decision you should have said so from the start, would have saved us all half an hour of our lives."

I see them tense up, Major Zoe was about to snap at me again but Mooroka-san waved at him. He entwines his fingers like Yuuko-sensei does and leans forward.

"I simply wanted to make sure we were making the right choice. You have many great skills, if we could find someone who could vouch for you and prove to us that you are not a violent element, I would have considered speaking with HC to revise their decision. Alas, that ship seems to have sailed."

"If that's what you wanted, why do you refuse to ask about what happened to my squad?"

"I said no backtalk! You son of bitch, who do you think you're talking to?!"

"Major Kawazoe, for the last time, remain quiet. You're here as a security measure, I am the one that makes the questions here.

Cadet, I believe I already told you why we won't talk with your squad." Alright, that bridge is burned. Just some more pushes, I'm almost there…

"I'm just telling you that if you do not listen to all the involved parties you cannot make a fair judgment. Why do you listen to the Wasp Squad but do not try to hear what my squad has to say? Our words as are important as theirs, and you also can't be sure that they're not lying and covering each other's backs." Zoe-san's eyes flare up, storming up from his chair, slowly stomping his way towards me. If I gotta endure some more punches, let 'em come.

"You little shit… You haven't even got into a cockpit yet and you're so cocky?! You're nothing more than a proud American trainee! You'll pay for insulting my-"

"Major Kawazoe, please step outside." Tapping his glasses, he sends a firm, unwavering stare towards him, which makes him grimace, twisting the scar on his face.

"Huh? Secretary… I didn't…"

"Step outside, now." Mooroka-san glares at him, and slowly and with heavy steps Zoe-san gets out of the room, sending a fire blast at me when our gazes met.

Then, after the door was slammed shut, he finishes his tea slowly and without hurry, as if unaffected by what just happened. After setting the cup back at the table, he returns another bored gaze at me.

"Cadet Shirogane, I don't know what you think being a soldier entails, but I can tell you won't be a very good surface pilot."

"What?!" That was rude. I'm better than half of the crew here, at least.

"You have no sense of responsibility, continuously act on emotion, remain constantly creating discord on your squad. Your answers are full of defiance, despite what you did. I don't see you being remorseful about your acts at all. Even if you managed to pass the test, even if you became an average pilot, you would never be able to fulfill your role with that attitude. You need to mature much before you can back up your words."

What do you know about me, anyways? All I've gone through… All I've had to endure… *You're just a fucking old wormbag. What the fuck do you know about me, about all I had to do until now?!*

… No, calm down. Can't snap here. Filling my lungs and exhaling the acid through my nose, leaning back on the chair, my eyes again clash against his.

"We still don't know that. And I did cooperate with my squadmates when we got together again. I'm not-"

"You have no idea what piloting is like, you've never been inside a cockpit, you may have fought against the BETA but doing so in a tank is completely different than piloting a TSF. And I don't believe a single bit that excuse you blurted out a while ago. Someone as noble as Cadet Mitsurugi would never stain her honor running away from a fight, Cadet Sakaki is such a dedicated leader I don't see her leaving a comrade to his misery. But you, a foreigner that only brings problems to his squad with his inflated ego? I can see you easily sparking a discussion before that made them resent you."

This is going nowhere. Nothing I say is getting through him. If he doesn't listen to me, to my squad, and doesn't want anything to do with me anymore…

That means I have him where I wanted him. And I even got Zoe-san out of the picture. Well, let's see if my gamble works.

I know the UN is in dire need for some help, if the situation continues going down like this, the relations with the Empire will most certainly

crumble, especially if word gets out about how they harmed Meiya. And I just happen to have a pair of things that can help them with that.

You want me to show you results? That I'm not just a know-it-all teenager that actually doesn't know anything? You want me to show you how I can contribute to the UN? Oh, I'mma do it. And then I'm gonna turn around, follow your orders, let you deport me, and I'll see your face as you lose this one-in-a-lifetime chance. Let's see if you let me leave. *Let's see how you react when you see that you don't have the back to refuse my terms, old wormbag.*

"… There is one thing I want to confirm before we end this questioning, sir."

"What is it?" He was already stuffing his notepad inside his suit, hurrying to get our of here.

"Since I'm leaving this base, I can take with me all of my possessions, right?"

"Of course, we are not so petty to keep your belongings from you."

"Does that include the patents of my inventions?"

"… What are you talking about?" He brings one finger to his glasses. Hehehe, gotcha. I'll have to thank Sensei for her gesture later. Assuming she wants me here after all this, that is.

"During my stay here I mentioned to the XO about a pet project I had. They're two training terminals that I designed to help Cadets all over the world. The MMTS and the WMTS, those are their names. Since I'm the inventor the patent belongs to me, but we still haven't applied for a trial for mass production, so if I leave-"

"The machines leave with you? Yes, I'm aware of the laws for such developments. Let me see what the database says." He takes out a

PDA and starts searching. Stroking his chin, he remains silent for a few minutes.

I can see his eyes twitch, no way in hell they would let these things leave their grasp, they're too valuable. So they will either reconsider my punishment in exchange of me selling the patent to the UN, or they'll kill me to leave no one to claim ownership of the consoles. Either way I win, the second option is actually the better one right now, ironically. Resetting this mad world would be so much easier than to keep bashing my head against the wall trying to make things right with all of you. *Sadly, I cannot simply resign myself to die at this stage. I lost far too many things to simply allow you all to do as you please with my life as if I were but another pawn.* So, even if it means giving myself a concussion and a gaping wound, I'm gonna keep headbutting myself against this wall, *until the day where I collapse comes.*

"This is… How did you come up with these concepts?" Wow, he seems surprised for real. Dropping the poker face and neutral tone, he couldn't stop blinking fast as he tapped his glasses, as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

"That's my secret. So, even if the UN helped in their development, since there was never an official offer to buy the patent or the production rights from me, if I leave the simulators leave with me. Then I'll take them to America and finish them there. That means that they'll be known as an American invention and shall be distributed first to American Training Schools and then to the rest of the world, assuming they even want to give them away that is." Leaning back on the chair, I stare at him and cross my legs.

"But if you stay, the Empire will get their hands on them first and they will be recognized as a Japanese invention?"

"Yeah, I'm sure we could arrange a trial run or something to give the Empire some exclusivity for a year or two, with the excuse that we are gathering data. The UN will profit from having control of these things, the Empire can have an edge on their trainings and will get

some recognition from it. Hell, if the Empire wants to help in their mass production I'm willing to give them a small cut from the profits. And I get to stay here. Not only you get another surface pilot, but another inventor that catched Vice Commander Kouzuki's attention."

He keeps stroking his chin as he looks at the data that was in his PDA. I honestly have no idea what's in there since I never needed to check the databases to know what they are and do.

"This is surprising, such small devices… And yet, this one's screen is better than that of a Pleiades? This other one can output such clear 3D images? And yet, they seem to be simple in design. Their cost isn't so high, considering what they can do. If we mass produced these simulators and gave them to all training schools in the IJA and the UN that are stationed here… The recognition from these inventions, the profits, the improvements they could bring to our Cadets… And you are willing to share it with us? Is this one of the reasons the Vice Commander scouted you?" You took the bait. *Time to feel the hook slice your cheeks apart.*

"Yes, that's right. I could have stayed in America, but I chose to come back home. I wanted to find out who I was, and even if I didn't, I wanted to help my nation in any way I could. But alas," I give him my most wicked grin, "that ship has already sailed long ago according to your words." He seems to be at a loss as he looks at me.

"But Cadet Shirogane, did you not want to stay here? If you're willing to share these devices with the Empire, I believe HC could-" I don't give him pause and continue to speak on my own.

"I don't want to waste your time anymore, I'm sure you're fed up by now, having to deal with a dirty foreigner like me. I acknowledge my punishment, I'll go immediately to get ready for my departure. Thanks for your honesty Secretary Mooroka. It was a pleasure to serve in the UN's Japanese branch, if only for a month." I stand up and move towards the door. Three… Two…

"Wait. Sit down, Cadet." Heheheh

available for the role they perform at their best, those are some of the teachings this program can convey."

Unlimited Bullshit Works is on fire today, I can't believe the sheer amount of it I'm spewing right now. This is just a game but I'm selling it as this super useful and deep training software. Maybe I should have dedicated myself to be an advertiser or a salesman…

"I never… I never thought such deep teachings could be explained in such a way. And you're telling me you did this on your own?" And he's believing all of it.

Well, last loop everyone kept thinking I was some superhero that was awesome, special, and what not after we announced the XM3. I still remember how crazy Meiya sounded when she confronted me after Marimo-chan's death, saying that I was the squad's pillar of strength.

Yeah right, me of all people. I'm no one's strength pillar, you're all just gullible idiots. I had nothing similar to your resolve, and even now I think I still don't. I'm just fighting for myself, the fight for humanity comes second for me. I mean, I know how pointless most of this is, with how many BETA are out there. Killing one Superior fixes nothing if they can send one or two more a few months after that, or if we start to kill each other again after we deal with the BETA.

… Though, would be better to have them here, even if I had to again carry those expectations around. Beats having to share the air with all these pricks. *What wouldn't I give to see you again, to hear your honest sermons and philosophical advice once more.*

"I had the idea, some sketches and a very rough alpha version of the programs. The XO and all the team that helped me are the real muscle behind these babies." They deserve all the praises and then some, those engineers are godly.

"Even so, you came up with these concepts, these maps, these missions… And the TSF simulators as well, they sound very interesting indeed. To think one could have the same training in such a small machine…"

"… Such a shame the Americans will get their hands on these first, right?" I raise an eyebrow at him while smirking again, he squints his eyes and sighs.

"… It would be a shame indeed. Cadet Shirogane, please stay here. I'll go have a talk with the Vice Commander, I want to see the machines myself. The door will be locked, to avoid the Major from doing anything foolish. I'll be back shortly."

"What about the punishment that was already decided?"

"… If you're deemed worthy we might be able to overlook your offense. There will be consequences, be sure of that. But at the least you'll be able to stay here. I'll be going now."

"Understood." And there he goes.

Yes! Take that! Critical hit, baby!

I ended up bothering Sensei again but it was all I could do. There is one problem with this though, they might kick me out of the army and enlist me as an engineer or something else here. That would be hilarious, honestly.

Sigh… Almost. Too close for comfort. If Sensei hadn't insisted on letting the consoles be under my name I would have been screwed. She told me that she couldn't give me any recognition from the TSF parts or the stealth tech so I should take credit for the consoles. That was honestly a life saver right now, even if I don't understand why she was so pushy about that. Pretty much didn't leave me a say in the matter, classical Sensei style.

Even if I can't fight anymore I only need some more time, just a bit more. At the least enough time to save my world, and after that… I'll cross that bridge when I get there. Here's hoping everything goes well enough. Depending on who the 'someone' that wants me off the army is, I may actually not have a chance. But at least I did all I could with what little I had at hand. Now… I gotta pray the world didn't roll me a one.

…

After a long while the door opens and Mooroka-san enters again. He sits down and, after arranging his glasses, looks at me with quite a bit of his poker mask melted away, speaking now in a slow but clear tone without any lingering spikes.

"Before anything, allow to say that I am throughly impressed by your inventions. They're truly revolutionary machines. However…" I don't like that change in tone a single bit. "I have not the authority to change your sentence. In light of these new discoveries, I'll go have a talk with High Command right now. You'll be escorted to the detention barracks where you'll stay the night. Tomorrow at noon, at the latest, I'll bring you a clear answer regarding your sentence. Allow me to thank you for mentioning these inventions of yours, if you had wanted it you could have stayed quiet and we would have been none the wiser, yet you chose to speak up. I don't know why you wish to stay in this base, but it plays in our favor. I have a ride ready to take me to our HQ near Tokyo, so forgive the fast notification."

"No, it is alright. Thank you for considering revising my situation, sir." I give him a small bow, he taps his glasses making another bored face.

"There is no need, I am only acting on what I think is best for the UN's Japanese branch. Well then, I'll see you tomorrow." He nods at me, I give him another bow, and he leaves.

Once he exited the room, two MP enter the room and get closer.

"Cadet Shirogane, we shall now take you to your cell."

"Roger." And so, with me walking in between them, I leave the room too.

Nothing was said on the way. People kept throwing side glances at me, looking like Sumika when she found Meiya sleeping with me for the first time. Others, though, looked like Tsukuyomi-san during the coup, completely repulsed by my presence.

Getting to the restricted area on B5F, entering the place after the guard opens the gate to the cell, we arrive at where I'll be sleeping. One of them takes my cuffs off while the other the opens my cell. As I turned towards the door, without even giving me a warning, one of them shoves me inside. Quickly catching myself, I manage to not fall down. Closing the door a bit too forcefully, sending me those same overheated gazes of scorn, frowning as if they had found spoiled food in the fridge, they then left without saying anything.

Sigh… What did I expect? *Bastards, all of them. Sons of an eldritch bitch.*

"Back here in the detention barracks, huh?"

Well, I delayed my fate for one day at the least. I can only pray now.

But what if I went to America for real? I wouldn't have to deal with Yuuhi, it would be a completely new experience here. I mean, the Empire hates me, there's no way they would be willing to receive my inventions. They might even go against Sensei if I stay. Sensei did say during our talk this morning that someone asked her to kick me off the army. It was either someone in HC or Yuuhi. And I do need some allies besides Sensei here, in case she betrays me. She could have vouched for me, but didn't. I wonder why…

Guess I should begin to think of possible ways out of here in case the Empire doesn't stop coming after me if I'm left with no choice but to stay in this world to save mine. Wonder what the hell could I do…

How could I do what I gotta do, without screwing Alt. IV but also without making trouble with the Empire?

Well, too hungry to think about that right now. I did what I could against hard odds. They did not care about anything I said just as I expected. I wonder what would happen if I actually talked with Tsukuyomi-san… She would kill me before I get a chance to say hello.

What are the girls doing right now? Heh, they must be glad I disappeared, now that I'm a murderer. Enjoying a good nap on the way here after playing on the beach and eating some quality dinner.

By the way, am I going to get some food? I had something on the way here just as we boarded but I haven't had anything since then. Ugh, I'm hungry. Luckily my hands are free again, having them restrained for so long hurt a lot.

I throw myself on what's supposed to be a bed and close my eyes. How did Sensei take what happened? Is she glad I managed to avoid the worst case? Or was she planning on me being deported? Why didn't she vouch for me? Was she using me as some sort of bait? If I look at it from her cold point of view… I'm just getting in the way. I'm a hazard to Alt. IV at this point, given how much trouble I'm causing.

I hear someone walking in the distance, is someone coming to see me? Who could it be? Oh, maybe Kasumi is coming to-

The person I see is one I was not expecting, one I did not want to see.

"Good evening, Cadet."

"Good evening, 1st Lieutenant." Tsukuyomi-san was here, with her old scornful gaze back. I'm so dead, aren't I.

"You seem to be in quite the conundrum. It appears you have done a very horrible act." She moves her hair out of her forehead as she approaches the cell I'm in.

"… Well, yeah. To what do I owe this visit?"

"I came to ask you a few questions, surely you do not mind?"

"Not like I have anything better to do. What did you want of me?" I sit on the bed facing her.

"First, could you remind me what was your name?"

"Takeru Shirogane." Frown, sharp eyes. Yep, she's been informed.

"… Well then, can you tell me a bit about yourself? Most of your information seems to be locked."

"Sigh… I'm just a simple guy trying to find a place to belong."

"I was referring to your life. Where did you live, why did you leave the Empire…"

"I don't know. I don't remember much from my life here. I do remember living in the Hiiragi district though." Or more like I remembered what he lived through. Oh, screw it. Too hungry to care.

"Why do you say that? If you don't remember much then-"

"I remember the view from atop a hill near this base."

"… Is that so? Then, what do you think of the Empire?"

"You're too prideful and judgmental people." Not lying here.

"Hmm… And what of the Shogun?"

"I have no opinion on her, I haven't paid much attention to the political matters since I arrived. I had a CCSE to pass. And as a

soldier it's for the best if I don't involve myself too much with them." She closes her eyes for some seconds. Not like I can tell her I want Yuuhi to eat shit and fall off a horse.

"Alright. Then allow me to cut to the chase, why are you in possession of a sword?"

"What about it being an honor, receiving a sword from its holder?" Her frown gets bigger, she takes a step forward.

"Much has changed since then, Cadet. Why do you have a sword?" Sincerity is a virtue, let's keep my promise with Meiya.

"I think you're misunderstanding something, 1st Lt. Tsukuyomi." She flinches when I call her by her name.

"What is there to misunderstand?"

"I don't have a generic sword, I have a Minaru Kamui." First opening her eyes wide, then gritting her teeth, her glare comes at me like it a laser would after a TSF.

"You claim to possess a… Minaru Kamui? Are you aware of what weight is attached to that particular blade, I wonder?"

"Yes, now I do. Cadet Mitsurugi told me how truly precious it is during the CCSE. I suppose that it's the Koubuin House's blue katana, right?" She nods at my words, slowly taking a step closer while running a hand over her hair.

"Indeed. Now, what would you be planning to do with it?"

"I'll give it to you." And she got tilted.

"… Huh? What do you mean?" I did promise to Meiya that I would give it back, and I want no more problems with Yuuhi.

"I didn't know how important the blade was, and going by your reaction I think I'm not recognized as a legitimate holder of it. I want

no problems with the Empire and the blade could cause a great harm in the wrong hands, so I'd like to ask you to take custody of it and return it to the Shogun."

"You… want me to… Why? Do you think we won't be suspicious of you with this gesture?"

"No, I want no trouble that's all. You can hate me all you want, but I don't hate you."

For now. Tsukuyomi-san is still someone I like a lot, but if she keeps antagonizing me I miiiight have to harm her. In the head. With a gun. As much as that makes my heart hurt, as much as that makes me want to bite my tongue off… If she becomes my enemy… Guh…

"So… could you please go to my room whenever you have the time? The Minaru Kamui is hidden in my closet." I can see her hands tensing into fists, her chest moving slowly up and down as she tries to calm down.

"Understood. I'll take the blade with me, thanks for being honest about this matter."

"Don't thank me, I just promised Cadet Mitsurugi that I would return the blade when I had the chance."

"I see. Might I ask… Could you tell me how did Cadet Mitsurugi fare in her CCSE?" She's trying to hide it, but those clenched fists give her away. Of course she would be worried.

"She scored a seventy, she passed it." A sigh of relief comes out of her as her eyes relax, but she quickly catches herself and goes back to her stoic persona. I better shut up about the whole 'Meiya got knocked out' thing, I don't want Yuuhi breaking relations with the UN.

"Thanks for the intel. If I may, can I ask you something else? Did you encounter my relatives during the CCSE, perchance?" She should know by now if they reported it so no point in lying.

"The Pickle Cousins? Yeah, I had to-… 1st Lt.?" Tsukuyomi-san's mouth was hanging wide open as her eyes froze. Did she got tilted again? "1st Lt.? Is something the matter?"

"How… How did you call them?"

"Huh? The Pickle Cousins? Oh, right. I wasn't trying to make fun of them, sorry." I give her a small bow, but her eyes are still full of sparks.

"Why did you refer to them in such a way? Where did you hear that nickname?!" Howling, she stomped her way real close to the iron bars.

"I just thought it was fitting really, if they let their hair loose since they have it so long and it's green one could say they're a pair of overgrown pickles. I tend to make lame jokes like this all the time. Forgive me, I wasn't trying to insult your family." I bow at her again, but she doesn't let the frown go. Fists shaking and gritting her teeth, she stares blades at me.

I just had to go and screw things up. Goddammit, myself! You have ONE job! Stop making everybody angry at you!

"You thought… it was fitting?" One brows of hers twitches. "Cadet Shirogane, can you tell me what is your blood type?"

"… What? Why?" That was not what I was expecting to hear.

"Answer me, or I'll report to the authorities you have a Minaru Kamui in your possession illegally."

"Hey, I didn't try to do anything with it! There's no need to be so hostile with me." I really need to stop making everybody angry at me.

"Then, could you please answer the question?"

"Uhh… It was B positive, I think."

"When is your birthday?"

"December 16th."

"What is your favorite food?"

"Why do you want to know that?!"

"Answer the question!"

What is wrong with her?! If she thinks I'm a spy, why is she asking me all of this? Talking about food, when I'm so hungry…

"Tch, it's steamed doubin without a doubt! The king of the mountains, the matsutake mushroom, alongside the treasures of the seas, breams and shrimps, steamed together with some nice seasoning. Add fried rice, eggs, and maybe some bacon alongside it, and you have a total delicacy! Best food ever created!" Shit, now that I started thinking about food…

I'M HUNGRY GODDAMMIT! Where is my dinner?! Even if they're half rations again, give me food! Hauu… What wouldn't I do for some fried chicken with rice…

"Those words… That expression… No… This… She said… Her Highness said…" Hm? Tsukuyomi-san was looking at me as if I were a ghost, hands shaking, her eyes watering. Taking some step backs from the iron bars, yet not looking away from me despite the slight tremble of her lips.

"1st Lt.? What's the problem?"

"You… Who are you?!" Fear and anger seemed to be mixed in her tone as she howls at me. I just smile back.

"Takeru Shirogane, it's a pleasure." And, again, she got tilted.

Did she also know this world's me? I mean, Mion did and she's her older sister. No wonder she's so enraged. However… He must have

been close to her, because it's rare to see this Tsukuyomi-san being so shocked.

"… You said you had a Minaru Kamui in your possession, did you not?" She caresses her hair as she regains her composure.

"Yes."

"Who gave it to you?"

"Someone back at Yukon, as a memento of someone important to me that had died."

"Someone at… No, no one was… But then…" Her lips quiver real fast for a sec there, but then she takes a deep breath as calms down. "I'll go take hold of your sword. I hope you are not lying, Cadet. Well then, I shall take my leave. Goodnight." She practically jogged out of here.

I'm sure I must have reminded her of him, considering how she ran away. If he also had the same taste in food then I'm glad to know I was a man of culture in this world too. Though, I shouldn't have said that about those two pickles. What if this only worsens the misunderstandings? I think I just fucked up, badly. Well, I do get careless when I'm hungry and tired.

Hopefully she'll lay off me for a while. If she came with a gun I'd be dead on the spot, I need to get out of here before she comes back with killing intent. She did mention Yuuhi, so now I'm convinced she's the one pulling the strings on this whole 'kicked out of the army' affair. I wonder how she'd react if Tsukuyomi-san tells… Nah, that's a new level of stupid even for myself. Nothing will change, they will come after my life regardless of what I do. Especially if he was someone close to the Tsukuyomis. Maybe he was in the same squad as them?

I can only hope I can avoid them from now on, I don't want to fight with them but given the situation I don't doubt they will be the ones

picking a fight.

Ugh, where is my dinner?! I'm so hungry right now…

However, no matter how much I waited, how many times I looked out into the hallway, no one came.

Grabbing my rumbling stomach, letting my clothes hit the floor, the cold water of the shower made me immediately regret my decision. Enduring it for a little while, to at least get this awful feeling off my back, I kept my ears peeled in case anyone came.

But no one did.

As I was getting resigned, I heard some footsteps in the distance. The leader of the volunteer crew came with a small tray, again with half rations.

However, instead of carefully passing the tray over the open space for that, he dropped it forcefully and pushed it in, making some of the food end up on the floor.

"… That was a dick move, man. There was no need for that."

"Heh… Serves you right, damn American." Spitting into the cell, he leaves with hurried steps, as if he couldn't bear to breathe the same air as me.

Picking up the tray and eating what little was left in it, couldn't help but frown. First Kyouzuka-san, now the rest of the base… Really, fuck you all. *What's the point in fighting for these fools if this is how they'll repay me?*

Rinsing my mouth, both to clean it and rid myself of this awful taste that refuses to leave me, again feeling a cold shiver on my back, I begin to clean the tray and the plates, feeling a cold shiver on my back and not because of the water.

"Sigh… Hopefully tomorrow will be a better day." Please let me stay here, I don't need more trouble. Or maybe… Sensei really doesn't want me here…

Maybe… this is it for me in this world. Well, I did what I could. The ball is on their court.

Sighing with a vengeance, I lay on the sorry excuse of a bed that's on the cell. Both hands behind my head, yawning the tension away, my eyelids decide their shift is over and begin to close shop. I curl under the thin sheets, rubbing my feet together to keep the cold away.

Damn… I'm beat… Yawn…

Here's hoping… I can stay here… Sigh…

… *until I can find a way back to my peaceful life.*

…

Zzz…

---

*Evening.*

*(Hida Mountain. Daizaburou Dojo.)*

**[Mana]**

---

The rumbling of the helicopter's flight reverberates on my ears as I stare down at the scenery, at the expansive lands covered in snow despite the fact that we're still nowhere near winter.

A completely clear sky, filled with stars that can be easily appreciated due to the absolute lack of man-made lights in the area, simply complements this mountain perfectly.

In the distance, the rather humble structure comes into view. A traditional dojo, lighted up by dangling lights from pillar to pillar. My ride descends onto the landing pad, shortly after receiving confirmation that we can disembark.

"Welcome to the dojo, Mana!" Guren Daizaburou, my former master in the art of the sword, comes up to the pad as I was descending, his unmistakable voice far louder than anything one could ever hear in this place.

As tall as I remembered him being, with that same sharp haircut on his sides yet now without much of it on top. As imposing as a bear, and yet, with those same small eyes that could be called as nothing but fatherly. A smile coming my way once he finally sees me, I return it after straightening up my dress.

"Salutations, Daizaburou-sama. It is an honor to be visiting." Giving him a bow only elicits a laughter from him, loud and heartily as always.

"No need for such stiffness, grasshopper. It is good to see you faring well, and for your complexion to shine as beautifully as our moon as well." He nods, smiling my way.

"Likewise, sir."

"Well, come on, let us enter. It is quite frosting outside." Turning back, making his own crimson dress sway momentarily, he leads us into the dojo.

The members of the Guard that were stationed here, the vast majority of them Tozamas in gray or white attires, saluted us as we made our way to the building. A few Fudais were awaiting at the doors, bowing down as they opened them.

The few decorations on the way were covered in snow yet again, the attendants were clearing them slowly. Within the dojo, not only it was

quite warm but oddly silent. A dojo might be in name, but this building could very well be called a small estate of the Guren family.

"Daizaburou-sama, what has made this night to be so quiet?"

"Oh? It is merely that the younglings have exhausted themselves earlier. Many are the ones who have not yet bested the preliminary testings, therefore, they have been made to clean the place. And so, they are now lacking any vigor to display."

Sigh… It is odd. Despite the hour it is, I expected them to still be trading slashes at the sparring room within here.

"Is that so? Is everything proceeding well enough?"

"Indeed, there is no need to repine about nothing. This generation has been filled with hardworking younglings, despite their slow learning curve." Lucky we are to be in new moon, for his smile is shining enough for the night to endure as is.

"That is good to hear."

Quickly arriving at a private room, we enter by ourselves. Leaving the suitcase I had on me on the sofa as I sat down, he went to prepare some tea for the both of us.

"So… How is everything in the Main House?" He inquired as he prepared the herbs, sheathing his glee.

"It seems that everything is still rather hectic. Nothing has turned up regarding the mastermind behind the attack."

"Is that so? I suppose, those outside the succession branch have been questioned by now?" His tone lowering as did his brows, almost as if chained to an anchor.

"Yes. And yet, they were free of any and all guilt."

"However, someone had to leak the intel of our patrols, and allow those terrorists to operate so close to our Main House as well… Has the US…"

"No, they cooperated throughly with us in this occasion alongside the UN. If fingers have to be pointed… it had to be a fellow who conspired against us."

"… From our fellowship, or another Regent House?" Handing me my cup, he sits in front of me.

"That we don't yet know. Both Maya and Masahide-san are working hard on the investigation. He came to visit a few days ago, to inquire about what was going on near our location. He seems to believe… someone was wishing to get rid of Yohime-sama, in a ploy to use *her* against Yuuhi-sama." I drink, choosing not to say more, gauging his own reaction.

"… And I assume, she is safe with Raiden?"

"… Yes."

"Sigh… That is a relief. Were you requiring our aid in securing his home?"

"… It would be most welcomed. I know I am not supposed to ask, considering who she is and-"

"Waste no more words. Even if they refused it, Takahisa-sama's wish was clear enough. Worry not Mana, I shall contact Seiten so that he sends some of our fellows to Raiden. Meiya-sama's wellbeing is of utmost importance for all of us, regardless of her brand as a twin." Hesitation shining for its absence, he nodded my way. It is a relief, to know he does not view her as do the rest.

"Thank you kindly, Daizaburou-sama."

"Haha, such words aren't required anymore in my presence, grasshopper. Now then, whatever is awaiting within that suitcase?"

"Oh, the reports from those who have already been sent back from the dojo, as well as other bureaucratic documents your sign is required for."

"Sigh… I would be wishing for Seiten to quickly become used to tackling these matters on his own." He laughs dryly as I pass him the suitcase. "So, besides my own House's matters, I suppose Yuuhi-sama must be wishing to hear about the progress those three have been making?"

"Indeed, so she does. Have they been faring well?"

"Mion and Shion have been… stagnant for some time." Reading the papers while drinking some tea, his tone slows down into nothing but the wind's gentle rustling. I also drink the tea as I await his words. "… You see, they seem to not yet comprehend the core teaching I try to impart them with, that they themselves are who shall cleave a path to the future."

"I see… Are they still progressing in their mastery of the blade?"

"Oh, yes, but of course. I have nothing left to teach them in that regard, however, their own hastiness is ruining their composure and resolve, dulling any and all advancements they have attained since coming here."

"Sigh… I suppose it will take them some more weeks, perhaps."

Me and Maya were the same, pushed by our rivalry and the pressure to excel we kept justifying our answers relying on what our ancestors had done, on what had been ingrained into our brains. Not understanding what else we lacked, becoming most adusted at his continuous disapproval. In our own hurry to prove ourselves worthy, failing to calm those raging waves we hoisted deep within our hearts, we were rendered unable to see that our own hands were what

would bring auspicious times to our nation. And that, if we kept clinging to our own little rivalry, if we kept second guessing each other, dreading the thought of 'losing' to the other, our minds would be molded into a truly jagged, cyclopean depth, corrupted by such reservations and self-doubts.

The inherent fear that comes when measuring up to one's elders, when it is finally time to spread wings and be judged by all… it is not easy on no one's shoulders, much less with all that comes with the Tsukuyomi name.

One most tightly hold onto one's own beliefs, never failing to adapt to the developing situation of the world. Should we kept clinging onto the code as tightly as we used to, we would have been crushed under the weight of our own ego. For following our teachings and adapting to them are completely different answers, and one must remain resolute when faced with the duty of safeguarding the future of our fellows. If only the code was required, us retainers would not be necessary.

A leader, and the individuals who support it, never learns through example nor has the luxury to possess footsteps to follow upon. The path traversed by the elders was one that won't reiterate itself. As the saying goes, a man never enters the same river twice. Therefore, those at the vanguard must not be swayed by other's words, not be driven by what dangers surround them. For if they are to be a beacon for their fellows, they must hold the bravery required to tread into unknown land. Becoming one's own tailwind, without ever losing sight of whatever it was that compelled the direction of our feet, whether we saw hope, victory, peace, or further conflicts beyond the horizon.

For us to be truly accepted as trusted fellows, we first had to learn to hold onto our own core beliefs even if it meant clashing with our elders. We were no longer supposed to be children, but adults whose voice had to be heard, whose convictions they had to protect. I suppose those two will need some more introspection to reach that answer. Thankfully, they have Takeru by their side, so I am sure he

shall aid them as he did with us before when we yet again were lost in our own doubts.

"So… How has Takeru been doing?" He then groans, his brows arching. "… Daizaburou-sama?" I am not liking such expression.

"… I frankly do not know."

"Huh? How do you mean?"

"Well, he is calm enough to still notice the beauty of the skies during the trainings, and he already has reached the right answer. Ignorant he is of the ways of the world, yet he does not allow fear to make nest within. However… I fear that he is perhaps too relaxed for his own good."

"… Whatever has happened?" Leaning forward, my lips tensed on their own.

"You see, I sent the trio to meditate on their own a few days ago. However, only Mion and Shion returned as they were scheduled to. Despite how much we waited, he did not return in time for dinner, so I feared that he had grown upset and left on his own."

"What?! I do not recall being told of-"

"Worry not, no such thing happened." Waving a hand in the air, my readiness and compulsion were also sliced in half and I returned my back to the sofa. "As I went to look for him, I did indeed find him. However, it turns out that… he had fallen asleep."

"… Excuse me?"

"I believe he enjoys stargazing much, does he not?" I nod, curving a brow. "Well, it seems he stayed looking at the skies, pondering on what he could do from then on… and fell asleep as he did so. When I woke him up, he told me he lost track of time while looking at the moon."

Takeru… I swear, why must you always do this? Unable to halt the rumbling of one of mine fist, I can picture the scene with clear clarity. Lucky you are to now have either me or Maya stationed here.

"However, he could have come down with hypothermia. Is he truly alright?"

"Worry not, Mana." Hoisting his chest forward, a smirk spreads like wildfire in him. "That unawareness of his is so profound, so sturdy that it seems to make him able to also ignore the weather as well, ahaha!"

"Daizaburou-sama, please, this is no laughing matter! Yuuhi-sama will not be pleased with this report." I fear she might decide to visit the dojo herself should he have actually incurred any injuries or become bedridden.

"As I said, there is nothing you should concern yourself with. He is fine, albeit formless in this training." Folding his arms after leaving his empty cup on a small table, he leans back onto the sofa.

"Is he giving you trouble?"

"No, it's just… I never trained anyone that resembles him, not in all of my years. Undaunted by the challenge, unrelenting in his own convictions, yet humble and warm, welcoming and 'friendly' as very few are in the Guard. While his skill with a blade is not yet sufficient to bestow him the honor of being called a Mugen Kidou Master, I fail to see him not reaching the aptitude required before the end of the year despite his insistence on using Maya's style."

"I see… So, could you tell me in detail how are they faring?"

Nodding with a smile, and standing up to procure some sweets from a shelve, he then told me all about their daily lives here. How Shion is far ahead of any other trainee when it comes to finesse with a blade and how she simply cannot seem to learn how to properly cook, how Mion's defensive style and composure are what one

would expect of my sister and yet she is always most tardy whenever tasked with cleaning the windows, and how Takeru is simply too relaxed for his own good and how that gets him in trouble with the other trainees, but then he's the one who adapted the fastest to the cleaning duties.

"It was truly a welcome surprise to have him willingly volunteer to aid in the chores." He says, a hint of a smile and a quiet current of acceptance in his voice. "Never did I think that he would agree upon the first question with a mere 'Sure'. Frankly, his presence here worked in my favor to force the other trainees to humble down from their prideful stances. And truth be told, his cooking skills aren't half bad."

"As one would expect. Takeru truly doesn't like to sit still." That boy is too sweet for his own good. Yohime-sama did say that he was always wishing to help Maya back home as well.

"Ahaha, indeed. Well, I suppose you should be going to visit them. I shall deal with these papers, we can continue tomorrow with the details of Raiden's security. Please do enjoy your stay here, brief as it might be."

"So I shall do, Daizaburou-sama." Standing up, I tried to bow down, but he again loudly laughed away, swaying a hand in the air.

"No need for such formalities, grasshopper. The way here must have been tiring, please do make yourself comfortable. I left word to the cooks, your dinner should be at the ready. I believe both Mion and Shion would welcome your company during this night. Go to them, Mana."

"Yes, thank you kindly." Returning the smile, I leave the suitcase in the room, exiting towards the kitchen.

It is a relief to know that those three are alright, despite the setbacks they might be facing. Treacherous this last trail of their training might be, yet I must trust that they shall triumph in it.

Also, a great burden is off my shoulders now that I know Master will aid me in protecting Meiya-sama. We may not yet know who sent those men towards our House, nor how they obtained our inside intel, yet the threat has been made clear to us. I would wish myself able to banish the assumptions that Masahide-san has suggested yet I cannot simply do so.

Someone might be planning to weaken our fellowship, and use Meiya-sama to impersonate Yuuhi-sama. Perhaps someone from outside the succession branch, perhaps someone within the fellowship who is being influenced by another Regent. Yet, one cannot deny the odd movements, the odd bystanders near Raiden-sama's abode on the days before the attack was carried out. It may be a coincidence, however no option must be left outside of the table.

I know such was the reason to hasten the training of our younger members, yet… With eyes blazing we must face the threats, whoever it is behind this ploy. I can only pray that Masahide-san is mistaken in his suspicions.

Not taking too much time to arrive at the kitchen, the chatter of the young trainees reaches my ears. Walking into the room, all eyes fell on me. Their expressions widened as the clearing skies after a storm, I quickly waved a hand to relieve them of the pressure of bowing to me.

"At ease, fellows. I am no inspector. Please, proceed with your meal." More than half of them eased up and returned to their plates, the others however kept eyeing me as I walked towards the two shapes that were eating by themselves in a table near a corner.

"Greetings, Mion, Shion."

"Good evening to you, Sister." Mion said, bowing down. Shion quickly did the same. "I did not hear you were visiting." Tracing some hair behind her ear, she smiled my way.

"Well, had you heard of it, it would mean I did not do a through enough job." Smiling, they chuckle for a moment. I sit by Mion's side, with Shion in front of us. Whatever it was they were eating, they had already finished it. "So, I heard you're faring well so far."

Not a second after the words left my lips, their own twisted oddly. My gaze lost contact with Mion's, her arms slightly closed onto her body.

"We have been… progressing at a steady pace until now, Mana-sama." Sending a hand to her hair, she answered. And yet, she also couldn't look me in the eye.

"Is that so? Well, would you like to speak of it?" Never losing my smile, I nod their way. Slowly, they seem to begin to thaw what held them captive.

"Ahem… You see Sister, Master has been refusing to impart further trainings to us. And yet, no amount of meditation nor sparring has made him relent in his silence."

"It is truly concerning." Her brows arched, that soft tinge of venom that sometimes resides in her sister's words lurking forward. "And despite our efforts, we constantly find ourselves unable to ascertain the answer to his queries."

"I see… Have you pondered on his words from a different angle? Have you taken the time to glimpse at the skies, to stop dwelling within yourselves?" Both of them look down, lips yet again twisting.

"… However, we do not know what is it that we are doing wrong, Sister."

"Then, dispel this hastiness you seem to have been imprisoned by, and simply meditate on the answer to the questions, and what they entail. Do not let your veneer be bent so easily, Mion, Shion."

Straightening themselves, they return a nod. And yet, I cannot say that they understood my words. That hurry itself is what is holding

you back, those fears of not measuring up, of not being 'enough' by yourselves. I know you must be under great duress, having to measure up and be compared to mine and Maya's own efforts, but I trust you shall triumph over this hurdle, as we did when facing our Fathers.

On an unrelated note, where could my dinner be? I would like to avoid going to the kitchen myself, it would be most rude for a guest to do so. However, I am beginning to feel the burden of the travel. Whatever shall I-

"Hey there, Mana-nee!"

"Oh?" Looking to my right, I saw him bringing my plate, dressed in a loose gray dress with an apron over it. "… Takeru? Where you the one tasked with cooking my meal?"

"Yeah, today was my turn in the kitchen. I'm all done with that, though." Leaving my plate, whose smell immediately brought waterfalls to my mouth, he then sat in front of us by Shion's side. He did not bring a plate with him, so I suppose he must have ate his own serving in the kitchen.

Glancing around, I could detect quite a few squinting gazes, narrowed and inquisitive stares towards him. As usual however, he does not seem to even register them. Sigh… I truly do not know whether your unawareness is a good or a bad trait, to be honest.

"So, didn't knew you were visiting. What's up? Are you gonna be part of a training?" Smiling my way, making his unkempt hair sway, I couldn't help but to return the gesture, seeing him unchanged.

"Takeru, please remember that Mana-sama is here as a Royal Guard." Elbowing him, the bridges between their souls began to sway and screech, a rapid current flowing under them. "You should speak formally to her, as we have been doing."

"What's your problem now? Mana-nee is Mana-nee, and we're on break."

"Regardless, Sister's attire should be enough to know how you should speak to her. It would be most unfortunate for you if you were once again reprimanded for forgetting your manners." She told him, what but a thunder tearing her composure into a subdued, bothered, and concerned frown.

"'Forgetting' would imply I had any manners to begin with." Folding his arms and nodding, he smirks back at her.

As those two pouted at him, I couldn't help but to chuckle. You truly haven't changed at all.

"It is alright. Takeru speaks the truth, we are on break for the moment. However, we also are in the dining room. Showing some decorum would serve you well, Takeru."

"Oh, I know. It's just been a long time since we've seen you." Easing up into a smile with the serenity of a descending petal, he nods again. "So, is everything alright?"

"Yes, I am fine. I heard you're having some troubles with the sword as of now?"

"Well…" He looks up, scratching the back of his head. "Sort of."

"Looks may be deceiving Mana-sama, yet Takeru has been making decent progress so far." She again smirked his way, showing him her teeth and pointing a finger upwards. Mion giggled as Takeru rose a brow, puffing one cheek.

"What the hell are you trying to say, you dumb Pickle?"

"That you have, surprisingly, managed to measure up to the training despite being still a young child."

"You're just a year older, don't get cocky because of that."

"Now, enough teasing. You all are doing well, in and out of the dojo. Isn't that right?" They all nod, relaxing into a calm smile.

"So…" However, he then looked down, twisting his lips as if a twister spawned within his mouth, joining his hands as if he had an injured pigeon between them. "Is everything alright back home?" His query also made the cousins tense up, locking their gazes onto me.

As I ate, we discussed what had happened since they were sent here. Sighing the pressure once learning that the Main House was safe and sound, happy to hear that everything was back to normal, and that nothing had happened to me where I was, they then told me about their own endeavors.

As Master had said before, Mion and Shion are most troubled by their setbacks in their cleaning efforts, Takeru mocking them about it helped not a single bit, and me agreeing with his points, despite scolding him for the teasing, made them pout much, as if they were once more little kids playing cards back home.

They then retaliated, with much pungency and freed audacity, about his lacking results with the blade, especially from Shion who also employs the same style as he. Sadly, it seems he also hasn't been deterred from wobbling as always used to. If not for that eccentric way of moving, he would already have been tasked with the last test in the dojo.

As the trainees left, some still daring to send their eyes towards his shape, the cousins relaxed in their manners and we could enjoy a more personal talk. Both of them repining about not being able to go to the Isumis concert, Takeru complaining about how Yuuhi didn't allow him to go to the manga circle with Arisa-san before coming him. Telling them what I could about Maya and Yuuhi-sama, of how everything was back in the city, they seemed to relax further. To be sent here after that incident, I am sure that much was the pressure you felt on your shoulders. And yet, there is nothing I can do about it.

"… Also, Yohime-sama confirmed to me that once you return you all shall begin your training to become surface pilots."

"Really?!" Slamming his hands on the table and jolting up, his clear cheer made me giggle.

"Indeed. Of course, a banquet with your favorite meals also awaits you all. The finest mackerel and matsutake are already reserved for you, Takeru."

"Awright! Now I'm really motivated to do this!"

"… What about us, Mana-nee?" Mion asked, clearly ballooning a cheek.

"Of course, your meals are also at the ready."

"… That means they expect us to finish our training soon, I suppose?" Shion's tone descended in its vigor, uncertainty lunging forward into the quiet shiver of one of her hands.

"There is no such time limit placed on you. We simply trust you shall deliver a satisfactory result." Smiling at them, the cousins seem to barely be able to nod. Just as how rain would force a flower to bow down under the pressure of the water, as how a rock would eventually be cracked wide open by the continuous inner piking, the cousins' complexion seemed strained, kept in place by tight wires.

I suppose that mentioning that was insensitive of me. It is obvious now, they truly are taking this far more heavily than Master thought. What could I do to aid them in-

"And that's what we're gonna do! Right, Pickles?" Smiling much, with the hesitation of a bull when seeing red, he nodded their way. And their mouth and eyes widened, lacking an answer.

"Um… Well, we are indeed making an effort." She caressed her ponytail, looking down. "However, what holds us back is nothing like

anything we have faced before."

"And we're gonna break through it, no problem!" Raising a fist, quick and ferocious as a chasing hippo, one could see the fire roaring in his eyes, as he likes to say. "But, you know what? If you keep being this down, I'm gonna pass the test first and eat all the cake by myself."

"… You take that back." Mion's eyes shot wide open, folding her arms far too tightly.

"It seems you have forgotten how to address your sisters, Takeru." A brow of her twitching, Shion again smirked his way.

"Heh, that's better. Would be such a shame to be the only one passing the test." He shrugs, they again pout at him.

Hehehe… Even when they bicker as usual, it is good to see you're still supporting them well, Takeru. I would be wishing to have you three, especially you, to begin to act more according to what being a Royal Guard entails, yet… for now, you should enjoy these fleeting moments.

I am sure Yuuhi-sama will be much pleased with this report, to hear you three are still able to smile and play around with each other like this. Even if she won't like to hear his complains about the manga circle a single bit.

… I truly hope you can finish your training quickly. Not so that you can join the training to be formally accepted into the Guard, but so that you can keep her company again. She truly does miss you all much, especially your smile Takeru.

That reminds me…

"Takeru, are you allowed to cook in your free time?"

"Hm? Yeah, why?"

"Well… I was wondering, could you perhaps prepare something for *her* ? It has been a long time since you've been here training, after all."

"Oh! Yeah, I'll see what I can do. Though…" He arches his brows, folding his arms.

"What is it?"

"Mana-nee, there are no apples in the dojo." Mion says, sighing.

"Is that so? That is a shame." She has come to favor them much, largely because of his cooking.

"Don't worry, I'll fix up something new for her!" Again smiling, he nods. "And some ginger and lemon drinks for you, since you seem kinda tired."

Aww… He still remembers that? And to think he would wish to take even more time out of his already tight schedule for me…

"Thanks, Takeru. I shall be probably leaving before dusk tomorrow so, do you think you can find the time?"

"Yeah, of course Mana-nee." He pounds his chest, but then grimaces as he placed too much force into his swing. Us three chuckle at the outcome, he blushes as he scratches his head. "A-Anyways, I'm gonna have to hustle to make everything in time. Pickles, you'll help out with the cleaning, right?"

"But of course." Shion says, plucking her lips. "There was no need to ask, silly." Raising her hand, they do a high five smirking at each other.

"Hehe… Thank you, you three. I am sure she shall enjoy the meal much."

All of them smile, again asking me about what I am supposed to do here. Speaking of what little I can, we spent the remainder of the

evening enjoying ourselves.

# Suspicions and Misunderstandings

## Chapter 26: Suspicions and Misunderstandings

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*November 22nd. Near 10 PM.*

*(Barracks, close to Takeru's room.)*

**[Mana]**

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"Mana-sama, the coast is clear."

"Roger, you may stand back Ebisu. Keep me updated in case anyone comes by." She nods, standing aside and retiring from this place.

With hurried steps the distance between me and that room is closed, taking a moment to glance around as I gripped the handle, a slight hesitation as his bitter expression when we spoke of food returned to my mind, the metal was twisted and I proceeded into the darkness that was covering his personal resting place.

Flickering the switch on, nothing seemed out of place. Another officer's quarter like all in the barracks. Of course, for it to belong to a cadet is nothing short of an irregularity. Only because of who belong to Squad 207 is this allowed. And yet…

"… How odd. For his bed to be properly tidied up." His desk also seems neatly organized.

No, I've no time to waste. There is one surefire way to confirm my suspicions. Turning to face the closet, closing my eyes momentarily as I opened it, an ordinary sight welcomed me once I looked into the row of clothing. Yet, as I pushed my hand into the back of it, a soft yet firm contact met my fingers. Pulling the hidden object out,

gripping it with undeserved tension, perhaps doing so far slower than I should have, what could my eyes do other than imitate a full moon, what could I do other than feel a sudden shiver as seizing as a searing slash on my sides.

Quickly removing the cloth that hid it, I was left with something only a few select have in this Empire of ours. A Minaru Kamui. And not just one of the many we have…

"This is… in more than prime condition. The handle brimming with softness with not a single stain or rugged spot in its cloth, the handguard shining as dawn would, polished to perfection, the sheathe also has barely no scratches."

And then, as I drew the blade out, there was also no doubt that it had been under only the most thoughtful care one could have given it. It does look… far less sharper than what one could expect of our blades, almost as if it was dulled on purpose to not deliver on its killing intent. And yet, bringing it to eye level, swinging it twice, any doubts regarding its finesse were dashed. This blade could tear a finger from a TSF if it were necessary. Perhaps, it was repaired at some point, and for some reason someone chose to grind the edge away. I suppose, to follow the laws of where it was at the time. However… However, this… means…

"… He wasn't lying, he did possess one of our swords. However, no Minaru Kamui had left the Empire. He couldn't have received it in Yukon. Therefore… That means…"

As if trying to crack ice, my jaw mows up and down. The blade begins to clutter and resonate as my hands quiver. And, as I took in the words he pronounced into my ears once more, as the reiteration aligned perfectly with how he used to be… I simply… realized that…

"Takeru-sama… was alive all this time?"

His smile comes back, all the times he kept both Mion and Shion company, whenever he would try to cheer me up when I was

overburdened with my work with what little he could cook, until he learned to make that ginger and lemon drink.

Elbows and wrists shake as if the ground were coming alive, a hand eases its hold on the handle to wipe the few tears that spawned on me. This is no lie, this is no replica. This is a legitimate Minaru Kamui, and one that was always cherished and well kept. And… And his reactions and words…

Yuuhi-sama said he had perished, that there was absolutely no conceivable way in which he could have survived, and yet…

"How could we explain this?… No, why… why did we not know?" As sudden as a summer rain, frowning much, indignation and frustration come pouring forward.

Whatever has caused this turn of events? Why was he in Yukon, and for two years? How did he keep his blade? And… And…

How was he taken from us on that accursed day of treason? Whatever athwarted him from our hands, away to Alaska? More considering how he used to be, I sincerely doubt he could-

A rumbling on my stomach slides down to my knees, leaving me little choice but to support myself on the desk. Those old days, those accursed days of endless battle. And the glare, the unspoken judgment, the adusted wreath in his stride.

Nothing of that is left in his current gaze. Takeru-sama has… been healed, somehow? Has the gash the war inflicted on him being mended after this time? He even referred to the cousins as he used to do before… Despite his situation, and mine own abrasive behavior, never once did he retaliate mirroring my intentions. Holding his elbow, simply yearning for some peace after the incidents… Alive. Takeru-sama is alive…

I pinch a cheek with much force, yet the blade in front of me does not change. There was no acting in his reactions before… Then… This

is… no ploy, no attempt to deceive us? He truly was…

"For the Holy Emperor… You were alive… alone and without memories…" Quickly drowning the tears and the sigh, straightening myself up, I take one deep breath. "I have to reporting this. Yuuhi-sama has to be made aware of this, posthaste!"

I know she was most adamant in wishing for this 'faker' to be removed from this place, to be executed for the grave offense of impersonating Takeru-sama, and I am well aware that speaking against her wishes will be a tall ordeal. I doubt she will easily believe my words…

"… Yet, it is what I must do. Still, I do not have all the answers… I should be cautious in my report." Sheathing the blade and again covering it with its cloth, I place it on my person.

I would be wishing to examine this room in more detail yet I cannot risk being found out, and I must deliver the news to Yuuhi-sama.

Because our Takeru-sama is alive. And more importantly, safe, sound, healthy… and calm.

I know not of what tamed the embers in his eyes, the raging waves in his soul, however I only have thankfulness towards it. I only wish… this situation can be salvaged before it is too late.

Exiting the room, glancing to make sure no one saw me, I threw caution to the winds, the abyss, and whatever else proverbial synonyms could be used and proceeded to rush towards my room, shaving many years of use from my boots.

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*Next Day. Near 7 AM.*

*(Detention Barracks. Takeru's Cell.)*

**[Takeru]**

Rolling to a side, to the other, rubbing my legs together to send the cold away, I try to bring my sheets closer to my face. That makes them leave my feet, and I shiver as I take in the coldness.

Opening my mouth as wide as a hippo's to yawn, stretching my stiff back, I gaze up to an unfamiliar ceiling.

"Uuugh… Right, the detention barracks." Yawning again, I sit down.

My shoulder is still hurting a bit, my back is all stiff. At least I think I had a nice dream, don't feel that heavy, cold feeling I always have when I have a nightmare.

I sit up and look around. No sign of people. I'm starving… Guess I won't get breakfast this early.

I rinse my mouth, reluctantly take another cold shower, and throw myself back in the bed, waiting until someone decides to come pay me a visit.

…

After just a short while, as I was about to doze off, I heard some steps in the distance. Three or so people, maybe? Sitting up again, I move my neck in circles to fight off the sleepiness. Three MP with rifles come up to my cell, looking at me with the friendliness of a Soldier-Class. *They're nothing but dogs of the high pigs, in the end.*

"Cadet Shirogane, you will come with us. We will restrain your hands now, please do not resist." I let them cuff me and we're off to wherever they're taking me.

I know I did something horrible but, do they have to look at me like that? The people that we pass on our way look at me with either frowns or as if they were smelling something that was in the fridge for too long. Those soldiers did something worse than what I did by your standards, since they harmed Meiya. Oh well, whatever.

*Nothing they say will hurt more than what I see in the mirror or in my dreams, anyways.*

We end up going to the same interrogation room I went yesterday. They surround me, gripping their guns.

"You'll enter alone, know that we will stand guard outside. You better not try anything, we have authorization to shoot you." Yeah, keep glaring at me. *Sure is Sagiri in here.*

"I understand, sir."

Once they open the door, not letting me out of their sight, one pushes my back with his rifle. Sighing and shaking my head, in I go. Mooroka-san was waiting while drinking some tea, sitting as he was yesterday.

"Good morning, Cadet Shirogane. Take a seat, please."

"Good morning, Secretary." I give him a small bow, he finishes his tea and looks at me as I sit down.

"Well, let's get down to it. Due to some last minute negotiations, the HC Council has decided to give you a chance to remain in the UN. The presentation of to your contributions to the XO's missions helped much in your case, and some of the more…" He stops, drinks some more, and sighs as he placed the cup back on the table "… fervent in the organization were convinced to desist in their intentions to execute you, to avoid a needless argument between the UN and the Empire over what was nothing but an unfortunate accident, I am sure." Then, he rests a hand on his chin while looking straight at me.

"… Thank you very much, sir. I shall not let your trust go to waste."

"Yes, so I expect. Now then." He opens a folder he had by his side. "Herein lie the conditions the UN proposed to allow you to remain stationed in this base. However, let me tell you that you can refuse

the terms if you wish. Nobody will force you to remain here, you can opt to go back to America if you so desire."

"Understood. What will my punishment be if I decide to stay?"

"First, regardless of your choice, the patent of your simulators will be taken by the UN. Consider this the main punishment you'll receive, and in grand part why you are given the chance to remain here. You will lose all rights regarding them, your name will not be mentioned at all in their documents, and of course you won't receive any monetary compensation. You also will be forbidden from taking them or any diagrams or documents regarding them with you if you decide to leave."

Okay, this was unexpected but welcome nonetheless. If they thought I wanted to profit from them, and did this with that in mind, it means the consoles did their work. They bought me my chance to stay here. Well done, my gaming partners. Now, let's see what are the rest of the punishments.

"I understand, sir. It is a shame that I'll lose them, but at the least I got to complete them and see them work. This isn't the end of the world. What are the rest of the punishments?"

"Alright, the rest of the punishments will only apply if you choose to stay here. For a duration of twenty days, starting today, you will be forbidden from accessing the barracks. You will have to sleep in your cell for the duration of this punishment."

Ouch, that may hurt a bit. The shower in the cell only has cold water, so that's gonna suck. Also, anyone could walk in at any time so goodbye privacy. And security, if Yuuhi sends an assassin after me I'm as good as dead. If Tsukuyomi-san got all paranoid after seeing the blade, dead I shall be.

"You will also be forbidden from entering any of the PXs on the base as well, you will lose one meal a day, so you'll only eat breakfast and

dinner, and you'll have to eat the same rations that were provided to you during your CCSE."

Ok, this is a major one. So I lose lunch, I will have to eat that sorry excuse of food, and I won't be able to eat with the squad. Well, the last one might be for the best, who knows how they will react to the news of me being a murderer? Heh, for all I know Meiya and Chizuru might have gotten all negative again after letting the fact sink in and will start treating me like shit again.

"You will also be denied any free time you might have after your training drills are over. As soon as they finish, you will have to immediately report to the XO and will have to perform any duties she might have for you. To clarify this, this means that instead of having your lunch break you will have to continue to work without rest for the duration of this punishment."

I don't know if this is bad or not. I mean, that's what I've been doing since I came back, but losing all of my free time and rest during the afternoon and evening will be hard, especially if I have to eat those rations from now on.

"Those are the conditions the UN has established if you wish to stay here. Cadet, do you have an answer ready?"

Hmm… The conditions are really harsh. What I'm worried about is the fact that I'll have to remain in the detention barracks, if someone wants me dead anyone could snuck in there and shoot me while I sleep. I guess I'll have to trust in Sensei? But does she even want me here now, after all the trouble I caused? Heh, if I die I'll either loop again or stop the negativity. Win-Win for me. Though… I still wonder why she didn't vouch for me. Guess… she really will throw me away once I'm not useful anymore?

Inhaling deep, licking my lips to change rails, I return his stare and give a nod.

"I accept the terms, Secretary. Thanks for giving me another chance, I assure you I will be on my best behavior from now on." He smiles faintly and hands me a folder.

"Those are the official documents regarding your punishment, you shall be taken to the Vice Commander now, since she's your legal tutor for the time being, to have her sign them. You will probably receive your orders regarding your afternoon activities from now on then. That is all from me. Best of luck in your endeavors from now on. May we meet again on a more pleasant situation." He gets up and gives me a small nod, that I return.

As he leaves the MP enter the room, saying that they'll take me to a briefing room to meet with the XO.

We make our way there, with a tense silence hanging in the air. They're still holding their guns as if they had to shoot at any time, were they not notified about my decision? Once we arrive they give me the same talk as before and after it they open the door.

And inside the briefing room, sitting near Sensei, there was someone I did not expect to see…. What the hell?

"Oh, about time. Take a seat, Cadet Shirogane." Sensei addressed me without looking at me, waving towards a chair.

I sit down and take a quick glance to the person that was sitting to my left, who was intently staring since I entered the room. Yui Takamura, what is she doing here?

"Well, let's do this quickly. Cadet Shirogane, the mission I'll assign you for the duration of your punishment will be to aid 1st Lt. Takamura in her mission." Wait, what?

"It'll be a pleasure to work alongside you, Cadet. I'm expecting great things from you." Takamura stares into my eyes with a firm, glowing gaze and a small smile.

Okay, stop. What is happening here?

"Shirogane, to clarify what your mission entails, you'll be 1st Lieutenant Takamura's assistant for the duration of your punishment. You'll work alongside her in the development of the EML-Railgun that will take place on the same floor where you developed the simulators."

You made me Takamura's assistant? You fucking what?! I demand an explanation right now.

"Excuse me, Vice Commander. What am I supposed to do as her assistant?" I stare at her, but she doesn't even look at me as she plays with her bangs.

"Exactly what that means. You'll be her assistant, you'll help her carry documents, sort and write reports, guide her in the floor until she's familiar with it, and all kind of assistant stuff. Basically, you'll be her dog for twenty days. Also, she will oversee your training from now on when she has the time. This means she'll monitor you in the TSF simulators and mock battles you will do as part of your training course." She finally looks at me with a devilish smile, narrowing her eyes. Those violet eyes were different than her usual eyes, something was stirring in them. I don't like that look on her, at all. I've got a bad feeling about this.

"Do not worry, Cadet. I will try to not burden you much, I've heard of your… situation, so I shall try to not impose much onto you. I hope our time together can be a fruitful one." She then offers me her hand, and I shake it.

She doesn't seem… No, her firm gaze reminds me somehow of Meiya. She, too, is one of Yuuhi's pawns. Why is Sensei… Could it be? No, she… she wouldn't… Right?

"Likewise. It… It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, 1st Lieutenant." She gives me a small smile as she grips my hand. First

holding it softly, and after one second she tightens her grip. A firm, resolute handshake.

"Well, let's get the paperwork done. Hand me the folder, Cadet." I give her the folder and we start with the paperwork. It wasn't that much, we finished in just a few minutes.

"Will that be all, XO?" Sensei, you have to call me to your office. I have a lot of questions and things to tell you.

"From me? Yes. However, you will remain here and answer some questions from the 1st Lt., since you'll be working together this is a good chance for you to get to know her a bit. After this, you'll go to the Storage Center for your breakfast rations and will then start assisting 1st Lt. Takamura in her mission. Was that clear?" She didn't look at me, she's looking at nowhere while slowly playing with her bangs. It's almost as if she were talking with herself.

… *She's sending me to the wolves, isn't she?*

"… Roger."

"Well then, I'll take my leave." She gets up and leaves with hurried steps.

Why did she do this? To leave me with Takamura, to make me her assistant… Does she not want me to stay here? Her attitude, her tone, the way she addressed me… Did she… abandon me? This is how she used to be during my last loop, why did she-

"Cadet Shirogane?"

"Y-Yes?" Crap, I forgot she was here for a sec.

"Please, do not be so stiff. I know I might look intimidating, but I do not wish to make you uncomfortable. Well then, I heard that you were also stationed at Yukon, right?"

"Yes, I was."

Dammit, if she actually starts asking me stuff like where did I eat or what did I thought of the base my cover's gonna be… Why did Sensei leave me alone with her? Why is she going to be monitoring me? *I guess that… she might be considering removing me from her side .*

"It must have excruciatingly arduous, to withstand all that being merely a cadet."

"Huh? Yeah, it… was really hard."

"I was also tasked with protecting the city. My squad also… was wiped out trying to stop the Red Shift. I cannot imagine what you must have went through during all this time." Closing her eyes, a hand goes to a strand of hair.

Is she making conversation to make me lower my guard? Typical, start by relaxing your opponent before sending them a tricky question. Not falling for that.

"It was indeed a hard time."

"As another survivor, I hope we can get along." And then, a small smile. "Well, first things first, what can you tell me about yourself?"

"About me? There's not much to say, 1st Lieutenant. I'm a simple guy." I really don't want to be with you, what the hell is… No, calm down. *They want you to make a miss, they want a reaction out of you.*

"Then, can you tell me why did you choose to come back to the Empire?"

"… Well, when Prominence was scrapped I lost any chance to keep training as I was. While I had the chance to stay in the US branch of the UN, I got a proposition from the XO to come to this base. Since I didn't have many memories about my home, I wanted to come back to find out anything I could about me."

"Hmm… Well, how has been your stay here so far? What can I expect to find in my day-to-day routine?"

"It's been fine, overall. People don't like me because I was abroad, but I got used to it. There isn't anything noteworthy about our day-to-day orders, I suppose that if you have to eat in a PX you should either go a bit earlier or a bit later since they tend to get crowded in the middle of lunchtime. Also, listen to the mechanics and engineers closely, they can get very upset about the smallest details." Just answer the questions nicely, don't be a jerk. You complained when Meiya got paranoid, don't do the same yourself. *Don't give them any signs.*

"Yes, I… was reprimanded by them yesterday." Nodding slowly as she crosses her arms, her brows come down a bit. "So, if you don't mind me asking, do you have… any preferences regarding your piloting career?" She slightly leans forward, moving some of her hair off her face. Why is she staring at me with such eyes? She really does remind me of Meiya, just that the fire is violet instead of purple.

"Preferences? No, I guess not. I mean, I'll probably be assigned to the frontlines since I'm here if I get commissioned."

"Well, there are other roads available to you."

"Other roads?"

"Yes, for example… Have you ever thought about becoming a test pilot?" Yes, that's what I was doing with the XM3 and the parts Sensei made with the intel I brought.

"Well, I gave it some thought, but only the best pilots get that job. I haven't even entered a simulator yet, so I have no idea how good I'll actually be." Gotta keep the mask up.

"I see, of course. But if you had the chance, would you consider it?"

"If I had the chance? Hmm…" I mean, considering the sheer amount of BETA that are out there, maybe it would be for the best if I stayed developing crazy weapons and tech on the rear.

Someone who can do the insane stunts I do would be very valuable as a test pilot. And in this world, where the Japanese see me as an enemy, it might be for the best that I stay away from the Empire after I'm done helping Sensei with the 00 Unit. I can't forget my real goal here either, I have to stabilize myself or go back to my world. So, I either erase Sumika forever… or stay here for the rest of my life. In the second road, getting out of the Empire as soon as possible becomes a top priority for me, so let's leave all the windows open, in the case I need a way to make a living here so-

No, wait. Don't forget who you're talking with. She's probably doing some scouting. If I say yes then Yuuhi will know that I want to leave the Empire. And she'll probably be more aggressive towards me. But… I probably can't hide anything for too long, I still don't know what came over Sensei. If… If Sensei is cooperating with Yuuhi now…

"Forgive the sudden question, you must be troubled with all that happened in your CCSE and I suddenly ask you such a hard question." Saved by the clock, she makes a small bow. "Well, is there anything you'd like to ask me?" Yes, why the hell are you here and why do I have to be your assistant.

"Hmm… Exactly what do you expect me to do for you, 1st Lt.?"

"I didn't expect you to be assigned as my assistant, to be honest. I requested the XO an escort to not get lost on the base, since the underground levels are like nothing I've seen. I also asked for someone who could help me with the reports and all the documentation. I never expected she would assign you to me." She… sounds as if she knew me. Let's push them buttons.

"Why did you not expect 'me' as your assistant?" I narrow my eyes as I entwine my fingers like Sensei does.

"Huh? Well, I didn't expect a Cadet-"

"You didn't say 'I didn't expect a Cadet', you said 'I didn't expect you to be assigned to me'. Did you knew of me beforehand by any chance, 1st Lt. Takamura?" She flinched. Gotcha.

"… Ahem, let me frank with you. I did hear about you before coming here." No shit, Sherlock. You're just another pawn after all. "I was notified of your exceptional results in your trainings." Wait, what? What kind of lame excuse is that?

"Of my training? If you don't mind me asking, why were you notified of my activities?"

"Please do not be alarmed. I merely heard about you because of our connection. Since you also were in Yukon, I was told of another survivor who was at the base I was going to be transferred." Nice excuse. So my cover is being used to cover you, huh?

"I see. Forgive the rude tone, I've been through a lot these last few hours." I give her a small bow. Gotta keep appearances up, no matter what she says. "So, can you tell me what you expect me to do?"

"Yes, I merely want someone who guides me around until I'm familiar with the lower floors since there are a lot of hallways and rooms. I won't ask you to write many reports, but I'll rely on you to deliver them. Also, you'll have to carry documents for me while I'm working."

She's younger than me, yet she talks as if she were in her late twenties. Being a member of the nobility must be so sad. *They are always so stuck up about regulations and poise, they can't be more bothersome because the day doesn't have more hours.*

"Alright. Then, about you monitoring my training… Why was that decided? Do you know?" She straightened her posture and joined her hands by her lap.

"I do not know. The XO simply wished to have someone watching over you, to avoid any incidents from happening." She's lying. How do I know? Because she's not meeting my eye and her hands are moving a bit. She got nervous when I asked her that. Got you.

"I see. I'll try to not give you any trouble 1st Lt., I'll do my best to aid you from now on." She smiles at me as her tension disappears.

… You know, she's kinda cute when she smiles like that. Sadly, she's here to either kill me or help an assassin do its job. Sensei better have a good explanation for this.

"Likewise, I might be very strict but I do wish to get along with you. The project I'll be tackling is a very important one, so if the XO trusted in you to be my assistant, it means you are a reliable person. I am expecting good things from you, Cadet Shirogane. Well, shall we go to get your breakfast?" She gets up quickly, puts a folder under her arm, and, after brushing her hair off her face, sends a small smile at me. Wait, why is she coming along?

"Um, 1st Lieutenant… I also have to go get my clothes from my room, so maybe you should-"

"Oh, do not worry. I have enough free time. I also haven't eaten breakfast yet, so maybe we can eat together while I explain you in detail your duties and the project you'll be a part of in my office. Is that alright?" She's asking me as if I could choose. She's mocking me, must be laughing at me internally going by that smile. *Ugh, damn Royal…* No, calm down.

"Alright, let's go then. Just one last thing."

"Hmm? What is it?"

"I have a bad habit of calling people by their first names from time to time, so sorry in advance. I might end up calling you Yui or Takamura without any honorifics at some point."

"Oh, is that so? You are aware of the habit and haven't fixed it? Well, I suppose… I shall let it slide if it happens. Just don't do it frequently."

"I'll do my best." I probably won't. Once I get tired I stop giving a damn about the poise, the manners, and all that. If Mom couldn't fix me, no one will.

"Alright then, let's go."

I leave behind her, the MP are no longer here. The storage room is in the other side of the base, this will take a while.

Sigh… I don't like this, I'm gonna die any day now if Sensei crossed me. Well, let's do all I can. On a good note, if I learn more about the railgun I might recover some memories from my time after Babylon. I am curious about that blue Takemikazuchi.

On a completely unrelated note… Takamura doesn't seem to be very strong. *If I wanted to snap her neck, I could probably do it.* She doesn't have her sword with her, *so I could kill her if I suspect she's onto me* . Though, she pretty much decided we'll be eating together and I think she'll try to keep it that way. It's like she's been ordered to monitor my every move.

If Yuuhi pressured Sensei, she probably had no choice but to comply. If the Empire becomes a hindrance to the UN, Alt. IV will suffer the consequences. In such a scenario, what will Sensei choose? To side with the leader of the nation that supports her life project? Or to protect with someone who can't prove his identity, who is being targeted by her greatest ally, who keeps giving her problems all the time? I mean, I got on the UN's bad side now, I pretty much shot myself in the foot.

Well, no point in getting depressed. Alone I arrived here and alone I'll leave. Whether I leave alive or I die trying I have no choice but to keep going. In a time of crisis, people are divided in two groups: Those who start crying and those who start selling tissues. And I'm

gonna go sell all those tissues, goddammit! Though, gonna keep some for personal usage, since it seems I'm out of allies here. Sigh… I wonder if Kasumi will still be nice to me, at least?

But, anyways, I can't just give up. I have the power to loop back, and in the worst case I can pass my knowledge to another Takeru in another parallel world. It's like… It's like I could load a save and retry again. Or as if I was abusing save states. Pfft, I'm such an idiot. *Well, being able to laugh in dire situations is one of my good traits.*

"Cadet Shirogane? We're here."

"Oh? Sorry, I didn't notice." We already arrived? Wow, I really space out when I get lost in thought.

"I see, try to not do that please. I will need you to follow me, so it'd be a problem if you went in a different direction because you got lost in thought. Be more mindful of your surroundings, if you weren't following me you would have ended up in the other corner of the base." What's her problem? Not even Chizuru complained so much. Does she gets off when she scolds people?

"Sorry, I'll be more careful from now on." Let's get this done.

I enter the storage center and the one in charge there gave me my rations, quite harshly if I say so myself. Well, I can't complain. I did kill two of their comrades so I am the enemy now.

Whatever, I'm here to fix the causal leaks and help as much as I can. If they don't want my help, I'll just sever my connection with this world. It's not like I have anything that ties me here. Sensei is acting weird, and she did threaten my life once, my squad probably hates my guts now, Yuuhi and the Empire want my head on a silver plate, I also got the UN against me. All of this, in just a month. Great job, Takeru. Great job.

Hopefully, Sensei has an explanation for this. I still need her help to stabilize myself and either go back or stay here. I mean, she won't

betray me right? She still needs me to complete the 00 Unit.

Or could she lock me up and force me to help her? That's right… The worst case here is not me dying, is me being locked up after being stabilized here. Did… Did the notes I gave her had any info about that?

No, don't get paranoid. Tonight, I'll go talk with her. That should clear up this misunderstanding. Or so I hope.

Meanwhile, let's try to get along with Takamura. I do not need more problems, I'll have to deal with a lot of shit for twenty days so hopefully everything stays calm for a few days at the least. I do need a rest from all this.

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*Same Day . 0 5:09 PM.*

*(Yokohama Base, B17F. Planning Room.)*

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"Cadet Shirogane, could you bring me report 09-11-TE?"

"Let's see… Oh, here it is." I hand Takamura the report. She starts rushing through the pages until she reaches the one she's looking for. "Sir, what could we use as a coolant for the system?" She's talking with the engineers that got put in charge of planning and assembling the railgun.

So far so good. She's strict and very noisy, but honestly she doesn't seem to be a bad person inside. I'm sure that if I weren't being chased by Yuuhi we could have been friends.

All I've been doing is hand her reports and carry documents, this is easier than I thought it would be. It's also nice to see that the engineers here still treat me normally. Well, they do have some foreigners on the team so I guess they're more open minded than the rest of the Empire.

"Shirogane, put the report on the shelve please." I grab it and stash it away, they keep debating.

"This will be tricky, 1st Lt. Takamura. I don't think we could make the rails exactly like the report specifies."

"Then, what materials could we use?"

I go near the table, they have been coming and going about a lot of things since we started working. This thing does seem terribly impractical, though. I know how awesome it is, I remember how many BETAs it killed in a single shot. But if we can't even… Hmm…

"Then, there is the problem of the ammunition. The backpack would be too expensive to build, and since we have to make special ammo for it, its cost would only grow more. There is the problem of overheating too." The Chief Engineer points to the schematics that were both in the reports and the ones they had made.

Takamura brings one finger to her lips as she scans all the papers on the table. It seems like we will have to make some compromises to get this thing running. I mean, since we have to make it again from scratch, can't we just use smaller ammo? Like, 90mm or 75mm? Pretty sure all the energy from the induction would still be enough to make mincemeat out of the BETA, going by my memories of it when I infiltrated the JFK Hive. That way we could also have the same amount of ammo, even at a smaller size. That would also lower its weight a bit, right? Hey, shouldn't I… like, speak up or something?

"Um, 1st Lt.? Can I ask you something?"

"Hm? What is it?"

"You've been talking about making the backpack smaller and shortening the rails a bit, but why don't we change the ammo the railgun would fire? According to the data, the bullets are fired with a lot of energy from it, so if we have to lower its specs, shouldn't we lower the caliber of the ammo?"

"But that would make it weaker. If we lower the amount of ammo it can carry as well as its caliber, its performance would drop significantly. It will already be less powerful since we will lower the amount of bullets per barrage it can fire, we can't make the barrages even weaker." She raises a finger as she talked. She's like a fusion between Chizuru and Meiya.

"But wouldn't that allow us to not lower the final amount of ammo? I mean, if we have to rebuild it from scratch and we already have data on how destructive it can be, can't we instead redesign it to carry 800 payloads of 90mm or 75mm ammunition? That not only would make the backpack smaller and lighter, but the rails as well since we would build them to shoot smaller payloads. Wouldn't that save us time and resources down the line?" She starts stroking her hair as she looks at the diagrams again.

"Hmm… Instead of lowering the amount of 120mm we can carry, we lower our caliber while… And we lower its weight as well… It is worth considering, I suppose. Chief, what do you think?"

"It's a neat idea, that's for sure. There is no need to recreate it exactly as it was if we don't have the resources." The Chief scratches his head as he starts doing some operations on his computer. I can't understand half of the math behind this, but it seems using common sense worked out.

"Sigh…" Takamura looked down as she crossed her arms, dejected as me when I received my math tests.

"What is it, 1st Lt.?"

"Nothing. Just… I can't believe I didn't consider lowering the caliber of the ammo before. I was so focused on bringing the railgun back that I was absorbed into making it like it was. You are right, its firepower is already great and right now we need to focus on making it practical to build. Thanks for speaking up, Cadet."

"Don't mention it, just doing my job."

"Hehehe, well I'll be damned Shirogane. Seems like we hit a gold mine." The Chief says as he grins happily. He shows us the final numbers of his calculations.

So… For one, we could actually carry eight hundred payloads in the backpack using 76.2mm ammo. That number drops to seven hundred if we want to use 90mm. The lesser weight would play in our favor too I suppose. Then, thanks to the smaller ammo, the rails can also be made a little bit smaller and more compact. According to the numbers, we could somehow manage to make them with their original length. Sure, in the end the railgun might end up being a bit weaker than how I remember it, but it's gonna be a godsend once we get to Sadogashima.

"It does seem like we found the most convenient point to sacrifice. Chief, let's redo our schematics with this in mind. Shirogane, can you bring me the last three reports again?"

"Sure, let's see… Here you go."

---

**Two hours later…**

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"Mmgh… Damn, what pain." I stretch my arms to the ceiling as I walk towards the Storage Center.

My suggestion ended up being useful and the team started making all these drawings and calculations about the railgun so fast that it was honestly scary. They work fast and efficiently. That meant that I was running around delivering reports and folders for a long while. Man, that was tiring.

Well, glad I was useful. Takamura does seem like a good person, she's nothing like Meiya and Chizuru when it comes to interacting with foreigners. Shame we are on opposite teams. Oh well.

I enter the place and go to the desk where the attendant was.

"Excuse me, I'm here for my rations." I hand him my ID and he passes it through a reader. Without saying a word, he goes into the door that was behind him, connecting this little office to the actual storage room.

Well, I'm used to it by now. I'm starving, and to make matters worse Takamura wants to eat with me again. Something about having questions for me and whatnot.

The clerk comes back and hands me a small bag. It's… a bit more heavy than I thought it would be. Definitely heavier than this morning's one.

"Those are your rations, Cadet. Here's you ID Card." He hands me back my card, a small frown as he did so.

Sigh… Whatever. I leave the room, making my way towards Takamura's office. This morning she kept asking me questions about how I spent my time here, my training regimes, and what I expected to do after being commissioned. I suppose that's her job though, scouting me.

Once I finish my dinner, I'll go have a talk with Sensei. Not only I need some answers about Takamura and the chasers, but I also have to tell her of the memories I got from this world's Takeru.

Also, thanks to my interactions with Takamura today, I discovered something interesting about his feelings. He hated the Royal Guard, but not its members. When I thought about it, I realized I didn't start hating Tsukuyomi-san or Maya-san despite them being Guards here. I also don't hate Takamura or Meiya, despite them being pawns of Yuuhi. And surprisingly, I don't hate Yuuhi either, I just want her to stop trying to kill me. I mean, I'm here to help and bring some peace back to this place, and I think he also felt somewhat the same. So he didn't hate the people, he hated the way they did things.

When I saw Takamura not being an ass with the foreigners of the team, taking advice from them and not looking at me like I was some

sort of psychotic murderer it dawned on me. That deep hatred I felt when I was facing the Wasp Squad, when I was fighting against Mion, I hated them because they ignited the memories of something unfair happening to me, like when the CO told us of Alt. IV being scrapped during Christmas. I think the Guard screwed him badly, but instead of hating the people he started to resent their ways.

That's why he felt alone and misunderstood. No one shared his views on how things should be done, and so he grew more and more hateful towards the Royal Guards as a whole. I mean, that's why he still wished to save the Empire. He hadn't given up on it and I don't feel like he wanted to fight against them either.

Well, not like knowing that helps in any way, since they still want to off me.

Now, if I remember correctly I have to take a turn here, and then after two hallways I gotta take another turn to the right.

"Special-kun?" Hmm? Oh, what have we here?

"Hey, Ayamine. So you guys are already back?" What's up with that patch though?

"… Where were you?" And here we go again.

I don't like her gaze. She might be making her usual poker face but I can tell by those tense brows that she's suspicious of me. I know, different people. Still hurts, though.

"I was working."

"On what? Another special mission?" Narrowing her eye, her lips plucked.

"Sigh… It's part of my punishment." Wide as a watermelon, then narrowed as if she were cutting onions, her eye remained scanning me. She must hate me now, huh?

"Punishment? You… What happened?"

"Nothing much, just sent to deliver some reports and folders around. Though, since, well, you know, I killed those soldiers, I'm under a strict overall punishment."

"… I see."

"When did you guys got here?"

"Today at morning. We got a lecture from the Instructor this afternoon." She looks down, her hands are tightening into fists. Let's not bother her anymore, I also have no permission to stand around.

"Well, congrats on passing the test. I suppose I'll see you during the lectures. Later." I knew it was gonna be like this. But man, doesn't it hurt to be treated like-

**TUG**

Hm? Why can't I move all of sudden? As I look behind me, Kei was holding my sleeve. Or more like, gripping it. Staring at me without looking away, her brows kinda down. I can tell she's somewhat upset. What's it gonna be? Regular throw or an STA?

"The PX is this way. Let's go." She starts pulling me in the opposite direction of where I was going. Putting some force into my feet, I manage to stop her.

"Ayamine, stop it. I can't go to the PX."

"Why?"

"It's part of my punishment. For twenty days I can't go there, that's why I have to eat the rations we were given during the CCSE." I show her the bag I was carrying. She doesn't let me go, eyes still narrowed.

"… Really?"

"Yeah, it's how it is." I shrug her hand off, looking away. "It's for the best, don't wanna be around a bunch of people who'll just talk shit behind my back anyways." I really don't. It's for the best.

"I… see." What's up with her? Holding her chin, as if she were pondering something, she stays silent.

"Well, I'll be going. Can't be found doing nothing." And anyways, it's not like there's anything we can talk-

**TUG**

"… Ayamine, let me go." And if you're gonna throw me, just do it already.

"Got a question."

"Sigh… What?" She probably wants to poke the wound, ask me why I murdered her 'fellows'.

"Are you still part of the squad?" She gets closer and she stares into me with that poker face of hers.

"… If you have a complain, take it to the Instructor." Maybe you'll convince her to have me train on my own, to not mix with the traitorous American.

"So, yes?"

"Sigh… Yeah, I'm still in the squad despite what I did. That all?"

"… Are you the only one getting punished?"

"Huh? Why would anyone else get punished? I was the one who acted out of place. Are… you insinuating I would push the blame onto you guys?" Biting my lips, acid again came up my throat. She lets me go, still staring at me.

"No… Just curious."

What is going on inside her head? Can't read her expression at all. She isn't upset, she would have thrown me if she were. Not picking a fight, but not feeling sorry for me either… Whatever, different people. Don't be an idiot or you'll get hurt again. *Your beloved ones are gone, remember that well.*

"Well, I still have to go do some work so I'll be on my way if that's all you wanted."

Sigh… Really, what's her deal? I was sure she was gonna be super pissed at me remaining in the squad, but-

**TUG**

"… Okay, this is getting ridiculous. What do you want now?" As I turn around, she looks right back at me, lips and brows tense into a line.

"… Why did you kill them?"

…

"… Doesn't matter. No one believed me when I told them." I shrug her off, this time with more strength. "I did it, and that's that."

"… Were you told not to talk?"

"Huh?"

"The Instructor told us to not say Mitsurugi was hurt when she came back from seeing you off. Told us we had no proof, so we better just shut up about that."

I see… So NotMarimo-chan had those orders, but didn't tell me a thing about it before I got in the chopper. Sensei's work to keep me in the dark, I'm sure. Question is, why?

"… Are you not gonna defend yourself? Not gonna call anyone from America?"

"… Look, do me a solid and don't bring it up. Stop trying to look for dirt, and just leave me alone." Of course she would come to laugh at my misery, of course she would keep being as she was. I'm an idiot for expecting otherwise. *They're not who I remember them as, we're no longer in good terms. I have to stop seeing them as my allies, from here on in I have to fend for myself.*

"So, you're not going back to America?"

"… Here or there, there's no one waiting for me."

"Huh?"

"Have work to do, gotta go."

Sigh… It's on me, for expecting them to change. This is how they are here, and I am not… welcome here. *I am the stranger in this place. I always was an outsider.*

"Hey, Special-kun."

"… What?" Turning around, she was giving me a side glance. Then, she rose a hand.

"See you tomorrow."

"… Yeah, later." Waving once at me, she then turned around and went her way.

What… was that? I don't get it. Was she… seeing my reaction? Is she still against me or not? Sigh… Understanding the inner workings of Kei's lanes would take me more time than all my loops until now, so let's cease and desist there. Let's hope she can be willing to make peace.

I made my way to Takamura's office quickly, and knock on the door once I found the place.

"It's open." I hear her voice from inside and enter the office.

"Excuse me. Good evening, 1st Lieutenant."

"Good evening, please do sit down. Well, what did you think of your first day as my assistant?"

She was eating some sort of mix of meat and potatoes. Ugh, this is torture… That thing smells really nice too. I'm stuck with this…

"It wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. It's a very light work, honestly."

"Light? With all the things you had to carry around, you thought it was light?"

"I mean, compared to fighting BETA this is nothing. I wasn't even doing any math on my head or trying to figure out sizes or costs. I just ran around delivering papers, you were the one doing the hard stuff." It's honestly surprising, she really is a capable woman.

"Well, I can see what you mean. But most soldiers would think such a workload to be most tiring and bothersome. Also, the report I asked you to write was very well redacted. Did you receive any lessons for that?"

"No, I'm just used to it after stu-… I mean, after working under the Vice Commander." I almost blurted out that I went to college. I'm a walking danger when I'm hungry and tired. I open my rations and… Hm? What is this? D Rank? It's also the right amount of it. The hell?

"Of course, after working under her for a month you must have improved many of your abilities. Well, regardless, I thank you for your efforts today. Your advice on changing the ammo was truly helpful, I was too focused on making it like it was before that I didn't think of that." She gives me a small bow. Is this her plan to eventually make me lower my guard?

"Don't mention it, I'm just doing my part."

"If you say so. So, can I ask you what do you think of the railgun?"

"Hmm… It may be really expensive to build, but I believe it will be a great asset once completed. And since it will be lighter now, with the right TSF it might also be possible to move with it."

I know that blue Takemikazuchi could move in and out of a hive with it, and if we make it lighter that would get even easier. If we had it during Kashgar, the mission would have went so much more smoothly. We could have had some backpacks on the XG to recharge the thing, Tama would have made short work of all those hallways infested with BETA.

"Move with it? You think that's possible?!" She dropped her fork as her eyes widened.

"I mean… It's not impossible, right?"

"Well, theoretically… But it would be very risky. Not many TSFs could pull off such a feat."

"Couldn't the Takemikazuchi do that?"

"Hmm… It may be able to, since it is made to be more robust than all of our other TSFs… Sigh, if only we hadn't lost both prototypes…"

"1st Lt.? What is it?" Her shoulders dropped and she lowered her eyes as she finished speaking.

Oh right, they lost both prototypes of the Second during the Incident, she must have remembered that. Damn, I just had to.

"Oh, nothing. Just talking to myself. But you do have a point, if we make it lighter than it used to be, it might be possible for a high performance TSF to move with it. Anyways, you did a great job today. I hope you keep it up from now on." She smiles at me again. Really, it's a shame I have to be on my guard around you.

"I'll do my best to not disappoint."

We continue to eat with only the tickling of a clock sounding through the room, she enjoying her food, me sharpening my teeth against mine.

"I heard that tomorrow you'll have your piloting test, right?"

"Yeah, will you be monitoring my performance?"

"Yes, that's the idea. I know that it is hard to adapt to it, but don't be scared of how much it shakes. I believe that in the UN's testing they also have you pilot for awhile."

"Wait, for real?" Another difference to the list. So we will have to actually pilot for a while. Huh, neat.

"Yes, I believe they shall have you go through all the different speeds at first, and then you'll have to actually pilot in the simulator. I recall hearing it's done in this way to measure the ability of the pilot to adapt to any situation, quick thinking is crucial for survival after all. Also, it works to see how good one is when you just begin, so that when you start learning all the theory you see how much of a difference it makes." That sounds reasonable, I guess.

"Well, I hope I don't crash into a building or something."

"Ahahaha, do not worry about that. From what I've heard, not many pilots here have lasted much during their first ever simulation."

I might need to fake it here, or is it too late for that? I mean, I will eventually stop messing around so is there any point in holding back? No, if I learned anything from this loop is that I shouldn't show all my cards right away. And we will be using the old OS, so I might end up feeling uncomfortable. That might work in my favor. I'm gonna barrel roll myself into a tree or something.

"That is a relief. 1st Lt., if you don't mind me asking, how was your training regime?"

"Mine? I was one of the first women to be trained on a special school of the Empire back in Kyoto. I graduated at a very young age, that's why I already have experience despite being younger than you." That also makes sense, since this world's me was a 1st Lt. despite being only sixteen. I wonder where did he train?

"That must have been hard." I better shut up now that I think about it. She must have been in Kyoto during the fall, last thing I want is to make her remember any bad memories she might have.

"Yes, it was… However… It also gave me many teachings that forged me into who I am now. Even if I'm on the UN, my heart does not forget where it belongs." Arching her brows a bit, her tone became a bit more firm and loud.

Oh shit, here we go again. The Empire this, the Empire that. *They truly do resemble a flock of sheep. Or a music box, only able to repeat the same sounds over and over again.*

"I see."

"Cadet Shirogane, if I might… Can I ask you about the incidents in the CCSE?"

…

"Go ahead."

"Ahem, then… Why did you took the blame for the incidents?"

"Why? Because I was the one who did them, of course. I killed those men, I harmed another three. Regardless of why I did it, the blood is already on my hands."

"Hmm… That's a peculiar way of thinking. You still feel remorseful about killing those inexcusable soldiers?"

"I mean, of cour-… Wait, what?"

"Hm? I'm talking about the men you attacked. I understand that all of us are comrades in service of the Shogun, but you shouldn't feel bad about your actions."

"… I think we're talking about different things here."

"Huh? Were we not talking about the incidents of the CCSE?" She brings one hand to her chin as she furrows her brows.

"Yes, so why are you… Well, calling them in that way? I killed them, I have no justification for that." She closes her eyes and moves her hair our of her face. Then as she opens her eyes with a weird glow in them, she addresses me again.

"I do not think it unproper to feel guilty about that. No one likes to have to point their weapons towards a fellow, however, their actions were most shameful. You should not regret acting in self-defense to protect your squadmates."

Okay, stop. Pause. Someone tell the world to stop spinning for a sec, I need to figure out what the hell is going on here.

"1st Lt. Takamura, my punishment was given to me because I had nothing to prove that I killed them with a convincing enough reason."

"What are you talking about? I've heard from some people on the floor that you did it to save your comrades. It seems those soldiers were abusing their power when you found them, and it was what compelled you to such extremes during the fight as they did not relent in their intentions."

"How… But… When I was given my punishment, my explanations did not convince the people that were questioning me. They said I had no proof to prove that. Who was the one saying that?"

"Who? I don't know, I still don't know most faces here. When I went to the PX to get my food I overheard some people talking about you, about how they went overboard with your punishment."

How is this… No, why is this happening? Did one of the girls spoke up despite the warning of the Instructor? Maybe Sensei spread a rumor to help me? Or is Takamura lying just to get on my good side?

"Are you sure? Everybody is still treating me like they usually did, I don't think anyone thinks too highly of me. I doubt people would actually say that." Her gaze turns stern as she taps the table, with a bit too much force.

"I am telling the truth. Are you not misunderstanding your punishment, perchance?"

"No, I mean, I can't go to the PX, I can't go to my room, I lost my free time." And the consoles.

"Hmm… It is odd. Well, perhaps your superiors are trying to teach you not to be so reckless from now on? In any case, do not dwell on it with such oppression, I'd like to believe you learned a valuable lesson from this regretful turn of events." How convenient, you're awfully understanding towards me despite being a noble. I wonder why. "So long as you remember to restrain your temper I am sure you will be fine from now on. And if you need advice on your piloting training I'm more than willing to lend you a hand." Why is she beaming at me like that? She's being too obvious, does she think I won't notice how kind she sounds? Does Yuuhi suspect I'm a surface pilot?

"I guess… Maybe I'll ask the XO when I go report to her tonight. And, when you say helping me out, what do you mean exactly?"

"I could spar with you on the simulator and teach you some footing techniques I've learned, for example."

"And why would you do that? Aren't you super busy with the railgun?" Why is a Royal Guard being this nice to me, after what I did? What does she gain from this?

"Well, yes. But I'd like to thank you for your help, and… Ahem, considering your scores and numbers, I believe you have much potential. I merely wish to give you a hand." It does look like they suspect I'm a pilot. I mean… If Sensei is cooperating with them…

"Please don't trouble yourself with me. I'll manage somehow." She drops her shoulders and eyes dejectedly.

"I see. Well, I'll be monitoring your training so don't worry too much about it. In the same way you're supporting me in my project I'll support you in your training, so if you need help do not hesitate to ask." Help, huh?

"1st Lt., if I may… Could you consider helping my squad instead of just me?"

"Your squad?"

"Yes, it would be unfair if only I got to learn under you. So, if you have the time, would you spar with my squadmates as well? Of course, if it's too much of a bo-"

"Alright."

"Just like that?!"

"Well, you asked me so sincerely that I'd feel bad if I refused. And I do like to help people reach their potential. Back in Yukon, one member of my squad had…" Looking down, she squints her eyes. "some trouble with his machine. When I sparred with him, he could find a hint that drove him forward, and eventually he managed to dominate a new style fitting for his TSF. That feeling was truly… How to say it? It wasn't just rewarding… I was truly proud about that." Smiling a bit, placing a hand near her neck, she looks up once more."So, if I can do the same for you and your squad, it'll be an honor to help. After all, lending my strength to my fellows will only make us stronger. I do expect you all to take this seriously though,

since I won't hold back." She crosses her arms as she stares at me again, with violet flares in her eyes.

"Oh, don't worry about that. We are used to being drilled to the ground by our Instructor." Regardless of my situation, if she's willing to help the girls that will only make them better. Even if you end up going against me, thanks for this Takamura.

We talked for a little while about my squad, who they were and how I saw them, and what I thought they needed the most help in. Thankfully, she is willing to lend me a hand in this. This will work wonders, especially for Tama.

After some small talk about today's work, once I finished my rations, I excused myself and went my ways. Walking towards the elevator on B5F, ignoring those glares people were throwing at me, the insults behind my back, I felt a small chill on me. Unable to look away from the ground, licking my lips over and over, I pick up the pace.

I guess now… It's time to see what's your take in all this, Yuuko. Are we… still in the same team?

# Invited to a Masquerade

## Chapter 27: Invited to a Masquerade

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*November 23 rd . Near 8 PM.*

*(Elevator.)*

**[Takeru]**

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Down and down, down it goes. A chime beeps out, the door opens. Sighing as I placed my hands on my pockets, I stomped my way to the office.

Would be faking it if I said I'm not scared of her answer, but I gotta face her frontally. Otherwise, she might doubt my resolve or intentions. *That is, unless she'd rather dispose of me.* I do have a mountain of questions for you Yuuko, so you better be ready to answer them. I don't need to know everything that happens behind the curtain but I'd like confirmation on whether or not we're on the same team.

I tried my best today to not get paranoid, but considering everything that happened no one could blame me for being nervous right now. I might have some plays to make, but that's all. Without her cover, anyone could kill me in my sleep. And Tsukuyomi-san did already take my sword, so Yuuhi should already be informed of that, too. Sigh… First this talk with Sensei, then I see what choices I have on the table.

Reaching the end of the hallway, licking the inner side of my teeth, feeling a quiver below my ears, I knock the door as I usually do.

"Come in." The beep sounds, the door is unlocked, and in I go.

"Good evening, Sensei." Sitting as usual, the mountains of papers in the desk, she was focused on her laptop.

"Good evening, Shirogane. Did you need anything? I'm terribly busy right now." So you still refuse to look my way, huh.

"As per my instructions, I came here to see if there are any other things you want me to do. And because I have a lot of things to ask you."

"I have no more orders for you today. Return to your cell, that's all." That's all? Does she really think I'll leave like this?

"Sensei, I have something to ask you. It's about-"

"Cadet Shirogane, return to your cell. That's an order." She drilled knives through her eyes into mine. Returning the glare, folding my arms, my feet moved not a single bit.

"I'm not leaving. We need to talk."

"Should I call the MP and get you some bullets you can trip onto?"

"Come on, you can't do that!"

"I'm the XO of this base. So yes, I can!" She gives me devilish smile as she spins in her chair. Ugh, is she being serious or is she mocking me?

"I know I must have caused you a lot of problems, but can you listen to me?" She stops spinning and looks at me again, with a frown on her face and fire in her eyes.

"Oh no, you don't. You have no idea about all the problems you've caused me."

"Err… Well, yeah. I don't know, but-"

"Shirogane, I did tell you someone wanted you out of here. Yet, you went and did all you could to stay. It seems you didn't quite get my message."

"Your message?" That does… sound pretty definitive to me.

"You caused me a lot of trouble, you got a lot of eyes onto you. You're being a real pain right now."

"… You say that after all I did for you?"

"Yes. Now, go back to your cell. I have nothing to say to you right now." She again waves towards the door, returning her attention to her PC.

"But I do. And it's important." And you're going to listen.

"Let me guess, this is about the chasers that went after you?"

"Yes. Why didn't you notify me of it?"

"I couldn't do that. That's all."

… That's all? That's all, you say?! They could have died!

"And why couldn't you? I believe we had an agreement." Taking a step forward, can't help but frown. She fixes her posture and again sends her flares on me.

"You're just a Cadet here. You couldn't know of that. If anyone noticed you had that kind of knowledge, things would have gotten more ugly than what they are now. I trusted you could manage somehow, but you went and murdered people. Our people, Shirogane. And that is giving me a lot of unwanted problems when I should be focusing on the theories. You know, those things that will allow me to complete the 00 Unit and save mankind?"

"Well, maybe I could have avoided killing them if I knew they were coming at us." I return the glare, she frowns as she entwines her

fingers.

"You couldn't possess that intel and I couldn't get myself more involved in those political ploys. That is all. Do not forget why we're working together. Return to your cell, now."

So you're willing to hide things from me if they're problematic for you? Of course she would. She's looking out for herself. I forgot I was talking with the woman who put a gun to my head despite all that I gave her, the one that sent me to my world knowing what would happen to it.

Actually… I will never know whether that Sensei already knew of what happened to me when I came back. She didn't care to screw that version of my world she sent me back to after Marimo-chan's death if it meant making me 'ready' to tune the 00 Unit. And even if she did offer me a gun twice… That might have been a lie, those guns could have had no bullets in them. And she might have known of what would happen to me when I returned to my world, but chose to not try to make me stay. I'm sure I would have given her a lot of problems, considering that we did deceive the Americans during Ouka. She had lost a lot of power back then, my presence would only have made her position worse, me being an outsider.

And this Sensei might be the same. Once I'm not useful to her, she'll throw me away. And if it is to achieve her desired result, she'll do anything. I know that well already. But as much as I want to punch her right now… I need her. But this does confirm it. I need allies. For the day you no longer have a use for me.

"I know that I gave us a lot of problems, and I'm sorry about it. I'm not… proud of what I did. But there's still something I have to talk with you about." She sighs and rolls her eyes.

"If this is about how they were harming Mitsurugi when you-"

"I inherited some memories from this world's me, Sensei."

She twitches. Her eyes freeze as she looks at me. For a moment, she didn't say a thing. Gazing at me, as if scanning me for a reaction, couldn't help but to rise a brow at her sudden radio silence.

"You… got some of his memories?"

"Bits and pieces. Feelings, more than anything."

"… Is that so. And is any of that information relevant to Alt. IV or any of the tech we're developing here?"

"Well, no. But-"

"Then I don't care. And you also shouldn't." She waves towards the door, signaling me to leave.

"So you won't even hear me out?"

"Sigh… I'm busy right now. And the memories you got from this world's Shirogane have nothing to do with you, so just forget about them. Right now, you're useless. Stay put and don't give me more problems."

And without pause she returns her attention to her computer. Heh, what did I expect from her? Just because she was being nice I forgot how she truly is.

"… Useless, huh?" I turn around, heading towards the door. "Man, what a shame. It would suck if we had some major incidents coming at us right about now."

"Huh? Major incidents? Shirogane, what are-" I send her a side glance as I stop by the door.

"It's such a shame we don't have a dashing, brave, chestnut haired soldier that can warn us of those. We're stuck with bothersome, bratty, useless me. Shucks. Well, I'm sure I'm just getting in your way right now, so I'm going to cry myself to sleep on my cell. Goodnight,

Sensei." Giving her a small smile and a salute, I leave her office. Her shouts come after me shortly after.

"Shirogane! Shirogane, stop right there." I stop, glance back at her as she was coming out of her office for a second, and continue walking towards the elevator. Fuhuhu! "Shirogane, I order you to stop."

"Oh, what is it, Sensei? Want to keep reminding me of how useless I am right now?" She comes to me, with the face of a hungry lion.

"Stop messing around, what was that about some major incidents?!" She moves one hand up and down, pointing at me. Her face is completely distorted into a scowl.

I shrug her off. Want some intel? You're gonna have to earn it now.

You pissed me off. You're the only one who can protect me here, if you don't speak to me I have no security I'll be alive tomorrow morning. Yet you stay quiet, ignore my plea of help, and push me away.

I'm not useless, nor powerless. I have something else to use, I know of three incidents that will happen. One of them might happen because of us this time. But I won't be an idiot, I won't reveal my cards so easily. You want this intel? I better get something good in return, because I want to help you in fixing this mess, and I won't reach my peaceful world if I you don't help me. So I need you to drop that cold mask and listen to what I have to say.

"Don't worry Sensei, I'm sure you have better things to do than wasting your time with this useless Cadet." I turn around and continue towards the elevator.

"… Stop right there."

"Hmm? What is it? Weren't you super busy?" I grin at her and I'm met with a frown.

"Shirogane, let's go back to the office. Looks like we have a lot to talk about."

"Do we?"

"Yes, we do. Now, come on. Stop wast-"

"And what do I get from it?" She freezes again, staring at me for some seconds. She brings one hand to her chin as she gets closer.

"I've been doing a lot of things to keep you safe, you know. Just because I don't talk to you doesn't mean I'm not your ally."

"And for how much longer will you be on my side? For all I know, and going by your attitude, as soon as I speak you'll no longer have any use for me. You always discard anyone who brings you down, to cut your losses. If I'm more trouble than I'm worth, you'll discard me too. You wouldn't let my presence here get in the way of Alt. IV."

One of her eyes twitched, for less than a second the hand on her chin did too. Slowly, as a snail, she began to get even closer, never losing the poker face.

"And why do you think I've been covering you? Why do you think I called you before you boarded the copter? You were supposed to stay quiet and let me deal with everything, yet you went and alerted HC of your involvement in the consoles' development… Thanks to that, I'm facing many inquiries about you. And yes, I'm covering your back from all the vultures that are trying to find dirt to throw at you."

"I did all I could with the limited knowledge I had. You didn't vouch for me, and they told me they were planning to execute me. So, I used them as a shield to make the UN less willing to off me."

"… So you truly thought I had left you to fend for yourself?"

"Or at least didn't or couldn't do anything from your position. Someone wanted me out, someone with much power, enough to

make you be riled up about it, and I rather not have to restart another loop, thank you very much."

"And you think I don't know that?" Frowning much, she places a finger on her chin. "Do you truly think I wasn't going to protect you?"

"Then, why didn't you vouch for me?"

"Because I had my hands full negotiating with those who wanted to execute you, to ease the punishment on you so that you could stay, and to find some dirt on who was the one who ordered the chasers to do what they did."

"… And? Did that work?" For a sec, she bit her lower lip. Folding her arms, her eyes gain a sudden interest in the nearby walls for some reason.

"No, but regardless, this whole affair would have turned out better for us if you had let met take care of everything."

"You should have told me that before I left the island, or you know, have the Instructor warn me about not pressing about how no one would believe me about how Meiya was harmed."

"… I believe that was an obvious outcome." Folding her arms, inhaling through her nose, she looks to the wall. "In any case, I was planning to keep everything under wraps, by force if necessary, but you had to let them know of the consoles."

"I mean, wasn't what I did for the best? If you couldn't dissuade them on your end without making much noise, better to solve this quickly, right?" Again, one of her brows twitched as the edge of her lips returned in for a second.

"If everything had been solved, then yes, you would be right. However, I cannot guarantee that the storm has passed as of now."

"… What do you mean?"

"I don't know how or why, but the order to execute you was pulled back without warning, and not because of me, I'll have you know." Placing a hand on her chin again, she looks right into my eyes, hers still filled to the brim with fire. "They're onto you now, many people are looking into your situation here, Shirogane. And many with ill intentions. You made Mitsurugi and Sakaki pass the CCSE, you've made many enemies here."

"That's no surprise, we already knew the Shogunate was coming for me. I suppose they were the ones placing the pressure on you." She nods, allowing herself to sharply sigh, fuming wordlessly at the situation. "So… Bothersome people to you are coming at me, then?"

"… As I said, many are inquiring about your situation in this base, and your prior location as well. And I'm taking the necessary steps to silence them, yet the fact that people now know of the little sims you 'made' will keep the eyes of many onto you. Some are only curious about your background, others want to inquire about why I allowed you to develop thes e machines without giving reports about it, and others are… still wishing you to leave, since you got the pigeons out of the cage."

"… And despite that, you wanted to still keep me in the dark?" Biting my lips, I return her glare as she again stares at me in radio silence.

Why would you be bothered about me fixing this as swiftly as I did? They already were planning to deport me, or very probably kill me going by how dead serious she's being. So, what is it with you now, Sensei?

"Could you illuminate me on what has you being this… doubtful towards me?" Frowning a bit, her verbal gun aims at me and fires off glacial shells.

"Well, after all you just told me, and considering you didn't warn me of the chasers and put me under Takamura, maybe we're no longer playing for the same team." She then takes a step closer to me, her face filling my view.

"… Surely you're not saying what I think you're saying, Shirogane?"

"I dunno. I told you before that if I saw you were not taking me into account I'll consider our partnership as finished."

"Don't be ridiculous! You're a crucial part in Alt. IV, you're my bodyguard and-"

"And you left me in the dark, and were planning to keep doing so. You didn't vouch for me when I got interrogated despite what you knew, you left me in the detention barracks where I may end up murdered in my sleep, and now you don't even want to hear me out. Don't forget that I've seen many times this side of you, and every goddamn time I saw it bad things happened to either me or the ones I care about. So Sensei, is our pact still in effect?"

"Of course it is. Stop being stupid, I don't know why you're so scared. No one is laying a finger on you while you're on my base. I'd like to remind you that I am not those other versions of myself you met before, I am not going to backstab you in such a way." She's offended, obviously. But she's also lying.

"Are you sure about that? Because yesterday 1st Lt. Tsukuyomi came to question me at night. I got lucky she didn't murder me, but if I have to stay there for twenty days… Sensei?" Her eyes are widening, and now she frowns. Did she not know of this?

"When? At what hour? Why have I not heard of this?!" She got close and grabbed me by the collar, shaking me for a little while.

"So you had no idea a member of the Royal Guard went down to the detention barracks yesterday night?" She lets me go and then she crosses her arms. Fuming like a bull seeing a Tank-Class, one could practically hear the rumbling sparks coming out of her eyes.

"No! Why did… Did the guard let her through because he thought she would… Ugh, more nationalistic pricks!" She ruffles her hair as a deep sighs escapes her lips. "Enough, let's go back to the office. We

have a lot to talk about." She starts walking towards the door, but I remain still. "… Shirogane?"

"You do know that I could have been murdered yesterday, and you would have been none the wiser, right?"

"… I don't like your tone. What are you trying to say?"

"First, that since it seems I'm being targeted now I'm scared shitless of going to sleep. Second, that we can't trust the rest of the staff here to not suddenly do something against me. Third, that I can't trust in you to protect me in case that something goes wrong." One of her brows twitched again. "And fourth, you still haven't told me what do I get from speaking, nor reassured me about whether or not we're still on the same team." She sighs as she rubs her forehead slowly. After taking a sec to inhale deeply, looking my way again, she folds her arms real tight.

"Well, for one, I'll send someone trustworthy as the watchman of the detention barracks from now on. This isn't the first time the Royal Guard moves around the base without me knowing about it, remember the first time you met them?" Oh right, when Maya-san interrogated me. Sensei didn't knew about it until I told her. "That should take care of points one and three. As far as point two, don't worry. Nobody would dare to lay a hand on you while you're here. Don't forget who I am, nor that this base is under *my* command."

"There is one tiny, little problem. You see, I'm going to be doing mock battles in a TSF in a few days. Couldn't one mechanic do something to my Jump Units? Or to any other part of my TSF?"

"That's solved easily. I take Yashiro to the hangar, and anyone who tries to do anything funny gets kicked out. That should serve as an example. Good enough for you?" Will that truly be enough? Well, I can trust in Kasumi.

"I guess. And what about point four?"

"Let's discuss it in my office. Let's go already."

"… And you wouldn't be working with the Shogunate, would you?" She stops again and looks back, this time clearly pissed off.

"Shirogane, you are a key element for Alt. IV to succeed. Without you, I don't think we could stabilize the 00 Unit. You think I'll let anyone kill you?"

"The chasers could have, Tsukuyomi-san could have, Takamura may. I don't doubt Yuuhi will send an assassin after me sooner than we think." She flinched. That's weird, why is she furrowing her brows like that?

"Yuuhi? Are you talking about the Shogun? Why are you calling her by her name?"

"What's that look for? You know manners are not my thing, and yes, I'm talking about the Shogun. What other Yuuhi could I be talking about?"

"But why are you calling her by her first name? Even for you that's too much."

"Look, I don't care about poise and all that stuff. I'm sure she wants my head."

"… The upper or the lower one?" She then gives me a smirk.

"SENSEI!"

"And? Why do you think… You said you got some memories from this world's you, didn't you? Is that what got you so paranoid?"

"Maybe. I also met those two damn pickles during the CCSE, and if he was related to them, the Shogun must have known of him. I'm sure she already has a plan to kill me."

"Pickles? Related?" She blinks fast for a while before ruffling her hair, again letting a sigh out. "Alright, enough with this. I honestly have no idea what you're talking about. Yoroi did mention something about the Shogun having plans about you, I also got informed this world's you served the Shogun. That's why I've been so busy, trying to get us some clear support to protect you in case anything happened. I honestly didn't think they would come after you, why do you think that?"

"I told you already. I met two members of the Tsukuyomi family during the CCSE, and they must have reported what happened there to Yuuhi. If he was related to the Tsukuyomis, I'm sure they will want me dead as soon as possible." And now they have the sword, so double that up.

"And since I kept you in the dark, you thought I chose to hand you over before the Shogun became a hazard for Alt. IV?"

"Yeah, if it was a choice between me and getting in more trouble with the Empire, you'd get rid of me after all." She sighs rubbing her head.

"You truly are an idiot. Let's stop wasting time, we have a lot to talk about. Come already."

She turns around and briskly returns to her office. Well, I got her to talk. So she had a talk with Yoroi-san, huh? She knew this world's me was related to the Shogun and kept quiet. And you want me to believe you, of all people, didn't knew that Tsukuyomi-san came to my cell last night? Yeah, right. Nothing escapes your sight, not on this base.

Whatever, let's hear her out. Then I'll decide what to do.

After going back and sitting again, she tells me a summarized version of what Yoroi-san told her. This world's me fought on the Battle of Kyoto, he was recruited into the Guard officially after that, he served the Koubuin House and Yuuhi before she was appointed

as the Shogun, and Sensei says she thinks he did some dirty work for the Shogunate. That last part was the important part. He felt conflicted regarding his views, so I bet those missions did a number on his mental health.

Then, almost taking no pause in her words, almost as if she had forgotten that oxygen was a thing, she tells me of all the pressure she received to send the Wasp Squad, and showed me her mail inbox. Ninety six daily mails, with pleas, threats, offers and bribes. What the actual fuck? She continues explaining me about NotMarimo-chan's report and what came after our encounter with the soldiers.

"Then when the report about you reached HC, I negotiated with them for quite some time. Some old shits wanted to make your squad execute you, to set an example for the other foreigners apparently. Honestly, I know the UN needs to gather personnel from the country where it's set up, but did they have to scout those idiots for the Council?!"

"I mean, if they hadn't done that, wouldn't that have given them more trouble with the Shogunate?" She strokes her bangs as she makes coffee.

"Yes, I know that already. It's just frustrating to deal with them. I used my connections and some suspicions I got to threaten that Captain. The UN couldn't allow that intel to reach the Empire, so they needed to silence you. But with my intervention, all I could do was try to stop the order to execute you without arising suspicions. I can't have anyone knowing you're vital to Alt. IV, or those damn Alt. V supporters may end up sending a kamikaze to get rid of you." I gulp at the notion. Imagine someone full of explosives rushing at you, ready to blow him or herself up just to off you. "Which is why this was taking its time, since as you said I couldn't make much noise about it." She then sends a narrowed side glance my way, her tone slowing down now. "I was planning to delay your punishment until I could show the UN the XM3, saying that you gave me the idea for it. But you had to go and let them know of the simulators."

"But in the end, that was what made many agree to do what you wanted them to, right?"

"Well, yes." Her brows arch down a bit. She hands me my cup, then slowly sits down by the blackboard. "But it made them aware of your involvement in the sims, and that was not necessary. There's also the fact that the execution order was retracted this morning without notice or explanation."

"And you weren't behind that in any way?"

"No, I was moving some strings, but in no way things would have settled down so quickly." She then drinks some coffee, brows still arched. I do too, looking up.

Wait… A sudden change in the decision to kill me… Something that changed overnight…

"… I think I know why that happened."

"Huh?" Clearing the second of surprise away, she leans her arms on the table, looking straight at me. "You do, hmm? Something in the memories of this world's you, perhaps?"

"No, not that. See, I sent 1st Lt. Tsukuyomi after my sword yesterday and-"

"Excuse me, why did you do that?" Fuming much, screw the fire, she has an entire flamethrower in her eyes now. "No, what did she want from you?"

Sigh… Telling her of what Meiya had told me of the sword, of what Tsukuyomi-san asked about when she visited me yesterday, and why I chose to hand over the blade, she began to spin in her chair, eyes closed but lips made into a small, tight line.

"… You do realize you just made yourself into a target for the Shogunate, do you?"

"It was better than having them grow suspicious of me, or putting you in trouble while trying to cover me."

"Sigh… I do acknowledge that, and I agree that hiding the sword wouldn't have done us any favors. Still…" Her spinning suddenly stops, then she rolls back to face me. "Why did they remove the execution order then? What else did you talk about with that woman?"

"I ended up telling her of the Pickles, and it's why she started asking me all those weird questions."

"… What are these 'Pickles' you keep mentioning, Shirogane?"

"Oh, I think it's how this world's me referred to the young Tsukuyomis that were part of the CCSE."

"Hmm… So, it is possible they were confused after the exchange. However, I can see why you grew so fearful. If the Shogun now knows of you possessing one of such blades, it is entirely possible that she is wishing to have you dead as you said. Sigh… Don't worry, I'll try to keep her at bay somehow."

"You think you can do that?"

Her brows arch down, as slowly as a progress bar fills up she squints her eyes while leaning her cheek onto a coiling fist. Then, she takes a sip of coffee, looking away.

"You already explained your situation with the blade, it was nothing but an error on your part because you lost your memory. No harm was done, so I'll pressure them to drop any intents they might have to harm you. And I was already preparing some countermeasures to allow you to stay here, considering how insistent Yoroi was when he came last time."

"Sigh… Good to know that. There is one thing you didn't explain, though."

"What is it?"

"Takamura. Why did you make me her assistant?"

"Oh, her. Don't worry, Yashiro read her mind while we had a meeting. I made a point to ask her about you, she doesn't have any bad intentions. If we can keep the Shogun from attacking you, she shouldn't be a problem. I also spread a rumor around the base, that you had to kill the soldiers because they harmed your squad. I don't need the whole base to get against you, and I honestly have enough dirt on the Council that if they try anything, I'll leak some sensible intel to Yoroi." So that's what Takamura was talking about. Even so, will just a rumor be enough? "Now, can you explain to me what happened during the CCSE?"

I tell her of my encounters with the soldiers, how I felt during the chase, what I heard during my clash with Mion, what she told me after that, my conclusions after calming down and reflecting on those feelings and about how I saw them at the end of the CCSE. Not interrupting me even once, which is kinda odd, she tapped her lips with two fingers as I spoke.

"… This is interesting." She's staring again at nowhere. She must be lost in thought again.

"That's not how I would describe this mess. Sensei, I think it's safe to assume that-"

"Shirogane, you said you couldn't really remember things clearly despite feeling like you absorbed the memories of this world's you, right?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Then, we'll make you remember them."

"Huh? How are-"

"If you have those feelings in you, that means that the memories of this world's you lie repressed in your subconscious, just like your memories from your past loops were repressed in you when you came back after your last loop. Normally, you would have to adapt to them first before being able to recall them clearly, but since we have Yashiro here we can use her to bring them out faster."

"Wait… Wouldn't that… like, change my personality? Wouldn't I become this world's Takeru?"

"Not if we do this carefully." Smiling again, she then points at me. "I mean, you didn't revert to your version of when you left that other world, you absorbed its knowledge and experiences into the you that had lived two years in your world. Of course, you might begin to share some feelings and ideas, but that's only because you already were similar to him in that sense."

"And you're sure this is safe?"

"Do you know of any other ways in which you can safely do this other than under my watch, and with Yashiro's help?" Placing a hand on her chin, her eyes sharpening, taking a hawkish tint, she leaned forward while resting an elbow on the table.

"Well, no, not really… So, we'll use that knowledge for what exactly?" She smiles like a devil as she raises a finger to the ceiling.

"To deceive the Shogun, of course!"

"… You mean making her believe I'm actually Takeru Shirogane?"

"Aren't you?" She puts one finger to her cheek and chuckles. Sigh…

"Well, yes. But I'm not their Takeru, even if I inherited some memories I am different than him. This isn't like when I got my own memories back, even if I share some traits with him I don't think I could replicate his mannerisms perfectly."

"Oh, don't worry about it. If you can't convince them, confuse them! They just need to see some similarities, all the other different things about you can be explained through your memory loss and experiences in Yukon."

"I think this will come back to bite us hard in the ass down the line…" And I don't think it's safe for me. If they ever find out I was deceiving them…

"It's that or getting the Shogun to come after your life. She now knows of that blade, and yet I assume she was the one who ordered to call off the execution order, for it to have happened so suddenly. I can deal with the members of the HC and the other politicians, but Her Purpleness is another matter entirely. There's little I can do if she convinces people to come at you again."

"So, since she seems to be doubting, you want to safely make me regain some memories of this world's me to calm her down and 'prove' to them I actually am who I say I am?"

"Yes, that would also immensely help me in dealing with your cover. Also, by seeing how you, as a Nucleus, absorb memories, I might be able to find a way to stabilize your self in this world far easier than I was expecting."

"Huh… So, you're really sure this will work?"

"Yes, I do." Saying it a bit louder, she narrows her eyes at me. I shrug and drink some more coffee. "If the Shogun called off the order, and the Tsukuyomi were close to him, they will surely lay off the pressure once they see you are, indeed, Takeru Shirogane."

"But what if they want me to assume his role then?"

"You lost your memories and want to keep living as you are now. No act, no lies, it's your life after all. Or, what?" Then, she again narrows her eyes, furrows her brows, and glances at me with more fire

coming out. "You wouldn't be thinking on leaving to the Guard, would you?"

"What?! Of course I'm not. The hell did this come from?" Then, she gives me a side glance, the hold on her mug tightening a bit.

"Well, you seem already *quite* fond of Her Purpleness, calling her Yuuhi like that."

"Oh, shut up. You know I don't care about status that your plan relies on that this world's me was on good terms with the Shogun, what are we gonna do if-"

"I'm sure he was. If not, they wouldn't have called off the execution orders. The fact that they're taking their time, despite the reports the three Tsukuyomis must have delivered, is proof of that." I guess… I mean, Tsukuyomi-san got weird yesterday after I said that bit about the pickles.

"Guess we just gotta bite the bullet and see what happens, huh."

"Exactly. This is our best bet to guarantee your safety, if the Shogun gives you her blessing all the nationalistic pricks will start seeing you as a fellow instead of a traitor. And then, all the issues we're facing now will be gone."

"Well… I guess we can give this a spin and see how it goes, at least."

"Good. So, what was that about some major incidents happening?"

"What do I get from this again? So far, you've given me no reassurance that things will get better. We're just making assumptions in the air." And again, her brows twitch.

"Is there anything you want?"

I bring my hand to my chin, remembering the things I thought about before coming to talk to her. Originally I was going to propose her

these ideas, but I think it'll be for the better if I take care of this myself. *As much as I welcome her support, I won't be as foolish as to believe it to be unconditional.*

"A few things, actually. This is the last bit of useful intel I have, since I'm sure the missions in the future will be very different. I don't know how the ripple will change history after we start Alt. IV officially. So, in exchange for everything I've done until now, I want you to give me real power."

"What do you mean?"

"I want an S5 Clearance pass for Hangar 90."

"What for?" She narrows her eyes, entwines her fingers, and leans forward.

"In case I have to escape from some pursuers. I also want that midnight blue Kagerou to be there, ready to deploy at any time for me." With that TSF I'm sure I could fight off anyone Yuuhi might send after me, even the Royal Guard.

"That one is already there, being used on another project. I suppose I could make you a part of it, under the guise of your punishment." Another project? Just how many things is she doing here? "Anything else?"

"I also want you to order me to do some 'paperwork' for you during my punishment. I want that as a cover, there's some things I want to research in the meantime. I'll need an office and a PC."

"Research? Exactly what do you want to research?" The fire gives way to embers, shining bright as she leans forward even more. Of course she'll be curious about it.

"Weaponry. There are a few ideas I have, but I don't know how practical they would be, so the first step is reading up on the intel we have here. My discussions with Takamura and the Chief Engineer

today made me realize you people lack flexibility, I honestly can't believe they were fixed on using 120mm ammunition despite all the resources that would take."

"Wait, you were the one that suggested to use smaller ammo?"

"You didn't know that? Way to go, Sensei." Frowning again, no retort comes out this time. She takes a sip from her coffee and let's a sigh escape her lips.

"Can you tell me what do you want to research? I might be able to lend you a hand."

"Don't worry, I can take care of it on my own." Her eyes veer down, breaking contact with me, as she goes for her mug again. "Offense wise, we have our bases covered. But there are a few little things I'd like to change and make. Like for example, we put sensors in every single part of our TSFs, right? Why can't we put them on the weapons too?"

"On the weapons? What for?"

"To help in not hitting your allies in close combat. And to improve communication. During a the fight in the Original Hive, my comms got screwed up so badly I lost contact with my whole squad. I don't remember if I told you, but on the walls of the BETA hives there's this material that blocks electric signals or something like that. Well, even if we would have been screwed anyways, having more sensors to help in the cramped, filled with BETA, and narrow hallways of a hive would come in handy." Sensei was again looking at the ceiling, ruffling her hair.

"… Sensors on the weapons, huh? Anything else?"

"Yes, but I'll let those be a surprise for you. I have three or four ideas, but again, I don't know if they're worth your time yet. I wanna do something, I want to prove to the UN that I am useful and that they shouldn't kill me off."

"If that's what you want, I'll allow it. If you say you've got more things coming, I'll do my part. Is there anything else you wanted to do?"

"The last one is more of a weird… How to say it? Fetish of mine. Is it possible to…" She brings a hand to her mouth, looking up at nowhere. "… What do you think?"

"… Yes, it is possible. But… No, with that other… Hmm…"

"So it isn't out of our reach?"

"No, it isn't. And you're sure you can do it?"

"Yeah. With two of them I'm sure we could turn this thing around. And also, it would be useful for the future." And for myself too.

"Hmm… We don't have enough intel to work with that right now. That will have to wait, but I do have some preparations that would go well with your idea."

"Then you have your deal. I'll tell you a bit of what will happen, and all of it one week before it happens."

"… Say, Shirogane. Are you happy with that Kagerou you modified?" Without looking at me, she begins to spin in her chair.

"Yeah? Why? Think you can get me a Shiranui?"

"What if I told you I could get you a Takemikazuchi?"

"… By Takemikazuchi, you mean the Type-00 that belongs to the Royal Guard?"

"Yes, what else could I mean? Then, you could modify it to make it like the Takemikazuchi of that game, with those weird machineguns built into its waist or whatever. I'm sure you'll feel more safe with that than with a Kagerou."

"For real?" She nods. "No kidding?" I mean, that would be a dream come true, to pilot Valgern-On's version of the Takemikazuchi.

"No? I got a deal from the Shogun, to hand her the sensors, antennas, radars, and the new parts of the F-15 in exchange for ten Type-00 for my personal use. Currently, the Valkyries have nine members. Isumi, Hayase, Munakata, Kazama, Suzumiya, Kashiwagi, Tsukiji, Takahara, Asakura. If I count you, the Viking, we have exactly ten members in the A-01 Squad. So, it makes perfect sense to give you that last Takemikazuchi, since you also want to do tests with it."

She wasn't kidding, her eyes had that glow she gets when she finds a new toy to play around with. She then hands me a folder, with the details of the deal. A Type-00C, huh? Hmm… I did not expect this, that's for sure. Imagine how good it'll be with the new XM3, radars, sensors and Jump Units. Maybe we could give it a little horn with the new antenna design too. In any case, if I can get one of those I won't say no, but why did she not want to talk with me about all this?

"Sensei, if you planned this for me, why were you keeping quiet when I came to speak with you?"

"Because, as I said before, there are things I cannot let you in. Possessing such knowledge would place you in danger, or make you even more worried. To be honest, I was thinking that someone was planning to send an assassin to kill you since the execution was called off, but I didn't expect the Shogunate to be coming for you so suddenly."

"And since I'm a causal magnet, you can't risk me getting negative, huh."

"Exactly. I admit I should have trusted in you more, and it is in part thanks to how you handled the situation with the sword that we have a shot at pacifying Her Purpleness now. Shirogane, just to be clear, I am on your side. So long as you help me, you won't leave this base

and no one will harm you. So, let's keep those nationalistic idiots at bay. We have a world to save, right?"

…

'So long as you help me', huh?

"… And this time you won't discard me or go around doing things behind my back?"

"I never planned to do that. I am not the other versions you met." Fuming much, she stops spinning to give me a scolding gaze. "You're my most important ally, so stop being so negative already, it doesn't suit you. You're the one that's always happy, what am I gonna do if you get all depressed? Do you want to make Yashiro sad too?"

"Hey, that's not… It's just…"

"No one will lay a finger on you, so you can rest easy. Keep your temper in check and don't fight with your squad anymore. And don't be suspicious of Takamura, she's on our side too. It'll take some time until we can prove your identity, so simply stay on your guard until this is taken care of. Are we clear?" Sighing, I give her a nod. "Good. Now, tell me what you think is safe about those incidents." I guess this is as good as it gets. I won't get anything else out of her.

"Sigh… Got it. But you better follow through with your promises." Rolling her eyes, she folds her arms and nods, awaiting my words. "Well, first things first, one incident doesn't have a fixed date. It happens when a certain thing is sent here. Do we have an OTH Cannon here?"

"Yes, we do. To think we would need it… I can't wait to see what happens." Seriously, why are you smiling about that? You should be shaking in fear, not shivering in excitement. Sigh…

"Well, I somehow found something that will help us with that, so hopefully we can avoid getting more eyes onto us."

"What do you mean by that? What happens with this accident?"

"We can either deal with it or use your influence to stop it. If we keep drawing attention to us we will only get into more trouble, so we have to deal with it ourselves this time. I casually stumbled upon something that will help us with that." Assuming Takamura's trainings help Tama gain some more confidence. "And we have the XM3 now on our side, I'm sure things will turn out okay." Or we go all KAPUT! and I have to restart the loop.

"You found something? Whatever, I'll let you deal with that. What about the other two incidents?"

"We can actually use those two to our advantage, I think. And one is part of the reason why I told Tsukuyomi-san about my sword." Eyes squinted for a sec, lips became a rigid line. "One involves a natural disaster, we can use it to appeal to the Shogunate."

"Appeal? So, you say we help them out? Despite how much they hate us?"

"Ohoho, yes I do. They hate us, but we have a certain person here that they won't be able to say no to." Sensei grins as the answer came to her.

"Mitsurugi, huh? So we use her to make sure this incident is solved peacefully?"

"Basically. If Takamura is willing to help, then we have two people that can help with that. It might not be much, but saving Japanese lives should be worth something for the Shogunate. We could emphasize how many resources we spent saving those people instead of giving our backs to them. And it lets the squad get some hands on experience, too."

"Hmm… Not a bad idea, if I say so myself. Then, what about the last one?" I need to choose my words carefully for this one.

"That's the tricky one. Last time, when I tried to prevent the second accident, things got out of control pretty fast. I didn't know of the political situation of the Empire, and the ripple caused a horrible thing to pass. That is the third incident."

"So… I suppose this entails some sort of political struggle?"

"Sensei, how do you think I knew of the Shogun before absorbing this world's me's data?" She closes her eyes as she drinks some more coffee, then returns a firm gaze towards me.

"… So that's the one we have to avoid at all costs. What you're saying is, we have to prevent any more damage to our relations with the Empire?"

"Basically, we need to create a scenario where violence can't be used to further someone's political agenda. That's why I handed over the blade yesterday, to avoid anyone using that to spark that up." I don't want to mention Kei's letters, because that would get her out of the squad. I need every single pilot I can get for the eventual Kashgar raid. As much as she might hate me, I can't lose her skills.

"So, if someone had to be blamed, you would shoulder it on your own?"

"Well, I did bring the blade here myself… Wouldn't sit right with me to not do something about it."

"Sigh… Well, what's done is done. Then, with all the more reason, we need to fix our relationship with the Shogun. I'll prepare the office you asked me and give you a nice computer, so that you can work as much as you want. I'll contact the Empire to accept this accord the Shogun asked of me, I'll get us those Type-00C as soon as I can. Oh, by the by, your Fubukis are on the way already, they should arrive in two days."

"For real? Awesome. Oh, that reminds me… Are we training the squad with the XM3?" She waves one finger left and right as she smiles. W-What is she plotting now?

"No, first I want them to get a feel of the old OS. You did mention before that we trained them with the prototype last time around, right? This time, let's show them how important it is to cooperate with foreigners using the XM3. I'll give it to you, and only you, and they'll have to ask for it." I don't think that's a good idea. At all.

"Are you sure that won't make them more suspicious about me? Or more resentful towards the UN?" I can't help but to raise a brow at her, but she just shrugs.

"In the end, our goal is to make the Shogun give you her blessing, so it doesn't matter." I can see what you mean, but I don't think this will be fine for the time being. We don't even know how that business with his memories will turn out.

"Alright. I suppose that's that. Oh right! How are the theories? And the 00 Unit?" She then slumps into the chair as she ruffles her hair.

"The tests are not going well."

"… As in, we failed them or-"

"We couldn't generate a reaction from the Reactor with what I have now. If the communication happened, I have no way to confirm it for now. As I said before, I'll send the Valkyries to Sadogashima in a few days, and that also will work as a test for the XM3 too."

"Well, that sucks. What about the 00 Unit?"

"Sigh… Thankfully, we figured out how to fix the flaw of the data leak. But we are having problems adjusting the hardware to perform what we want it to do."

"Is it… not going to work?"

"Oh, not saying that. I can make it work." She rose a finger, fire again coming out of her eyes as she narrowed them a bit. "But we're in the middle of the optimization for that, between the tests on the Reactor and me reading the theories throughly. Since it's directly related to that whole emotional linkage of the second theory, and we are using prototype versions of the programs, the progress has been rather slow so far. Once we finish that ESP protocol, I believe there will be no leaks when the 00 Unit connects to a hive to recharge. But it is taking quite some time. More than what I thought."

"I see. I can't really help you with that. Oh, what I can tell you is that I did notice something about that theory." Her eyes spark back to life as she straightens her posture. This does work in my favor, so let's try to be nice to her.

"What did you notice?"

"The data that flows through me can be somehow controlled. I'm convinced my squadmates were receiving negative causal data through me, due to how paranoid they got. And when I got depressed and started doubting them, I also started getting more and more negative. As of late, it's been hard to control. So one's attitude does affect the leaks, especially when I'm around."

"Hmm… Then, with all the more reason, stop being so depressed. You're only making things worse here."

"I know… It's… Well, I'll do my best to not be so paranoid anymore. And if I could affect my squadmates, the 00 Unit will definitely be affected by it, and we can use that to draw the best solutions once she's up and running again." That's my hope here, the second theory is what will allow me to reach my slightly-more-peaceful world.

No matter how dark the future is, if Sumika can start pinpointing causal data from across all parallel worlds then we will be able to turn the tide of this war. Nobody can argue against results. That's my key to get out from this cage, not even the Empire would be able to

keep antagonizing us after we recapture Sadogashima and neutralize the Cheorwon Hive.

"Well, that's good to know. I will have you monitored during these memory recovery sessions, to gather more data on the Nucleus and see if I can get a hint on how to proceed. That's all, go and rest for today."

"So… You're sure this will work, right?"

"… What is it? Are you still doubting me?" Leaning forward and squinting her eyes, a battalion of barrels aimed my way within her tone.

"Just… I don't think he was on good terms with Yuuhi. Do you have a plan in case the memory recovery goes wrong?"

"… Perhaps. For now, you shouldn't get negative about it. You are in need of some good rest, so simply go to sleep for today. We'll deal with the issues once they come up. Are we clear, Shirogane?"

"… Yeah. Goodnight, Sensei." She gives me a small smile as she finishes her coffee, I sigh as I stand up, going to the door.

"… Also, I'll make sure you remain safe in the detention barracks. Since people have to ask for permission to enter them, you're safer there than in your room for now. So-"

"I'll stay cool, I know. Thanks, Yuuko." Looking back, I give her a smile. She looks away as she ruffles her hair, bored as always.

"… Good. Now, off you go."

I nod, turn around as I wave her way, and leave the office. She locks the door as soon as I got out.

Walking down the hallway, passing on the idea of greeting Kasumi considering the mood I'm in, dragging my feet and feeling as if a

mountain was on my shoulders, I reached the elevator and pushed the buttons to call it back down here.

Sigh… We could have avoided that discussion if she had talked to me from the start. Honestly, what did she expected me to do? It's not like I wanted to murder those guys.

Well, whatever. I'll start doing stuff from now on, since I can't rely on my knowledge from the other world anymore thanks to all the changes that are in this world. I do hope my weird ideas can actually work, they would be a godsend during Sadogashima if we managed to get a proof-of-concept done. And I would benefit from having useful stuff with my name on them, just in case Sensei decides to once more hide stuff from me.

But man… A Takemikazuchi… Just with that, Sadogashima got less scarier. It's still gonna be a hard mission, that's for sure. And that's without counting that other idea… Man, we just might be able to capture the Reactor this time around. I wonder if I can convince Sensei to not blow it up. I mean, we do need more G-Elements…

The elevator reaches the floor, the door opens, I get in and push them buttons, and then I lay onto a wall as the things begins to go up.

I never thought I would be happy about an eruption happening in my life, but if the UN can aid the Empire in the rescue efforts then things might go a bit better between both sides. We don't need Sagiri doing another coup.

So, it's time to start pulling my weight here, I can't start dragging my feet. This is a prime chance to get more and more power and support for me, and for Sensei too. With all the eyes that are on me right now, if I show them my piloting skills, more crazy inventions, and help during the rescue efforts, I might be able to clean a bit the image I have right now.

So, my dear and purple Yuuhi, don't send anyone to kill me for a few days. Stay put in the palace, or wherever you are, and let me do my thing. Though, if her relation with this world's me was bad I'm screwed. There will be no blessing whatsoever. If Sensei's plan works though, I might be able to remain in this place even after I stabilize myself here, if I choose to go that route.

Though, that's not the only thing on my plate now. Just a few more days and Sumika will be free from that tank, and the 00 Unit will be complete. I wonder if Kasumi will manage to talk to her before we have to kill her, I know the 00 Unit will have the same voice and face, but still… Even if she isn't my Sumika, I'd like to send her off. To let her hear 'Takeru's' voice one last time before she dies.

That's all I can do for her. She's the one I'll never be able to save here.

All the more reason to get my shit together and start delivering results. The railgun, my squad's training, these new weapons I wanna make, the incidents that will come. So first step, I gotta calm down. Let's believe in Sensei for now, even if I do have to somehow find me some support that doesn't rely on her.

Tomorrow it starts. From now on, no more bullshit. And I'll be damned if I let my feelings get in my way again. So, let's hit the sack and rest well. Let's see if I can fix my relation with the girls.

… I sure hope I can. Let me enjoy some peaceful days with all of you, please. I'm really tired to be always on edge. Please, I'm not asking you to love me again… Just… for a few days, let me see you as my friends. Before the war starts again.

" *Yawn*… Though, for now, let's just chill down and go to sleep." The door opens, and I step out from the elevator.

For a sec, I forgot where I had to go and was walking to the stairs to the barracks. Shaking my head and yawning again as a hippo, I

turned around and began to make my way to my new resting place for the coming days.

# Ignited

## Chapter 2 8 : Ignite d

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*(Ruined Settlement. On Kyoto's surrounding area .)*

**[ Okamoto ]**

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Toppled buildings as far as the eye could see. What was once a chirping city is now nothing more than a desolated graveyard. And as stupid as it may sound, this graveyard is all they have left.

The small group of people refuse to give an inch, they don't want to leave their city. 1st Lt. Ichimonji is trying to reason with them, because if they rebel we will have to detain them. We, who act on the Shogun's orders, have the power to order these civilians to move out and come with us to a safer location. By force if necessary.

I don't like this, at all. I don't know why I was given an offer to be inducted into the Guard. I mean, I don't dislike the uniform, the pay, or the privileges that come with the position, but all this nonsense about status and power? I don't mix with this.

It doesn't help that most people here are so prideful. Look at 1st Lt. Ichimonji, for example. Instead of approaching the people more calmly, trying to actually talk with them, he's just screaming at them.

"-of the Shogun, this area is no longer safe. The Shogunate has taken hold of the ownership of these lands, you as vassals of the Empire should know what this means. You are currently illegally living in the Shogun's lands, shame on you! Desist in your futile struggles and let us guide you to a shelter. The Shogun only wishes you to be safe, why can't you understand that?!"

Yeah, keep shouting at them. Sigh… The things I do for money… Thanks to this whole situation my dream of having my own house is getting farther and farther away by the second. I know we just barely survived the first wave but, is this truly necessary?

"These are our lands! We're not the Shogun's slaves! The Emperor is our leader!" A young man screams at the 1st Lt., making the other people rise up.

"Yeah! You young'uns think that us peasants are nuthing' but a bunch a' ignorants? We are the Holy Emperor's vassals, not the Shogun's ones!" An old lady says quite annoyed while waving a wooden stick at Ichimonji-san.

"What she said! You samurai always do whatever you want! Why haven't we heard no words from His Excellency?! Huh?!" A younger woman, probably near my age, shouts while pointing at us.

I don't know much about it, but I haven't heard the Emperor talk once. Seems he used to do press conferences often after the war was over, but I don't recall him doing so since a few years back. What is he doing in the Holy Palace anyways?

"We, members of the Royal Guard, follow the orders of the Shogun. The Emperor speaks only to the Shogun, to avoid his words be twisted by some traitorous vermin. If you call yourselves loyal to His Excellency, you shall comply to our orders. Or else, you shall be branded as traitors to the Empire!" 1st Lt., I think that's not a good idea.

The peasants start kicking up a fuss, calling us names and raising their shovels at us. Ichimonji-san made a gesture with his hand, and another of our group shot once at a place near their position. The impact from a 36mm shell on the ground silenced all their vigor. Is this how the Royal Guard operates? Ruling by force? Were is the honor in this?

"I do not wish to taint myself with the blood of my people." He says, folding his arms, giving all of them a good look. "Desist on your actions, we are here by the Shogun's orders to ensure your safety. However, if you raise your arms against us one more time, under the laws of the Royal Guard, we will have to treat you as traitors." A gray Zuikaku points straight at the group of people, who start retreating into the small building they were living in.

This is wrong, this isn't what we should be doing. Harming our fellows? Isn't there a different way of doing things?

" *Screw the rules, we gotta help our fellows! Isn't that what we should do as the guardians of the people?!"*

Shirogane's words come back, those so firm yet rebellious words he uttered in the middle of the battle as he convinced his squad leader to send some help to the city. While the Guard was too busy trying to take control of the MDF unit I was in, he addressed the more pressing matter despite the risks that had for him. It was because of his insubordination that we made it in time to save the people that were evacuating from the Warriors, because of his bravery we were able to begin cooperating with the Guard during the invasion while we guarded the vehicles that would take those escaping to safety, not letting a single BETA get anywhere close to the highway or the subway.

The suit covering my hands gets stretched as I clench them, a sudden heaviness comes up on my stomach. Feeling my legs as stiff as when I had to carry Yuri on my back whenever she got hurt, my breathing a bit rugged as it was after helping Mom clean the house, and the underside of my fingers feeling the peeling pressure of the grocery store's plastic bags' torture like whenever I had to carry them back home by myself, I clench my teeth and inhale slowly, filling my stomach and exhaling a few times until I got rid of that awful feeling.

I may not be him, but… I am a Royal Guard now, and I gotta do my part to protect my common fellows.

"1st Lieutenant, Chain 6 asking for permission to speak."

"Permission granted, what is it?"

"I believe that continuing with this course of action will only bring us more problems. Please, reconsider your approach." His face that appeared on my vision through the Data Link looked quite different than his usual calm face.

Tilting his head slightly backwards, as if to imply he's looking down on me, half closed eyes with a fire in them staring right at me. We never got along well, me speaking against his actions will only make our relation worsen. But I'll be damned if I do nothing to avoid this mess.

"What do you suggest then, 2nd Lt. Okamoto?"

"I do not know. But I beg you to listen, if we keep intimidating all the people that survived the attack, they will only grow to resent us, and by extension the Shogun. It is not hard to imagine them eventually growing to despise us, and His Highness, if we don't show them any measure of kindness. I know it's a futile gesture, but I believe we should keep trying to talk peacefully with them. We of the Royal Guard should be the ones to uphold our honor code more than anyone, what example are we leaving with this brutal way of doing things?"

"So you're just wasting my time… What did I expect from a fresh inductee?" His face twists as if he were smelling rotten food.

"1st Lt., my origins have nothing to do with my words. If us as a group start giving people the wrong impre-"

"And who are you to decide that? We were ordered to evacuate the people, this group here is rebelling against us. They're insulting the Shogun, raising their weapons at us! I, as your flight commander, cannot allow any damage to befall any of you. I have made myself

clear yet they are still refusing our helping hand, raising the few weapons they have at us. Why should we overlook this offense?"

"Even so, this is abuse of power against a defe-"

"No, it's subduing an enemy of Japan. We must remove this kind of attitude from its roots, these kind of people that raise their swords at us when things go rough are the worst kind. They only care about their wellbeing, as soon as things go badly for them they stop cooperating. We have already lost enough time with them. More than what they're worth, if they cannot see how much the Shogun cares for them. But at least this served to know what side you stand on, 2nd Lieutenant."

"I do not know what you speak of. I only wish to finish our duties without harming our fellows."

"I… I think so too, 1st Lt. Ichimonji. I don't think threatening them like this is the right way to do this." Another of my partners joined in the conversation, another one that was inducted. A man around my age, with dark brown hair and magenta eyes. Fukuha was his name, I think. "Please reconsider your stance, there is no need to be this hostile towards our fellows."

"Hmph, what can I expect from a bunch of inductees? Your education is severely lacking. We are the authorities, we are the Shogun's sword. Acting against us is the same as acting against the Shogun's life, and by extension the Holy Emperor's. If these people do not cease their hostilities, we will execute them for betraying their soil. Those of you who do not comply will also be treated as traitors!"

Us two kept trying to pacify him, reach a middle ground. However, he retained his cold demeanor not even flinching at our efforts.

Him, a member of the Tozama, wearing his pristine white and orange suit against us, a bunch of inducted people with not a hair of nobility in us, in our black uniforms. Rank is not as important as status, even if we eventually outranked him due to his standing he could still boss

us around. Giving people power by birthright is clearly wrong, if this is how they use it.

"SILENCE!" He screamed as the discussion heated up. "These people have refused the aid we offered them, they tried to bite the hand that gave them food, and we, as public servants, have a duty to uphold. I expect you all to honor it. We cannot allow these peasants to sow unrest in the rest of the population."

The people were clearly shivering, unsure of what to do. They could hear him talking, but not what we were saying. They must be terrified right now. There is no talking with him, what is his problem?!

He addresses the people once more, and one of the old men in the group got closer to him. He's trying to reason with Ichimonji, apparently. After a short while, the old man went back to talk with the rest of the people, and after some words and shouts a group started coming closer to us, willing to evacuate. Around half of them stayed behind. Thank the Holy Emperor that this can end peacefu-

One of the young ones that chose to stay behind started hurling rocks at the ones that decided to evacuate. Shortly after, many of them mimicked him, and started to throw rocks and blunt objects at the peasants and us. Dammit, why can't they-

The 1st Lt. gestures towards one of our members, that raises his rifle towards… No, you gotta be kidding me…

**BOOOM!**

A Zuikaku painted in gray shot at their hideout once the ones that came towards us had taken some distance. The last building in the city that was still standing fell in a cloud of dust, nothing but a pile of rocks remain. The people stand in shock, no longer throwing things. The ones that came with us quickly rode a carrier, choosing to not look back.

The people cry, fall to their knees. One man rushed towards us and tried to punch Ichimonji, but he dodged it and returned the punch. Without even looking at the man, he briskly moved towards his TSF and rode it once more. Then, without a hint of hesitation in his movement… He shot at the people that didn't came to us. In a split second all the people… all of them were… this isn't… I didn't join the Guard for this.

"1st Lt. that wasn't necessary! They had already surrendered!"

"And what do you suggest we do then? They acted against my and their fellow's life, they were subversive elements that had to be removed from our Empire." Eyes closed, he maintains his usual tone despite what he just did.

"Sir, even if they were being aggressive, outright killing them is against the honor code we all got trained in when we were inducted." Fukuha says, also giving him a nasty stare through the projection.

"They raised their weapons at us. We had no choice but to proceed in this way." And he still goes on about that.

"Imprisoning them would have been enough, sir. If we had approached them with a different attitude then-" I'm cut short as the gray and white TSFs in our group surround the three black Zuikakus we, the commoners, were piloting.

"You sound displeased for some reason 2nd Lt. Okamoto, I wonder why that is? You wouldn't be on their side, wouldn't you?" They aim their swords at us, they have all the intention of bringing us down. So… This is how you truly are.

"… My apologies, sir." Biting my tongue within, I tap my glasses to calm down. Fukuha also apologizes afterwards.

"Apology accepted. I expect you three commoners can start to perform your duties as it's expected from you. Understood?!"

"Yes, sir." We all reply with a low, dejected tone. I can't help to grip the controls tightly, this is wrong on so many levels.

"Well then, Chain 2 to all units. We leave this area to the rest of the Rescue Corps. We move to the next settlement, I hope you all to be on your best behavior. Do remember that Raiko-sama isn't as lenient as I am."

"Roger."

The two flights under his command begin to heat up their boosters, the carrier with those who wished to evacuate takes off towards the city. Once it was away enough, Ichimonji gives the order and we take off.

And as we were flying, a private connection was formed with my unit.

"Chain 6, do you copy?"

"Chain 6 here, loud and clear sir." Sigh… Why do I do things? I need to learn to shut up.

"What exactly were you trying to do, challenging my authority?"

"As I said before, I just wanted to avoid unnecessary problems for us. I meant no disrespect sir." As much as I dislike it, he's the one in charge.

"You almost sent our unit into chaos. I know you must have heard this a thousand times already, but to be inducted into the Royal Guard is one of the greatest honors one could receive. It means someone trusted in you so much that they decided to bet their honor and credibility on you. And like it or not, you have a duty and an obligation to ensure that trust is not misplaced."

"I know that, sir. However, there is a big difference between being loyal and being blind. I do not believe treating our people so harshly is fair for them. They've lost everything, their families, their homes,

their peace. Their grief is a great one. I think we could allow ourselves to be more-"

"You need no thoughts, you're a blade. You do not waver, you obey your holder until the day you break." Unable to hide my disagreement, I simply close my eyes for a moment. "I was like that once too, you know."

"Like that? What do you mean?"

"I was once inducted into the Royal Guard, I am no noble." He leans back into his seat as his eyes turn relaxed, losing the firmness I'm used to seeing in them. "I merely wished to honor the name my Father had bestowed me, so I enlisted in the IJA and broke my back in my training. I eventually became a surface pilot and was sent to the campaign on mainland Asia a few years back."

He takes a breath, and stares at me before continuing, returning to his usual sharp complexion.

"I was one of the few survivors of that carnage. Someone saw my skills during those fights and thought they could be useful for the Shogunate, and so I was inducted when I returned to the Empire. I also had to deal with this new way of doing things, but I believe this is the most appropriate way now. Dissidents must be silenced, order is above everything, in and out of the battlefield."

"But, why? Why go to such lengths?" The thought of something like that happening to Yuri or Arisa… It's enough to make me want to vomit my insides out, feel as if someone sucker punched my kidney. Thankfully, I know they're safe for now… but if the Capital ever falls…

He takes a deep breath, and after a moment of silence opens them again, going back to his sharper way of being.

"… I saw how everything fell apart because of the people's inappropriate conduct, both in and out of the battlefield. Their pilots

were quick to run away, to panic, to break formation. The people didn't cooperate and rioted many times on their shelters, despite the fact that they were taken to safe areas away from the frontlines and had proper beds and meals, while the warriors that fought for them had to be treated in tents out in the wild, on something that could barely be considered a resting place, while eating E Rank synth food."

I say nothing and wait until he keeps talking. Seeing it on the news was one thing, but hearing it is… To think that's how Dad spent his last days alive… But even so…

"I do not wish the same to happen to my land. We must maintain order at all cost, lest we fall not to the BETA but to human misery. If our ruler's power is being defied by a bunch of peasants, what will happen when things get even worse than how they are now?"

I'm not so daft to not understand his words and how much this weights on him, but even so this is going too far. One thing is arguing with them, another is pointing at them with an Assault Rifle. They had no way to actually harm us, and they reacted like that because you got violent first. Maintaining order with an iron fist is never the correct way to do things in the long run.

"However, will this kind of treatment not force the people to act against us eventually?"

"Who will?"

"Huh?"

"Who will act against us? We are their lifeline, if they're so foolish to not see that, then they're not worth the sacrifices that have been made to keep their hides safe. Or perhaps, are you talking about yourself?" Again with that look, looking down on me.

"I would never act against the Empire, but to keep pushing the people like this… I frankly do not like it. I believe sincerity to be a

virtue, so forgive me for speaking my mind all the time. But I don't believe this is what the Shogun wants." He sighs deeply as his adverts his gaze, eyes getting clouded.

"Nobody wants this. Not this war, not this ruins, not any of the things happening right now. But we are blessed, for we still have our land even if it's in ruins. I understand it can be hard to accept, but know that so long as you're part of the Guard everybody is expecting great things from you. You can feel however you wish on the inside, but never forget the effect your words can have on those around you. Don't let your emotions control your actions. This is the way of the Royal Guard, and only a few elites are chosen to perform this duty. Do not forget that."

"So… You're telling me I have to swallow my feelings and watch as we murder our fellows in cold blood?"

"They're no longer our fellows if they force us to draw our blades. However, I will overlook your offense today. Everybody makes mistakes, just make sure there is no next time. Raiko-sama will not let this misconduct go by without retribution, since she already has her hands full with Shirogane." It is a mystery to me, how do those two even get along. One would think she would have kicked him out of the squad ages ago, instead she's always reprimanding him… How weird, but none of my business. "And if you still have doubts, look to the Capital. See all that we had to sacrifice to merely keep them away for a single night."

"… Yes, sir. My apologies, I shall redouble my efforts."

"Good enough. Don't disappoint us, Okamoto. We expect much from you."

The channel is closed. He always speaks his mind and before waiting for a reply he goes away. Is this how it is then? This is what being a Royal Guard means?

Cold assassins, that's what we are. All to keep absolute order, to keep the people in check, to show that the nobles are the ones at the top.

I understand that we need to keep order to fight against the BETA. And I don't wish to have us lose anything else either, I know how heavy is everything we're sacrificing so far. But this isn't the way to do things. We… We are no different than dogs if all we do is follow orders blindly. Is this what the Shogun wants? Is this how we always did things? Perhaps this is how it always was, but since there was no war, no hunger, no visible death, we chose to look the other way so long as it didn't concern us. I thought… the nobility was better, that they were different than the cutthroat competition we commoners have between each other. Looks like there is no honor, no fellowship to be found here.

If they're branded as traitors, it must be for something. If they're executed, they must have done something. But what if… there was no reason more than to keep the people intimidated?

*The next settlement comes into view. I can only pray that these people agree to our terms peacefully.*

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*November 24th. 0 7:21 AM.*

*(Hallway.)*

**[Takeru]**

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Light pours from outside into the base, clouds slowly making their way to nowhere in particular. My feet barely lifting from the ground for each step, my hands refusing to leave the comfy lair that is my pockets. No one is on this hallway, yet my eyes continue to rebound around, to the ground, to the window, to the sky, to the ceiling. I sigh slowly, arching my brows a bit. Come on, man. No need to feel all antsy, what's the worst that can happen. R-E-L-A-X.

Par for the course, I had another bad dream. Still can't quite piece it together, but damn, it feels awful. There's this really annoying voice yelling at me over and over, and everything feels so… suffocating, so crushing. First I'm on a garden but then it gets set on fire, then I'm seeing a race for some reason but then the whole place collapses on itself, then I'm on some shelter, but the view was kinda… tilted, as if it was in diagonal to my vision, and this voice just kept following me, reprimanding me for some reason.

Thank God Kasumi came to wake me up as sweetly as usual. Seeing her being nice to me really made the cheer return to me, at least until I had to take a cold shower again. Sigh… I wonder when these dreams will stop bothering me.

I keep walking, making my way to our classroom. Today we should have our first lecture on TSFs, assuming NotMarimo-chan doesn't decide to rush through the modules again. Already got breakfast with Takamura, it was D Rank again and the right amount too. Seems like the rumor is doing its work, though people are still talking behind my back, looking at me suspiciously.

So, now's the time to see how they react. The fact should have sank already, they now know I am a murderer.

Kei was rather odd yesterday, she was upset at something that's for sure. But she did made a point to ask me if I was still in the squad. Part of me wants to believe she somehow understood I didn't kill without reason, but, well, she never liked me much. As for the rest, with how sensitive Tama and Mikoto are, they might see me as a monster. Meiya, being who she is, could have reverted back to a negative view of me once she meditated calmly the fact that I murdered 'fellow Japanese soldiers'. And Chizuru… hates foreigners.

Depending on what the Instructor told them, on how they reflected on what happened, it is possible they might not openly scorn me but maybe they will just put a barrier and not talk to me. Who would want to be on my side after what I did? Being the comrade of a

murderer… *No sane person would risk their honor standing by my side after what I did, after all. I should expect no helping hand nor tailwind, else I'd be setting myself up for disappointment.*

To be honest, I don't know what would be worse, they hating me openly or they keeping their distance and ignoring me. Feeling as if static was filling my neck and chest, my fingers keep moving as if I was clumsily trying to play a piano. I know I said I was ready to be all alone, but facing them… is harder than I thought it would be on me. Sigh… Whatever happens, happens.

I reach the room, hear nothing from within. Licking my lips, my eyes look up, resisting the urge to peek into the windows. One deep breath, I move my neck left and right hearing it crack once. I blink at the doorknob for a second, grabbing it and delaying the action as I gulped. Come on, this isn't the end of the world. And anyways… If Yuuhi comes after me, it's all the same in the end.

And so, after sighing hard enough for the air to reach my hand, I open the door and step into the classroom.

"Good mor-" Before I could even finish speaking, Mikoto rushed to my side.

"TAKERU! Hey, are you alright? What was that about a punishment? Why can't you go to the PX? Hey, why?!" Her face was full of wrinkles, her eyes were sharp as scissors, and it seemed as if steam was coming out of her ears. Royally pissed off, to put it mildly.

"M-Mikoto, calm down. As you can see, I'm fine." She gives me a good look and then takes a step back, restoring my personal space. Sigh… That wasn't good for my heart, dude.

"Really? So? What was that about a punishment?"

"Shirogane-san, is it true that you can't go to your room? Where are you sleeping?" Now Tama came close too, with downcast eyes. Seems like they're the only ones here.

"Yeah. I was given twenty days of punishment, in which I can't go back to my room, enter the PX, and I have to help out someone here at the base. I'm staying in the detention barracks until the punishment is over." Both of them open their eyes wide and then share a glance before curving their brows. They don't… look rejecting.

"The detention barracks? Takeru, I've heard they don't have warm water down there. Will you be alright?" Is she worried? Look at how she joined her hands, she really is.… Thanks, Mikoto.

"Yeah, I'll manage somehow."

"Shirogane-san, will you really be alright? Ayamine-san told us you would have to eat the rations from the CCSE, and we're starting our piloting training today. Are you-"

"Tama, don't worry. I'll make do." I force a smile, ignoring the scratches on the back of my head, and they let out some air, giving me a smile back. But in a second, their faces got clouded again and they start avoiding my gaze, remaining silent. "So… Err…" Now I'm the one looking down. Sigh…

"Um… Shirogane-san?" Tama took a small step forward, her tone as hesitant as mine when I had to show Mom my math tests. "Would you… Can you forgive us? For abandoning you?" Tama and Mikoto gave me a bow. Wait, why are they apologizing?

"Tama, that was an accident. You two had nothing to do with it, so don't apologize." This day started weirdly, I thought they would be against me being here since I'm a murderer now.

"That's not true! Takeru, we didn't…" Mikoto's lips quivered and she looked down for a sec, but then she returned my gaze as she melted the stiffness in her posture. "We didn't try to help you, Meiya-san or Chizuru-san. You didn't deserve that, but we just ran away. Can you forgive us? Please?" Uuuhh… This is cheating, you can't double

down on me with those teary eyes. My Mental Fortitude stat is decreasing by the second.

I felt a clog on my throat, unable to process words for a sec under their gazes, honest and clear, showing that they didn't see me as some sort of monster.

"… I wasn't angry at you and I'm not holding a grudge, so stop apologizing. I mean, I thought that you would be more… you know, rejecting towards me. I did kill those soldiers." I bring a hand to the back of my head, lowering my brows and slightly looking away from them.

"Shirogane-san, you did that to save Mitsurugi-san and Sakaki-san, didn't you?"

"Yeah, but that doesn't-"

"Yes, it does. Shirogane-san, e-even if you ended up killing them, I don't think… that what you did was wrong." Tama made fists coiled and hissed in every word. "What if those soldiers had killed Mitsurugi-san?"

"Well, but there was no proof that-"

"The soldiers were also very aggressive with us, too. Something was really weird with them!" Tama furrowed her brows, shaking just a tiny bit.

"Wait so, those soldiers also roughed you guys up?" Kei did have a patch on her eye yesterday. Did those bastards do that?

"Yeah! Takeru, you're not the only one who had to harm those soldiers." Mikoto frowns, having a mix of fear and anger in her rising voice. "If things had gone wrong we also may have had to resort to that. Her eye is better now, but they really hurt Kei-san during our fight. We just got lucky, really." Both of them drop their shoulders.

Tama is slowly playing with her hair and Mikoto is just staring to the floor.

"So you guys had it hard too, huh? Can you tell me what happened?"

They tell me of how they saw the struggle from the other side of the cliff, how they met and dealt with the soldiers and how they reached the evac point. So the soldiers weren't only after me, Meiya and Chizuru. They wanted our whole squad to fail. Considering all those mails Sensei showed me it's not surprising.

"It was really scary, you know. I thought we were done for." Tama closes her eyes and shivers slightly.

"Yeah, me too." Mikoto nods as her eyes almost close. "So it's not like we don't understand, Takeru. We also had to harm those soldiers really hard, too."

"But, well, you didn't resort to… killing. Nothing is going to erase that stain from my hands." We all look down, they don't reply and leave me alone with my thoughts again.

Funny, actually. I didn't have the guts to shoot during the coup or to give Yuuhi the medicine, yet now this really hurts my heart even if I still don't entirely regret what I did.

I murdered Meiya. Compared to her, these bastards are nothing. And yet, it was so… pointless. I killed them, and nothing changed. It could have been avoided, yet I can't really see how. I know that talking it out or trying to scare them off would have backfired, and despite that my heart is choking inside. So easy, so pointless, and it makes me as conflicted as the coup did. I took their lives and in the end… Yes, I did protect Meiya and Chizuru, but I still would have liked to have had the calmness to take another course of action. Maybe if I had and one of them would have gotten injured I would be wishing to have been more ruthless. Wondering about what could

have been is pointless, I know, but I still would like to… I don't know, just stop all this messed up shit.

I don't want to shift the blame. I don't want to look away. And I don't want it to be 'forgiven' or for this to 'be the norm'. I will kill if I have to, but I would like for one day for this to no longer be necessary, for whatever made the soldiers do that crazy shit go away to hell and never come back.

I sigh, closing my eyes and arching my brows. Feeling as if I had swallowed an ice apple, now stuck on my neck, I claw at my fists. I wonder… Did you also feel like this? What made you fall in that rage, what pushed you over the edge, twin me? What did the Royal Guard do to you?

… Or is it, what did they made you do?

"Even so…" Mikoto's voice returns me to the classroom. She takes a breath as she played with the ribbon of the uniform, her gaze breaks like ice under a hammer when it meets mine. "I know how hard it must have been for you… When that man got up and was ready to lunge at me…" She begins to quiver, eyes rammed shut. "… I couldn't take out my knife. I knew that they were not going to ease up, but I couldn't do it. All I could do was hit his head with a rock to leave him unconscious, and in the end that almost cost us the test."

"Yoroi-san, that's not your fault! They were the ones who escalated that fight!" She places a hand on Mikoto's shoulder, yet she still doesn't open her eyes.

"No, he could have choked us unconscious if he wanted, Kei-san might have ended up with even worse injuries than what she has now. So…" Softly biting her lip, she looks at me, a tear running down her cheek. "I know how scared you must have been… and how brave you were to do what you did, Takeru."

"I… I didn't knew you guys had to go through so much shit, too." If I had taken care of him then… *I should have maimed the Captain*

*when I had the chance.*

"Um… Yoroi-san, you weren't the only one who… harmed a fellow." Burrowing her head underground, Tama's tone jumps off a skyscraper. "There was one soldier I harmed gravely with a rock, when I saw her getting to the rifle before me. At the time I didn't doubt, but I'm sure she's gonna need surgery after what I did to her." Sniffing a bit, Mikoto patted her back, all I could do was bite my tongue within, wring my hands in anger. "I don't understand why they pushed us to that stage… What was the need to be so hostile?" She hangs her head, shaking again.

"I was shaking all throughout the battle, driven by adrenaline and fear. So… I can see why you did what you did, Takeru." Looking back at me, her lips twisted and she let out a sigh but she still returned my gaze, without any shadows or spikes. "If I had seen them harming Meiya-san and Chizuru-san like that… I don't know what I would have done, I don't know if I could have protected them at all. But I think you only were so… aggressive because they forced you to. I'm sure you're… not like that, that this was just a reaction to their aggression." Her tone seemed to be lacking some firmness, as if she were trying to convince herself.

"I agree with Yoroi-san, we heard from Sakaki-san what happened. They forced your hand, if they hadn't kept kicking them nothing would have happened."

"Of course, I'm not proud of what I did, and I am not like that… But I still made a miss. So… Uh, like, do you guys…" I scratch my head, barely able to meet their gaze as the ants again start walking on my back. "… still want me around?"

"Huh? Of course we do, Takeru!" Mikoto took a step forward, hands joined tight. "I know it must be really hard but you shouldn't… punish yourself so hard. We all only defended ourselves from them as best as we could, and they made the first aggression. You wouldn't attack anyone like that again without a good reason, right?"

"Yeah, I wouldn't. I'm… That's not how I want to be as a soldier." She smiles, seeming to finally let go of what kept her tense and compact.

"I can understand why you're so troubled." Tama said as she looked down. "All of us had to bloody our hands, one way or the other. Only that we were lucky to be together and managed to get away by injuring them, but you were alone. So, um, I at the least don't think you're a murderer. You just… tried to protect your squadmates when they were in danger." A feathery knife twists itself into me, hearing her voice honest and soft. They really… don't see me as monster.

The heaviness in my hands eases up a bit and I stop clawing at my palms. I inhale slowly, biting back the tears.

"Thanks Tama, Mikoto. Really… Thank you." This time I didn't have to force the smile.

"Ahaha…" Mikoto laughs dryly, sending her hands into her pockets. "A-Anyways, we don't want you gone. You're our comrade, Takeru. So… let's keep doing our best together from now on, without leaving anyone behind again." I nod at them, we finally all sigh and manage to somehow smile.

"Well, in any case, glad you could make it out without any lasting injuries. So, we're all good with each other?"

"Yes, of course. Shirogane-san, I… I will try to be more resolute from now on, to truly help the squad. I know I'm… the weakest one of the team, b-but I'll do my best to not hold any of you back. So, um… Let's do our best!" I smile at her and see the seriousness disappear from her face.

That's one thing we'll have to work on, since we need you to get in top form ASAP, before the HSST arrives. She might not have killed that soldier, but it's clear Tama is also blaming herself for what happened to them, between what she did to that woman how she hesitated at times to fight back. And since Mikoto rarely speaks

about how she really feels, I'll have to keep an eye out for her too, without being too bothersome of course.

"Say Takeru, where were you yesterday? Despite it being our free day and having a lecture from the Instructor, we didn't see you at all."

"Oh, I was helping 1st Lt. Takamura as part of my punishment. I was mostly delivering reports and folders around."

"Oh, it doesn't sound so bad."

"Yeah, it really isn't. It's a light job, honestly."

Then, the door opens and the rest of the squad comes in. They twitch upon seeing me, my hands shook for a moment. Deep breaths, man.

"… S-Shirogane." Chizuru approached me from my left, slow as a turtle but still looking at me in the eye.

"Good morning, Sakaki."

"Good morning. How have you been?"

"Fine, no problems whatsoever." She nods and seems to be at a loss of words as her eyes veer around.

"Sakaki, if you cannot say it allow me to do it." Meiya also approached me. She spoke in her serious tone and was bearing a stern look, reminding me of how she was after Marimo-chan died. Sigh…

"Good morning… Meiya." Knees threatened to tumble under those sapphires, but I managed to hold her gaze. I think Tama and Mikoto flinched as they heard me calling her by her name.

"Good morning. Shirogane, is what Ayamine told us yesterday true? About your punishments?"

"Yeah."

"Why were you given such a punishment?" She's angry, going by how those sapphires of her are glistening. She must be upset about having a murderer on their team now that she had time to let that sink in. Looks like… I'm on the other side of the board.

"Because it was that or either getting kicked out of the army."

"Shirogane, that does not answer my question." She was again folding her arms, eyes closed, her voice still sharp.

"I mean… What did you want me to answer?"

"I'm asking about why you had to be punished! You saved our lives, why are you the one to be blamed? Didn't you tell them of what happened?" She opened her eyes, now filled with those purple flares, and didn't hesitate on a single word.

… She isn't upset or anything at me? Meiya held my gaze with visible fury, but not about me still being here. She… She didn't get all negative again?

"They didn't listen to me. They said I had no credibility, that I was a violent element, that there's no way that would have happened." Again, her eyes flare up as she takes a step towards me. For a second I thought she was coming at me, but she furrowed her brows and seemed to be now holding her hands quite tightly.

"Why did you not ask us to testify for you?! What would you have done if they kicked you out?!" No hesitation, no restrain in her words.

"Meiya, they told me they couldn't count on your impartiality, they refused to call you to testify." The little purple flares in her eyes turn into pyres of fire. She's… worried about me? Like, for real? She… really is…

"… What? Mmmgh! I won't let this stand, there's no reason for you to-"

"Meiya, stop it. That's that, you can't… you shouldn't do anything about it. I mean, I did kill them. That won't change, fair or not I deserve the punishment."

"Shirogane, what you're saying is to make me stain my honor once again." She tilts her head backwards, narrowing her eyes. The venom in her voice was so strong I took a step backwards unconsciously.

"What do you mean?"

"I owe you a great debt. It's thanks to you that I passed the CCSE and didn't sustain further injuries, and you wish me to stay put as I see my fellow being punished unfairly, while the culprits are free without even a reprimand? What would that say about me? What kind of samurai would I be if I let you take this unjust punishment?!" She called me her fellow, despite how much weight that word has here. She's… not lying?

Chizuru steps towards me, with a similar look on her face.

"Mitsurugi is right, Shirogane. When we went to talk with the Instructor to tell her about what happened, she told us you were taken to be questioned for your crimes and nothing we said could change her mind to allow us to write a report to help you. She also insisted that we should not bring this up again, since the decision had already been made. We… We all were very worried about you." She then adverts her eyes as she plays with her ponytails. She also doesn't seem to be lying, Chizuru can't even look at me in the eye so lying is out of the question.

"Sakaki-san is right. I also think you don't deserve the punishment." Tama rose a small hand, Mikoto nodded as she frowned. "They were the ones that started it, if they had harmed Mitsurugi-san the UN

would have gotten in a lot of trouble. They also tried to harm us, so they should also be punished for what they did."

I… I did not expect all of them to be so supportive, considering I killed Japanese soldiers. They're not lying either. They're… really worried… about me?

"… Shirogane-san?" Tama looked up at me with puppy eyes, holding her hands near her neck. Uuuh… That is not fair play.

"I mean, I did kill them. That won't change. I murdered Japanese soldiers, so technically I am a traitor to the Empire. Are you sure you want to defend me like that?" I feel a tap on my shoulder. Meiya moved me to look at her, her face was twisted into the look of an angry hunter as the purple fire kept coming out of her eyes.

"Shirogane, you're no traitor. You saved me and Sakaki from those soldiers. Our lives were in serious danger, regardless of what the UN may say. So do not speak about yourself in such a way anymore, I promise you now that I will remove that burden from your shoulders as soon as I can. I just ask you to give me a little time, it's the least I can do to truly repay you for your actions." She gives me a small bow, her face tensed up when she met my eyes again.

She's telling the truth. And if she is… As happy as that makes me, as much as it lifted an asteroid off my shoulders and a knife from my heart, I have to stop her from getting into more trouble or from actually lifting my punishment. Yuuhi should already know, the Pickles probably reported it to her, but if Meiya speaks in my favor… I don't want to risk anything being misunderstood, so let's play it safe.

"Meiya, it's better for you to not do anything. It will only keep bringing problems and tension between the UN and the Empire. Think of the implications this accident could have. Just let it pass, I can take it." She pursed her lips as she holds back a retort. Then, softening her gaze, she gave me a nod.

"Sigh… If that is what you wish, I will do as you say. So, you weren't kicked out of the squad?"

"No, I managed to stay here. So it seems you'll have to bear with me until you get commissioned." I say jokingly to try to clear the air, but it only caused them to drop their shoulders. Except Kei, who was just laying against the wall staring at nowhere.

"Are you upset?" Meiya's voice was so small, creaking, that it reminded me of that call I received from that Meiya the day I recovered my memories, and that made me wince for a second. "Shirogane?"

"Err… Why would I be upset? You didn't do anything to make me angry at you. It's the other way around, I'm really happy to… well, hear you don't want me gone or anything. I said as much on the island, if you're willing to have me, let's just start over."

"So Shirogane, you don't… resent us?" Chizuru is being abnormally nice, and hesitant.

I mean, I know how sweet she can be, but that's to someone she really likes. I'm… I mean, for them I was… a foreigner, an enemy. And now I killed people. I still can't believe it, maybe this is all a dream.

"Why would I resent any of you, Sakaki?"

"We scored better than you, we didn't help you when you were questioned. And all of that is our fault, you bloodied your hands because of us." She holds one of her elbows with her other hand. I haven't seen Chizuru being so apprehensive with me ever.

"C'mon, don't be like that. Nobody forced me to do what I did."

"Still, you fought to protect us. Had we not left you behind…" She inhales, then finally returns my gaze as her tone recovers its firmness. "If we had fought back with you, this could have been

avoided. And you could have left us behind, but didn't. So, well, I can see how you could resent us."

"Look, I did what I could because I wanted. I know that… I did something horrible, but I chose to do that. I did it, it's on my hands." Their eyes seem to almost close, pursing their lips. "So… You don't hate me or anything?" All of their eyes then turn wide at my question.

"Shirogane, what reason could we have to hate you?!" Meiya, you're… a little too close.

"Because I killed Japanese soldiers and I'm an American or something along those lines?"

"We don't… We don't see you as a foreigner anymore. You're our comrade, we already told you that during the CCSE, right?" Chizuru returned to her usual bossy tone taking a pose like Class Rep, making circles in the air with her finger.

"Indeed. Sakaki is right. Shirogane, you've done a great deed for us, defending us from a clear case of abuse. And instead of being praised for it, you're being punished. I truly do not think we should let this slide. Are you certain you do not wish me to speak with my contacts? If I tell them of what you did for me, I am sure your punishment will be lifted." Oh shit, Meiya's stubbornness activated.

Sadly, my punishment is giving me a cover to start my research and to keep a close eye on the railgun so I can't lose it, even if it means bathing with cold water at night. And… at the least I can see she truly means her words. They really don't see me as a murderer.

"Meiya, thanks for the gesture but I don't want to cause more trouble. Let's leave it at that, please?" I give her a little bow.

"Huh? But… Well, if that is what you wish…" Folding her arms and the embers inwards, she still doesn't seem convinced though.

"Well, so… How are you guys? I mean, I haven't heard about you since we parted ways. How were these days for you?" Relaxing my posture, trying to rise a smile, I look at them all.

"Oh, you won't believe this Takeru! Lemme tell you of how Chizuru-san started choking when she ate- Mmmmmggghh!" Chizuru put her hands over Mikoto's mouth. And she was blushing.

"Tamase, can you explain to Shirogane what happened in these days?" Smiling all the while, she spoke with a soft voice that hid knives within.

"Eh? Sure. But Sakaki-san, Yoroi-san is going purple…" Mikoto's eyes were two big white dots again. Chizuru lets go of her and she breathes deeply, placing a hand on her chest.

"Chizuru-san, that's so cruel. What did I do?!"

"What didn't you do is the question here." Meiya frowned at her as she caressed her ponytail. She was blushing too. The hell happened when I wasn't around?

Tama told me of how they played on the beach before coming here, about some of the food they ate, and about how the Instructor gave them a lecture on teamwork as soon as they landed here. Marimo-chan, come back to us. We need you more than ever.

"That sounds rough. Oh right, I forgot to ask, what was your score?"

"Ninety. It was truly a surprise, that's for sure." She beams at me, clearly happy of her result. "Ah… Sorry, I didn't mean to brag. You ended up with the lowest score, right?"

"Yeah, but that doesn't really matter. Our skills in the cockpit are what matters most."

"Exactly. Well said, Shirogane. Our real training starts here, and now we're on even ground with you so we won't let you get that number

one spot so easily. All of us have to step up and drive ourselves past our limits, so that nothing like what happened in the CCSE occurs again." Chizuru is clearly trying to motivate the squad, Mikoto and Tama give a 'Yay' and raise their fists. Meiya just smirks and Kei… is staring at me. Guess she still doesn't trust me.

"Say, Special-kun…" Why did I have to look at her? Causality Magnet? More like Disaster Magnet.

"What's up, Ayamine?" She slowly got close to us, I can't read her at all. Is she going for a punch? Or will she throw more hate at me? I'll just have to endure.

"Is it true that you got beaten up by one of the soldiers during the second fight?"

"Yeah, that's the case."

"… How did that go? You didn't harm them, right?" God, it hurts to see her like this. And again, stabs and slashes tickle my neck.

"No, I didn't harm anyone."

"Those two told me you had to restrain the soldier to win."

"Well, yeah. That fight was real tight, though. I mean, Mion was really aggressive because she wanted to check if I was a spy or something. It really wasn't-" Why are they staring at me like that? What did I say? "Guys? What's up?"

"First name already? Special-kun, what a stud." Kei gives me thumbs up. Oh, so that's what happening. They're just surprised. Don't scare me like that, dammit.

"Shirogane-san, did you know that woman?" Tama being suspicious? That's a new one.

"Mion?" I feel a drill on my neck, Meiya's gazing at me quite angrily for some reason. "I… errr… I mean, I don't think so?" I know I gotta

play my part in faking being this world's me, but I really don't know her.

"Do you know her or not?" Meiya was looking into me with those blue blades of her. Why is she so upset now? Wait… didn't something like this…

"Meiya, that's my own business, right?" I answer bluntly which only makes her eyes spew more fire.

"Oho? So you had some 'business' with her?"

"She was literally trying to beat the shit out of me. I just wanted to calm her down, show her that I was no spy."

"Takeru, even so, why did she have to beat you up like that?" Mikoto and Tama were now looking at me worriedly.

"You know, she had to restrain me to check whether I had a mask or not. Since she thought I was an American spy. Really, after we sorted that out she stopped being so aggressive." The little ones smile at me, but the other three seem to want to ask more.

"W-Well, but Shirogane, why do you call her by her name?" Chizuru was also giving me a side glance. Kei was smirking from ear to ear.

"I mean, if I had to call both them Tsukuyomi it would get confusing in my head." There are four of them now. And for some reason it doesn't feel right, I wonder if it has to do with his memories?

"Shirogane, that still doesn't explain why she was so aggressive with you, or why you use her name. You wouldn't happen to know them, perhaps?" Meiya was now sending a dubious look at me.

Didn't something like this happen when I called Maya-san that in front of her back in my world? She isn't getting jealous, right? No way, not after what happened.

"I told you already, I don't know them. Look, she wasn't going to believe my words, so I had no choice but to fight her head on. I mean, those two pickles were not going to back down so easily."

… Why are they looking at me as if they were goldfish? Even Kei's eyes are wide open now.

"Shirogane-san when you say 'pickles', who are you talking about?"

"Who?" Oh, I did it again. It feels so natural I just said it without a second thought. "About Mion and Shion, of course. Don't they look like a pair of pickles?"

"Shirogane, you can't go giving nicknames to members of the Royal Guard! If they heard you, you would get in a lot of trouble." Chizuru, again making circles in the air, scolded me as she always did. Heh, it's so good to have that little thing back, instead of that poison-filled voice. Finally some relief for my ears.

"So you also call Shion by her name…"

"C'mon Meiya, what do you want me to call them?"

"Well… Why do you call them pickles, however? You haven't given us nicknames even though you've been with us for far longer than them." She's a bit bothered. She did think I was on the Guard, so me calling them by their names is making her suspicious, I guess. It's still odd, though.

"Oh, he did name me Tama though." She should have stayed quiet, because now Meiya was glaring at her. Tama's eyes became two little white dots as she shivered.

"Um, guys? Can we… make peace already?" Let's stop this before things escalate. I do not want to deal with the wrath of a jealous Meiya.

"Fine, I'll let it go. But you should be more careful about how you approach women from now on. It's unproper for a Japanese surface pilot to act in such a way. Right, Sakaki?" Both of them nodded in agreement.

"Of course. Exactly what Mitsurugi said. You should be more tactful about your actions, Shirogane-kun."

… Shirogane-kun?

Wait… Is Chizuru receiving positive data now? Well, they should always be receiving it when around me, but these days I wasn't around. In this case, she's receiving stuff from my world's Chizuru, but she wasn't like this during the CCSE… The data leak shouldn't be so strong when I'm not nearby. Is that why they're not reacting as badly as they would originally have?

"Sakaki-san, what was that?" Tama asked as she looked at Chizuru with wide eyes.

"What? What is it?" Chizuru seemed puzzled, not noticing what was going on, why the others were giving her the stink eye.

"Chizuru-san, you just called Takeru Shirogane-kun." Mikoto was also narrowing her eyes at Chizuru.

"I did?! I mean… I just… Ahem, I was merely trying to be more friendly with him, seeing how he's taking what happened. There's no problem with that, right Shirogane-kun?"

"Sure, I don't mind." Chizuru smiles a bit as Mikoto and Tama give me the stink eye. Haha, they did the same during my first loop once.

"It will never cease to amaze me how relaxed you are." Meiya sighed as she caressed her ponytail.

"Come on, now. If she's more comfortable calling me that, just let her. I'm calling you Meiya and nobody complains. Or what? You want

me to go back to calling you Mitsurugi?" She flinches at my words, staring blades at me.

"Of course I don't want that. I promised to allow you to call me by my name on my honor as an apology. So you can't call me anything but Meiya now, because you'd be breaking our accord." She kept nodding at her own words. She's so cute when she gets nervous, really.

It's still a surprise for sure, seeing them be this friendly. I sigh, relaxing my hands and releasing the stagnant air in me. I still have my squad, and it seems like we might be able to finally start building some trust between us. Well, it's not like they're head over heels for me, they're just being considerate towards me. I'm sure that even if I'm a stronger Nucleus the transfer couldn't happen so fast. But that's more than enough for me, I'm lucky they're still willing to talk with me after what happened.

"Okay. So… You're really cool with me staying?"

"Yes, I have no complains whatsoever. Let's keep working together, Shirogane-san!" Tama beamed at me with her usual cheerful smile. Mikoto gave a nod.

"I also wish for you to remain on the squad, it's obvious you were not at fault for what happened. We're all in agreement, right?" Chizuru crossed her arms and looked around the room to see the others' faces. But she stopped on a certain black haired one.

"… Ayamine, what about you?" I look at her and she just looks away.

"You're really on our side?" She says, still not looking at me. I look down, closing my eyes.

"I mean, yeah?"

"And you won't harm anyone in that way again?"

"Ayamine, that's rude. Shirogane-kun already proved us he isn't the type to harm when it isn't needed."

"Sakaki, it's fine. She has all the right reasons to doubt me. Ayamine, is there anything you would like me to do to prove you that I'm not some sort of madman?" This is my problem, so I'll deal with it myself.

"… Yes. I have a question."

"Go ahead. Fire."

"Why did you kill the soldiers? Feel like answering today?" Sigh… It really hurts, different world or not.

"… Because I saw Meiya was unconscious while getting kicked on the head and Chizuru crying in pain." Both of them look down, grimacing. "Honestly though, I was enraged at the time from my previous fight, so well… I'm not proud of my choices back then. That's why I'm taking the punishment without complaints. I lost it when I thought one of them might have been dead, but I won't put up excuses. I killed them because I decided to not hold back." She stared at me in silence for a second, keeping that poker face perfectly.

"Hmm… Then, is it true that you were trained on the UN and not by America?"

"Yeah, I was trained at Yukon Base." Regardless of the place, I only ever got trained by the UN. So, that is not a lie. She stares into my eyes for a while and after a while she leans back and returns to her usual bored face.

"Hmm… Fine. You're good." She raises her hand, showing me her palm with her eyes closed. She relaxed her posture, so she believes me for now.

"Well, glad we can get along." She probably is letting this go to not get in an argument with the rest of the squad. It's up to me to prove

to them I'm not a psychotic murderer.

"A-Anyways! Let's do our best together from now on! Say Shirogane-san, did you know that we also have to pilot for a short while during our aptitude test?" Tama comes up to me as she bounces around the desks. It's so endearing, seeing you so hard to stay cheerful while trying to clear the air.

"Oh, that's gonna be hard. Takeru, don't take it too hard if you crash after some seconds. I don't think anyone could actually do very well on their very first try." Mikoto closed her eyes and with her hands joined she began to shiver.

"Yes, I've heard about it from Takamura. Well, today is just our first try so there's no point in overworrying." And I'm gonna crash myself into a building just for the heck of it.

"That's the idea. Squad, regardless of our score today, it's what we do from now on what determines our real aptitude! So, after we're done, how about we all go to the library to discuss about our impressions and read some books on tactics? Shirogane-kun, can you get permission for that?" Chizuru is definitely doing her best to lead the team this time. Well, considering what she went through…

"I don't think so. I will probably have to go help Takamura as soon as I'm done with the test." And after that I gotta start my research, and then Kasumi will try to make me remember some stuff from this world's me.

"… Shirogane, who is this Takamura you speak of?" Meiya was again folding her arms, giving me a firm stare.

"The 1st Lt. I've been assigned to help for the duration of my punishment. I'm basically her assistant."

"So, is it a tough work?"

"Nah, just handing some folders around. Nothing too complicated."

"Shirogane-kun, you're not intimidated by doing office work? I would get so nervous I'll probably end up mixing some reports in my head. Helping out in actual matters is no small job." Chizuru was again making circles on the air. "Well… It's a shame you can't join us, but we will keep you up to date with our studies so don't worry about it."

"Thanks, Sakaki. Really." She adverts her eyes. Is she embarrassed? I forgot how cute it was to see her like this.

"Good morning, Squad!" The Instructor enters the room, as I see her she smiles for some reason.

… Considering how she treated me during the final evaluation, how she chose not to warn me, and the report she sent to Mooroka-san… Yeah, I can't expect her to be nice to me. Marimo-chan does not exist in this world. *My old Instructor or not, it is clear we stand in opposite sides of the board.*

"Salute!"

"At ease. First, it is a surprise to be welcoming you back, Shirogane." Smirking much, she places a hand on her desk. "Glad you were allowed to stay here. I expect you to remain on your best behavior from now on."

"Thanks, Ma'am. So I shall do." She nods, brushing some hair out of her face.

"Now, I have three things to tell you today. Number one, I'll be giving you a long lecture on how TSF are controlled until noon. After that you'll have to read up the documentation on your own. Second, I've been informed your Fubukis will be arriving tomorrow."

"EH?! Really?!" Mikoto bolted up in joy, and then immediately sat down again as the Instructor's gaze drilled her eyes shut.

"As I was saying, your TSFs will arrive tomorrow. Since you're the only Cadet squad here for the time being you'll have priority to use

the simulators during the afternoon. However, if you wish to train for more than that make sure there are no commissioned officers waiting to use the sims. Understood?"

"Roger!"

"And lastly, just because you're going to be training to become surface pilots doesn't mean you'll get a nicer treatment." She smiles widely. Oh God, what now? "You all, with the exception of Shirogane due to his punishment, will have to run twenty klicks with full gear everyday after we're done with the morning lectures and before you go for lunch."

I could feel the temperature crash down in a second. Everybody got tense at the notion of having to keep running twenty klicks on full gear from the start just before the simulator training. Marimo-chan is nowhere to be found here.

"Roger."

"Now then, here's your textbooks. But before that… Shirogane."

"Yes, Ma'am?"

"I've heard you'll have to leave as soon as you finish your training, and that you haven't got authorization to perform extra training if you so desired, is that true?"

"… Yes, Ma'am."

"Hmm… Well, it's a shame. I was wishing to include you on the evening courses." Is she doing this on purpose, or did Sensei just not tell her? Can't tell, haven't seen Marimo-chan being like this ever. "I expect you to perform at your best with the little time you have so that you do not fall behind." I nod, she then proceeds to hand us our textbooks.

Going back to the desk, grabbing some chalk, and then writing on the blackboard 'Basics of TSFs' History and Design', she turned around with a huge smirk.

"Now, let's start the class!"

# First Answers

Chapter **29: First Answers**

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*November 24th. A few odd minutes before 1 PM.*

*(Classroom.)*

**[Takeru]**

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Dear Marimo-chan, this is Takeru Shirogane.

I write to you to let you know I am deeply sorry for any and all problems I did assuredly give you, both in school and as an Instructor. From the bottom of my heart, forgive me.

This might sound odd coming from me, but there is a reason behind such an apology. You see, I've come to realize just what a truly great teacher you were for me, and for the rest as well. To say that we miss you, even if the girls by my side never met you, is an understatement. You truly were a stellar tutor in both worlds, and you didn't deserve all the trouble I gave you.

… Save for that one time in the hot springs, that is. That was your fault.

Hopefully, one day we might meet again, and then I shall apologize in person for-

"Shirogane! You must be so bored, looking out the window like that, hmm." Smirking much, NotMarimo-chan placed a finger on her cheek by her lips' side. "Why don't you answer the questions on the next page by yourself, since you're so confident in your knowledge to not pay attention to the lecture?"

Marimo-chan, please come baaaack! I'll behave this time, I swear!

Sighing and picking up the book, I then moved to the page we were looking at. And, as usual, thanks to Marimo-chan's excellent tuition, I answered everything correctly and fast.

Sadly, that only made NotMarimo-chan smirk more, and she then told me to do the same for the next page.

We're rushing the modules again. At this point all the questions are a cake for me, but again the girls answered some questions wrongs so far. I mean, the 'How many arms a TSF has' question does not belong here, Cpt. Isumi asked me that after I joined the Valkyries last time. What the hell?

But it's so nice to have a class without the girls avoiding my gaze, actually willing to debate with me. I could finally relax my back and forget about how tough stuff has been as of late for a little while.

Save for, you know, the Instructor's hellish hellbent intent on making me answer all the hard questions by myself.

"Well, that shall all for today. Remember to keep reading up on your own the remaining pages, tomorrow we're tackling the basis of movements and tactics."

"Roger!"

"Alright, Shirogane, you come with me. Since you can't go walking on your own, let's get you in your suit already. Girls, after you're done with your lunch, come to get changed into your suits as well. Dismissed!"

"Salute!" We all answer in unison as we get up.

"See you later guys."

"Later, Takeru!" Mikoto practically rushed towards the PX, book under her arm. I don't recall her being that into TSFs before, though.

… Oh, right! Didn't we have a tradition here? To make someone eat a lot more or something?

"Hey, guys. I might be wrong on this, but wasn't there a tradition here for when one does its first piloting… Guys?"

The color left their faces. Tama's eyes became whirlwinds and she started swaying left and right. Chizuru and Meiya crossed their arms as they let a heavy sigh escape their lips. Kei simply looked down, but with a clear, obvious, open for all to see bitter pout.

"You're not wrong, Shirogane." The Instructor pats my shoulder, signaling me to follow her. "You lucked out since you're being punished."

"Uhh… Later, guys." They don't answer back. We walk into the hallway, but the girls are seriously taking their time to get out. "Um, Instructor? What is the tradition about?"

"All fresh Cadets must eat double their normal fill before taking the aptitude test." She says, rather happy about it.

"Why?"

"What do you mean, why? Not only they would be under great stress but they would also be feeling rather tight in their stomachs." Then, she shoots a gaze my way, dead serious. "You've seen BETA already, haven't you? What did you do when you first saw them?"

"What did… I went berserk and started to attack them." She stops in her tracks and looks at me with wide eyes as her iris becomes smaller. Her eyes end up being two white dots.

"You… attacked them?!"

"Yeah, it was nuts, I know. But well… I got… enraged to hide my fear?" I know I said no more bullshit, but I can't help it.

"That's… impressive. Most greenhorns either freeze or start throwing up when they see them. It gets worse when they start to kill and eat people. So, we feed our Cadets more food than normal to make them used to control the urge. But really… Of course you wouldn't be intimidated by some soldiers when you attacked the BETA in a tank. Hehehehe, I'll be watching your performance closely today, Shirogane." Why is she smiling about it? Shouldn't she, like, tear me a new ear for what I did.

"About that… I think someone else is going to be monitoring my test today." She stops again and looks at me as she narrows her eyes. Reminder to self: Shut up, goddammit.

"Shirogane, why haven't I heard about this until now?"

"I… err… Didn't the Professor tell you?"

"Not a word. Ugh, what am I gonna do with you, Yuuko?!" She then begins to stomp her way forward, mowing down any dust that was lingering on the floor. Sorry Sensei, but this is your fault.

But… She seems odd. I expected some backlash, some of those same words that people have been whispering behind my back all this time.

"Um… Instructor?"

"Yes?"

"Are you not going to… say anything about what I did?"

"… I believe you already had enough on your plate." She says, without looking back or changing her stern, filled with knives tone. "Moreover, I do know that… some matters must remain unspoken." She turned back, narrowing her eyes. "Therefore, I think you should not let this hinder your training. Focus on what you can do from now on, Shirogane. And, just to be clear, I do not see you as a murderer.

However, I believe you already know of how… precarious this whole situation is."

"Yes. I can see what you mean."

"Well then, let's not bring this up again. Of course, I trust this was nothing more than an unfortunate accident, a limit situation where both parties share the blame. Your conduct so far makes me believe you are not a violent element as some claimed, but you will have to prove that to the rest of the base." She stopped walking and directed a frontal gaze at me, sizing me up for a sec. "And, surely, you will be on your best behavior from now on during your coming training courses, Cadet. Isn't that right?"

"Of course, Ma'am." I clamp up my lips, returning her gaze. Stone cold and unfaltering, she nods and we walk again…. I really miss you a lot, Marimo-chan.

Does she really believe that? That felt like empty business talk in some parts. I don't know if she was being honest or if she was just telling me what Sensei told her to. Sigh… I can't expect everyone to be nice to me, at least she's being civil instead of raising her voice and hurling more insults my way.

Yeah, don't be an idiot again. Different world, she isn't your Instructor. She's just doing what she was ordered to do, you saw her real feelings when she gave you the score in the CCSE. And she didn't report anything about the whole issue, probably under Sensei's orders. But… She doesn't seem troubled in the least.

… At least this makes it easier to dissociate her from the Marimo-chan I knew.

We eventually made our way to the changing room. As I open my locker I see a small note on it. 'This is the same suit you've been using, don't worry about your data, it's all here.' Thanks Sensei.

Again I'm using the black suit, which is appropriate since I'm actually a commissioned pilot. Well, I'm kinda jealous of the girls since I've never used the Cadet suit. Or any other suit for that matter. I wonder if it'd feel different, to use other suits.

As I get out I see that Takamura was talking with the Instructor.

"… is why I'll be monitoring… Oh, Cadet Shirogane, good afternoon."

"Good afternoon, 1st Lt. Takamura." I salute her and she returns the gesture.

"So we don't have any Cadet suits for you, huh? So, how does it feel?"

"Fitting? It does seem to do its work as intended."

"Oho, so you don't think it to be frail?" Instructor, I'm not giving you the chance to hit me.

"I tried to hit myself but I didn't feel a thing." She smiles at me as she starts walking around, giving me a good look. "Uh… Instructor?"

"Well, even your posture is different than other Cadets."

"For real?"

"Yes, most are still a bit ashamed of the… open areas in the suit." She points a finger to the chest, then to the back.

"Thankfully, I got an officer's one, I guess. So, what are we going to be doing until the rest arrive?"

"I suppose we could begin setting up your suit while we're at it."

Nodding once, I start up the suit functions, and then I am made to have a one-on-one lecture with NotMarimo-chan. Why her smirk keeps growing the more correct answers I give, I've no idea. And, why is she also asking me about the obscure tidbits? I am taking my

time on purpose, saying I heard this from an officer, but there's no way I would know this if I were a Cadet. Takamura also chimed in from time to time, to note some differences the Guard's suits have, due to how they seem to be tailor made to sync up with the Takemikazuchi as perfectly as possible.

As we were in the middle of the questioning, the five overfed shapes of the girls made their way to us.

"We have arrived, Instructor!" As if they were lifting a whole box filled with bricks, they made a salute. Damn, now I'm feeling bad for them.

"Good, go in and get changed on the double. Shirogane is already almost done with the lesson on fortified suits here." She then gave me a pair of pats, or more like force palms, on the shoulder.

Then, the girls looked at me. Meiya, for some reason, immediately looked away, as did Chizuru. Kei narrowed her eyes, hand on her chin, probably suspicious I have an officer's suit. Tama just tilted her head, wondering the same as Kei. Mikoto, though…

"Oh, man! An officer suit! It looks so cool! Say Takeru, how does it feel?"

"Like I'm both naked and in heavy armor at the same time. Look." I then punch my stomach, to a grand total of zero damage points.

"Come on, enough chitchat. Squad, into the room!" Not a second after her order, the five of them marched in.

And then, the lesson continued for a while… and another while…

… And as we were running out of topics regarding the suits, as I was told of more models than I thought ever existed, about why certain colors are banned to be used on the suits, and about why NotMarimo-chan thinks the French suit's color scheme is the most heinous thing ever created by mankind, the girls slowly, as if a snail and a turtle had fused together, came out of the room.

Hiding their chests with their arms while their faces rode into the sunset, unable to lift their gazes from the ground. Save for Kei, who gave no shits about it. This is crazy, really. The first time I saw them in those I almost got a boner, now it's just normal to me. I feel like I've lost an irreplaceable part of myself along the way.

"Well, let's go to the briefing room near the simulators, I'll give you the talk about the suit in detail there."

And so, we began our walk to the sims, me marching in front of the girls to save them the embarrassment. As we got to the room, the giant boxes look as they always do. I've been here during night for the XM3's test so I kinda forgot how this place looked with light. Some people avoided looking my way, others scowled at me. I focused on the machines, that were free as of now.

"Impressive, aren't they?" Takamura comments as she sees me staring at the things.

"Yeah." Well, I'm sure this time I also won't have a problem with this, but I still should take it-

"Huh? Who're you?" Hmm? Looking towards the voice I see some people that I didn't think I would see here.

Hayase, and the rest of the Valkyries behind her. Looking alive and radiant, nothing like… those last moments we shared together.

"Good afternoon, 1st Lt.!" The Instructor salutes her, the rest of us follow in kind, me lagging for a sec as I took in their faces, biting the inner side of my lips to calm myself.

"Oh, Instructor. There is no need for that with us!" Munakata looks at me with the smile of a devil. I do not like this situation, at all. "So, who's the boy? I thought Squad 207 was the only Cadet group being trained here!"

Akane seems to be giving me a hard stare, as well as the others from her group. Tsukiji and Kashiwagi are whispering something, while other two girls I don't really recognize were also staring. The one with green hair said something to Akane, which made her frown, and then the blonde one tried to pacify them. But the seniors don't seem to be hostile towards me. Not in the hateful sense, at the least.

"Yes, he's part of Squad 207 too. He joined during October, and let me tell you, he's scoring better numbers than you Hayase." Thanks Instructor, I totally need Hayase to get on my case before I even join the Valkyries. Yep, no problem whatsoever.

"Oho? Aren't you a hotshot? I'm 1st Lt. Mitsuki Hayase, who're you?" I give her a salute as I answer.

"Cadet Takeru Shirogane, Ma'am."

"Hmm? Aren't you too stiff? What's up, scared?" She smiles as she slightly bends over, that cheeky little smile she always wore whenever she challenged me in the sims. Heh, nice to see you truly are the same, on the outside at least.

"My apologies, I'm under orders to behave well."

"Huuuuuh… Me thinks the pup is scared." Looking back at Munakata, never losing the cheeky grin, she chuckles. I just smile back, and that seems to put her off a bit, not expecting a calm reaction.

"Ahem…" Cpt. Isumi steps forward, probably to stop Hayase from going into another of her rivalry tangents. "Say Instructor, can we stay and watch the cadets' test?"

"Huh? Well… I've no objections, so if you're free there is no issue."

"Don't worry, we've got authorization from the XO to have the afternoon free to see…" She briefly sends a gaze my way, smirking for some reason. "Their first test, as a form of gallery of spectators.

Best wishes on your first step to become commissioned pilots, Cadets." She, and then the rest of the Valkyries, give us a salute that we all return.

"N-No, it is an honor to… perform for an officer." Chizuru's lips turn and twist, unable to look up firmly.

Wait… Is she… Oh, does she also have a rivalry with Akane in this world?

"Hey Chizuru, don't sweat it!" The person in question stepped forward, giving her a wink. "And all of you girls, too. Good luck in there!"

"Yeah, the first time is hellish for everyone here." Kashiwagi folds her arms, smiling as widely as she always did. "Poor Tsukiji seemed like a broken wind-up clock after the session."

"Uuh… Yes, it was horrible." Hunching over, she quivers a bit. Her honest reaction made Tama and Mikoto laugh a bit, but the other three remained as cool as ever.

"Well, let's not keep them any longer." Cpt. Isumi said, taking some steps back. "Welcome to the Training School, Cadets. Sgt. Jinguuji's real course starts here." Then, she cracked a smirk, as did Hayase and Munakata.

The girls opened their eyes wide, seemed surprised and quite a bit scared at the claim. The Instructor sighed and shook her head.

"Please try to not scare them more than necessary, Captain."

"I am merely speaking out of experience, Ma'am. Suzumiya and her squad can attest to the quality of your piloting training, after all."

The five of them twitch and look away as NotMarimo-chan locked her gaze onto them, arms folded and a small smirk rising in her. Just what the hell is this training of hers about?

"Hmm… You don't seem shaken at all, Shiroganeee." Hayase said, getting a bit too close, tip of a finger on her chin, the grin still in place.

"Well, I'll just have to overcome the training, whatever it is. I didn't come this far to fail."

"Oh, now you're speaking my language!" Small embers rose in her eyes, here we go again. "Do try to give us a decent show at the least, hotshot."

"What is it, Hayase? I didn't knew you were into younger boys." Munakata, please no! "So you already forgot about the Viking? To think I catched you sleep talking about-"

"MUNAKATA! Shut up!" Hayase's face goes crimson as she shouts at her, while Munakata smiles wickedly.

The rest of the seniors chuckle at their exchange, the younger ones seem to… not want to join in their fun. Akane was shooting me one of *those* glares, for some reason.

The five girls are simply staring at the two of them bickering, some sending me a gaze with a raised brow. I just shrug back.

But… Hayase sleep talking about the Viking? This does not bode well for my eventual arrival to the Valkyries. Assuming we manage to keep Yuuhi at bay, that is.

"Fuhuhu! Why are you getting so angry?" Hand in her waist as usual, she smiled at Hayase, who seemed to want to lunge at her throat on the spot. So basically, same as always. "It's normal for you to want to establish dominance over your love interest."

"I said shut up! This isn't about that!"

"Mitsuki, you shouldn't be ashamed. Weren't you the one who spoke to him first?" Wow, Haruka-san teasing her, too?

"Oh, now you turn on me too?!" Folding her arms, she faked a pout.

"… Perhaps you should leave the drama for later. We're troubling the Instructor." Akane, you're doing all of us a favor.

"Sigh… You two never change. I suppose you can stay, so long as you don't make much noise or disturb the cadets." Folding her arms and giving them one of the serious glares, all of the Valkyries returned a lazy salute her way.

"Of course we won't give you trouble!" Regaining her grin, she nods. "I'll be expecting a nice show, Shirogane." Uuuh, great. I'm already on her sights.

"I'll try to not disappoint."

"Hmm? You're not intimidated by Hayase after all this? Aren't you confident!" Munakata, please stop. Before it's- "Hayase, I think he's looking down on you. See? He's totally unfazed, like he doesn't even register your existence." Goddammit Munakata! Captain, don't just stand there smiling!

"Oho? Is that so, Shirogane? If you have anything to say, why don't you-"

"1st Lt. Hayase." Takamura got between me and her, I can't see her face but to make Hayase flinch she must be sending her some violet flares. "It is unproper for a Japanese surface pilot to threaten a Cadet in this way. The same goes for you, Munakata-san. You should reconsider your way of treating your peers."

"Huh? Ah… Well… I was just… W-Who are you, anyways?" Hayase was stuttering. This is a new one.

Most of the rest of the Valkyries were shocked into silence. Cpt. Isumi coughed and stepped forward, giving us a small bow.

"Forgive us, we tend to play around like this in our unit. We were just testing the cadets, nothing more. We're sorry, right Hayase?"

"Yes, sorry about that. Shirogane, forgive the screams."

"Nah, it's cool." If you didn't do that, you wouldn't be you.

You did manage to get me out of that cloud I was in, even if my heart lost some health points. I still can't deal with you two, but thanks for cheering me up in your own way.

"Cadet Shirogane, you shouldn't be so lenient with them. They were clearly intimidating you." Takamura, you're legit more intimidating right now though.

"Thanks for worrying 1st Lt., but there was no danger whatsoever."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I'm in a Fortified Suit and they're not. So, if they tried anything, I have the advantage." Mikoto and Tama giggle, Kei just nods with a smirk, Meiya and Chizuru sigh and give me a doubtful gaze.

"Heheheh, you're really special Shirogane." NotMarimo-chan again force palms my back a few times. "See, Hayase? Not only his numbers, but his attitude is better than yours. Maybe you should learn to keep that short temper of yours in check before you try taunting cadets."

Instructor, stop adding fuel to the fire! I might be calm now, but in a few days she's gonna be all over me asking for a match!

"Grrr… Well, let's go get something to drink while we wait. Good luck, hotshot." She grins at me as they leave, Munakata also gives me a smile. The rest give us a salute with a smile, going their way to the nearby open space.

So I'm Eight and Hotshot for Hayase now. I can only pray she doesn't find out I'm the Viking, cause that will put me in quite some trouble. It is good to see they were similar to how I remember them, though.

"Cadet Shirogane, are you truly alright?"

"Don't worry, I'm used to it. And I didn't take offense, I also don't really care about formalities that much. But Instructor, was there any need to taunt her like that?" She just chuckles at me.

"I didn't taunt her. I just spoke the truth, you do have the best numbers of any cadet that was trained here, and I trained a quite a few 'hotshots' before you. Let's see if you can also get a high score on today's test."

Sigh… There is just no stopping the Instructor here, huh. Well, I just gotta bite the bullet and cleave through whatever this hellish training is about. And lend a hand to the girls, if they want it.

"Um…" Tama hesitated for a moment, looking down. "Is what they said true? That your real training starts now?"

"… In a way, it isn't wrong. However, if Suzumiya and her squad could overcome this hurdle, so can you. Surely you're not getting cold feet, are you now?"

"No, Ma'am!" All six of us answered.

"Good, now let's take care of the briefing."

We make our way into the briefing room, then the Instructor and Takamura start the explanation while taking their turns.

Now that I think about it, I never used the helmet of this thing, or the Feedback Protector. Man, it might be scary to fight the BETA in it, but that Pile Bunker looks sick as F. I wonder why we don't have

more melee options than swords here, another thing to research today.

Once that was done and all suits were properly set up, she coughed and pointed to the door. We follow her out, back to the rails by the side of the sims.

"So, allow me to explain what you will be doing. You'll go in pairs, in pods one and two, and we'll have you stay seated for fifteen minutes. I will be monitoring your performance at all times. Also, as you already know, your simulation will be displayed on those monitors there for everyone to see."

What?! The girls look to the ground, Tama was already shaking. So that's why the Valkyries are here. Maybe Sensei sent them on purpose?

"After you go through the three speeds, you'll have to pilot for two minutes. First in an open space and then in an urban environment. Just to let you know, the best time we have is from 1st Lt. Hayase, at one minute and three seconds." Huh, so Hayase was top tier material since the start. "Well, let's start this. Sakaki, pod one. Mitsurugi, pod two. Here you have your bags, in case you need them."

"Um… Instructor. May I ask a question?" Chizuru spoke as she took her bag.

"What is it?"

"Why has the 1st Lieutenant joined on the briefing if you'll be the one monitoring us? Will she be helping in our simulation?"

"1st Lt. Takamura is here to oversee Shirogane's simulation." She couldn't hide the twinge of bother that was deeply rooted in her voice.

"Eh? To oversee…" Great, negativity I can already feel you.

"So she's Takamura… Could she be…" Meiya was glaring at her, which made Takamura flinch surprisingly.

"Ahem… I should have introduced myself earlier. I am 1st Lt. Yui Takamura. While I've been stationed here on a loan from the Empire, I've been assigned to monitor Cadet Shirogane's tests during his training course."

"Um… 1st Lt., is Shirogane-san in trouble?" Tama, thanks for asking.

"No, this is just to lend a hand. I was also stationed at Yukon like him, so I was asked to watch over him." She spoke in her usual work tone, which made the girls start fidgeting. They're throwing glances at me now.

"I see. But why only him?" Wow, for Meiya to speak up. What is worrying her now? Going by her eyes, it looks like she knows who Takamura is.

"It was simply an order, nothing more." They stare at each other for some seconds.

Takamura was composed and calm, while Meiya was furrowing her brow with yet again fire coming out of her eyes. Is she worried Takamura might do something to me since she's on the Guard?

"We've lost enough time on this. Sakaki, Mitsurugi. On the simulators, now."

"Chizuru! Good luck!" Akane yells at her while waving one arm, the rest of the fresh members also wave at her.

Chizuru smiles as she slowly waves back before getting into the pod.… Meiya didn't even look at them. Guess she still doesn't feel welcomed by the rest, huh.

Meiya and Chizuru's TSFs appear in the monitors. And the simulation starts, the rumbling starts in the two sims, echoing about

the room.

"Uwah… Look at them move!" Mikoto's color was draining from her face as she stared at the pods shaking.

"This looks much more worse than what we did back last spring." Tama's voice was frail and tense. Kei was just staring, but she also must be nervous.

The images on the monitor change to an urban environment, they're on the last speed. After some sharp turns, the scenery changes to a prairie again. Some circles appear on the air, I suppose they have to fly through them?

Chizuru seems to be doing okay, Meiya however was having trouble moving her TSF. After they pass through ten circles, the image changes to a city again, and they have to start taking turn. At first they had some space, but as they got closer and closer to the center of the city, the buildings got closer and in the way. Meiya was the first to crash, Chizuru crashed shortly after.

0:27, Meiya. 0:34, Chizuru. Barely near half a minute, and Hayase got double than that? Wow, she must have been good from the start. The sims calm down and both of them get out of the pods.

I see some of the Valkyries laughing, others groaning. Are they… making bets? Seems like they're enjoying themselves, even if there seems to be a clear line between the seniors and the fresh ones.

As Meiya and Chizuru got close, I saw they were pale and walked wobbly. Grabbing the iron bars they slowly approached us.

"Sakaki, Mitsurugi. Well done. Ayamine, Tamase. You're next." The other two went into the pods with heavy steps.

"Chizuru-san, Meiya-san. Are you alright?"

"Uuuuuhhhh…" Chizuru sat down on a nearby bench and started to slowly rub the back of her head.

"Meiya-san, what about you?… Meiya-san?" Mikoto was completely ignored as she kept walking past the extended hand that was offered.

"Hey, Meiya? You okay?"

"Eh? Ah… Y-Yes, S-Shirogane. I'm alright." Unlike Chizuru, Meiya's face was burning red. She doesn't look sick, maybe what she ate is making her stomach hurt?

"Meiya-san, are you sure? You don't look so good." Mikoto lent her a hand as she sat down near Chizuru.

"Yes, it was… an eye opening experience. Uuuh…" She slumped onto the bench as her breathing got more calm.

The sims start shaking again. As the starting drill finishes, the prairie with circles appears again. Kei's TSF flies through shaking slightly, while Tama's on vibrator mode. As they reach the city, Tama crashed at the first tall building she met, while Kei kept going despite her tense maneuvering. She ended up crashing at the same spot as Chizuru, go figure.

0:19, Tama. 0:34, Kei. This is not good for Tama's self esteem, Kei is going to be so annoyed that she scored the same as Chizuru. They get out, Tama was walking as if she were drunk with swirly eyes. Kei walked slowly as she rubbed her forehead.

"Good work, cadets. How are you feeling?" The Instructor greets them as they approach us.

"Hauuuhhh…" Tama can't even speak. Mikoto helps her to the bench.

"… Urk." Kei was slowly making her way to the bench too.

"Kei-san, how are you feeling?"

"… Fine."

"You look white as a sheet though." She gives me a bothered stare as she sits.

"This is nothing."

"Kei-san, you're tied with Chizuru-san with the best time so far." Mikoto jiggles at her but Kei closes her eyes as she frowns.

"… Fuck." I knew she was gonna react like that, but it's still funny to see.

"Tamase, Ayamine. Good work. Yoroi, Shirogane. Your turn." We nod at NotMarimo-chan's words and then go towards the sims.

As we do, I hear a whistle coming from the Valkyries, but I ignore it and continue to walk on. I'm not reacting today. As we got on the steps to get inside, I looked to the side and saw how Mikoto's shoulders are slightly shaking.

"Hey, Mikoto."

"Hm? What's up?"

"Don't worry too much, yeah? Just relax and do your best." I remember I did this during the tournament to ease his worries, so maybe I can do the same for you.

"Uuuh… Well, you're right. Let's do our best, Takeru." She smiles faintly, but she's still tense as the air on an exam room.

"Mikoto, you must chill. I know, think of it as a game. It's just you and me having some fun."

"The Instructor is gonna kill us if she hears that." She starts shivering. "But I'll do my best! Don't think you'll have it easier

because you're stronger."

We grin at each other and get inside the pods. I sit down and put the bolts in place. That's done, now the upper ones… Okay, all done. Now, what do I do? Do I go seriously? I mean, I won't be shaking around like the others, so let's take it easy.

"Cadet Shirogane, can you hear me?" Takamura's face appears in my vision.

"Loud and clear, 1st Lieutenant."

"Are you comfortable in that position?"

"Yes, no problems."

"Alright, remain in standby. Once Cadet Yoroi finishes the bolting we'll start the test."

A few seconds after that the start code appears on my sight, the prairie appears all over me and I feel the pod start moving. That being said…

This is a joke. The sims should move even more than this, this is nothing like a TSF. Ugh, I can't even get in the mood to pilot like this. The prairie looks nice and all you want but… Oh, we're in the city now. The thing picked up its pace and now we're going at the third speed. Which is still slow. I mean, I'm used to all the G-Forces of my stunts with the XM3, so this is like going back to Squash 64 after playing Mereengue.

"Cadet Shirogane, the manual part of the test will begin shortly. Get ready to pilot."

"Roger." I grab the controls and put my feet on the pedals.

Then I feel some response from them and I slightly move them forward. The prairie appears before me with the same circles in the

air. To the left, to the right, dash ahead, to the right, boost upwards. Ugh, this is such a chore.

I reach the city and start moving around. I jump over some houses, before landing I dash to my left and jump again when I can towards the following circles. This feels really stiff, it's really unresponsive. No wonder we're losing the war with this thing, it's not even that I can't cancel or that it's less sensitive, this is a straight limiter on the pilot. By teaching you to only move within these boundaries you'll never think of doing piercing maneuvers, or to use the aerodynamics to their fullest.

Ugh, I can't even get motivated for this. I'm actually having trouble making the thing move as I want it to move, I have to time my jumps earlier or the thing just won't respond.

Whatever, there's two circles next that require one to jump between some big buildings, I'mma crash here. Let's speed up a lil' bit, and now do a barrel roll~!

**CRASH!**

[DAMAGE SUSTAINED - TEST OVER]

Ahh, that was fun. I rarely get to actually mess around in these things so this was actually a one in a lifetime treat. How much time did I last, though? I kinda spaced out there for a sec as I was complaining about the OS. Oh well, whatever.

After the thing stops shaking I get out of the pod, Mikoto is getting out too and she looks like she's made out of jelly, wobbling like the Frost Climbers.

"Hweh…"

"Mikoto, you alright?"

"Everything… spinning…" Lending her my shoulder, I help her go towards the rest.

"Good work, you two. But I'll be damned, I didn't think you'll actually do it Shirogane." The Instructor was again smiling at me, Takamura's eyes had small flames on them. What are they talking about?

"Shirogane, that was truly impressive!" Meiya was beaming at me, Tama was also looking at me with sparkly eyes.

"What are you talking about?"

"Cadet Shirogane, you broke the record. Your time was 1:18. You're now the Cadet with the best starting time." Takamura points to my monitor, a giant smile plastered on her face.

"What a surprise. Special-kun stormed the course again." Kei deadpanned me as always, and despite the small doubt it seems she also is intrigued.

"Huh, neat. And what about Mikoto?"

"Yoroi lasted 0:42, it was a surprise for sure." Chizuru patted Mikoto on the shoulder, she finally seemed to have regained her composure and smiled at her.

"T-Thanks, Chizuru-san. But it was more turbulent than I had thought… Hweeeh…"

"Yeah, that was rough." Tama closes her eyes as she starts shivering.

"Well squad, let me give you your results." We all form a line, standing in attention, except for Mikoto. "Sakaki, Mitsurugi, Ayamine, Yoroi, Tamase, all of you are progressing fine. You did better than I expected of you, considering about much trouble you've been until now. Seems like training you wasn't a big a waste as I originally thought."

She can't contain herself, can't she? The girls had recovered the color on their faces, but now were again looking to the ground. Takamura grasped a strand of hair, to prevent herself from speaking up probably.

"Now, Shirogane. Your data from Yukon was lost in the incident, so we have nothing to compare today's data with. However, these numbers are really something else. You were calm and composed throughout all the simulation, did the shaking not bother you?"

"Well, honestly no." No point in lying now.

"Hmph, you've scored the best score any Cadet got in their first run. Not just from the squad, but from any cadet that has been trained in the 207th Training School to date." As expected, the girls are left speechless. Though, in my defense, I also did that during my first loop. This isn't cheating. "I hope you can keep it up. That's all for today, squad. Dismissed!" She then beckons us to follow her back to the changing room.

As we left the sim room, I saw the Valkyries looking our way. Akane and Tsukiji waved at the girls, the green haired one shouted a goodbye and the blond one gave them a court bow.

However, Kashiwagi, Munakata and the Captain had the biggest, cheekiest grins I ever saw in them, they rose a hand to salute me. And… Hayase was looking straight at me with a huge grin on her face, eyes squinted while tensing a fist, with Haruka-san doing her best to calm her down. Before we left, she made a gun with that coiled hand, and 'shot' it at me.

So… I just made her lose a really big bet between her and the others, didn't I? She's not gonna let me off easily, ain't she?

"Takeru, did the shaking not bother you at all?" Mikoto's eyes could pop out of her face any second now.

"I mean, what can I say?"

"Well, regardless of that he still beat all of us with his score. You too, Yoroi. I didn't expect you to get so farther ahead from us." Chizuru seems puzzled at Mikoto's results. It is surprising though.

"Yeah, Yoroi-san beat all of us too." Tama, cheer up. What are we gonna do if you start getting depressed?

"Miki-san, don't look so down. You just gotta practice to get better!"

"Shirogane." Meiya tapped my shoulder as the rest continued to talk.

"What is it?"

"Say, can you tell me if it's true that you weren't bothered by the shaking?"

"Huh? Oh, well… No, I wasn't that bothered by it." She sighs as she softens her gaze.

"I see. That's another hurdle to cross, huh?"

"I mean I… Yeah, I already had some battle experience, you know? In the tank?" I remembered the excuse I gave them about me fighting in a tank, she nods at me.

"Oh right, I had forgotten about it. Of course, you already have experienced the heat of a real battle. Even so, to surpass the previous record… You truly are special." She smiles faintly at me, thank God she isn't getting all negative and suspicious.

"Please stop with the praise. I mean, how was your run? You did seem pretty beat up, and your mech was swaying a lot. How did you feel?"

I was expecting her usual resolute tone or a philosophical remark about how she has to continue to hone herself, but instead she adverted her eyes as her face turned red again.

"It… It was… I mean, it was certainly… harder than I thought it would be."

"Well, don't beat yourself up. All of us have some bad days."

"No, it's not… Uh…" She bit her lip as she returned my gaze. I… I've seen that gaze before… And not out in the open…

"… Meiya? Hey, you seem kinda out of it, you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I just had a… daydream while I was in the pod. That distracted me and… N-Nothing, I am fine. Twas nothing but a mistake on my part to let such thoughts come to me at that time." She folds her arms and looks away.

The way she looks like… She said daydream… In a sim pod… Which made her… Ooooooohhhh… You're telling me she saw that memory? This… is kinda awkward now.

"Sorry."

"Eh? W-Why would you be apologizing?" She turned even redder, but she couldn't look at me in the eye. Yep, she saw it.

"I shouldn't have asked. Sorry to bother you, Meiya." I give her a small bow, but she starts fidgeting as she seems to try to find words to speak.

"No, this isn't… your fault. It was my own fault for thinking of… o-of such matters." Stop being like that, I'm trying to calm you down here.

"Shirogane-kun? What are you two talking about?" Chizuru to the rescue.

"Meiya seemed to have a hard time on the sim, I went and made her relieve that, so I was apologizing."

"I see. Not that I can blame you, Mitsurugi. It was harder than I thought it would be." We both nod at her words, heaving a sigh for

the same and a different reason at the same time.

"Squad, we're here. All of you have the rest of the day free, consider it your last share of easy time. Let me remind you that until you all haven't completed all the basic training drills on the simulators, you won't be allowed to pilot your TSFs. That's all, leave your suits in your lockers. Well, then."

The Instructor leaves, and we all enter the changing rooms. Since I'm alone here I quickly get back into my fatigues and get out. Takamura was waiting for me, leaning on a wall.

"Well, shall we get going? Or would you be wishing to speak with your squad for a while?"

"Thanks, but let's get going. I'm sure they must have a lot to talk about already. The project can't wait." She nods at me and we go our way.

I should leave Meiya alone for a while, she'll only get more vivid memories if I stay close to her, and I'm pretty sure I don't want this Meiya, who seems to be even more resolute about her duty, to have sexual daydreams about us in the middle of our training. Imagine how bad she'll feel if every time she has to get in the sim pod she has the same visions. I also don't know which one she saw, since we… kinda did it in the sim pods quite a few times.

Since they were welcoming enough to trust in me again, let's give them some space to avoid any weird causal stuff from flowing into them. After all, Meiya wasn't the only one who I did it with in the sims. And it's not like those times were-

"It was truly surprising, I did not expect you to retain such poise during your test." Takamura brought me back to reality before my thoughts spiraled out of control. "The incident must have affected you greatly."

"… Yeah, it did." If by incident I assume all the deaths in my world, then yes.

"Your movements were also quite precise even if you were fumbling with the controls at times. I think you'll make a very good surface pilot, Cadet Shirogane." She beams at me again.

"Thanks, but, can I ask why are you so interested in my piloting skills?"

"Huh? Why? Well, I think you have potential, and as a fellow survivor I just want to help you. Really, that's all." She looks at me squarely in the eye. Her tone however hides something underneath. I can't tell if it's good or bad, but she's not telling me the truth.

"Well, in any case, if I impressed you I'm off to a good start. What did you think of my squad's performance?"

"They did well for their first real simulation. Except Tamase."

"Do you think you could help her?"

"Hmm… That might be a bit complicated. I did get permission from the Instructor to aid them during the evenings, since it'd free her own schedule." Bureaucracy and Sensei's overworking schedule playing to our favor for once.

Of course, Tama's specialty are guns and Takamura is more oriented to close combat. Aside from some footing and movements she might not have much advice for her. She might have it easier with Meiya and Kei.

"If you can find any advice for Tama, please look out for her. She isn't very confident, so she tends to get down easily. Maybe forcing her to push her limits gradually would work?" That's all I can think of to help Tama, since she herself has to find her resolve.

"I'll do what I can within my boundaries."

"That's more than enough. Thanks, Takamura. For real."

"No, it is nothing. I did give you my word, so I must follow through." The honor code also helping out, huh? *Color me surprised, it would be a first for those damn rules to do anything good.* "By the by… Whatever does 'for real' means?"

"Oh… It's… Uuh… My way to say 'Really', basically." Not this again, goddammit.

We made some talk about the test until we reached the office. Things picked up from yesterday and I had to run around delivering more folders than yesterday. It does look like we're on the right track for the railgun now, by the end of my work we already had some schematics done for the remodeled version of it.

With some luck we will make it in time for Sadogashima.

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*Same Day. 0 8:53 PM.*

*(B19F. Takeru's Office.)*

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Nothing but the sound of my clicks and typing could be heard in here, in the small office Sensei prepared for me. Looking like a small classroom, with a small blackboard behind me, a small desk where the PC was, a shelve with who knows what kind of papers, and little else.

"Hmmm… So this Tornado has the blades mounted on the outside of its arms…" It does look more practical than having them sheathed. Doesn't the Takemikazuchi have a small dagger ready in its arms too?

I look up, away from the screen as I stretch a bit.

Been reading up on weapons and TSFs since I finished aiding Takamura at 1900 hours, but this thing is really slow. The PC looks to be running on Weóndows 95 and with all the documents I have open, it's running really slow at times. It's UI is also really old, but considering that widespread usage of PCs has probably stagnated it isn't surprising.

But boy, did I not learn a lot of useful tidbits of info today! Honestly, we're gonna get rich with the F-15's parts. It seems to be one of the most widespread TSF in the world in usage right now. Now, those Europeans are crazy. They put blades mounted on the arms of that Tornado, they made an axe, and a spike shield. I mean, I could have seen a shield being turned into a claw or something, but to have the shield shoot out its spikes… Gun shield, best shield. You can even use it to bash the hell out of the Grapplers. Imagine someone sorting with only those shields as a weapon… Knowing the lack of supplies in the frontlines, that probably has happened once, or will happen at some point.

But the Soviets are not far behind, they made literal chainsaws for their TSFs. Shame we don't have much info about those. I might ask Sensei if we can somehow copy that. I also found a gatling gun, the M61 Vulcan, that was redesigned to be used on TSFs way back when the first TSAs were created. It's light enough to mount it on a TSF and powerful enough to be worth it. Since it uses 20mm ammo, I could put two small containers on the back of a TSF's legs to hold the bullets. The GAU-8 Avenger is too heavy, and the machineguns of the A-12 are a secret of the American army, so that's my best bet to see if the idea works outside of Valgern-On.

I'm glad Sensei kept her words with this, but I was expecting she would since this is profitable for her. And thanks to this setting I'll be able to do stuff to my leisure now.

I hear a knock on my door, I answer and Kasumi enters the room.

"Good evening, Takeru-san."

"Hey, good evening Kasumi. Did Sensei sent you to start on that memory thing?" She nods.

"Are you ready? I wanted to do it near Sumika-san, to link any memories you might have of his childhood to her."

"Give me a sec, I'll save these docs real quick."

After some clicks here and there, I saved everything I had noted down today, and then we leave the office.

"So, how do you think this will go Kasumi?"

"I don't know. I never really tried to bring someone's memories back to the surface. I can't really talk with Sumika-san, it's a completely different thing. I will do my best, though." She moves her bunny ears as she looks at me, determination oozing from her eyes. I return a smile, patting her head. She moves her bunny ears again as I do.

We reach the cylinder's room. The santa rabbit is still hanging in there. Kasumi signals me to sit near the cylinder and after I do, she presses her head against my back.

"Takeru-san, close your eyes and relax. Also, here." She passes me some sort of tiara-like object that looks a bit like her bunny ears, probably what Sensei will use to monitor my brainwaves during this session. "It might take me a while, so just be calm. The images might be somewhat distorted and lack color, but you remain calm and listen to me. Since I'm intruding on your mind it might hurt a bit, but please do remain calm at all times."

"Alright. I'll stay cool, I do trust in you, Kasumi. But don't force yourself if you can't do it."

"Don't worry, you can leave it to me." She smiles at me from behind, and then puts her head against my back again.

I take a deep breath and close my eyes. For a while I feel nothing different, seeing pitch black darkness.

But then I felt a tingly feeling on the back of my head. When a slight tinge of pain appeared, I started to calm my breath, focusing on that feeling. Slowly, my body began to feel a bit stiff.

"Relax, Takeru-san. You're safe, nothing is wrong."

"I know."

"Take a deep breath." I do as told, I feel the tingly sensation get stronger. "Calm down, think of being in peace."

"Like, sailing on a boat or something?"

"If that is what you imagine, then yes."

Eyes still closed, I remembered that cruise Meiya sent me and Sumika once. The lights of the city, the slow rocking of the ship. Left and right… Left and right…

"Yes, calm down. Focus on the lights." Slowly, the pain faded away. "Calm down… You're safe now…" I felt like nodding off, leaning back a bit.

At some point, I realized I had stopped feeling my body. A similar sensation compared to when I jump between worlds, but without the nausea and the world spinning around. The tingly feeling is still there, somewhere. Then, the lights I was remembering start to twist and curve. As if it were a stain spreading, a visage comes closer to my sight, giving me some form of vertigo for a sec until everything came into place.

The colors stop being blurred, the shapes take noticeable forms, I can begin to tell the depth of what's around me after a while.

I find myself looking at some sort of street. It looks really run down though. Also, everything looks so much bigger.

"Bro! Wait right there!" A child shouts in the distance. I can't really control anything here, similar to that time I couldn't materialize and ended up getting punched by Sumika back into this world.

"Bleh! Jouji, you slowpoke!" My view moved back, and I saw two boys running towards me.

Both with black hair, one had a red bandanna on his forehead, was wearing a white shirt and blue shorts. The other had a red shirt and black shorts. Their clothes look really old, like in the style the ones my Dad had on those old pictures he showed me. The last shriek of fashion in town, before it was brutally murdered.

"Takeru! It's not fair!" The bandanna-less boy shouted as they tried to catch up. However I, or rather this little version of me, turned around and started sprinting again.

He jumped over fallen stuff that someone left lying around, took a turn to his left and went near some sort of park. Then, without slowing down, he jumped on some sort of fence climbing game, and reached the top in no time at all. Way to go, little me.

"Uuuh! Bro, you just wait!" The boy with a bandanna tried to do the same, but ended up falling. That must have hurt a lot.

"Hey, Jouji! You okay?"

"Uuuuuhhhh…" His eyes were two big whirlwinds. Little me got down from the game and went near him.

"No, you're not. C'mon, get up." He helps this Jouji up, as the boy rubs his head. Hey, he's nicer than I was when I was little.

"Hey, did Jouji hit his head again?" The other boy got closer.

"Yeah, he's really dumb."

"Like you're not! Bro, you're the dumbest of them all! Only you would think in climbing like a monkey!"

"What?! I'm not a monkey!"

"Yes, you are! Like the ones in that book you're always reading!"

Little me and Jouji start arguing about who's dumber, with the other boy trying to make peace between them. This looks like your everyday life, is this in the Hiiragi district? It doesn't seem that different from my life back home, considering how much I fought over the most silly things with the boys in Pee Park.

Hehehe… I forgot how… nice this was. Just fooling around with your friends. I'm glad he also had someone like that. So he wasn't always alone.

"H-Hey! Takeru, Jouji… S-She's here." The second boy says as if he just saw a ghost.

Little me looks towards where he's pointing and I see a tall figure getting… What the hell?! You've got to be kidding me.

"Takeru, what did I tell you about playing outside?"

"That I shouldn't do anything dangerous?"

"And *did* you?"

"No? There is no proble-Eeeh! It hurts! Maya-nee, let go of my ear!" Maya-san came closer, looking infuriated, and pulled his left ear quite strongly it seems.

"No problem?! What would I have done if you fell from that height?! Gosh, what am I gonna do with you? I let you out of my sight for a second and you run off to the park."

"Let me go! I won't do it anymore!"

"You always say that. No more playing outside this week."

"EEH?! No fair!"

"Silence. You have no right to complain. Now, let's go back home." Maya-san starts pulling little me away, who tries to resist in vain.

"Don't worry Takeru! We'll go visit you later!" The boy whose name I don't know waves at little me, after a while the one named Jouji starts waving too.

After some steps, Maya-san lets go of his ear and instead grabs his wrist, and so they keep walking quite fast. Little me waves at them with his free hand, before turning forward.

"Maya-nee, let me go. It hurts."

"Hmph, pouting won't help you." She says as she arranges her glasses like she usually does.

They keep going somewhere, but with a clear direction. This person is without a doubt Maya-san, she looks to be around my current age but she isn't wearing her Guard suit, or a dignified one either. She looks like a commoner, wearing a crimson and white dress. Her hair is tied in a similar fashion to my world's Maya-san.

But… This only brings more questions. Little me called her Maya-nee, she said going back home. As for how she scolded him, it would seem they're actually siblings. But that's impossible, since his last name is still Shirogane.

Mion did seem to like him, and Tsukuyomi-san did act weirdly last time we met after I called those two pickles. And now this. Were our families that close?

Maya-san is looking out for him a lot, she's actually worried about him. He's still complaining at her.

… She does look like an older sister right now. Family, huh?

… Is that why he was so hurt? Because the Tsukuyomis were Guards and he felt betrayed by someone he trusted a lot?

No, they're the retainers of the Koubuin family. Why is she taking care of little me? She doesn't seem to be bothered, it feels… Like when Mom always scolded me, but finished the rant with a kiss to my forehead. Why is she here? What is he to her?

Slowly, the image starts to lose color and twists itself in a whirl. Everything mixes itself into a weird gray, where all shapes are part of some sort of giant abstract 'something'.

"Takeru-san, I can't focus on that memory anymore. Do you still feel fine?" I hear Kasumi's voice from somewhere.

"Yeah, no problem. Can you keep going?" I didn't really reply. It's like my thoughts simply reach her without much effort.

"Yes. Give me one second."

I feel a slight jolt, the whirlwind moves again. Color returns to the visage in front of me, the shapes slowly return to reflect a normal view. Now, where is this place?

Again everything looks big, so I'm again seeing little me's memories. This place looks like… an old fashioned house? No, looks far more regal than that.

Looks actually like those houses of the nobles I saw on TV back home, but for real. He's walking behind someone in a red Royal Guard uniform. I start hearing two voices bickering.

"It's cheating! You can't clap my ears!"

"All is fair in a battle. You're merely jealous because I always win!"

Are those… Yep, it's them Pickles. Mion and Shion are arguing with each other, something about Shion cheating in some training. Both of them are wearing a red gi, similar to the ones people that do martial arts have. Mion's short hair has a small ponytail behind, while Shion's barely reaches her shoulders.

Little me rubs his hand, he has a bruise, he's on a gray gi instead. So they already trained? Uh… I wanted to see him fight, dammit. Now that everything came into view I can recognize the person walking in front of the three kids. Tsukuyomi-san, wearing her red Guard uniform, looks back at the girls as they argue before speaking.

"Alright, you two. Stop fighting already, Yuuhi-sama does not like noise on the table." Tsukuyomi-san opens a big door, and we enter into a bright room.

There was a table, its wood shiny and all, with a really nice looking cloth covering it. The wooden chairs having some curls, some design on their top and legs, remind me of some old and expensive store that was in the shopping district back home, only more regal and with the wood having a slightly darker color.

And looking our way, there was a small figure sitting on the left side. Wearing a white kimono-like robe, with a small purple ponytail, she smiled at us. Yep, that's Yuuhi.

"Oh, good evening. How was your training?" Her silky voice is a treat to my ears. It's hard to think this cute little thing wants to kill me now.

"I won both matches!" Shion declared proudly as she sits, puffing her chest.

"I couldn't win…" Mion drops her shoulders as she sits by Shion's side on the right side.

"Takeru, your arm is hurt." As little me sat by Yuuhi's side, she grabbed his arm and started softly rubbing his bruise.

"I'm fine Yuuhi, don't worry." He's calling her by her name, sitting by her side… Just who are you? Why are you here?

"Truly so?"

"Yeah! I might have lost once, but I'll do better next time." He seems to be beaming at her, because she immediately recovered her smile. He's also talking to her informally, like I usually do.

"Alright, no more talking. Here's dinner, so eat while it's still warm."

Tsukuyomi-san brought the food to the table and the little kids started to eat with her. It does look like he was part of the family, going by how everybody is treating him.

… Eating with your family. Something so trivial, something so irreplaceable.

One day, it was the last day I ate with my world's Meiya, one day it was the last day I talked with Grandpa, and those days, the days of the accidents… might have been the last days I spent with my world's versions of everyone.

But I didn't knew that.

It's obvious why they want me dead. I'm replacing someone that was like family to them. What would I do if someone tried impersonating…

… Didn't I replace Sumika with the 00 Unit in my last loop? Didn't I keep mixing my world's and that world's versions of them in my head?

… Who did I fall in love with again?

… Am I such a superficial person? Did I just not care? I just wanted someone to sleep with?… Or, did I actually love each and every one of them?

The happy voices around me only enlarge the clouds in my heart. Now I feel like shit, planning on replacing him like this. I mean, why did he grew so resentful towards the Guard if he was so close to

them? Why didn't they reach out to him? Or did something happen between them when Yuuhi became the Shogun?

"Tsukuyomi, would it be alright for all four of us to go play for a while?" Yuuhi asks as she finished eating.

"Hmm… I guess you could all play some shogi?"

"Mana-nee, we're gonna lose again." Mion protested at Tsukuyomi-san's choice. Little me nodded in agreement.

"Nobody can beat Yuuhi in a game of Shogi." Little me's comment made Yuuhi blush a bit.

She does kind of remind me of the memory of that little Meiya of my world when we met in the park. That Meiya was more soft and less… aggressive? Frontal? Yuuhi does somewhat remind me of that polite and sweet side of my world's Meiya. The side… I might never see again.

Sadly, I now understand why she wants me gone.

"I'm not that good… Shion, do you want to play?"

"Only if I win something." She brought a finger to her lips as she grinned. So she was a devil since she was a kid.

"What would you be wanting? Oh, a new dress perhaps?" Little Yuuhi tilted her head with a big smile, but Shion's grin grew wider and wicked.

"I want Takeru to play with me all day tomorrow!" Wait, what?

"Shion! That's mean, you can't… do…" Mion was protesting against her cousin's idea but fell silent suddenly. And I can see why.

In the corner of my sight I could see blue flares come out of Yuuhi's eyes as she pouted. I mean, it isn't very intimidating for me, seems

more cute and sweet than anything, but the kids seem to be scared of her.

"No. Takeru stays with me tomorrow." She then hugs little me tightly, as if to enforce her point.

"Yuuhi-sama, you don't have to get jealous. Tomorrow you'll all have time to play together." Tsukuyomi-san's attempt to calm Yuuhi failed spectacularly.

"But he'll have to leave again after tomorrow…" Still protesting, she doesn't let go.

Leave? Where is he leaving? No, why is he leaving? I want answers, not more questions!

"See Shion? You're making Yuuhi sad. You dumb pickle!" Yeah, you tell 'em!

"W-What? I didn't…" Shion looks down, Mion grins at her making her pout and look away.

Then little me's vision goes towards the purple girl that was still hugging him. She doesn't look like she wants to let go.

"Don't worry, Yuuhi. Tomorrow we'll play a lot together! And next time, I'll bring you more souvenirs, so cheer up!" He patted her head and she slowly looked up at him, her eyes recovered the usual shine. She can't be so cute…

"You promise? You'll come back?"

"Yeah!"

Yuuhi smiles again and let's go of little me, Tsukuyomi-san laughs quietly as she watches. They seem to be awfully close. If he was so important to her, of course she would want to dispose of someone passing as him.

But… He said he'll come back with souvenirs. Did he came and went from the Hiiragi district to wherever this place is? Why? Where are my parents?! Actually… Who are my parents here? Are they… still alive?

They keep eating, talking about some festival, about how hard the trainings are. But again, slowly the images become distorted and start losing color. The shapes again mix and blend into that gray thing.

"Kasumi? How are you feeling?"

"I'm… fine. I can still…"

"You sound tired. Let's leave it for tonight. I mean, these two memories gave us a lot to work with. Take it easy, yes?"

"Alright."

Everything fades to black, and I feel a slight warmth all over me. As if rising back to the surface after diving in a pool, the tingly feeling slowly dissipates and I open my eyes, and see that I'm back on the cylinder room. My limbs feel all stiff as if I was sitting for hours on end, like when I had to study for my first finals.

"Ugh… Kasumi, how are you feeling?"

"Fine. Just a bit tired." She rubs her head with her eyes closed. She's having trouble calming her breath, so she did exert herself.

"That was awesome, I could see it as if I was there on real time. You did a great job, Kasumi." She giggles as she opens her eyes, I took the tiara out of my head.

"That's a relief. But we didn't get to see Sumika-san…" Then, a wild pout appears.

"Don't worry, we can keep trying. And even if we only saw two memories, that still gave us a lot of answers." And a lot of questions,

too.

"Yes. Seems like he was part of the Shogun's household. But he also was in a normal city. He's weird." She moved her bunny ears as she breathed a sigh.

"Yeah, no kidding. I don't know whether he got adopted into the Tsukuyomi family or if my family also served the Koubuin House. Well, we'll find out eventually." I slowly try to get up. My legs feel really numb. Kasumi seems to also have trouble standing up.

"This was… more draining than I thought. I'll wait until tomorrow to show these images to Sumika-san."

"Yeah, don't exert yourself anymore. I'll be going back to my cell before it's too late, can you tell Sensei of what you saw?" I lend her my hand as she stands up, it feels as if she were made out of literal paper. This must have been really taxing on her.

"Yes. You go on and rest. By the way, how did you feel during the session? I didn't harm you?"

"No, it was really relaxing. It was kinda nice, to be honest. I do feel a bit stiff, but it's like all the tension I had stockpiled today vanished into thin air, all thanks to you."

"I see. So, should we continue with this approach?"

"I don't see why not, I did say that I kind of enjoyed it too, that feeling before seeing the memories. I did feel pain at the start, but the mental image of the ship helped out. How about you? Are you really fine?"

"Yes, don't worry. I am just exhausted, since I didn't knew how much I had to focus. Well, if it went well that's good enough. Let's be on our way."

I nod and we exit the room, talking about the whole feeling and the session as we walked on the creepy corridor as we stretch to remove the stiffness from our bodies.

"You should rest well today, just in case. Night, Kasumi." I hand her the tiara, and then wave at her.

"Bye bye." She waves back before entering Sensei's office.

As I make my way to my cell I can't help but wonder about what I saw.

He was apparently living with Maya-san when he was little and called her Maya-nee, so they were close. Where were my parents? Were they living with us? Maybe we were some sort of vassals of the Koubuin House? No, if that were the case, why were they in the Hiiragi district and not near Yuuhi?

And then, the second one. He seemed to be really close to Yuuhi, and from the looks of it I was training with Mion and Shion. Tsukuyomi-san didn't seem to treat me differently, so who was him?

Well, one thing is clear. Sensei was right, he was on good terms with Yuuhi. No wonder she and the Tsukuyomis are so mad with me. I wonder what will I see tomorrow, I sure hope I can see something about his life in the Guard this time. Or about his life with Sumika.

Anyways, today was a fruitful day. It seems I'll be able to get along with my squad for the time being, the railgun is proceeding steadily, my research started off with a good pace, and I got to learn some nice tidbits of info about him.

But I'm spent.

I'll have to be careful during training to not end up exhausted. Well, let's hit the shower and then go to sleep, tomorrow will be another long day.

…

"… Family, huh."

# Ripples of Change

## Chapter 30: Ripples of Change

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*November 24th. Almost 3 PM.*

*(Changing Room.)*

**[Chizuru]**

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"So you still are suspicious of him?" I stare at Ayamine, who was in the middle of taking off her suit.

"You saw that he has an officer's suit, and he passed the first test as easily as always. Isn't that really odd?"

"… I do concede that his performance was amazing, however, I don't believe the shortage of male cadet suits is his fault." Tapping my glasses, I then continue to get out of the suit myself.

"Wasn't he transferred from overseas? There was enough time to request a suit if there wasn't one for him." She insists.

"Um… Maybe asking for a single suit wouldn't work, right?" Tamase suggests, unable to lift her gaze from the ground.

"Could have asked for a delivery for the next batch of cadets ahead of time." And Ayamine doesn't let it go.

"You wouldn't still be thinking of treating Shirogane-kun as an American, would you?"

"… And if I do?" Giving me one of her habitual side glances, she raises a brow.

"I believe we made it clear to you that he isn't like them. Shirogane-kun was always just trying to fit in."

"Then, why is he also a star pilot from the get go?"

"He might just be talented. Don't let your jealousy speak out again."

"Did you even see how he was when he got out?" A hand on her chin, she looks up. "He wasn't even groggy, wasn't affected by all the shaking. And he's got someone from the Guard watching him."

"Sigh… Look Ayamine, we all agreed to treat him fairly from now on. None of those things are in his control."

"Doesn't mean I can't keep an eye on him."

By the Holy Emperor, what is wrong with her? I do understand her concerns, however, none of them are his fault. And… I cannot simply look away after all he did for me.

"It would be a hindrance to the squad's unity for you to continue down this road, Ayamine."

"… I can treat Special-kun however I want, so long as we get results in the trainings." Narrowing her eyes, our gazes clash once more.

"And, as the squad leader, I'm asking you to refrain from doing something you might regret later. Just like how you acted on your own when we saw those small sims and almost made him unwilling to show us the other ones. Remember?" She plucks her lips into a small circle, looking away.

"Not my fault that you want to force us to do whatever you want all the damn time."

"What?! I wasn't-"

"Really? You always insist on following orders, but didn't you also treat him like shit when you wanted? You know, despite it being bad

for the squad?"

"I… I was wrong back then. I already admitted to it. And if we keep acting in that way, we'll only make our trainings worse."

"That's your opinion. We don't have to act friendly with each other if we don't want to." Coiling a fist, she shrugs before I could retort. "I will follow your order to not be vocal about my opinions, but that doesn't mean I'll just turn a new leaf because you want me to. Special-kun will have to show me he truly isn't a traitor."

"Kei-san, please." Yoroi, who was already in her fatigues, took a few steps towards us. "If you just close up, then this will end like our argument during the test." She keeps staring at Ayamine, who, despite her poker face, was now facing away from Yoroi.

"… You can think whatever you want about me, just like I can think whatever I want about Special-kun."

Having finished to get into her clothes, she sits down and grabs her boots, seeming intent on remaining silent.

"Ayamine, we can't have that attitude in the squad anymore. You saw what it did to us during the test."

"And will debating about it solve anything?" She frowned once she sent a gaze at me.

"Huh? I'm just asking you to-"

"No, you're harassing me. I am free to act as I see fit as I've been until now. Stop bitching about it."

"And precisely because of that, I'm telling you to give him a second chance!"

"Um…" Tamase, tapping her fingers, came a bit closer to me. "I don't think Ayamine-san means anything bad. I also don't think it's fair to

treat Shirogane-san as we were, but she only needs to see for herself he's being honest, right?"

"That is true." She smiled, until I tapped my glasses. "However, we can't let this go as it is, otherwise this might, and certainly will, come back to haunt us later."

"Chizuru-san, I don't think insisting will change her mind."

"… I get it, I'll give her some space. But, just don't treat him unfairly from now on."

"Tch… Already heard you the first time." Going down to tie up her boots, we all got back into getting ready to leave.

"A-Anyways, it sure was a surprise, how a real simulator works!" Yoroi smiles, joining her hands. "For a moment I thought I was gonna faint."

"Yeah…" Tamase sighs as she gets her boots in place. "I wonder if I'll be able to endure the trainings from now on…"

"Don't worry, Miki-san! Akane-san and the rest seemed to get the hang of it by the fourth day, right?"

"I agree with Yoroi. The suits will accumulate more and more data each day, so by then the shaking won't cause us that much dizziness anymore."

Remembering those days, when we were left to do independent reading back from the beginning of the course while the Instructor tutored Akane and the rest in their piloting sessions, when they got sent to a table far away so that they didn't have to hold back to discuss their trainings, it made me so frustrated.

While basic TSF operation, the situation of the war, and some outlines of the systems used was available from the start, I truly didn't think the suits and all the things involved would be of such

excellent, state-of-the-art technology. I do understand why they didn't want to let us know of it ahead of time, and yet… back then we barely had the morale to follow through the basics again.

… And the only reason I'm standing in a changing room is because he protected us, when we did nothing to deserve his help. He wasn't even fazed when Akane's squadmates pressured him, as if trying to make him react aggressively.

So, I should start doing an effort to regain everybody's trust, while also looking out for him. So, just like he did with Yoroi when she had just returned, I should focus on lending them my own strength.

"I was thinking on going to the library, to reread the books and try to find a hint towards how we should proceed. Does anyone want to join in?"

"Oh, yeah! I am so looking forward to reading up on how the Fubuki works!" Yoroi's smile could barely be contained by her lips.

"Sigh… We need to focus on the standard movements before that. We won't get to pilot a TSF until then."

"Man, I wonder if we're gonna get to see them when they bring them here." Swaying slowly, she closed the locker with her suit.

Sigh… And there we go again, she's lost in her own world. I do appreciate her enthusiasm, but it is very concerning to see she's as absentminded as always.

"I was also wanting to go." Tamase nods, standing up from the bench. "There is so much left to read from the books… It is a bit frightening, to be honest."

"Damn right, those books are dummy thick."

"So, would you like to come as well, Ayamine?" She looks my way, her eyes almost closed, then she nods.

"Sure, you can't bitch at me in the library after all."

"Y-Y-You! Why do you have to-"

"Sakaki-san, please don't be angry! She's just joking!" Tamase waved her hands in front of me, putting herself between us. "Isn't that right, Ayamine-san?"

"Nope, being dead serious." Placing a hand on her waist, she gives me a side glance. Then, she smirks.

Tamase's eyes shoot wide open, seeming to be wordlessly screaming, as if her eyes were melting into an abstract form as she quivered.

"If you're just going to sass me then, do all of us a favor and don't join in the studying session."

"I'll stay quiet, won't let you get under my skin anymore."

"What?! You're the one who's always-"

"Sakaki-san, please!" Tamase again trying to put herself between us, a sigh escapes my lips as our eyes make contact, I then take a step back.

"Kei-san, you too. Please don't act like that, we're gonna end up thinking the wrong thing if you keep it up." Yoroi admonished her, sounding more concerned then upset. Ayamine sighed and gave a nod.

"I get it, I also wanna get better soon."

"Sigh… Good then. Mitsurugi, what about you?… Mitsurugi?"

She was already in her fatigues, had already put her suit in its place. Folding her arms, seeming to be groaning, she was leaning on the wall. If I recall correctly, she seemed to be bothered by her performance, according to Shirogane-kun, so she might be mulling

over it now. I'm sure coming to redo the lessons will do her good to clear her mind. It is very odd for her to stay this quiet.

"Mitsurugi, are you listening?"

"… Hm? Oh, my apologies." Giving me a small bow, she softly let out a sigh before brushing some hair to a side. "What is it, Sakaki?"

… Did she not even register our argument? Mitsurugi would normally jump in to stop it, now that I think about it. How odd, she must be tormenting herself for some reason.

"We all were planning on going to the library to read up on the material we were given. Would you like to join in?"

"But of course I would. Are the rest ready?"

"… Yes, we were… debating just now on what to do."

"I see. My apologies, I was lost in thought."

"Meiya-san, are you feeling well? You look rather pale."

"I am well, thanks for asking. The training left me…" She looks up before closing her eyes, sending a hand to those odd shapes she forms atop her head. "… shocked, one could say. Pay me no mind, I am fine."

"Still, it wouldn't be good for you to force yourself if you're in need of rest." Yoroi didn't let the issue go, after all her medical knowledge is her best trait. "There is much to read, so an hour or so of sleep won't-"

"I said I am fine." Folding her arms, she leaves the wall. "I welcome the chance to clear my mind, so if everyone is in agreement, let us depart for the library."

"… I see. Sorry, didn't mean to… boss you around or anything." Yoroi looks down, playing with her belt.

"Then, should we be going, Sakaki?"

"… I suppose. Are we all ready?" All of them give a nod, and so we exit the changing room.

Shirogane-kun wasn't outside, so I suppose he must have been made to aid that Lieutenant from the Guard. Even Mitsurugi didn't seem pleased with the arrangement. I only hope he doesn't become sick by forcing himself in the trainings. There is little to be done if the Instructor decides to push him as she always did. Perhaps I could ask Mitsurugi to come along to speak with her if anything happens.

As we went our way through the hallways, going to the barracks to get our bearings for the study session, Yoroi and Tamase kept discussing what they thought about the simulation, with Ayamine's one liners popping up every now and then. Yet, I can't help but notice Mitsurugi is still out of it, walking as if merely following us on automatic, her attention locked on cloud nine.

"Mitsurugi, are you alright?"

"Eh? Oh, yes. Nothing's wrong, Sakaki."

"Then, why are you spacing out so much? It isn't like you."

"I'm just… pondering on my performance."

"Then, why not discuss it with us?"

"Because I haven't made up my mind about it. I do not wish to give an… emotional response, nor to downplay mine own lacking display." Looking away, her tone turning harsh, her eyes closed with much tension.

What on earth is she this upset about? She does take her training to heart, yet this is just the beginning. This isn't like her, at all.

"… I'd say that you shouldn't take this so hard, but after the CCSE I can understand your wish to excel again." She looks down, her

hands going to her belt. "However, this is merely the beginning. Let's all throw in our grain of sand, and see how we proceed from then on."

"… Yes, you're right. My apologies, Sakaki."

"Please stop that, it's unlike you. Why are you this down about it? I don't remember you being like this over firearms practice." And you were awful at that. I still remember how bitter you looked, how you wouldn't even respond after you failed right at the start of the very first sniping run.

"I'm just…" And again, she looks away while sighing Mt. Fuji out of her. "Dejected at myself, one could say."

"Well, all of us are, in a way. Let's focus on what we can do for now, alright?" I don't know why she takes it so hard, but her own personal code must be at work. I'm no one to judge, so let's simply lend her a hand.

"Yes, I agree. However, I believe you performed better than myself. You didn't seem to be shaking as much, and were tied in second place with Ayamine from our original members."

… Precisely that's why I'm mad, but I won't let it show.

"Anyways, we all have our own issues with the training, so let's get the basics ironed out today." She then nods, making a small smile.

Rejoining the conversation, we all proceeded to discuss our opinions on the sims until we reached the barracks. The study session went well enough, since both me and Ayamine made an effort to be civil about it. Thanks to all that Shirogane-kun pointed out during the lecture we had earlier, we could arrange a proper reading order that allowed us to tackle almost one quarter of the book.

He was right in that there was no need to memorize everything in here. I do wonder why there is so much unrequired, dated

knowledge on these books. Either the UN is handed second-hand equipment or there is a large delay between the shipping of the manuals and the time it takes to iron out new protocols and tactics. Perhaps, some higher-ups don't want to share the knowledge.

In any case, the first reading session ended well enough.

Then, since it was still early enough and we have the day free, I asked Mitsurugi if she felt well enough to give me some lessons on CQC, but Yoroi insisted that she looked off. Despite her initial complains, Mitsurugi apologized and said she would take an afternoon nap.

I only hope she doesn't take this failure too deeply. Knowing what duty lies on her shoulders, what expectations she has to satisfy given her face, even if I don't know her situation, it would be understandable for her to need some time to meditate on her own.

And so, I simply let everyone do as they pleased. Ayamine said she wanted some more reading, so she stayed behind in the library, while us three went back to the barracks, since Yoroi proposed us to play something to kill time.

At the very least, the squad is still functional. Once Ayamine clears her suspicions, we'll be able to focus on what's ahead working as a team. I only hope she learns to keep that attitude away from the sims.

… Sigh, now, it's only waiting to see how we fare from now on, and hoping Mitsurugi doesn't dwell too much on this.

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*Same day. Just some minutes before 6 PM.*

*(Barracks. Meiya's Room. Shower.)*

**[Meiya]**

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"I cannot believe it…" Washing the foam that formed atop my head, enjoying the warm water running down my back, my lips refused to relax.

I wasn't allowed to visit his cell earlier, since he wasn't in it. Having just gone to ask yet again, it would seem Shirogane won't return to it until dinner has ended, and by then our curfew will be in effect.

Such a blunder on my part, I should have asked him to wait for me after the test. Then, we could have gone to deal with the matter of his sword. It will do him no good to delay it, and yet that discussion might have slipped his mind after all he had to go through. Not only that but, since I am still slightly doubtful towards him, I wish to be there in case Tsukuyomi decides to act out.

I know he told me not to speak of it, but if it is to shield him from further burdens I should tell Tsukuyomi of how he defended me. Perhaps Mion and Shion reported the matter already, but due to the smokescreen the UN is trying to erect, Tsukuyomi has been left in the dark.

"Yet, she also wasn't in her room." Moving my hands to my shoulders, in a futile attempt to imitate the detailed, almost dead-eye precision of his massage, I move my neck from one side to the other.

It is most odd for Tsukuyomi and the trio to not be present. Their presence wasn't around me when I trained, so something serious might have come up. It might only be her trying to pry for intel, in which case I should talk with her posthaste. Then again, she wasn't in her room, so all I can do is wait.

And yet… My hands stop, I close my eyes. As warm as the water on me, but as tender as the sheets are during winter. Just as kind as his massage was on the mountain, as careful as a mother laying down her children to sleep, such as that is the embrace I saw in the sim pod.

Why am I having such daydreams? I do admit… I see him in a new light now. However, in no way am I such a salacious person. This is… merely my hormones acting on their own. Indeed… that is the only logical explanation.

…

Furthermore… There is no way we would ever do something as shameful as… that in a sim pod. I would never give in to such ways, no matter how pleasant his massages might be.

"… No! His hands were not pleasant! Whatever am I saying?! Guh… Pah!" Some foam entered my mouth, now that taste just refused to leave it.

Uh… This is all his fault. How dare he to lay his hands on me in such a way.… I do appreciate his gentleness, but still, that was uncalled for. To even go as far as demand to call me by my name as well…

*"It's a beautiful name, that's all. I just think it suits you well."*

Ugh… No one had ever praised me in such a way. And he was being honest, as well.

" *Your name is beautiful and it suits you, Meiya."*

And it isn't as if I am ungrateful for what he did for me, or how he continued to aid us afterwards. Refusing to abandon Sakaki, and even facing off against Mion all on his own despite his exhaustion… I do see why he would have been given a Minaru Kamui. However…

" *And since your name suits you, that means I think you're beauti-"*

"No! He did not utter such words! Ugh… Bleargh." Great, now I ended up swallowing warm water.

Such blunder… Just what is wrong with me?! What is this feeling on my sides? Why do they tickle me so? Whatever spawns these thoughts on me?

It is true I haven't heard anyone compliment my person, aside from my performance in the trainings, in a very long time, and he did seem honest at the time… However, I am, in no possible way, so shallow as to simply lose myself over a single compliment.

Sigh… In any case, this is mine own folly. I should be grateful Takeru exposed this side of myself to me, it would be most shameful to display this out in the open. Next time I see you, I should thank you in some way. I wonder whatever could I do to aid you, Takeru…

"Hm? Did I… Ah!" I'm calling him by his name? Whatever is wrong with me?!

I think I… did try to do that a few times back during the test. Guh… How shameful of myself, to be so easily swayed. The heavens have blessed me, for the one who did so seems to be an honest fellow. Imagine what would befell me had I shown this pathetic side of myself to an untrustworthy person. I would only have given trouble to Tsukuyomi.

Shaking my head, finishing my shower, and drying myself up, I sit on my bed as I get changed.

Assuming our TSFs arrive tomorrow, I am sure Tak… Shirogane will be in our designated hangar by early morning. I can then ask him for a moment to go deliver the sword. Perhaps, I could try to see if Tsukuyomi is free after dinner. I know not what she is busy with, but a mere moment of talk shall suffice.

"Sigh… Still, I need to be careful. I never thought I would… be so careless."

Lucky I am to not have had her watching over my training, or I would have been found lacking any answer to justify my behavior. All that I went through in the CCSE, to now be held back by such a petty sinkhole…

*"It's a beautiful name, that's all. I just think it suits you well."*

Argh! Why did you have to say such a thing to me?! I mean, there is a point where baseless flattery becomes an insult. I do not believe he truly… thinks me beautiful. I am just… shocked. It has been a long time since I've been complimented. That is all there is to this.

Once dressed, I lay on my bed while resting both hands atop my stomach.

Still, I do wonder who he received his blade from. He was very passionate when speaking of it the day of the alarm… and even during our talks in the CCSE…

Someone who marked his life… Perhaps… Could he have been given that blade by whoever he had to mercy kill before? The way he spoke of that woman, especially when we talked by ourselves while Sakaki slept, was enough to see the wound in his heart. Was he… being courted by a fellow? Otherwise, I fail to see how he could have been handed the blade.

No… It matters not. Whoever was the one who gave him the sword, he seems honest enough and already agreed to return it. Yes, that is what matters most.

… However, it does make me wonder… The way he spoke of her, how he defended his sword before… and even the first time we dueled, how happy he was when he told me of the time he was soundly bested by someone far better than him…

"… Just who was that woman? What did she do to ignite such a fire in your eyes?"

Considering everything, she must have been one of our high fellows, to have been sent to Yukon. I wonder… what kind of fellow she was. She surely was mature enough to not let some prejudices blind her actions. To make someone as talented as Shirogane fall for her, who could she have been?

"Sigh… No, this isn't what I should be thinking about."

Standing up, running both hands over my trousers, I yet again sigh.

Remember all what you were taught about poise, remember what Grandfather said about keeping one's composure in front of vile compliments, and… remember what Tsukuyomi taught me since we first met.

Even if he was sincere, there is much separating us. And even if he does have a Minaru Kamui… I cannot expect him to remain being my fellow. After all… I am a shadow.

Remembering those days I was under Grandfather's care, and how it later became worse once I was assigned as Sister's body double, how 'freedom' was erased from my lexicon…

I was always alone. The heavens have blessed me with such caring squadmates, and for Ta… Shirogane to have given me a second chance despite my lackluster behavior. Now that I'm finally able to have some measure of freedom…

"Curiosity is not a sin, but you should be careful with it. Sometimes, the answers that you seek are not those you would be wishing to hear."

Therefore, if it does me no good to learn of who she was, I should not pursue the issue. I finally received my role and began my piloting training, this should be enough for someone like me. I will make Grandfather proud, so, focusing on my own endeavors is what I should be doing.

Exiting my room, I directed myself to the PX. Running into Tamase on the way, we went together the remaining distance, enjoying some simple chatter as we walked.

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*February 11th, 1989. 02:48 PM.*

*(Mitsurugi House.)*

**[Mana]**

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Grabbing the scarf I wear with a hand so that the gust does not take it from me, I await the moment to enter.

Then, the wooden gates are opened and I quickly walk into the grounds of the house, bowing to the attendant that opened the gate, and then quickly walking past the small garden set in the entrance and going towards the door, where I am welcomed by a maid in service of Raiden-sama. After the greeting, she moves aside and opens the door for me, so I then enter the Mitsurugi residence.

I have been made to wear a rather modest dress for the occasion and I have tied my hair in a single hairbun to travel here. Even if I have been ordered to move using the trains of the House, I must remain ever vigilant for this is a secret task given to me by Yohime-sama herself. My concerns over Maya's attitude should remain subdued until my return to the Koubuin House, for now I have only one task ahead of me.

I am guided to the living room by the maid. Raiden-sama was sitting there, waiting for me.

"Good afternoon, Raiden-sama." I give him a bow, then later I remain standing in attention.

"Welcome, Tsukuyomi. Please, sit down, let us enjoy some tea as we talk." Thanking him for his kindness, I sit in front of him, serving myself some tea. "Now, I am not wishing to sound ungrateful, however I believe I told Takahisa-sama I required no retainers." He folded his arms, sizing me up with his stare.

"I have been tasked with aiding you in Meiya-sama's teaching, and the order was issued to me by Yohime-sama. I will not be staying here, at the least not for now."

"I see. Then tell me, what have you been tasked to teach her?"

I proceeded to inform him of my orders, which encompassed many subjects and areas. From our history to how to conduct herself in the higher circles, from how to employ Shogi as a form of negotiation, to how she should carry herself in front of others. As well as all other lessons regarding her education, even if I'll be but an overseer for the time being.

"This does feel as if you were a retainer…"

"Yohime-sama was clear on her orders, however. I am not staying here, I shall be coming every odd day from now on."

"Haha, I understand Tsukuyomi. Now then, allow me to ask you a question."

He shifted in his seat, his coming gaze sent a shiver down my back. Sending the birds of caution away, the storm clouds in his stance were coming towards me.

"What do you think of Meiya?"

"What do I think? I do not have an opinion of her, I haven't met her yet."

"Answer me clearly, Tsukuyomi. What is Meiya to you?"

What has brought such hostility? This feels as if he were one of those specters in those tales, those guarding a princess. Raiden-sama narrowed his eyes filled with storm clouds, his words rumbling with thunders.

"She is another member of the Koubuin Family, regardless of her situation. I am but a servant, and she is someone I will guide and protect will all of my might if the need calls. What else could she be for me?" I also narrow my eyes at him, I know I am nothing but a fresh recruit yet I find his doubt insulting.

I only hold worry for Meiya-sama in my heart, as I do for Yuuhi-sama. They are one of the reasons I am who I am, and I desire nothing short of being by their side to aid them in what I can, in what they might need from me.

Even if I also would like to bestow them kindness, I know such closeness could backfire. Sigh… I can still show them what affection means through other ways. Using my cooking, for example.

Raiden-sama remained staring at me silently for some seconds, grasping his beard as he did. I couldn't help but to gulp under his stare, clenching my fists and bringing my legs closer. It feels as if someone were passing a feather just over the nape of my neck right now, trying to force me to make a miss.

"I see, so that's how you think." He relaxed his posture, I had to hold a sigh as he did. "Well, do forgive the inquiry. Meiya should be done with her math lessons, were you wishing to see her now?"

"Yes, if you so allow."

He stood up and I followed, however he went towards a set of stairs on a corner of the house. Those stairs descended for some reason.

"Raiden-sama, where are we going?"

"To see Meiya, of course."

"Forgive me for asking but… Is she being kept on the basement?"

"Yes, that is the case. The traditions so demand. It is sad, but she spends most of her time there." He says, a tint of grief apparent in his squinting eyes.

The weight of his words on him was as obvious as the dissonance of the grand steel door we found at the end of the stairs with the rest of the house. It resembles those founds in prisons, made entirely out of steel with a small rectangular area to see further into the room. As if

this were the entrance to a dungeon were criminals are kept in, as if something monstrous was on the other side and that required such a door to be framed into the wall in such a way.

As he opens it and enters, I also follow behind. A rather well decorated living room came into view, in extravagant blue as I was told Raiden-sama likes, an elderly man was sitting by a little girl's side pointing to her book in the other end of the place.

The girl looked at us, her eyes widening as we made eye contact. Wearing a black sweater and a long, frilly blue skirt with lines of black and white, Meiya-sama had her hair done in a similar ponytail to the one Yuuhi-sama uses.

"I believe it has been enough for today. You might retire." Raiden-sama said, the old man bowed to him and said his parting words, reminding Meiya-sama to follow with the contents of her book.

The man gave us another bow as he approached us and then exited the room. The little girl came to Raiden-sama's side, but unlike Yuuhi-sama, she had no smile in her complexion. She bowed to us, hands joined by her stomach.

"Good afternoon, Grandfather."

"Oh, Meiya-tan! How were your lessons?"

Huh?

Raiden-sama's eyes reflected a clear sky as he hugged Meiya-sama and lifted her off the ground. What does the -tan mean, however?

"I have been fine, Grandfather." The girl returned the hug, smiling faintly. "However, who is this teacher?" She said as she looked at me.

"Good afternoon, Meiya-sama. My name is Mana Tsukuyomi and I shall be looking after your learning efforts from now on."

Raiden-sama brought her back to the ground. Meiya-sama got closer and gave me a bow.

"Thank you kindly for your help, Tsukuyomi-sensei. I shall do my best to answer to your teachings."

"No, Tsukuyomi shall suffice Meiya-sama."

"Eh? No, you are my teacher. I have to show you respect." She said, the firm resolution of Takahisa-sama in her words, the same way to look straight, deeply into my eyes as Yohime-sama.

"I… Ahem, Meiya-sama please think of me as your vassal. I would prefer you referring to me as Tsukuyomi."

Meiya-sama gave a glance at Raiden-sama, curving her brows as her hands shifted together. He nodded at her and she relaxed her posture.

"I will call you Tsukuyomi then. Thank you kindly for your help."

"Please, you don't have to bow to me. It is alright, Meiya-sama." She again seemed to be uncomfortable at my words, a hand slowly rising to her chin.

"Well, I will leave Meiya in your hands. I expect you to handle her with care, Tsukuyomi." I gave a nod to Raiden-sama and he went his way out of the room, closing the door once he did.

"Alright, let's start. Meiya-sama, what do you say of having a few Shogi matches?"

"Yes, as you say Tsukuyomi." A few pebbles leaned on my back at her words. The contrast with Yuuhi-sama is subtle but evident. Meiya-sama lacks that sunshine in her eyes, as if she were minding her words to not upset me. As if… she were afraid of something.

We went towards the table that was already prepared and we then spared against each other. She is very good for her age, but I

suppose she has been trained in case she was ever required to be a body double for Yuuhi-sama all her life.

We spent the afternoon together seeing how good she was at what she had learned, with the passing of time she slowly relaxed a bit more. Her speech mannerisms are very good and formal, though she seems to use a rather frontal approach when using her own voice. She is even more formal whenever she speaks in 'the proper' voice, as she called it.

Meiya-sama is far ahead from both Mion and Shion in her math and history lessons, and her thought logic and ability to make arguments is astounding for her age. She… does seem to be a tad bit too stubborn when she likes an idea however, just like her father. It is truly nice to see her show emotion as she pouts when I prove her wrong as we debate over the smallest of details.

To think there are people who only see her as a political tool, as nothing but an expendable body double to shield Yuuhi-sama. I will do my best effort to aid her, Takahisa-sama, Yohime-sama. Not just as a teacher, but as a counselor and confidant.

"Well, this was enough for today. Why don't we take a small break?" A few hours have already passed, after all.

"We can still practice. There are some books we didn't see yet." She says, leaning forward. She does not like to lose a discussion, apparently.

"It is alright, Meiya-sama. Let us spend some time simply talking to our leisure, what do you say?"

"… Yes, as you say Tsukuyomi." She again bowed to me, stiffness overflowing. Sigh… I suppose it'll take time for me to be anything other than another teacher for her.

I went to the small fridge that was in a corner, found some fruits, and after peeling and cutting them I returned to her side. Bringing them to

the table on a wide dish, Meiya-sama sat in front of me and ate slowly.

"You won't eat, Tsukuyomi?"

"I will, but it is only natural to allow you to pick your food first. I am your vassal after all."

"But you're also my teacher. Please, let's eat together." She pushed the plate towards me, furrowing her brows.

"If you insist, so I shall do." I picked some slices of apple, she seemed to prefer strawberries. "Meiya-sama, if I may ask, have you been taught how to wield a blade?"

"Yes, Grandfather has taught me how to use the Mugen Kidou style. I practice every day after my afternoon classes are over."

"I see. What do you say of sparing against me today before I leave?"

"Yes, as you say."

"No, Meiya-sama I am your vassal. Do not be so formal with me."

"Eh? Is it truly alright? My teachers have taught me to always be polite. They said it is rude to refer to your elders in any other way." She said, her eyes cascading downwards.

"It is true that you should abstain from such behavior, but I am your vassal. You do not need to be so stiff with me."

"But… If you say so, Tsukuyomi." Yet more rocks stockpile on my shoulders at her answer.

I guess she won't understand she doesn't need to be this formal to me in a day. Well, it is a matter of time. She'll get used to me eventually.

"Then, shall we go practice your swordplay?" She nods and stands up. I do so too, but I halt my movement as I realize the door is closed and, at first glance, it seems we cannot open it from the inside. "Meiya-sama, how do we contact Raiden-sama from here?"

"Oh, there's a button nearby to call Grandfather." She goes to the wall and points to a painting. "It's behind this, he told me to use it if I needed him to come for anything." She then steps aside, letting me get close to the painting in question.

I move the frame and see a small button built into the wall. After I push it, however, a rumbling similar to that of a stampede could be heard from up above. As if glasses and plates were thrown to the ground and shattered, as if the furniture was being moved violently, as if someone was hurling rocks at the wall, the sounds reiterated themselves for some seconds. Soon, I could hear the steel door being rammed by something. And the sound reiterated itself, this time with more violence in its echo.

I stood in front of Meiya-sama instinctively, yet as the door was swung wide open, Raiden-sama was the one who entered the room…. Why are his eyes furrowed in such way?

"Meiya-tan! What happened?!" Before I could blink, he was already behind me. Crouching by Meiya-sama's side, he ran his hands over her body to see what was of her.

"Tsukuyomi said she wanted us to practice swordplay. So I called you." Meiya-sama was unfazed by all this, however.

"Oh, is that so? I forgot to leave her a communicator, now that I think about it."

"Um… Raiden-sama, what was that noise just now?"

"What noise?!" He stood up sharply and looked around with hawkish eyes, placing a hand on the katana he had on his waist.

"No, I was talking about the noises after I pressed the button."

"Oh, that was me. I feared something might have happened to Meiya-tan, so I hurried to her side." He says, puffing his chest.

"I believe I heard some plates breaking, however."

"Don't worry, we can always buy more of those."

"However, how-"

"Now, I believe you wanted to go to the small dojo we have on the house?" Just like Takahisa-sama, he just won't allow anyone to pierce his speeches.

"… Yes, sir. That is the case."

"Well then, let us go. I believe I should have some gear you can wear to spar against Meiya. But of course, you will be careful with her, won't you Tsukuyomi?" Again, his eyes took a hawkish tint. I stand in attention by reflex, nodding at his words. "Good. Now, let us be on our way."

As we returned to the surface, I saw three maids sighing as they tried to fix what little was left of the living room.

Going out to the garden, we went to a small building to a side. The dojo wasn't as big as I assumed it would be, but it was enough. Raiden-sama gestured to a side, towards the changing room. After changing into the traditional protective gear, not the new one I have become used to in my training on the Guard, me and Meiya-sama each grabbed a wooden sword. Taking our positions, she took the Mugen Kidou stance while I chose to take Waki.

She makes the first move, a frontal slash. I parry and pressure her with few but precise attacks. Unlike Maya, I vastly prefer to take a more reactive approach and capitalize on the mistakes my opponent

makes. After all, the one who shows the first signs loses. Prediction is half a fight.

She tries to aim to my lower left, I allow her to pressure me for a moment. Deflecting her attacks with ease, I shift my footing. Moving forward with my left I send few, but strong attacks at her. Aiming upwards, I keep pressuring her. Once I realized it was impossible for her to counter me at this speed, I arched my knees and went for the final blow. I pushed forward one last time and delivered a downwards slash, that she barely managed to parry. She took a step back and tried to block the follow up, but the force of the strike made her slip backwards. Falling to the ground, Meiya-sama didn't let go of her blade however. I halt my movements, letting out a sigh.

"Well, this is my victory. Well done, Meiya-sama." I help her up and we then bow to each other.

"That was a spectacular bout, Tsukuyomi. As expected of someone of your family." Raiden-sama praised me, clapping a few times as he got closer. "Meiya, what did you think?"

"It was a good duel." Some stiffness resided in her voice, it seems she is upset to have lost. "Tsukuyomi, would you practice with me again sometime?"

"Why, of course. I have been assigned to aid you, so if you so desire I can spar with you any time, Meiya-sama." And for the first time in today, she smiled at me.

It wasn't Yuuhi-sama's wide, radiant smile. It was a smaller, but in a certain way stronger, smile. The sun will always shine bright no matter which day it is, however that is not the same for the night. That is why the landscape one can see during a full moon night is a sight to behold.

"Thank you very much, Tsukuyomi. I shall do my best to improve." I nod at her. She's still being too formal, but there will be time to fix that.

After going back to our attires and going out of the dojo, the sky had darkened already. We went our way to the basement again as Raiden-sama asked Meiya what she thought of my lessons, to which she answered she was pleased and she found all of them helpful.

"It is good to hear you two got along well, Meiya." Raiden-sama patted her head as he walked. "Now, let us enjoy dinner together."

"Raiden-sama, a moment." One of the women serving as maids got closer to us as we had reached the stairs to descend. "You have a call. Please come answer it."

"Tell whoever it is I'll answer later."

"Sir, it is about some of the repairs needed for the house. The call cannot be delayed." The woman insisted, one of Raiden-sama's brows twitched.

"Mmgh… Tell them I'm on the bathtub. I am going to have dinner with Meiya now. So Kamiyo, please relay the message to-"

Then, the two other maids appeared and, all three together, dragged Raiden-sama to the opposite direction.

"Tsukuyomi-sama, please take Meiya-sama to her room. We shall be taking dinner to you shortly." One with blonde hair said to me, throwing a key my way. She then locked her arms around Raiden-sama's right arm.

"Ah, yes…" What is wrong in this household?

"Release me! I am your boss… Let me have dinner with Meiya-tan!" Raiden-sama kept wailing as he was dragged away.

"Meiya-sama, is this normal?"

"Normal? What do you mean?"

"Does this happen frequently?"

"Yes, Grandfather sometimes has to answer important calls. When that happens and he doesn't want to, the three maids come and take away him like this. Grandfather is very strong, so they have no other choice." So this is normal to her… I guess it only shows how dear you are to Raiden-sama.

"Well, let us go back to your room."

"… Yes." She grabbed onto my arm as we descended the stairs.

After entering the room, it only took a few minutes for the food to be brought to us. I asked Meiya-sama about her kendo lessons as we ate, it seems she isn't as far ahead from the two little ones as I thought. Lacking a sparring partner who matches her skill is what's holding her back the most in my opinion.

Once we finished dinner, I began to gather my bearings to leave for the Main House again. As I was putting what few things I had brought with me back into my bag, she approached me, hesitating in the last steps.

"When are you coming back, Tsukuyomi?" Her hands joined and hanging low, she directed a gaze my way.

"I will be back every two days. Please do keep studying as you have been."

"Yes, I will. Um… Can I ask you something?" She came closer, looking from the ground to me a few times, her hands shifting together in their hold.

"Of course, what is it?"

"Can you tell me… how it is to be outside?"

"… It isn't that different. I also stay indoors most of the time."

"I see. Do you go somewhere you like sometimes?"

"Yes, I go buy books from time to time. While I also used to have free time of my own, I mostly spent it studying inside or practicing Kendo with my cousin and the others in the dojo I went to."

"How is it? Walking outside?" Her eyes staring right into mine, her lips trembled like a boat's rippling waves.

"It is nice, feeling the wind on your face. Have you been shown pictures of the Empire, Meiya-sama?"

"Yes, of parks, the castles, the shores. There is something I do not understand about them." She folded her arms, looking down.

"What is it?"

"Why do people like to go to the beach so much?"

"Well, many do like the sea. I believe you were shown what it looks like, what do you think of it?"

"I think it's pretty, but isn't the sand bothersome?" She tilted her head, bringing her hands together once more.

"Not particularly. I have only gone a few times, but it isn't bothersome by any means."

"But Grandfather told me it gets stuck to your skin, gets inside your clothes, and it also can dirty your hair and ruin your hairstyle. And it can burn your feet when you walk too." Plucking her lips, she counted on her hand the 'bad things' as she said them. I had to make an effort to not giggle at her pouty expression as she did so.

"While that is true, one only needs to be careful. Sand isn't as foul a trouble as you described, Meiya-sama." I say, smiling at her innocent stare.

"I see. Then, what about forests? I was told you can hear the animals at night. How is that?"

Meiya-sama kept asking me about how it was to be outside, how it was to walk in a park, to be in a meeting, how was the city when the people were moving around. Despite being taught about the world, she wasn't allowed to be in it. So, all she can do is fill the gaps by herself.

And in her current position, I doubt she will ever be able to enjoy such freedoms. Even Yuuhi-sama accompanies her parents on their travels sometimes, however Meiya-sama has been forced to live inside these walls forevermore. I wonder if I could bring her some books to help bridge the gaps under the guise of giving her context for her role as a political piece.

"Well, it is time for me to leave. Until next time, Meiya-sama."

"Ah… Wait, Tsukuyomi." She held my arm with her tiny hands as I stood up from my seat. "May I ask you one last question?"

"Yes, of course you can. What is it?"

"Um… What kind of person is… that Yuuhi?"

My hands halted all movement at her question. I have been forbidden of speaking of the matter, but she shouldn't know anything about her family. She should have never heard the Koubuin name, she should never have had any contact with radios or televisions… The rocks that were on my shoulders forced themselves down my throat as she stared at me with those clearly innocent eyes, clutching my arm.

"… Who is this Yuuhi you speak of?"

"I once overheard one of my teachers saying I wasn't acting like her as good as I should. Then, when I asked her about it, the teacher said I heard that wrong." Looking away from me, her gaze descends as do her eyelids, as if submerged under a frozen lake. Her hands release me and get together, folding tightly. "I never saw her again after that day, and everyone else I ask says they don't know

anything." Then she looks up at me, her tiny lips shifting and twisting. "Tsukuyomi, do you also not know anything?"

… I could lie. That would be easy. However, what could I tell her? She's far too young, she wouldn't understand. But… Looking at her now… Forgive me, Father. As a member of the Tsukuyomi… No, I won't shield myself behind my family. I cannot lie to her. I do not wish to blatantly lie even if telling her the truth is beyond of my options.

"Meiya-sama, you are someone very special." I crouch and caress her hair.

"Special?"

"Yes, you are the only one who can help this Yuuhi."

"Help? Then, will I meet her one day? Will I go outside?" She got closer, expectation brimming in her trembling hands. She seemed to be holding her breath, waiting for my answer.

"… One day you might. However, you need to be away from her for now."

"Why?"

"Because you need to get stronger. You are to protect Yuuhi from the shadows, just like your name implies."

"My name? I have to be in Yuuhi's shadow?" She tilted her head, her brows lowering slightly. I pat her head softly, ruffling her fringe.

"Yes, that is the case. One day you will be old enough to learn everything. Until then, you have to keep honing yourself. Your efforts will never betray you."

"But will I go outside someday?"

"… If you're strong enough to help Yuuhi, you may. She is also alone, so I hope… you two can be good fellows whenever you

meet."

"I see… I got it, I have to keep doing my best. And then, I'll be able to go outside and help like Grandfather does." She said, nodding a few times.

"Yes, but keep this a secret. Can you promise me that?"

"But… But why can't I know?"

"You see Meiya-sama… Curiosity is not a sin but you should be careful with it."

"Careful?"

"Yes, sometimes… it is better to wait to receive an answer than to purse it hastily. Be patient, the time will come. Can you promise me you'll be patient, Meiya-sama?" She nods, her brows narrowing.

"Yes, I promise. I won't say anything and I won't ask anymore. Thanks Tsukuyomi, now I know what that weird feeling was." She smiled again, her shoulders dropping in relaxation.

"Weird feeling?"

"Yes, ever since I heard that name I've been feeling weird from time to time. Like when I try to open a jar of jelly but it won't no matter how hard I pull at it, or when I can't solve my calculus and my head starts to hurt. I don't know why, but I feel that kind of way when I think of that name."

So she's… worried about her sister? I have heard twins are somehow connected. Despite never having met, she can still feel the absence of Yuuhi-sama by her side. Or perhaps… Does she resent her?

"Do you… dislike that feeling?" She closed her eyes, narrowing her brows a bit.

"No, I do not. I don't know but I feel… lonely." Her gaze lowers like an anchor, her hands again rustling together slowly. "I never felt that way before. Being with Grandfather was always so much fun, and the maids also keep me company too. But…" She stops and looks up again, returning to her neutral expression. "But since I heard that name, for some reason, I feel lonely. I don't know who she is but I want to meet that person called Yuuhi." I found no hidden feelings in her. She's as earnest as she could be, children cannot lie and when they do they cannot hide it.

Meiya-sama doesn't hold any ill will towards Yuuhi-sama. It looks like you are wrong after all, Father. Meiya-sama will never put her sister in any danger, her heart is in the right place.

"I see. I can't promise you anything regarding that, but at the least I can guarantee you that, in due time, you will know all about why you're here. Please be patient, Meiya-sama."

"Yes, I will. Thank you, Tsukuyomi." She smiled again, this time her smile was wider and truly shining.

"Good. Well then, I have to be going. Until next time, Meiya-sama." She nodded, and I smiled her way before bowing, then going my way.

# Introductions of the Masquerade

## Chapter 31 : Introductions of the Masquerade

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*December 16th, 1988. Near 7 PM.*

*(Takeru's House.)*

**[Native Takeru]**

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After helping by placing the chairs in order, I look and see the oven is still turned on. Mom still hasn't taken the cake out of the fridge. Walking into the kitchen, I pull her dress a bit.

"Mom, is the cake ready yet?"

"Takeru, you've been asking for a while now. The answer won't change in a few minutes." She sighed, looking over what she was making in a pot.

"But is it going to take much longer?"

"Takeru, let Mom cook in peace." Dad closer and grabbed me, lifting me off the ground. "Let's go watch TV for a while, what do you say?"

"Yeah." We go back to the table, Dad leaves me on a chair and sits by my side.

It's so good that he came back like he promised. He hasn't told me anything of what he does with the samurai rangers, but he seems really, really tired. So, let's have a lot of fun today, so that he can rest well. He's gonna leave again on Sunday… But he'll come back another day!

Everything is already tidied up on the table, so we're just waiting until Mom is done. They're even letting me watch TV manga now, instead of them putting on the news as always during dinner.

*Ding!*

Hm? Oh, maybe Sumika is coming?

"Takeru, you stay here. I'll go see who is it." Patting my head as he stood up, he started to go to the door.

"Eh? I'm going too!" Leaving the chair, I follow behind.

"No, it's too cold outside. And you're not wearing a scarf."

"You're not wearing one either." I puff my cheeks, Dad's brows got together as his mouth moved a bit.

"Well, but I'm big so I can take it. You're still small, so stay here. I'll be right back." And there he goes.

What's up with that? I'm already six! I can tie my own shoes by myself! I'm not so little anymore.

Once he opens the door, I hear two familiar voices, and then both of them came to the living room, dressed up with coats.

"Oh, Takeru-chan! How are you?" Haruna-san came in with Sumika, both wearing yellow scarfs. "Is the cake ready?"

"… Not yet."

"Hahaha, how cute you look when you pout." She patted my head, smiling. "Sumika, don't you have anything to say?"

I looked at Sumika, who was kind of nervously coming towards me. With her hands hidden behind her back and her eyes glued to the ground, she slowly walked, like a turtle. She's usually reserved, but she had started to smile more often…

"Takeru-chan… Here, happy birthday." Eyes still down, she handed me a small box wrapped in red and blue.

"Thanks a lot, Sumika!" I give her a hug, and she made a cute noise when I did. "Really, thanks a lot for coming."

"I live next door… There's no way I wouldn't come." She said once I released her.

… Some of my other classmates also lived near and they never came to visit me for my birthday, or invited me to theirs.

"Well, let's see what it is." I slowly untie the knot on the package, and rip the paper once I did. "Oh! A spinning top! I never had one of these!"

"… That's good." Dad crouched and looked at the toy. "It looks to be made of good wood, too. It wasn't too expensive, right?"

"A present's price must never be disclosed." Haruna-san said, placing a finger atop her lips.

"Thanks a lot, Haruna-san, Sumika."

"No, it was nothing. Sumika was the one chose it for you." She then smiles, pushing Sumika's back. I look at her, she quickly looked to the ground again.

"No… I just thought it looked nice…" She said, rubbing her hands together.

"Thanks a lot, Sumika. Let's see how it spins."

As Haruna-san and Dad sat down and started talking, me and Sumika tried to see who could make spin the top for the longest time for a while.

"Takeru, come here." Dad called me, so we stood up and went to his side.

"What's up, Dad?"

"Let's go wash your hands, you still have to open your other presents."

"Oh, yeah."

After washing our hands and going back to the table, I saw a box on top of it.

"Happy birthday, Takeru. This is from Koetsu and Kobayashi."

"Really?! But… Are they busy?" I haven't seen them in a long time, since we moved here actually.

"Yeah… They're really busy in their office." Dad's eyes grew smaller as he patted my head.

"Can we call them to say hi?"

"I'll send him your thanks, Takeru. Koetsu is really, really busy. He's doing all kinds of calculus with very complex math." He said in a scary tone, raising a finger upwards.

"Eh… Why is everything about math and numbers?"

"Hahaha… You'll understand when you grow up. Now, open your presents." He gives me a pat in the back towards the table.

There was a smaller one wrapped all in white and another bigger in green and white. The smaller one was from Mami-san… And there's a letter in it.

" *Greeting, Takeru-kun.*

*I suppose I should also say happy birthday, since I hope this letter reaches you by then. I hope you're well and in good health.*

*While I have been mulling on what book recommend to you, the notice of your coming birthday gave me a good reason to hasten my search for a suitable one for your tastes."*

She also writes as weird as she talks.

" *Remembering our talk about Mayal's Gift, I thought it proper to bestow you a book that might help you in learning to read in between the lines. A book is more than what you might think of it at first, after all."*

"Dad, what does… 'bestow' means?"

"It means giving someone something."

"Why didn't she use giving instead, then?"

"It's… Sigh, it's a manner of speech Takeru." I don't get it.

"And what of this in between the lines? There's only spaces between them."

"No, it's not literally Takeru." Dad pats my head, sitting by my side. "It means you can arrange words to mean more than one thing at a time."

"So… Oh, is that like what the teacher said of that tale?"

"What tale?" Sumika asked.

"You know… The one where the princess goes to the moon… What was its name?"

"Kaguya, was it?" Sumika says, tilting her head with a finger in one of her cheeks.

"Yeah, that one. I thought that she abandoned his love, but the teacher said she left him that weird drink so that he would live long

enough to meet her again, but he didn't get her message. Does that mean reading in between the lines, Dad?"

"Yeah, that is it. You can be really sharp when you want to, Takeru." He seems happy that I understood it.

Adults are so weird and complicated… Why can't they just say what they mean openly? I again look at the letter, with Dad by my side in case more weird words are in it.

" *That is why I chose a book about poetry. It is not as long or detailed as I would have liked, but I do recall you disliking long reads. It has many simple phrases found in our literature as well as explanations on their meanings, and some simple Haiku poems as well. I believe it fitting for your age, and a good first step if you find yourself liking poetry.*

*I believe you'll find it interesting, but regardless of your opinion of it, I shall be looking forward to hearing your thoughts on it at a later date. Please, do be as detailed as you wish in your reply."*

Poetry? I never really read any before… This should be fun though!

" *I shall be awaiting your answer and book recommendation. You can only send me it's name. I shall look for a copy of it in my free time.*

*I hope your evening can be a pleasant one. We might not be able to see each other for a long time, but I will be looking forward to these exchanges.*

*See you later.*

*Mami Kobayashi."*

"She writes with a lot of hard words…"

"… Did you like the present, Takeru?" Dad asked kinda in a low voice.

"Yeah, it's gonna be fun reading something new! But it's hard to understand her letter sometimes…"

"Haha, you'll get used to it with time. Now, here's mine and Koetsu's present."

In the other box… It's really heavy. Tearing the paper off it, there was a big, long box under it. I slowly push the lid off it.

"Is this… Oh, a sword!" I took it out slowly… A long, wooden sword! "Is this for me, Dad? Can I really have it?"

"Yeah, you told me you wanted to have one. But, promise me you'll be careful with it. If you're good, we'll take you to learn how to use it on Summer."

"Really?!"

"Yeah… But! You have to be careful with it. No taking it out of the house and no using it inside. Do you promise you'll be careful with it? You won't give Mom any problems?"

"I won't! I won't! So, you'll take me to learn to use it? Will I go with the samurai rangers then?"

"Well… You'll need to be really really good with a sword before the samurai even think of recruiting you. Only those who are really good with a sword can be a samurai, after all."

"Uuh… Then I'll practice! I'll get really good and then I'll go fight with you!"

"Thanks Takeru… But don't worry, we'll beat the bad guys before you have to fight." He patted my head, this time more slowly. "So, what do you say of reading that book? Sumika, wanna read it too?"

"Yes, it sounds fun!"

Dad took me to my room to put the sword somewhere safe behind my closet. Then, we went back down and sat in the couch with Sumika. Then he read us the book.

Some things are really weird… But they're also really fun. I never thought stuff could be explained in this way with only three sentences.

After a short while, Mom called us to the table and we all started eating together, sharing jokes and complimenting Mom's food.

It's sad Uncle Koetsu couldn't made it… But I'll send him and Mami-san a letter and some cake later. The book was really fun, even if it also had weird words sometimes.

Sumika and Haruna-san said their goodbyes after a while, since it was getting late even if it's Friday.

"Takeru, let's go to sleep." Mom grabbed my hand, but I released myself and went towards Dad.

"Dad… Thanks for coming." I give him a hug, really tightly. Sometimes, he couldn't come for my birthday before, but he made time to come home for the weekend. "I'll send you a nice present in your birthday."

"Thanks a lot, Takeru." He also hugs me tightly. "Today was fun?"

"Yeah! It was the best birthday ever!"

"I see… That's good." He ruffles my hair, then gives me a kiss on the forehead. "Let's read some more books tomorrow. So, you gotta wake up early."

"… I'll try." I look away. I hate waking up early… But Dad is here, so I'll do it.

"Haha… Well, come on. Mom is waiting." He takes me to the stairs, and then me and Mom go to my room.

After getting in my pajamas, Mom closed my window so that I wouldn't stay up late talking with Sumika.

"Thanks for the cake, Mom. It was really tasty!" I say after I get under the sheets.

"Hehe, that's good to hear. Are you happy with your presents?"

"Yes, but I'm more happy that Dad is here today. We should have moved here faster. It's much more fun to be here." I say, rustling to a side. Even if Jouji is really noisy, the people here are more funny.

I still don't like some of the teachers, and some guys in our classes are really mean too. But Hiiragi is much, much more nice than Yao and Osaka.

"… Yes, we should have. Now, I'll turn off the lights." She said, standing up.

"Eh? You won't read me a book?" I say, pouting.

"You still want a book before going to bed? Didn't you say before you were a big boy already?" She smiles, playing with her hair.

"It's my birthday today."

"Haha… I can't argue with that." She gently and slowly caressed my cheek, her smile getting bigger. "So, what should we read tonight?"

And, as usual, Mom read me something until I nodded off.

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*January 8 th , 1989. Around 4 PM.*

*(Takeru's House. Backyard.)*

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"See? It's not that hard." I say, stopping the beanbags I was juggling.

"But I can never do it right." Sumika puffed her cheeks as much as she could.

"Hehe, then you just gotta practice." I hand her the two bags and she starts juggling them.

She made it to twelve before one fell off. She started pouting again.

"It's too hard!" She moved her hands around, her hair swaying as she did.

"Does that mean that you give up on the candies?"

"Ah… Don't be mean, Takeru-chan. I can't do it."

"Yes, you can. You just gotta do it!"

"But I failed to get to twenty."

"Then you try again. Don't you always tell me that every time you help me with my math homework?"

"Takeru-chan, this is different." One lone hair of hers tumbled down, all swirly. Her eyes dropped to the ground, looking like a stray puppy.

"Come on, Sumika. Let's try again one more time. Or I eat all the candies." I smile at her, she taps the tips of her fingers for a while and then nods.

I show her again how to do it and again she tries. This time she made it to fifteen.

"See? You just gotta try harder."

"But I still didn't made it to twenty."

"A small pebble will eventually cause a rock slide with enough impulse down a hill." I say, puffing my chest.

"There you go again, with those weird phrases…" Sumika plucked her lips, narrowing her eyes at me.

"What? It's true, it's called snowda… snowballing. Things growing bigger suddenly or something."

"You're reading that book too much. You're speaking really weird now, Takeru-chan." She pouted at me, her voice raising in complain.

"No, I'm not. So, let's try again!"

We stayed outside playing for a while, with Sumika complaining she couldn't so it every time she failed. It started to get really cold, but Mom didn't come to tell us to go inside. And that's weird.

"Takeru-chan, let's go back inside. I'm cold…"

"Yeah… Let's go read a book or something. Did our moms went to buy something?"

"No… My Mom was back home cleaning."

Hmm… How weird, they never let us play outside by ourselves for so long. We went back inside, but it was all quiet. The lights weren't on yet. So maybe they did went to buy stuff?

… I can't reach the switch so I can't turn on the lights. Some light still comes from the windows, but it's really dark. I didn't knew… the house could be this scary with the lights out.

The TV and the radio aren't on, the keys are up there where they always leave them. What's going on here?

"Mom? Are you there?"

…

No answer.

"Maybe they went somewhere?" Sumika said, walking closely behind me.

"Hmm… But they would have called us. They never leave us alone in the house." It's weird. Something's weird here.

We slowly walked towards the table, but there was no one in the kitchen or the living room… Hm?

… On the floor, just in the corner where the small division to the kitchen starts…

There was a pot, just lying there. That's weird, Mom never let's stuff on the floor. And why are the lights out?

As I got close to the fallen pot, I could see something else on the floor near it. A hand. Sumika tightened her grasp on my back, gasping as she saw it.

"W-Who's there?"

I slowly made my way there, dragging my feet and Sumika along.

There were no sounds in the house, save for the tickling of the clock, the sound of the fire of the kitchen being on.

I gulped, closing my eyes really tightly, taking the last steps towards the kitchen.

Grabbing the edges of the small wall and peeking into the kitchen, with Sumika grabbing my arm from behind me, I saw someone… sleeping on the floor.

"… Mom? What are you doing?"

Mom was just there, face down on the floor. She had left the fire on.

"Mom, why are you sleeping on the floor?" I crouched and shook her shoulders. She didn't react.

On the inside of the house, it was really warm. Outside was where it was cold. And yet… And yet… Mom feels really cold right now.

"Mom! Wake up! You can't sleep there!" I keep shaking her, grabbing her strongly, but she still doesn't wake up. Why? Why won't she wake up?

"… Takeru-chan." Sumika pulled my shoulder. "Let's go call my Mom."

"Why? Mom… Mom is just sleeping. Nothing's wrong!" She said she wasn't sick anymore! Nothing is wrong!

"Ah… S-Sorry…" She took a few steps back, looking like she was about to cry.

"Sorry Sumika… Um… So…" I gulp, my feet feel heavy all of a sudden. I can feel my heart in my neck, beating really strongly. "Let's… Let's call Haruna-san. She might know how to wake up Mom."

I grab Sumika's had and dash out of the house. Because Mom… must be tired.

Haruna-san must know what's wrong, how to wake her up. Because nothing is wrong.

Because Mom isn't sick anymore, and… and she will wake up, and she won't have to go to the hospital again… Nothing bad is going on… Nothing bad will happen again .

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*November 25 th , 2001 . 06 :03 AM.*

*(Detention Barracks. Takeru's Cell.)*

**[Takeru]**

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Ugh… Rolling to a side, I feel a pair of hands on me.

Slowly, they begin to shake me. And they don't stop.

Opening my mouth wide to yawn, exhaling all this awful feeling away, I open my eyes.

"… Hey, Kasumi."

"Good morning."

"Yeah, good… Yaaaawn." Rubbing my eyes, I sit down. Then, I yawn again, as if I were screaming something caught on my throat.

"Are you feeling fine?"

"Yeah… I just had another nightmare and my head hurts a bit." Lately, I can't remember what I dream about, but damn, it makes me feel like shit.

My back swaying down, I could just stay on the bed for another hour. Covering my mouth as I yawn again, hunching forward, my eyes feel heavy all of a sudden.

A day full of working for Takamura, no lunch for me, still don't know how the Guard took the business of my blade. Seeing that memory of this world's me… only made me feel more lonely.

Family. As much as I miss them, my parents are gone. Can't turn to my squadmates as I did when I could rely on them, if they smacked me last loop, saying I shouldn't burden them with my own emotional shit, I don't wanna know what they'd say here if I tried.

Yawning again, I know I gotta get out of the bed. I'll end up looking at the ceiling for hours on end like I used to do back home after the power plant blew up… But why do I feel so heavy?

At least they're willing to do peace with me. That… should be enough. And Sensei will help me, so long as I help her. I always

knew she wasn't the Yuuko I fell in love with… I know that already…

Giving in, I flop back onto the bed, yawning yet again. Legs feel asleep, like when I was sitting for a lot of time while studying for a final. Shoulders feel heavy, stomach is empty… Sigh… Just endure it on your own… I can… I have to do this, to fix what I did to my world.

Sigh… Ugh, shit, now I can't muster the willpower to get up. Goddammit…

Then, I feel a hand on my head, ruffling my hair.

"Takeru-san? Are you feeling well?" Kasumi was looking down at me.

"Yeah… Just… Tired."

"Your mind does seem exhausted. Is it… my fault?" Her bunny ears fall down. "Did I harm you during the recovery session?"

"No, that's not it… I think I might have woken up in a bad spot of the sleep cycle or something."

"… Your mind seems sad. What is it?"

"Sigh… Can't hide anything from you, huh."

"Sorry…"

"Nah, I'm not mad." Smiling at her, I finally shrug off the heaviness and sit down again. "I guess the exhaustion just caught up to me today. Seeing him being treated as part of the family in the second memory… just made me miss mine, to be honest."

"I see. Are you sure you're well?" She rubs my back, sending the awful feeling crashing down like it was hit by a Heavy's laser.

"Yeah… Thanks for always looking for me, Kasumi." I pat her head, ruffling her hair, some of it caught between my fingers as I slowly do so. She moves her bunny ears as I do.

"No… It's nothing."

"It isn't nothing to me. So, thanks." Smiling her way, I end the patting with a soft caress to her fringe. "I'll be fine now, you can go back."

"Really? I can repress the memory if it hurts you." Locking her eyes with mine, her brows moved down a tiny bit.

"It's okay, I just had to catch up to the stress, I guess. I'm okay now, Kasumi. For real."

"… If you say so. Then, should I go to your office tonight as well?"

"No, I have some questions for Sensei, so I'll drop by the cylinder room around 1900 hours."

"Alright, see you then. Have a good day."

"Yeah, you too." She smiles, leaving the key to my cell on my bed.

"Bye bye." We wave at each other, and then she goes her way.

Sigh… What an idiot I am, making her worry. But still, better that this happened on a Sunday. I… don't think I could go to a lecture how I'm now.

Getting out of the bed, standing up and stretching, I sigh as I hear some bones crack.

Can't help missing them, can't help getting sad from time to time… But I have to prove to this base that I'm not a mad murderer so retiring into my shell won't do me any good.

Seeing Kasumi smile, that is what I wanna do for others. One day, they will smile in that same way, whether I am there by their side or

not.

Yeah! That's why I'm here! Sure, I'm still sad and feeling heavy… But I'm letting this hamper my efforts.

Going to the sink, I splash cold water on my face to properly wake me up. Rinsing my mouth, taking off my clothes, I enter the shower and turn it on.

It's as it were slowly scalping my hair, this cold feeling. Clenching my teeth, my breathing picks up in speed as the water keeps running down my back, my knees begin to shake.

Force palming a wall, letting the water fall right on the back of my neck, grinding my teeth against each other, I inhale sharply over and over.

"… This is nothing. I came here… to fix my world, to save as many as I could. And one day… one day… I'll see them again… I'll see my family again…"

This time I won't let anything screw me over. Nothing is going wrong this time.

Feeling the stagnant, heavy feeling be replaced by a sudden gust of euphoria, I grab the soap and, very violently, wash myself to prevent the cold from getting to me.

Because this time I'm not failing. No accidents are going to happen. And I can't go making others worry. Like Hayase said, don't go throwing your burdens onto others. I screwed up my world, I gotta be brave… even when I'm feeling down, when I'm missing them. *Because they're not coming back, and I gotta honor their lives. No one is getting in the way of my ambitions from now on.*

*"* I'm saving them… No matter what… *Struggle… I'll struggle until the very end…* Can't be getting depressed… *about being left all alone…"*

The cold water kept falling, I kept scrubbing away. Repeating my oath over and over, feeling my motivation return to me, yanking me wide away and into alert mode.

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*Same day. Some moments later.*

*(Hallway.)*

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Having eaten breakfast already, the sudden seething motivation having calmed down, and the odd, heavy feeling having vanished as well, I expected Takamura to lead the way to the usual office. However, it seems she had other plans for today.

"Are you sure this is a good idea, 1st Lt.?"

"Yes, were you not wishing to go see them?"

"Well, yes. But I have no authorization to-"

"Cadet Shirogane, we're just taking a visit to the mechanic crew of the hangar to check on my TSF's maintenance. Isn't that right?"

"Yes, I guess."

I didn't expect Takamura to be so carefree. As soon as we finished breakfast she asked me if I wanted to go take a look at the Fubukis that were arriving. I don't know if she is being considerate or if she has an ulterior motive for it.

Well, in any case, it'll be nice seeing the Fubukis again. I wonder if I could convince Sensei to actually use them in combat, last loop they actually proved useful and I guess they're easier to produce than the Shiranui.

We reach the hangar, and as we enter we see two of them being docked in. Man, I might have better TSFs at my disposal now but the

Fubuki will always have a special place in my heart. Let's hope I don't reduce this one to scrap this time around.

"Oh, so it was you. Good morning, Shirogane." Meiya approached us as we walked near the iron fence. "And 1st Lt. Takamura." Her smile turned into a tight line as she saluted Takamura, who returned the gesture.

"Morning, Meiya. So you came to see them too, huh?" She smiles slightly as she takes a look at the Fubukis.

"Yes, I honestly couldn't sit still despite being Sunday. But didn't you say that you had a mission?"

"Yes, we are here to check something with the mechanic crew." Takamura smiles faintly at her, but Meiya tenses up and averts her gaze with a dry 'I see' barely escaping her lips. I wonder why she doesn't like her. Does she think she's here on Yuuhi's orders to watch over her?

"Hey, Takeru!" Mikoto and the rest come towards us.

"Morning guys."

"Morning, Shirogane-kun. Ah, salute!" They all salute Takamura, who again returns the gesture.

"Good morning, squad. Shirogane, let's go pick up those papers."

"Sure. Don't stare too much at the Fubukis guys. See you around."

I know, I can't be seen slacking off. I wave at them as I follow Takamura to the floor. I feel like… someone's staring blades at me right now. And I really don't wanna turn around.

I let Takamura do the talking as I grab the folders with her Takemikazuchi's data. As she kept discussing things with the mechanics, I took a peek from below at the Fubukis. They're really something else, I don't know why people look down on them so

much. If we could upgrade them, they would be even better than that Kagerou I piloted while being much cheaper than the Shiranui, according to the notes I read yesterday night. Then, we could put the extra money to something more powerful, like mass producing the Type-00C or restart the Second's development.

I'll have to make a mental note of that for when I go speak with Sensei today. In any case, tomorrow I will have to start doing the work with my squad, so you five better get ready to… Wait a second… One, two, three…

There's only five Fubukis lined up on the hangar. Why is that? Did Sensei plan on giving me a different training unit?

I hear the sound of the stairs and see Mikoto running towards the left corner of the hangar, where the purple Takemikazuchi was just unveiled. The rest soon followed, looking at it in awe. Except Meiya, who I think is furrowing her brow as usual.

"Oh? What is…" Takamura stared open eyed at the purple TSF, frozen in place. One could practically hear the noise of her fans overloading as she tried to comprehend what she was looking at.

But man, it looks so… empty. Now that it doesn't have its machineguns docked forming the long skirt like in Valgern-On, it looks so ungraceful. Also, I know it doesn't exist here, but still, it just looks weird without the TR on its back. You just cannot lack that ridiculously looking and unnecessarily bulky rifle. I'm gonna mod my Type-00C and show the world the greatness of Valgern-On's Takemikazuchi. Well, this time let's make sure you stay in one piece purple buddy.

Wait, didn't something bad happened around this-

"How dare you touch it, you insolent commoner!" Ah, there it is.

Tsukuyomi-san teleported out of nowhere and slapped… As far as I can recall, she always used to slap Tama's hands away from the

thing, but this time she directly slapped Mikoto in the face. Mikoto stumbled back, almost falling, as she slowly closed the distance, the trio on her back.

"What reason have you to touch this TSF? Do you not recognize the meaning behind its color?!"

"Tsukuyomi!… 1st Lt., what is the meaning of this?!" And now Meiya snapped.

They start arguing as they always did in our past loops, except Meiya looks angrier. I can clearly hear her shouts from here, and she's never sounded so… angry? Livid? Bothered? I dunno why, but this time she's more upset than in the past loops. Maybe it has to do with the stronger nationalism?

"Shirogane, follow me." Takamura signals me to come along her as she walked towards Tsukuyomi-san.

We approach the group, Chizuru was taking a teary eyed Mikoto away from the Guards. Tama was trying to calm Mikoto, who kept shivering despite the other two's attempts. Meiya was facing a furrowed Tsukuyomi, that was still trying to reason with her.

"Hey Mikoto, you okay?"

"Yeah, I just… It looked so cool I couldn't help myself." She rubs her cheek as a few tears drop down her eyes.

"Let's go get breakfast, Yoroi." Chizuru and the rest leave. Kei took one look at Meiya as she kept arguing with Tsukuyomi, and then also went into the hallway.

"Even if they are your partners, we cannot allow commoners to touch this Takemikazuchi. Surely you know who sent this to you, please understand our actions." Yes, the usual stuff. Tsukuyomi-san is again begging Meiya to take the TSF as her own, and our blue samurai looks insulted to no end.

"Cease your prattling! I… I am a mere Cadet, I have not even finished my training in the way of the sword, much less being appointed as the successor of the Mitsurugi House, there is no reason for me to receive such a privilege. Take this Takemikazuchi back to its rightful owner at once!"

"I cannot do that. Her orders were clear on this matter, in case you ever need it, this Takemikazuchi will remain here at the ready for you. Please, do not reject her aid. She merely wishes you the best, you must know how much you mean for her."

"Silence! What would everyone think of this?! This is a clear violation to the honor code, I have not the right to pilot it. This is-"

"Cadet Mitsurugi, if I may?" Takamura speaks at her, causing Meiya's complexion to change. Her enraged face relaxed a bit as she looked away. "1st Lt. Tsukuyomi has been ordered to deliver this machine, if I didn't misunderstand anything from your words. If she cannot go against her orders, would it be too much for you to accept this gift open handed?" I didn't expect… No, of course she knows who Meiya is, she's also a pawn of Yuuhi. She must have been informed of Meiya's true identity.

Tsukuyomi-san gives Takamura a court bow, that she returns in kind, and takes a brief glance at me. For some reason I feel a knot on my stomach. It… hurts to see her.

"Meiya-sama, we cannot simply return this. So please, do not reject the helping hand she's giving you." Meiya tensed up her eyes as she closed them. As she opened her eyes, she took a glance at me. I gave her a nod, she grimaced and sighed audibly.

"Do as you please then."

"Thanks for your understanding. Well then." She gives Meiya a deep bow along the Three Idiots, and gives Takamura a small bow before going her way.

As she passed me, our eyes met for the briefest moment. Hers were frontal but almost dulled, there was not hatred or suspicion on them, but the way they twitched, the slight trembling of her lips, and the fact that she couldn't hold my gaze made her confusion obvious. The other three still looked at me with the usual scowl.

"Shirogane, let's go back to the office."

"Yes, let's… Wait, what's that?" I stop in my tracks as I see a sight to behold on the right end of the hangar. Hohoho, so you're already here, eh?

"What is the meaning of this?!" Meiya's yell by my side was soon replicated all throughout the hangar.

Ten Type-00C, standing proudly side by side, were being docked into the hangar. That was fast, maybe the delivery of Meiya's Takemikazuchi helped speed the delivery of these units. Us three made our way towards them, as well as many others.

"Alright! You've seen them already, keep your distance!" That shout…

"Did you not listen?! Until the XO comes to sign the papers, you cannot lay a finger on these things! So can you all do us a favor and get out of our sights?"

Mion and Shion were in their red dress along many black robbed Royal Guards making a human wall between the Takemikazuchis and the curious onlookers. Tsukuyomi-san and the other three were also helping out with the task.

"I cannot believe my eyes…" Takamura was staring at them, clearly shaking a little.

Us three made our way back to the upper section of the hangar, looking at them from here is kinda surreal. Having this many Type-00 on the base so soon is a stroke of best luck.

"Ten Takemikazuchi units, whatever are they doing here? Those two…" Meiya gazed at the guards, clearly staring at the pickles that were arguing with a mechanic.

"So Mion and Shion are delivering these ones here?" Not a second after I said that, she shot me a glare. Urk, I should have stayed quiet.

"Shirogane, you're still calling them by their names? I won't help you if you get in trouble for that." Meiya, stop with that dubious look.

"It is truly a surprise, what could have made this happen?" Takamura, who ignored Meiya, stroked her hair as she gazed at the ten gray titans.

"Make way! Who do you think you are?!" What was… That voice…

The sudden shout gave me a slight pain on the back of my head. A man in the red dress of the Guard, in a stronger tint than Tsukuyomi-san's one, drove must onlookers away with his voice. The man has a ridiculous haircut. Two 'horns' in his sides and a pointy strain on top. Very tall, he could probably hug a bear and get out of it unscathed with his muscles.

"M-Master?!" Meiya's looks as a wild animal that saw a tree get hit by lightning as her eyes widened.

She said Master… Is he her teacher or something? She approached the man, and he drew a giant smile upon seeing her.

"Oh, Meiya-sama! It is good to be graced by your presence!" He gives her a small bow.

"Master, what turn of events has brought you here?"

"Well, I came to deliver these machines, and was assigned here with a small unit to give you a test, to see if you're worthy of receiving my final teaching in the Mugen Kidou." So he is her teacher… which means, he's an important person within the Empire.

"I can't believe he of all people would be sent as a mere deliverer." Takamura stroked her hair as she gazed at the giant that was talking, or rather shouting, with Meiya.

"1st Lt., do you know that man?" She froze and looked at me with an inquisitive glare.

"You do not know of General Guren?" Guren…

"The name sounds familiar for some reason, but I don't know who he is. I suppose he's one of the Royal Guard's most important men, right?" Her eyes open even more. She then sighs and shakes her head.

"He's not one of, he's THE most important one. He's the General of all the regular Guards who are not in service of a Regent House. He's Koubuin-sama's most trusted soldier, one of the best commanders in the Empire. Great General Daizaburou Guren is the personal commander of the 15th Royal Guard Battalion that serves under the express orders of Her Highness, the fabled leader of the Wolf Battalion." Almost puffing her chest, one could taste the pride coming out of her every word.

But… The Wolf Battalion? I never heard of them last time. If we had such a powerful unit, why didn't they send it to Sadogashima? Were they killed during the coup? Or left protecting Yuuhi, maybe?

"I see. I don't really know much about the Empire's or the Guard's units. But you're right, let's go back to-"

"Oho! If it isn't Takamura-dono!" Or not.

"General Guren, it is an honor to meet you!" Standing upright and tense as a cable, she salutes this Guren. I never thought I would see Takamura nervous around someone. Well, he is a General, so showing this much respect is the obvious thing to do.

"No, no, do not be so stiff! It is good to see you're fine, grasshopper! Last time I saw you, those eyes of yours were mired by awful eye bags, clouded beyond recognition. Even if it's on the UN, I am glad you can continue your endeavors!" He's louder than Zoe-san, for the love of God. Why does he have to shout?

"Master, please, could you speak more softly? This isn't the Palace." Seeing Meiya being so apprehensive is weird.

She's not like this with Tsukuyomi-san, but I suppose this guy is a total different beast compared to her. He is Yuuhi's most trusted General after all. Wait… I think I'm in danger, now that I think about it.

"I vastly prefer to yell, Meiya-sama! But in any case! Best of luck in your work, Takamura-dono." He smiles widely at her. He doesn't look like a bad guy though, despite being kinda scary with that haircut and his stoic face.

"Thank you very much for your kind words, General." Takamura bows deeply to him. Then, as he finished his talk with her, he apparently noticed I was here. I should have ran away when I had the chance.

"Who would this grasshopper be?" He stopped shouting.

"Cadet Takeru Shirogane, sir." His face distorts itself, I can see why he's the leader of the Wolves. He looks like a one right now, ready to charge at his prey.

"So you're Shirogane, eh?" He frowns his brows, tensing his lips and cheeks. He looks like one of the Four Heavenly Kings statues that were in my world's temples, I suppose you came here to harm me under Yuuhi's orders. Well, F my peaceful time.

"Yes, sir."

You could poke the air right now thanks to the tension here. I could see Mion and Shion getting closer, both bearing severe expressions.

"Um, Master? This man is one of my squadmates on Squad 207. He's done me many a great favors." Thank you, Meiya. He gazes at her and relaxes his posture, dropping the tension in his body. This guy's stare is intense for sure. He's the real deal, a true war vet.

"Is that so! Well, I sure hope you continue to support her from now on, Shirogane." Stop shouting dammit! And I despise that hateful glare. Ugh, these fucking… No, bad Takeru. Don't snap.

"Daizaburou-sama, the attendants have arrived. We are to proceed to the designated briefing room." Mion spoke in a business tone similar to Tsukuyomi-san's. Looking at her and Shion is… making me feel weird, as if I were meeting with an old friend. Is this because of the memories I saw yesterday?

"Finally. To make us wait so much… Well, Meiya-sama, I will be awaiting the day when we can have our final duel. Until then, stay safe." He salutes her, she responds in kind. And then goes with the Pickles towards a group of people, that were being apparently led by Pyatkh.

Ugh, my head hurts a bit. Daizaburou Guren… I feel he knew you. Your hostility right now wasn't because I'm an unknown face near Meiya, you reacted especially bad to my name. If Yuuhi sent him here, he and the Pickles were ordered to kill me. Heh, she sent her right hand to make sure no mistakes were made. But of course she did, I'm soiling the memory of someone dear to them. *What else did I expect from these brain-dead mannequins?*

"Cadet Shirogane, are you alright?" Takamura and Meiya were looking at me, brows arched.

"Yeah, just a bit surprised. Didn't think a General would waste his breath on me."

"Please do not take offense Shirogane, he was merely being cautious. I'm sure you know why." I nodded at her. Meiya still looked kinda down as she gazed at them leave.

"Well, 1st Lt. Takamura, let's go to the office, we lost plenty of time already." She arranged her hair again and gave a nod.

"True. Let us go. Until later, Cadet Mitsurugi."

"Ah, um… 1st Lt., could you let me speak with Shirogane for just a moment?"

"Hm… Alright, but please do not take too long." Takamura goes towards the hallway, giving us some space.

"So, what did you want to talk about Meiya?" I hope it's not about those visions because… I won't answer that.

"Shirogane, I'll cut to the chase. Do you think you can find some time to go return your blade?" Oh, that. Since I already took care of that I forgot I had promised her we would go together.

"Actually, I already returned it." She opens her eyes wide, and then looks at me a bit upset.

"Why did you not tell me of this? Rather, why did you do it alone?" I suppose she's suspecting me. It is an important matter after all.

"I just seized the opportunity. 1st Lt. Tsukuyomi came to talk with me when I arrived here and I told her of it. When I went back to my room to pick up my clothes, my sword was no longer there. So don't worry, it's in safe hands now." I thought she would be happy but… Why does she seem so down?

"… Is that so. So you no longer have it. Well, I'm glad you could resolve the issue before it became a problem. Did Tsu… the 1st Lt. tell you anything? She wasn't too harsh on you, I hope?"

"She was quite angry, yeah. But I suppose I'm in the clear for now, since nothing happened since then, and even when she saw me today she didn't do anything." She nods slowly at my words. She does look troubled now for some reason.

"Yes, you're right. In any case… It's good that's solved. Forgive me for holding you."

"Nah, it's cool. As much as I wanted to keep it, this was for the best." I sigh, shaking my head. Meiya had folded her arms, her eyes now looking away from mine. "Sorry for not telling you before."

"No, it is alright. You were understandably exhausted, after all that happened since your return to the base. Well, I shall hold you no more. Best of luck in your endeavors."

"Same to you. Later, Meiya." I wave at her as I go into the hallway, she waves back with a faint smile, and then turns around and seems to remain gazing at the purple Takemikazuchi.

Shouldn't she be happy that the sword is back with the Empire? Did she… expect me to become her fellow for real? Oh well, whatever.

I rejoined Takamura and we went towards the elevator, the hallways were bustling with rumors as we walked. This surely made things lively here, but it will also make life difficult for me.

Under the guise of delivering these Type-00C and coming here to finish this training Meiya was talking about, they're probably here to kill me too. And it's not like I can attack that guy without getting into a lot of trouble. First, I don't know if I could win in a fist fight with him, due to his build. Second, if I harm him, our relations with the Empire will be done for. There is no way I can harm or kill a General and get away with it. Yuuhi you're not playing around, you purple devil. *Didn't expect that sweet face to be capable of such cutthroat behavior.*

"Cadet Shirogane, are you truly fine? You seem truly out of sorts." Takamura stared into my eyes while we were on the elevator. I was

being too obvious, huh.

"Well, it seems the General does not like me much. I just hope they don't try to spark a fight with me."

"The XO mentioned to me that you didn't like the Royal Guard much, can… can you tell me why?" She must be nervous because she… Oh, right. You're also a member of the Guard. And if the General, who is Yuuhi's right hand, ordered you to cooperate… "Cadet Shirogane?"

"Oh… Ah, well, since I was… Ahem, since I'm seen as a foreigner here, the Guard has not been very kind to me. I don't really hate them, but it seems they don't want me around." I scratch my head slowly as I look up, I have to remain calm.

I can't show her that I'm suspicious of her. Yuuhi might have left her in the dark to avoid a leak, but all she needs is a word, an order from the General to turn against me. I wonder if Sensei knows of this… I mean, I did talk already… Nah, she wouldn't… Alright, stop it. No more depressing thoughts, I have the S5 pass right here, the Kagerou is waiting for me down in Hanger 90 in the worst case. It's too early to start panicking, Takeru. I did try to-

"Ahem, allow me to tell you that he was merely doing his duty. I assure you, in no way could a noble man such as him hold any ill will towards you. And I highly doubt someone as honorable as General Guren would soil his name by antagonizing a mere Cadet."

"… Yes, you're right."

"In any case, let us focus on our project. There is much for us to do."

"Yeah… Let's make the most out of today."

The rest of the day went by uneventfully, with me delivering folders around again and giving some advice to Takamura when she got stuck on some documentation, thanks to the different way we do

things here under Sensei's command. The planning stage seems to be going on without much problems anymore, so we just might be able to get one railgun done and tested before Sadogashima.

Here's hoping the Guard leaves me alone long enough to get there.

# Links of the Undercurrents

## Chapter 32: Links of the Undercurrents

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*November 25 th . Near 7 PM.*

*(Yuuko's Office.)*

**[Yuuko]**

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*"* Don't worry, I've pacified the few that wanted to keep pushing for the punishment." Mitsuko-nee says on the other side of the line, I spin on my chair. "So long as your promise to pay for the soldiers' treatment holds water, everything will be fine."

"Good to hear. I suppose you will be paying us a visit in some days?"

"Yes, I am looking forward to that. However, Yuuko, are you sure you're going to pay up their silence? I thought you were on a-"

"We shall be getting some funds soon-ish. And, as I said before, Shirogane will be the one paying up."

"… According to the databases, he has no family nor possessions. Can you explain me how is he going to get the money? He's a cadet, he has no wage as far as I'm aware."

"He doesn't, and you'll get your answer once you come here."

"Sigh… If I didn't knew you, I'd think you have something with the kid."

"… Mitsuko-nee, if that is all, I'll hang up."

"Come on, now. Don't get all cranky." Again, her cheery tone along a chuckle. Ugh, how I hate it when she does this. "There's one last thing. I assume you already had a meeting with the detachment of the Royal Guard that went there?"

"Yes, it honestly surprised me that your report was spot on. The General was very 'to-the-point', which was welcomed to be honest. They seem to be here to get a direct report for the testings we've been making, and to… appraise one of the pigeons."

"… Nothing else?" Her tone descending into a whisper, hushed and alert as if we were talking about the casualties of the Valkyries, and the almost non-existent list of volunteers to join our cadet program in this nation. "Look, my sources tell me someone from the Guard, from high above, was the one who ordered the execution to be called off, and now the General suddenly was put in charge of the delivery of the Takemikazuchis. Is that truly all there was to the meeting?"

"Yes, nothing else happened. Anything else you required?" Sadly, there is no way I can tell you of the mess that the little sword caused me, or about his circumstances.

"… No, nothing else on my end. If I hear anything, I'll contact you."

"Thanks, as always. Later, Mitsuko-nee." Cutting the call, I finally sigh aloud.

To think the man came to 'question' me about the motives behind the… How was it? Minaru Kamui, I believe, Shirogane had on him. Luckily, I truly had no idea what it meant until Shirogane told me about it, so lying was easy enough. However, he kept pushing for answers on his past, if I knew about how he acquired the blade, asking why his profiles were locked.

When I said I was his tutor and deemed the matter to be private, he instead chose to, quite foolishly, try to pressure me about why the UN kept hidden the fact that Mitsurugi was harmed.

Sending him away by force isn't something I can do, so I simply told him the truth, that the HC wasn't behind the accident, which is what this is, and that they were taking measures to prevent losing face. In the end, Mitsurugi didn't sustain any serious injuries and the chasers didn't act on what they were ordered to do, we have recordings and the accounts of the Pickles' on their briefing to prove that. And that they were also going to receive a harsh reprimand behind the curtains.

Again, I reiterated that I had made sure Shirogane was punished accordingly for the folly of murdering people, and yet, that seems to have picked his interest. Refusing them would have been a bad idea, so I suggested him that they could approach him if they had any doubts regarding his loyalty, so long as they didn't try to pick a fight in my base, else the deals we signed would go up in smoke. To say that he was taken aback would be an understatement. He didn't think I'd let him approach Shirogane so easily, for some reason.

However, if Motoko-nee's report isn't wrong, and if it happens again today, then it is in my best interest to at least let them speak with Shirogane. I don't need more distractions, after all.

The matter of the sword settled as I wanted it to, with it being nothing but Shirogane's mistake due to his missing memory, and no harm intended from our side, we returned them the sword in good faith and, in the name of the project, I kindly asked him to not bring it up ever again. He seems to have a brain over all those muscles, so he agreed to the terms easily enough.

Allowing them to approach Mitsurugi to their leisure and perform whatever test they wish to have against her at a latter date, and me handing them a report on the parts we made for the current deal, was enough to end the meeting on a good note. Until they asked for permission to speak with Shirogane, and I obviously refused.

Not only he is in the middle of a punishment, not only is he helping out with the railgun, and that project has little hands as is, but they should learn that on my base we play by my rules. Of course, they

then began to prattle on and on about how they were merely wishing to speak with him regarding the blade, but in the end they had no choice but to comply with my rules, since they backed off when I requested an answer for why they were insisting so damn much.

This small window will give us a buffer to have him recall any little tidbit he can to convince them, or at least make them doubt, of his identity. I'll see how we move forward after seeing their movements and answers, and Shirogane's progress on the memory recovery as well.

Opening my mail, seeing the reports, for the moment I'll focus on the shorter ones.

Now, the Valkyries seems to be getting the hang of the sims, going by Suzumiya's reports. However, it seems the fresh ones are still lagging behind, and some of the 'training courses' are too complicated for them. According to her, Isumi believes the machines to have some sort of psychological trigger, since most of them find it hard to stop training despite the difficulty.

I wish I could send Shirogane to them, but considering his punishment and his role as the Viking, as well as all that he's handling as of now, I don't want to overburden him. Perhaps, I'll ask him to write a handful of tips for what they're having trouble with, besides his suggestion to make sure they don't isolate themselves or get 'sucked in' in his own terms.

Otherwise, I could arrange a mock battle against the Viking to clear their heads away from the sims. Hmm… Now that I think about it… I could dust off that TSF for it, as well. Yeah, after all, he wanted more sensors, so let's see how he handles it.

Sigh… Drinking some more coffee, opening another mail, the preliminary tests on the Type-00Cs are here… Hmm… Not bad, worth the money if you ask me. The most money I would spend on a per unit basis for maintenance, but with an output far surpassing any TSF at our disposal. Honestly, this is nothing like those early

estimates we received when the Takemikazuchi was unveiled. Heh, the Royal Guard must have purposely sent the Type-R's cost sheet. If we had received this data, the Type-00C would already have been adopted, at least by the Valkyries and the top squads of the IJA. Well, it plays in my favor.

At least everything is taken care of within the base. Now, if only I could decipher the way to apply the second theory to the 00 Unit. I swear, at times it feels as if it wasn't supposed to work on it by itself. The graphs don't align, the equations sometimes contradict themselves, it's as if there was something missing, as if the 00 Unit that world's me envisioned had something the one I built is lacking. And frankly, it's pissing me off to not figure it out, no matter how many tests I run, how many times I look over the numbers and the specs. I wonder what was I researching on that other world.

**Knock!**

Hm? Looking at the cameras outside my office, I see him waiting as usual, scratching his head. Oh right, Yashiro said he had some questions.

"Come in." Tapping the button, the door is unlocked and in he comes, a slower stride in his steps.

"Hey Sensei, how's it going?"

"… Frankly, all's good. So, sit down, I've some questions for you."

"Uh… Sure." Raising a brow, he sits down on the usual sofa.

Standing up and grabbing the mug I usually give him, I start the machine and pour coffee into it. Going to hand it over, after leaving it on his hands, after he gives me his thanks I lean back onto my desk, a finger on my chin.

"First, the negotiations about the sword are over and done. The Royal Guard won't press the matter anymore."

"Wow, for real? I thought they wouldn't back off easily."

"Oh, believe me, they didn't. I think you saw who they sent this morning to negotiate." Rolling my eyes, I grab my mug and finish my drink. Then, I go pour me some more coffee.

"Oh, right. About that, I think he knew the General."

"… Is that so." I didn't tell Shirogane about how this world's him served under Guren. So he got that answer by himself, huh. So my hunch was correct, he can pull the memories without much effort, so long as we spur them to the surface. "Anything else that came up?"

"No, not really." He then drinks, leaning back and stretching his legs.

"Well, that's taken care of. Be on your guard, they might approach you any time now."

"… I guess you couldn't convince them of my innocence, huh?" Looking into his drink, he sighs as he crosses a leg over the other.

… How odd, for you to doubt my influence. I could have easily prevented them from getting close to you by simply having you be escorted by an MP during your punishment, you should know that. Also, I could have shielded you myself, since you are my special protegee, and they surely didn't want to be too pushy once I asked for their motives to delve into your past. Whatever has spawned such doubts towards me, I wonder?

"… What's up, Sensei?" Raising a brow, staring at me as if he didn't have a clue.

"Nothing."

"Did… the Guards gave you problems?"

…

Okay, now what? Yes, the Great General is someone very important indeed. I won't deny that, and I won't say it would have been easy. But this is my base, and moreover, I have the recordings of when 1st Lt. Tsukuyomi chose to overlook the issue of the blade after Niigata. I had cards to play to nullify their movements, I had planned some moves ahead and it's why the meeting went by just as I planned. Did something happen in one of his loops; or, are you doubting me?

"No, there were no problems. Is there anything you think I should be concerned about, perhaps?"

"Well, the guy is a General. And in this more nationalistic world, nothing good will come out by clashing with the Guard when we could avoid it, so I can get why you would be upset at more setbacks getting in your way." Closing his eyes, he then, grabbing his mug with both hands, drinks some more.

"… As I said, everything is on the rails. You do not need to concern yourself with that."

"Alright, if you say so."

"Now, about what I wanted to ask you." Looking my way, drinking again, he leans forward. "What did the me of your world did while researching the Nucleus?"

He furrows his brows for a moment, blinks a few times in quick succession, leaves his mouth barely open as he groans, then shakes his head.

"… No idea."

"What do you mean?"

"She never told me, and I never asked. She said she figured out how people could link themselves to different futures by seeing how Marimo-chan was always being negative about her relationships and how others were always positive no matter what shit happened to

them. But she never told me in detail what exactly did she do to get the theory right, and she did say she was not even close to test it out. She was just a physics teacher, after all."

"… I see. Nothing we can do then."

"Something's wrong with the theories?"

"No, I just can't line up both theories well enough for now, so I was hoping you could offer some insight into the matter." I sit down, resting my neck against the seat, spinning slowly.

"Oh, so that's why you want to observe how I regain his memories."

"Yes, that too. So, what were you wanting to ask?" Considering he is reading up on some documents, perhaps he's willing to ask for my help now.

"First, is there any chance we might get the Fubuki accepted to be used on the frontlines?"

"… Huh? The Fubuki?"

He then proceeds to tell me how much better it was after the XM3 was installed on it, and how, during the third incident we have to prevent, it basically saved his and his squadmates' lives.

"Sadly, due to the way the Type-97 and 94 are built, there is little we can do to upgrade them. Starting another project for it would be a waste of resources."

"But it could help in replacing the Gekishins, at least for the ones in the backrow, or for either solo missions or hit-and-run naval tactics to support the TSAs." He counters, a cocky smile raising up, as if as I did when I had just solved the measurements of the new rockets for his modified Kagerou.

"… I'll consider it. Anything else?"

"Yeah, what's up with the OS of the PC you gave me?" He leans forward, yet his eyes aren't entirely focused on me. It's as if he were looking at my shoulder.

"Hm? The OS? I believe it had the latest version installed. Is it giving any issues?"

"Well, no…" Again, a brow raises as he scratches his head. "But the UI is godawful. I'm having some trouble actually using it."

He then went on to explain how the OS wasn't 'user-friendly', how he had to rely on the repository to install programs, how it was lacking many features he had gotten used to in his home world. I explained to him there was nothing to be done, and that I would send him a mail with the details on how to work around it. I had hoped he had come with some serious questions, but it seems today was a wasted day in the end.

… And all the while, despite his tone remaining composed, his eyes were locked away from mine, and there was a lack of the usual glee that Shirogane usually displays in his gestures, in the way he moves his hands, or even in his shrugs.

"… Was there anything else you wanted to ask?" Resting an elbow on my desk, making a point of dropping my mug a bit too strongly so that it made noise, I stared right into his eyes. He nodded, holding my gaze yet remaining as composed, as oddly calm as he was.

"Actually, yeah. So, before I go to Kasumi, was yesterday's recovery session helpful?"

"Hm? Oh, yes. The data was… interesting, for sure. Now that you mention it… Are you sure that he was being watched by one of the Shogun's retainers?"

"Yeah, it was Maya-san, no doubts about it. Same with the other one, he clearly was with the Pickles and Yuuhi eating dinner, it seems." Finishing his drink, leaning back comfortably, speaking

slowly and without any pause. And yet, his eyes again avoid mine as Yashiro does with carrots.

Yuuhi, is it? Perhaps we didn't even need to bring out the memories, he seems already quite attuned to them on his own. Could this newfound composure be an effect of that? No, it would be too fast for inherited memories, especially forced ones, to affect someone's way of being in this way.

…

So he's doing this consciously? To what end? He… wouldn't still be holding some kind of reservations towards me, would he? If I recall correctly, he did say he was getting rather negative before, yet this isn't what I would call a shift towards that end of the spectrum. It's just a lack of the usual hyper attitude he has, that is all… there is to this.

"Sensei, you hearing?"

"… Yes, yes. So, you claim he was close enough to Her Purpleness when they were still children. Any idea why?"

"Hmm… No, not really. I never met the Pickles, and Yuuhi was dead in my world."

"Huh? Excuse me, what?"

"Oh, I never told you? Yuuhi doesn't exist in my world. Meiya is the sole heir of the Mitsurugi Group back there."

"… Huh. Is that so? So, you have no link whatsoever with her?"

"No, our contact during the mission I met her in was scarce. I didn't get a bad impression of her back then, but nothing that could have made us close happened. So, no idea why things turned out like this in this world." He crosses his arms, no delay in the words or the

gesture, clear as the only result of an equation. "You didn't find anything else on his background?"

"No, sadly." I can't dig more info on him carelessly. Yoroi was clear enough on his message, and with this matter of the blade and the deals, I have to be careful. "For the time being, you stay on your guard around the Royal Guards if they approach you. You can retire to your cell after you're done with the recovery session."

"Okay, got it." He gets up, leaving the mug where he usually does. "I'll let Kasumi give you a report then. Goodnight, Sensei."

Nodding my way, he turns around and goes to the door. Moving his arms left and right, with slow steps all the while, he exits the room, without looking back or waving as he used to do.

I took his mug and put it back in place, wiping it with a tissue. Leaving it as usual, sitting and spinning back and forth slowly, resting my entwined fingers on my stomach, I look up at nowhere. And yet, one of my brows refuses to rise up, its inner edge sunken in.

"… So you're not smiling anymore, huh. I wonder why."

---

*Same day. Right after that .*

*( Outside the office .)*

**[Takeru]**

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Well, shame Sensei didn't have a better OS to use. I do know how to use the terminal… for the most basic of stuff, that is. Seriously, how do they even use this all day long? Isn't it a time waster?

Luckily, she dealt with the sword already. I really didn't wanna part ways with it, but it is what it is. I just gotta be careful around the Guards. She wasn't surprised about him knowing the General, so I

guess she's still keeping some things from me. If I had any guilt of doing stuff behind her back, that just made it go up into the sky as I did whenever Sumika landed a DMP on me.

On the plus side, I did find some interesting bits of data though. Thanks to having read up on many different TSFs and weapons I think I can start writing those reports about the weapons and stuff I wanna make. But that will have to wait until tomorrow.

Sadly, he didn't contact me yet. Sigh… I know I shouldn't be so paranoid, but I need to build this bridge just in case this memory business goes wrong.

Getting close to it, the door opens on its own and the hallway welcomes me once more. This long black hallway always gives me the creeps, it's like it was made to tell you that you were trespassing into forbidden ground. It kind of reminds me of that hallway in the Megoman games, the one before a boss room where the music changes. My gaming senses tell me a boss is waiting for me on the other side of the door. However, what awaits me is a small bunny girl playing Cat's Cradle by herself.

"Hey Kasumi, sorry to keep you waiting." She moves her bunny ears to acknowledge me and slowly turns around, pouting. She had some string in her hands and was trying to form something with it.

"… I still can't make a Dancing Butterfly by myself."

"You're still hung up on that?" It has been a while since I showed it to her though.

"Yes."

"Ahaha, you'll just have to keep practicing. So, how did Sumika react to the memories?" Sensei did refuse to talk about that, for some reason. She stands up slowly and comes closer.

"She reacted well to the first, I think she was overjoyed to see it. But she reacted very badly towards the second. She went into shock again. I don't know why, I could only feel the overflow of the emotion, I couldn't even get her to listen to me." Slowly her eyes dart to the floor, her palms shift around as if she were gripping something.

"Well, let's go one step at a time. Let's assume the memories with the Royal Guard are bad for her from now on. So, do we do the same as yesterday?"

"Yes, sit down please." Then, she goes to get the thing I have to wear on my head. Handing it to me, I put it on. "Do you wish to see any kind of memory in particular?"

"Wait, I can choose now?" I sit down on the floor and Kasumi again sat behind me, placing her head on my shoulder.

"If you focus on certain thoughts, it will be easier for me to bring out the memories. Also, we will probably see more of it."

"Alright, I want to see something about his life as a commissioned Royal Guard today. This General came to the base, and I have the feeling he'll try to attack me, so let's see if I can get any useful info that might stall him, even for just a bit. I'll try to focus on the feeling of some grand, important mission. Would that work?"

"Yes, now close your eyes. Let's focus."

I close my eyes and remain like that for a while as I start thinking about my meeting with Yuuhi during last loop and some of my deployments against the BETA.

Relaxing again, that tingly feeling on the back of my head appearing once more, the pain below my ears as well, the darkness remains as it was for a while as I took deep breaths to calm down. Slowly, painfully so, a light appears on my vision. Twisting and turning, rippling as if it was a water surface hit by a rock, it begins to envelop my whole vision as my limbs feel more and more distant.

But this is different than yesterday's. It's as if I were gazing at a fire, but then what seemed to be a tunnel stops and the fire starts moving in a diagonal, but half of it is gone now. Dark yellow and orange distorted wings cover my whole field of vision, then a darkened figure appears within the flames. It's getting closer and closer. I still can't hear anything. What is that thing?

I feel as if a jolt of electricity spread throughout my head, then I'm enveloped in a feeling similar to that of being on a hot spring, relaxing onto the warm water. The figure comes out of the fire, my vision becomes more focused. A towering Fort-Class marched through the remains of a city. And it's getting closer to… No, I'm getting closer to it.

"1st Lt.! Return to your position!" A voice rings right on my ears. He's on a TSF during a mission, inside a cockpit. The voice is one I don't recognize as well.

"Don't we need to stall for the rest of the vanguard to arrive?" He moves his head slightly to his left, as he slashes a Tank that tried to jump onto him.

"Yes, but charging at the Laser-Class like this is suicide!"

"Marching against these numbers is suicide anyways, so get ready to boost at my signal." You tell 'em, boy. It's like hearing my old cocky self from school, but with an actual serious intent behind his cheery tone.

"All units, ready for the command sir!" Another voice I don't recognize speaks to me.

"Well, get ready to blast those guns! Three, two, one… Forward!" Unlike last time, I feel the rush in me as we charge at the BETA.

This tense, warm and exciting feeling… The rush of battle, just like Hayase said once. It takes hold of you, and before you know it your

heart swells within and everything else kind of fades away. Only what's in front of you exist.

They make short work of the BETA, Tank and Grapplers alike, in synchronization too perfect to be a fresh team. They know how each other fights, and they cover their backs almost without delay. Despite, you know, his recklessness and almost suicidal charges. I guess we are more similar than I thought.

He takes a look behind him and I see four Zuikakus, two black and two white, as they spray their muffins upon the remaining BETA. The radar's red dots disappear in an instant, only to be replaced by more red dots.

"Oi, Amanohara! Send the canister shells to the herd to our right." Oh, nice decision. If those Destroyers get too close this will turn into a slaughter. Wait… Why do I feel like-

"Roger!" I feel like I've heard that voice somewhere…

"Fukuha! On me! We're marching onto those Grapplers!"

"Roger that!"

A black Zuikaku rushes forward along us as the herd to the right gets bombarded by the canisters. This world's me and this Fukuha decimate the Tanks with their guns as they march forward. With the momentum of the boost, he took aim at the Fort and started shooting at it with some 120mm ammo. Yeah, take that! Wait! The sting is gonna-

He back-boosted away from the sting, wasting not a single second. His reflexes are really good, and without the XM3 to boot. Fukuha dashes forward and slashes the sting off with his sword. Yeah, way to go! This is almost like looking at a video of a battle! That being said, that was a top notch move. Bait the sting, dodge at the last second by having the boost end and start another one upon contact with the ground, then have the other in the element shave the sting

away. I recognize this tactic from my trainings in a Gekishin during my first loop, when we were prepping up for Iceberg. No wonder he'd rely on it, using a Zuikaku.

"1st Lt., I ran out of canisters! That's all I can do for now." The female voice I have trouble recognizing speaks through the comms.

"Don't worry, keep covering our rear with Okamoto and Onda. Me and Fukuha will take care of that Fort! Let's go!"

"Roger!" The other three voices roared as they sprung to action.

Looking at the radar, there were many blue units advancing to our position. So they're literally the first vanguard in whatever this mission is.

Fukuha's Zuikaku was to my left, he boosts ahead and slashes a Grappler. Another tried to jump onto him, but we shot it down with a 120mm to its body. As we rush forward, our maneuvering turns weird. His TSF starts kicking at the BETA, he starts side dashing at irregular intervals along the stream of Tanks, he put both guns on his shoulders with the pylons and they were still shooting at the BETA to his sides according to what the radar is showing. Fukuha was also gunning at the BETA in front of us, he back-boosts as he jumps, sending two shots at the Fort's head. I suppose that since they're close to the Laser-Class they can't jump so high, hence the need to stay close to the ground. The Zuikaku then back-boosts and rejoins us, shooting at the aliens that were behind us.

"Is that amount of gore enough to please you, 1st Lt. Shirogane?" He says in a jokingly tone.

"Yeah, we go onto the Fort!" He chuckles, I could feel the honesty in it. "Take your sword out, we're ripping it from below."

"Yeah, because swording everything is the way to go." He replies in a deadpan tone. What the hell is wrong with this guy?! Isn't he a Royal Guard?

"Hahaha! Don't say that in the common channel or 1st Lt. Tsukuyomi is gonna kill us."

"Which of them?"

"Both, probably." He says, rolling his eyes. Both share a laugh.

"Hehehe, you're right. Getting closer, careful with the Tanks to the sides."

"I know. Now let's tear this bitch down! Swordbreakers!"

"Swordbreakers!" Both shout at the same time as they Boost Jump under the Fort, sword at the ready. And like me and Hayase did during Niigata, they tear the Fort from below, splashing blood and flesh onto their TSFs.

"Squad Leader! Please refrain from using our squad's name during this mission!" The other male voice complains at him. Another female voice that wasn't Amanohara, one that sounds mature, replied in a cold tone.

"Okamoto, even if we're part of a bigger force today, we have no reason to change our methodologies, especially when they're the most effective solution to our situation. There is no need to restrain ourselves, have some pride."

"You tell him, Onda! Regardless of our standing here and the nature of this mission, our way of doing things won't change. Isn't that what makes us who we are?!" He yells at the top of his lungs, and for the first time I can actually feel it.

Not just looking and hearing. I feel his breathing get faster, the beating of his heart, and this blazing sensation on my gut. It's as if I was recalling a vivid memory of my own.

"You heard the leader! We're tearing these monsters, we're the Shogun's might! The Swordbreakers!" Fukuha also yells, I feel a grin

on my face form.

Both of our TSFs keep boosting and slashing at the Fort's joints. Seeing the damage, he takes a step back and sprays uranium into the Fort. Fukuha does the same to the other side. As the Fort starts to tumble down we dash away from it. Okamoto finishes off the Fort with some 120mm at its head as it falls to the ground, showering both of our TSFs with its brains and blood.

"Sir, our rear has been secured."

"Good job, Amanohara." The other four Zuikakus form a circle around me, shooting at the stray Tanks that were still around.

"1st Lt. Shirogane, respond immediately." Oh, Maya-san is calling us.

"Oh, Maya-nee! We cleared our zone alre-"

"1st Lt. Shirogane, you have to address me appropriately as per the protocol states." Yup, she got angry. I feel him laugh internally with me. Maya-san does sound slightly worried.

"Sorry about that, 1st Lieutenant Tsukuyomi. We have cleared our zone, we will advance onto the Laser-Class right now."

"Desist from that course of action, my flight will meet up with yours in around four minutes along Takatsukasa-sama's flight. Hold the line until we-"

"Negative. That's too much time, we're better off doing a Laser Hunt and then pulling back towards you than sitting still here." He's right, even now the other three are shooting missiles at the Tanks and occasional Grappler, no way in hell they'll last four minutes alone.

"Then rejoin us now, charging in with just the five of you is too-"

"Negative, we're already close by. And if we let the Laser-Class advance any more our rear will get blasted off, and the HM cloud will

dissipate soon anyways. The Swordbreakers will perform a Laser Hunt and then rejoin your flight in a short while." I've never heard of what a Laser Hunt is, I might go and do some research on this.

"1st Lt. Shirogane! You're the leader of Squad G during this mission, you're not an independent squadron!" I can now clearly feel the tension in her voice. I never thought the cold Maya-san could be so openly worried.

"Sorry, Maya-nee. The interference is kiiiinda making it hard to maintain communication. Can't hear you very well, to be honest." Pfft! You're a jokester just like me. This is just like what me and Meiya did during the Mt. Tengen incident.

"Takeru! Don't you dare to-"

"Later!" Did he just close the call on Maya-san's face? Boy, you have some steel balls. "Aight, listen up! Take a second to fix the Laser-Class' position on your radar, and then we're marching right into them. Switch your magazines if you must, we will have to kill around a thousand Tanks to get to those white little bastards."

"Um, 1st Lt Shirogane? Is this not insubordination?" Amanohara asks with clear tension on her voice.

"It's not treason so long as we produce results, right Leader?" Fukuha says, with clear venom in his voice.

"Exactly. Let's go and kill those Lasers, you'll see that we'll get a scolding at most."

"However, we are lacking our usual members." This Amanohara replies, stuttering at times. "Both Tsukuyomis are absent so-"

"We don't need the Pickles for this kind of issue." Ugh… What was… the sting I just felt, right in my chest? Were they… not in good terms? "Trust in yourselves, we can save many lives by nullifying the

Lasers here and now. But, what do you think? Should we go through with it?" He asks, I could feel the pressure, the tension on his gut.

"If you say we can do it, I'll follow you." Fukuha answered, almost instantly.

"I agree." Onda also replied quickly. "If that devil's luck of yours is telling you to advance, that is what we shall do, Leader."

"Sigh… Not like we could convince him of doing anything else at this point." Okamoto snickers and sighs again, making the rest chuckle as well. "Yeah, it is better if we deal with this ourselves, before we get noticed by anyone. So, if you so order, I shall follow."

"So Amanohara," He asks, "If you wish to retreat, you're welcome to-
"

"Uh, fine! I wasn't doubting you, and I am going to follow you. However, I am telling Hikami-san about it. It is risky for us to fight at our best under so many eyes." Huh? Under many eyes? Are they some sort of secret squad? Would make sense, since there's no intel about him left.

"Sigh… Got it, so let's do this swiftly then. Would that be alright with you?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you're still rattling me out?"

"W-Well… I do think you should be more careful…"

"Heh, thanks for worrying. But rest easy, this revenant ain't going down tonight." All of them chuckle for some reason, his face was tensed into a frown as he cackled to himself. "Now, we'll do a NOE flight until we reach the lasers, just do it as we have always done even if we're only five this time. Crush their fangs, Swordbreakers!"

"Swordbreakers!" All four of them shout in unison as we boost while flying almost near the ground.

As they were getting closer to a herd, however, some shapes begin to blur and not because of the speed. Slowly, everything starts losing color. The pain comes back, the tingly feeling reappearing on me.

"Kasumi, are you alright?"

"I'll… try to… Just give me a second…" She sounds terribly exhausted. But as I was thinking on stopping her, color returned to the images and they started moving again.

They open fire onto the wall of Tanks. Since they can't move up or they'll get shot by the Lasers they have no choice but to pierce through the red sea. See? If we had that ammo I wanted to make this thing would be a piece of cake.

"1st Lt., I'll dive into the herd and drop an S-11."

"Roger that. Careful with it, Onda. Okamoto, let's open up a path for her."

"Roger!"

A white Zuikaku rushes into the herd as we give it cover. There's many Tanks trying to climb onto it, we're keeping a clear line between her and them, but we're getting low on ammo and fuel.

"S-11 dropped! Let's retreat!"

"All units, fall back."

The four other units back-boost dash away from the herd alongside us, and a few seconds after that a giant explosion blinds my sight. Wow, half of the Tanks in the front got decimated. Well, S-11s are mighty powerful.

"All right, this is our chance! Rush in and get to those bastards!"

Our frames get filthier and filthier as we keep advancing, our blades are soiled with BETA blood from top to bottom as our slashes cut through dozens of them at a time, littering our path with dismembered limbs and torn pieces of flesh, at this point no one could say that the other Zuikakus weren't supposed to be painted in red.

Piercing through the jumping Tanks at top speed, I feel an enveloping sensation. His… My… Our body tightens, our vision grows narrow. The sheer shift into full focus brings forth an unexpected rush into me, and despite our breathing being steady, I feel our heart beating faster and faster. I know this feeling… To shift into killing mode, to become a blade. Reveling in this old but intense feeling of both hatred and hope, I lose myself in the battle ahead along him.

"Squad, what are we?!"

"The people's blade!" Okamoto shouts as he drives his sword into a Tank, back-boosts and then does a wide slash, killing four Tanks in the swing.

"The wolves that keep watch over them." Onda says calmly but fiercely as she hovers while slashing at the Tanks with daggers on each hand, only to later swiftly take out her rifle and shower two Grapplers that were charging at her.

"The sword that smites evil from its roots!" Amanohara shoots her two guns at the charging Tanks, clearing a path for me and Fukuha.

"Made of a steel that's harder than truth!" Fukuha dashes along me with one gun on its pylon shooting forward and his sword at the ready. He kicks some Tanks and slashes at them, doing side steps while we keep boosting.

"Crush their fangs!" We say as we swing our sword and boosts onwards. I feel the fire coming out of his throat as he leans forward,

boosting into the herd, tearing through it with its blades and sheer speed.

"Swordbreakers!" All five, or six counting me, shout in unison just as the Laser-Class appear on our monitor.

The five TSFs go into full boost gunning at the Tanks, creating a red carpet that's ready to guide us to our targets. A sound beeps inside the cockpit, alerting us that we were near the Lasers.

I feel a wide, wicked grin appear on our face. Full boosting ahead, the end of the sea became visible, and beyond it were our targets. The Laser-Class got choked with the uranium muffins as we kept marching forward at top speed without giving them a chance to look at us and shoot, their small bodies were crushed easily. However, there are too many of them.

"Everyone, sick your 120mm at them!" As we move in zigzags in the air to avoid the ones that shoot at us, we send what little ammo we have onto them. Less than ten remaining, eight, seven, six-

**BOOM!**

Amanohara's Zuikaku got both arms destroyed. It fell to the ground with a deafening roar, the Lasers were ready to scorch her. We're too far away, dammit!

In a split second, we rush forward and throw our sword at the herd, as it were a boomerang, as we take aim with the rifle.

The sword crushes two Lasers and we manage to strike down the remaining ones along Fukuha. Okamoto and Onda are clearing the Tanks on our flanks, while Fukuha moves to cover our rear.

"Amanohara! How are you? Any injuries?!"

"F-Fine, sir. I've sustained no injuries, but some of my sensors are out of order. I can still move, do not worry." Sigh, she's alright. Still

can't remember where I heard her voice, though.

"Glad to see you're fine. Lock onto our IFF and follow us. Alright, team. Out of here!"

"Roger!"

The TSFs fly towards the blue dots on the map, the signals of our allies, but slowly everything loses color again. The shapes get blurred, the sounds begin to resemble an echo, and in the end, after some blinks, everything is distorted into that gray abstract thing.

She must be exerting herself, this was more than enough for today.

"Kasumi, it's fine. Don't push yourself, take me back."

"But…"

"C'mon, you've done enough today. This is much more than what we saw yesterday, don't exert yourself."

"Uuh… Fine."

I feel my body being detached from somewhere, a very familiar place. Feeling as if I was going back to the surface of a pool after taking a dive, like I was this morning when trying to release myself from the prison that was the cushy hold of my pillow, I slowly regain my own senses and open my eyes. Even the low light in the room looks terribly bright right now to me.

"How are you feeling, Takeru-san?"

"… Hmm? Kasumi?" Why is she looking at me from above? Where…

I was resting my head on her lap. Slowly raising up, feeling even more stiff than yesterday, gotta use a hand to support me as it felt as if my battery was flashing red. I blink a few times and finally feel like I'm back, swaying a bit and rubbing my forehead.

"You took quite a lot of time to come back." She rubs the top of my head slowly in a circular motion.

"What? What hour is it?"

"A bit past midnight." She says as she takes out a clock from one of her pockets.

"Damn, didn't think I would get so exhausted. Ugh… But it was totally worth it. How are you feeling, Kasumi?"

"I'm fine. I drank something and ate some fruits and got better." She smiles as she gets up. "I already reported the results to the Professor, so don't worry about that."

"Thanks a lot, Kasumi." I pat her head, she moves her bunny ears. I yawn, stretching as I also get up, moving my ankles to make sure my legs are awake and ready. "Ugh… This was completely different than last time, though. I could actually somehow feel the same as him, and we saw so much more today."

"Yes, now that I know what to do it will get easier. It is still very tiring." She drop her shoulders as her eyes half close looking downwards.

"Wanna take tomorrow off? I'd be bad if you collapsed because we were trying to rush this."

"But… We have to make you regain those memories as soon as possible." She protested firmly, moving her bunny ears up and down a few times.

"Kasumi, there's no way we can regain years of memories in a few days without that harming us somehow. Let's take it easy. That, and I can only handle so much badassery at a time." Some of his movements were actually good, his sidesteps are more coordinated than mine, his slashes follow a similar but more concise pattern. I'll try them out during tomorrow's practice.

"If you say so. How do you feel? Do you want something to eat?" She hands me some chocolate which I accept.

We talked for a while on how the memory projection felt. After that I returned to my cell.

This time was like nothing before, I could feel his laughter, his nervousness, the smile on his face, his fire as he motivated his men. I still can't remember who Amanohara was, but I feel like I do know her.

He was someone important to be in charge of a Squad during such a mission, and for it to need to remain hidden as well. Swordbreakers, huh? In a nation with a sword fetish as high as the Empire, to have that name on a squad…

Well, I have no idea what the mission was about or where it happened. I'll have to wait until after tomorrow to see if I can get some concise answers. However, going by that little exchange with the Fukuha guy, at that point he was already against the ways of the Royal Guard. I wonder why those two Pickles weren't with him on that mission, or who Hikami is. I'll ask Sensei tomorrow, hopefully she won't just give me the silent treatment.

Oh well, let's just go to sleep. Rinsing my mouth and washing my face, I rub my feet for a while before getting in the bed. Hm… My nails are getting out of control, should have brought my small kit from my room. I'll have to ask for permission to go get it tomorrow.

" *Yawn*… Damn… I'm beat…"

As soon as I laid my head on the pillow, all the heaviness I was holding back came at me, I yawned again as I curled to a side, rubbing a cheek against the pillow.

Sure hope tomorrow goes well too…

I really don't need the General or the Pickles… getting in the way…

Yawn… Let's hope… the training starts with… the right…

Zzz…

# Reluctance

## Chapter 33: Reluctance

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*November 26th. Around Noon.*

*(Track Field.)*

**[Kei]**

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Panting, almost feeling like if I lose any speed I'll fall over, I continue to run. Those two annoying ponytails being ahead of me, almost as if I were following her line.

"… So, you still think… he's a normal cadet?"

"He just… is very talented." She retorts, trying to not lose breath or speed.

Yeah, right. Shirogane bested the preliminary level during this morning practice. In his first try. Trampling the best record by a factor of five, add that to his already large list of oddities.

He even had the balls to try and give us some pointers, acting all friendly. In no way a normal person could attain such aptitude by mere independent training, even a genius would take time adapting to the controls, anyone would make mistakes in their first piloting sessions, no matter how tiny.

But you don't, Special-kun.

"Ayamine, please stop showing such open enmity towards Shirogane." Mitsurugi, catching up behind me, said. "He has… his own reasons to possess such skill."

"And he can't tell us because…"

"Because it's tied to his prior location." Arching her brows, me slowing down to run by her side, she sighs in thankfulness. "Surely you do remember what occurred… to Yukon Base merely some months ago?"

"… So that's where he was?"

"Indeed. He requested me and Sakaki to not divulge the details, however, he has a valid reason to… have cleared Level D as fast as he did."

"And why didn't you said anything?"

Suspicious, too suspicious. Mitsurugi never would hesitate to defend someone, nor would she remain quiet if she could prevent an issue by being frontal.

"… He asked us to remain quiet, and it is a serious matter for him. Furthermore, I believe it best if Shirogane himself decided when to speak of it with the rest." Looking right at me, an avalanche would have less impulse than her gaze, she may be stomping her boots as hard as she can to keep up the pace, yet her words flew out with far more vigor than our stride.

"… Got it. My bad."

"No, I wasn't placing blames on your shoulders." As sincere and open as habitual, that's what I like about you. "However, there is little reason to ignore him as you did earlier. Shirogane was merely trying to be attentive after his performance."

"… I see."

Maybe I let the frustration of, yet again, being on the same spot as the princess control me. But if she says this much… What happened

to him? Was he forced to pilot against his will? I don't understand why she would refuse to speak of…

Hmm… Oh, right. Special-kun said once… that he got someone killed. And yet, he could so easily murder those soldiers…

No, he was rather down when we met again back at the base… Am I the asshole right now, then? I guess that, by screening him out, all I did was sour the mood for the rest. It still doesn't sit right with me, how easily they're letting it slide. He killed our fellows, he actually did it himself. All that I had to go through after Mom and Dad… Why do you get forgiven so fast? What didn't I do?

As the laps kept going, as it felt as if my socks were getting ingrained in between my fingers, my mind replayed the video footage that was shown on the monitor of his run. Again, as a soldier, I've nothing but respect. But it's too odd, too out of place. He did some… unorthodox movements at times, yet it is obvious Special-kun knows the basics already, at the least. Why? Why does he inspires such trust in the rest? I was always… doing my best and trying to help… and all I got were screams from the princess and some nods from Tamase, whenever she actually tried to be part of the conversation that is.

Slowing down, jogging away from the track once I finished my run, my boots dragged themselves to a tap, refreshing myself. While I didn't expect the Instructor to ease up, having to run right after the sim practice is truly a new flavor of hell. Luckily, today is yakisoba sandwich day.

"Well, Tamase is already finished." The princess said, tapping her glasses. "Are you all ready to go get lunch?"

Yoroi and Mitsurugi agree, I nod, Tamase hurries up to drink some water and wash her face. All together, we return to the barracks to wash ourselves properly, they debating the trainings as we did.

"Um, Ayamine-san?" Tamase had come to my side, both of us walking behind the rest.

"What's up?"

"How did you manage to maneuver through those two buildings at the middle of the test?" Speaking slowly, a hand on an elbow, she almost gave me a small bow when asking.

"Hm? I just tried to position myself for the next jump, by making a dash through the opening." But then, I got shot down by one of those odd giant balls they use as the targets.

"I see… So you were trying to prepare another jump then."

"Yeah, I don't have your shooting, so all I can do is try to put some distance between me and the targets."

"Come on, my shooting isn't that great… I even ended up failing the run because I ran out of time." And again, she sighs and, well, everything in her hunches over.

"But you didn't get hit. Good job." I pat her shoulder, giving her a thumbs up.

She truly did a great job in there, she did miss some shots but not a single target made contact with her during the run. She's the only one, bar Special-kun, who didn't sustain any damage at all.

"Ahaha… Thanks, really. So, um, would you like to accompany me to the library before dinner to reread some of the chapters about tactics?"

"Sure."

"Hey, hey, what're you talking about?" Yoroi slowed down, coming near.

"I was just asking Ayamine-san if she didn't mind coming with me to the library later, to review some of the controls and maneuvers in the manuals. Would you like to join us, Yoroi-san?"

"Sure thing! Though, I still can't believe the amount of targets we have to deal with near the end." She sighs, scratching her head.

Yoroi also did very well, scoring third place in the run. I didn't think she'd move so nimbly in a TSF, and her aim also isn't anything to scoff at. Sure, Mitsurugi handled herself better and received less damage, which is why she got second place, but Yoroi's performance was better than mine for sure. She may always seem to be in the clouds, but can also get shit done when it counts.

"Damn right, can't believe they sent three at us at the same time." If it hadn't been for that, I would have passed the very first course at least. Nothing like Special-kun who cleared the whole level, but still making progress.

"I do agree that, perhaps, the last segment is unnecessarily treacherous." Mitsurugi joined in, her arms folded as she nodded. "I barely managed to react on time to the threat."

"Regardless, you and Yoroi managed to complete your first run." She taps her glasses, sadly joining in as well. "I was thinking on going to the library after the afternoon course, what are your plans?"

"Me, Kei-san, and Miki-san were going before dinner, to get a small breather." She answers for us, not noticing how the princess' eyes narrowed as she did.

"I see. Perhaps we could all go together, then. Mitsurugi, would you happen to have plans already?"

"… I am planning on taking some time for myself, there is something I need to look into." Looking away, sounding solemn, yet another wall erected between us.

"I see. Then, what about going to the library after the next training?" Tapping her glasses, looking away from Mitsurugi, away from the rift, she yet again tried to make us do what she wants to do.

Looking at Tamase, the hand on her elbow is rubbing it over and over, in a slow but constant rhythm. She's slightly looking down, her lower lip pursed. But she won't speak up. If the princess asks directly she'll just say yes, to not be a bother.

"Sorry, I'm going before dinner." She sends me another narrowed gaze, crossing her arms.

"And, why is that? We could all debate together on our impressions after our first formal day of training, that would benefit the squad as a whole, to compare our logs and find ways to improve together." Then, for some reason, she rose a finger up and started to make circles in the air. "So, it would be better for us to at least do a small review together."

Tamase kept looking away from us, her steps becoming a bit delayed. She should know how sensitive Tamase is to the whole 'for the better of the team' approach. Why can't she piss off and let us progress at our own pace? It's not like we passed the CCSE because of her. Some squad leader you are, you ended up being more of a dead weight than anyone else.

"Don't feel like it. I'll hit the books by dusk."

"Sigh… Why must you always act on your own like this?" Frowning much, she rose both hands up, looking away. "Fine, study by yourself. Don't come complaining at us when you keep making amateur mistakes."

"… Why don't you save those words for when you can actually pilot better than the rest, princess?"

"What was that?"

"You heard me. You're not the ace of the squad, you don't have any right to go around dissing or bossing us around. Seems to me like this is you trying to get Yoroi and Tamase to show you their maneuvering and shooting data."

"You…" She stops walking, facing me as she frowns.

"Sakaki, stop!" Mitsurugi grabs her shoulder, preventing her from getting closer. "We cannot start this again."

"Stand back, Mitsurugi. Ayamine, what is it with you now?"

"I won't let you diss me. A squad leader that's dead weight on the CCSE, who can't even get a single, decent score in her training has no right to be bossing us around as you do."

"First, I wasn't dead weight. And if we're going by the scores, you're tied with me."

Tch… That's only because I tried to actually clear the mission instead of playing it safe like you always do. I got shot down instead of receiving high damage, that's the only reason I got the same score as you.

"And unlike you, I'm trying to help the whole squad. Study by yourself if you want, keep that poker face you always make, but can you stop getting in our way if you don't have anything to contribute?"

"Sakaki-san, that's going too far!" She finally spoke up, still holding her elbow despite how she was, very subtly at it, quivering.

"Yeah, we can't start fighting again!" Yoroi said, placing herself between us.

"She started it, I'm just drawing the line." She shrugs, rolling her eyes.

"You didn't ask for our input, as soon as I spoke you got all pissed off. Some leader you are." She gritted her teeth, Mitsurugi sighed as she shook her head, and Yoroi looked back at me while furrowing her brows.

"Kei-san, please stop this!"

"Why? You okay with being bossed around without a care?"

"Well… But that's not what's going on here."

"I was taking into account our combined goals." Tapping her glasses, she exhales through her nose. "While I am the leader and I could order you around, I was asking you what you thought, and you immediately chose to answer aggressively. You're the one at fault here, Ayamine." Again raising a finger, her tone also did the same.

"Ever heard of asking for an opinion? Don't recall you asking me or Tamase our plans before you tried to make us agree to yours."

"… Huh?" Her stride halted, she blinks quickly while looking at me, then at Tamase. "Don't use her as a shield for your-"

"Why don't you ask her, then?" I then tap her shoulder, giving her a nod. Still rubbing her elbow, she takes a step forward.

"… I… I wanted to write a letter today, for my Papa, so, um… I can't… go to study after the trainings…"

"… I see. Sigh… You should just have said so."

"W-Well… I… I was… Um…"

"You started preaching about the team, made her feel bad for not coming along." Mitsurugi and Yoroi shoot me a glare, I shrug.

"Sakaki, I believe this little discussion has been solved." Mitsurugi said, caressing her hair. "Ayamine, you shouldn't have reacted as you did. Assuming Sakaki had ill intentions won't do us any favors."

"Not my fault she can't ask for an opinion before shoving hers down our throats."

"What was that?! You're the one who's always blowing everything out of proportion!" Again frowning and with that damn finger up doing circles, her voice rose to even more annoying levels.

"Who was the one who dissed the other first again?"

"Ugh… You could have simply told me Tamase wanted to study later." Folding her arms she looks away, from me and her own faults while trying to keep a expression as neutral as the UN.

"C-Come on, you two." Yoroi hesitantly steps back, giving both of us a look. "This was just a misunderstanding."

"Indeed. I am convinced none of us here are wishing to be subjected to yet another lecture on teamwork by the Instructor." Mitsurugi nods to herself, folding her arms.

"Um…" Again grabbing her elbow, again looking down. "I'm sorry, I should have spoken out by myself."

"… No, Ayamine is partly right." Oh goddammit, how thick can she be? Partly my ass, it was your miss. "My apologies, Tamase. I suppose I should begin by asking your opinions before anything." Tapping her glasses, she sighs. Then, she looks at me. "That being said, you could try to be more direct next time."

"… Sorry, Tamase. Didn't meant to put pressure on you." She shakes her head, giving me a smile. You're too good to be a soldier.

"… Aren't you forgetting something, Ayamine?" Raising the finger, she eyed me sideways.

"… Oh, right. Today is yakisoba day, don't have time to waste on you."

"Wha… Why, you-"

"Chizuru-san, no! Kei-san, you too!" Pouting much, she again placed herself between us.

"Sigh… By goodness." Again sending a hand to the ponytail, she gave us a worried look. "Despite everything, Ayamine is right. We are tardy for the PX. Let's leave this matter behind."

"Yes, please stop fighting!" Tamase also chimed in, doing an effort to frown and seem upset. A caterpillar would certainly instill more fear in the CO than her on us right now.

"Don't worry, won't let her get under my skin." Nodding her way, I could practically hear the princess' groans.

"Mmgh… Sigh… Fine, let's just go." We start walking, me behind Tamase and near a wall. "So, are you in agreement to study before dinner then?"

I nod, Yoroi also does the same, Mitsurugi says that in that case she can also join in, Tamase thanks them, and we continue walking on. Yoroi again tried to engage us in one of her ramblings, so I used that opening to relieve some tension by joking about the news.

Still, the nerve. Must be nice in that glass house of yours, seeing nothing wrong with your own behavior. She was the one who pushed the issue and resorted to insults. I was an idiot for thinking that the test had changed her way of being.

The sun coming in strongly through the windows, Kyozuka-san shouting at someone who didn't want to get beans in the rice, the usual ruckus of the PX welcomed us as we got close to the entrance. The line was larger than usual, thanks to us wasting time, but luckily we all could get our full plate.

"And 'ere, some extra yakisoba for you, Ayamine." She gives me her usual grin, placing an extra sandwich on my plate.

"Thanks, Ma'am." Giving her a bow and a smile, that only makes hers grow even more.

"Haha, don't mention it. Y'all started the pilot training, right? So, how's it goin'?"

"Well enough, we're doing fine."

"Good for y'all. So…" She furrows her brows, leaning in, covering her mouth, and speaking in a whisper. "…'bout that Shirogane… He still giving ya trouble?"

"… He's kinda odd, but at least he isn't bothering me."

"I see. That's good to hear. Keep up the good work, girl. And if ya need an ear, ya know where to find me." Again grinning my way, I nodded back and gave her a small bow.

Going my way to the table, I wonder why she asked me that. What are people saying of Special-kun now? He never had a good reputation, so maybe there are people who only heard of him killing people and are spreading a rumor or something? I mean, he did help Mitsurugi. I do recognize that. But I can't speak up, if someone links me to him, I'm done for. It's back to being constantly badmouthed behind my back like when I just got here at the start of the year.

Sitting down by Tamase's side, with the other three in front of us, we began to eat, discussing what we thought of the trainings so far.

" *Did ya see? He ain't around today, either."*

Hm? Are those people… Yep, looking around our way, even if they're trying to be subtle. Subtle as a brick, and thick as the princess' eyebrows.

" *Told you the guy was a bastard. That's why they have him under surveillance."* Another 'whispered' to the group.

" *I heard he killed some of our men when they were unarmed, even threatened the squad to fail the test if they rattled him out."*

… It's the same they did with me.

Whenever I was late for the PX, they would say I was looking for things to break, for ways to sabotage the UN. Saying I was planning to steal, that I was doing comforting duties for a high rank, and all

kinds of shit. Clamping the lips and deafening myself was all I could do. And thankfully, no one bothers me now. But no one spoke out for me, save for Kyozuka-san.

I know they're lying. Special-kun didn't kill unarmed soldiers, and he didn't threaten us. Those chasers also attacked us three, so I can sort of understand how he could have been left out of choices… but he still resorted to killing. Does that make it okay to ignore these lies? I have no choice but to do so. If I speak up, they'll lump me together with him, then it's back to daily hell.

… But it's unfair. And, if he… was in that base when that terrorist attack happened, then I suppose… he could have been made to fight. He wasn't lying when I questioned him either. Munching on my sandwich, closing my eyes, I can do nothing but listen in.

"Excuse me." Tapping her glasses, and with the other hand pressed onto Mitsurugi's arm, the princess turned around. "Would you happen to be speaking of my squadmate?"

"Huh?" The man blinked for a second, not expecting a reaction. "Oh… Yeah, that bastard. You got my sympathy for being paired up with that-"

"Could you kindly retract your words?" Crossing her arms, narrowing her eyes, she shot them a glare.

What the hell is going on here? Is she… speaking up so that Mitsurugi doesn't have to?

"… Huh, so that's how is it." A woman that was seated on that table, leaned her cheek on a hand, smirking. "Guess you don't like us speaking bad of your man."

"If you don't realize the folly that is speaking behind someone's back without knowing anything, then I will have to again ask you to take back those words."

"I, too, must ask you to refrain from speaking in such a way towards him." Mitsurugi, folding her arms and squinting her eyes, glared at them.

"Ah… No, I mean… Didn't that guy… you know…"

"If you're referring to the accidents, yes, he had to." Raising a finger again, she sighed before brushing some hair off her face. "To protect us, because those soldiers were trying to maim all five of us."

"Eh?! But… that American-"

"He's Japanese, and protected us against his better interests. Please take your words back." Tapping her glasses, she insisted. Mitsurugi was giving them all a stern look, nodding to the words.

The tables around us simply fell silent, some wide eyed, others looking away, others standing up and leaving. The man fumbled an apology before turning back, the woman simply left in a hurry.

"… Such foolhardy way of being." Mitsurugi whispers, coiling a fist.

"I don't know what I expected from the UN." Tapping her glasses, she fumes as she drinks some juice.

"Are you sure that was a good idea, Chizuru-san? I mean, we're just cadets."

"There's no way we could just let that go, can we?" Raising a finger again, Mitsurugi nodded to her words.

"I wonder how Shirogane-san is taking all this…" Hunching over, her fork stopped cold.

…

"… Why did you do that?" I couldn't help but ask.

"Huh? What do you mean?" Raising one of those thick eyebrows, she looked up my way.

"Why did you speak out for him?"

"What? Because they were speaking ill of him, of course!"

"You could have ignored it."

"Don't be ridiculous! In no way I would let anyone spread such baseless accusations towards of one of my squadmates."

"… Then, why didn't you do the same for me back then?"

…

Her mouth hanging open, she can't find an answer. Because she doesn't have one.

"Ayamine, Sakaki didn't mean… anything by remaining quiet back then." Her tone slower than usual, a hand tracing her fringe. "We all were getting acquainted to the UN, so everybody was merely exercising caution on how to deal with the issues the others may have. Which is why we placed the policy in the first place, and, well, since you never requested our aid, I personally didn't think it wise to speak out of turn without knowing if you'd welcome the intrusion."

…

"… I see." Gulping down what's left of my juice in one go, munching down the remaining half of my sandwich, I then pick up the tray and stand up.

"Ah, Kei-san! We didn't-"

"Later."

Picking up speed, I go to the counter and leave the tray. Looking down, I leave towards the barracks, to get my books for the short

lecture we have before the afternoon training.

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*Same day. Around an hour after that.*

*(Sim Room.)*

**[Takeru]**

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Yawn… Man, what a pain this is.

The stock Fubuki appears in my sight, not even moving. The shots are fired without me needing to align them well, without actually testing my precise shooting. Down it goes in stock explosions, another appears shortly after crouching by a building a bit farther ahead.

While getting the hang out of this OS again isn't exactly easy, these fights aren't really doing much for me either. But I can't steamroll through all of this or the girls will get all paranoid again. Level D with all the basic drills was a chore to deal with, and these first two missions of C aren't exactly challenging in the slightest since assisted aim is on, the enemies don't move, and they also don't attack immediately.

Really, training with Valgern-On would be far better than this, other than for getting used to the shaking, but it could be done in a better way. Sigh… However, Sensei said she didn't want to give us the XM3 yet, and if I press her anymore, with how pissed she was yesterday night for some reason, that won't end good.

I finish off the last Fubuki and quickly shoot a volley at the sudden shadow, flinching a bit at the alarm. I was kind of doing things on auto, so that shook me wide awake.

"Exercise C-8 completed. Well done, Cadet Shirogane." Takamura grins in the projection. "You achieved yet another record time,

congratulations."

"I see. Good to know. Is this all for today?"

"Yes, that shall be all. Unbolt yourself and come on out." Cutting the connection, the projection also disappears and I'm back at the cockpit.

Once I'm done and ready to get out, moving my neck as I do, I spot Mikoto coming out as well from her pod, followed by Tama on the next one.

"Hey. How was your run?"

"Oh, mine wasn't all that bad." Mikoto smiles, coming to my side as we walk. "I got to the last mission in Level D just now. Didn't expect another of those flying balls at the end, though."

"So, you couldn't complete it?"

"No, the alarm also caught me off guard, so I messed up my shot's timing." She sighs, scratching her head.

"Yeah, that alarm is truly scary." Tama quivers a bit. "But your tips were very useful, Shirogane-san. Thanks to that I also reached the last mission in Level D today, but I failed it too."

"I see. That's good to hear, you two. That's awesome progression for a first day." Giving them a thumbs up, they chuckle as we get to the open area.

Tama always has problems with her pace. It was why she got taken out in that mock battle where Kei and Chizuru just refused to cooperate until the last minute. She's too cautious, so she's the one who's less likely to commit to a full boost dash or even try to engage at melee. So, I simply told her that it's better to screw up at the start, and that she shouldn't discard being more offensive, like she was

during our match in Valgern-On with the Game Guy, by first mastering dashes and firing as she did so.

Mikoto, on the other hand, is the one who is always trying to outmaneuver the opponent, so I told her to be more concise, to shoot first and move later, or do both as she keeps the distance. That way, just like my world's Mikoto, she can get more done in the same move. Instead of always looking for a vantage point, she should polish her already good instinct for dashes to force mistakes on the opponent. This will let her see her potential for midrange shooting faster, while also teaching her the importance of spacing for whenever we get the XM3.

Getting back to the Instructor, Meiya was again shaking her head as Kei and Chizuru were with their back turned to each other. Let me guess… those two couldn't get close to clearing Level D today.

"Alright, squad, line up!" We do as ordered, I eye those two as we did.

Chizuru has the inner side of her brows firmly planted down, her arms glued to her sides. Kei had her poker face as usual, but her hands were coiled a bit too tightly. Sigh…

"You've done spectacular progress for a first formal day. Shirogane has already taken on Level C, and Mitsurugi, Yoroi, and Tamase are at the last movement exercise as well. While Sakaki and Ayamine found some setbacks, they're also close by. This was a much better first day than many others squads enjoyed, congratulations." She smirks, so we can't really celebrate. She must have something up her sleeve. "So, we shall keep this schedule of a small lecture to then come to train. I trust you shall be able to keep up with the reading, seeing your performance just now. Well, that's that. Dismissed!"

"Salute!"

The Instructor goes her way, Takamura also does, at least to wait nearby until I get changed.

She did offer the girls her help, but it looks like they're going to read up stuff this night. Luckily, they all were more than willing to have her help in the trainings, so that's one concern less.

"So, how were your runs?" Asking the other three, I smile their way as we begin to walk out of the sim room.

"Mine was most challenging. It was truly complex to maintain my speed while not losing balance." Meiya says, again folding her arms as always. "However, your advice was truly helpful, Shirogane. I had not yet noticed my aim was being assisted in any way."

"That's true, however I still can't handle the full speed of the machine." Chizuru sighs, dropping her shoulders. "I cannot understand how you can endure the shaking of a full dash for so long."

"Eh, it's all a matter of practice. I can handle the G-Forces, but even then it's not like I'm going to have it easy either."

"By the way, Special-kun…" Kei had gotten closer, yet was still giving me a side glance. "What were those odd moves you were pulling?"

"… Which of all of them?"

"You know, when you landed with a single feet. What was that?"

"Oh, I was just trying to do a sidestep." Like I saw in that memory of his fight.

"… Huh, and why did you?"

"I thought it was a good idea." But sadly, I can't seem to get the timings right. If I had the XM3 I could do it, but with the stiffer controls… I truly got spoiled by the superior OS. "I mean, at some

point the enemies will start attacking us seriously, right? We can't count on them acting so dumb all the time."

"So that's what you were thinking then." Meiya nods, a hand on her chin. "Would you mind sharing the reasoning behind it?"

"I guess? It's more of a gut feeling than anything. I was just trying to have a way to move out from the line of fire without using the boosters."

"Sigh… Shirogane-kun, you may be very talented, but do try to stick to the curriculum. The Instructor will get upset if you keep trying those odd moves."

"I know, I just thought it was worth it. By the by, what did you guys have the most trouble with?" Looking at Chizuru and Kei, one sighs and shrugs, the other gives me another side glance.

"I'm merely getting used to the speed, that's all." Raising both hands in defeat, Chizuru shakes her head.

"What about you, Ayamine?"

"… I'm fine, I'll clear it next time."

"Come on, don't be like that. If you got problems with your shooting, why not rely on your squadmates?"

"I can manage on my own, thanks."

Sigh… You stubborn, hard-headed, bull. I can tell she's in a bad mood for some reason, maybe they had another argument, or maybe she still has something against me. However, I can't just ignore this. I need her to be better. And yet, if I keep pushing she'll get in an even worse mood, she doesn't like me much to begin with. What should I-

"Look Ayamine, this isn't basic anymore." Raising a finger and doing circles, Chizuru gave her a frontal stare. "We are training to become

pilots now, all together. If one falls behind, all of us pay for it, right?"

"Yeah, I know. You saying I'll fail the course?"

"No, but if you don't improve, you'll only hamper the rest. Why not just admit what you're having trouble with?" She is trying to be less confrontational, by her standards, but still…

Kei looks away, poker face in place. We keep walking, but no one says anything. Chizuru taps her glasses, sighing a mountain off. Tama and Mikoto keep switching glances between them. Sigh… Guess it's better if I take the fall.

"Hey Ayamine, you really think none of us can lend you a hand?" Giving a look to Chizuru so that she desists, I then look at Kei, whose brows lower a bit.

"No, not saying that. I can handle this by myself."

"I mean, I'm sure you can. But we're comrades, so we should lend a hand if we can. No one can protect its life alone, right?" Chizuru twitched when she heard me, Kei frowned and looked away. "And believe me, I know how frustrating it is to hit your head against a wall you can't overcome. All the tips I'm giving you guys are what my old squadmates told me about when I was down on my luck."

That seems to have taken all of 'em by surprise, eyes as watermelons, brows up above the clouds.

"Really?" Again back to the poker face, she holds my gaze.

"Yeah."

"… For real?" She gets close, eyes narrowed as she scans my face.

"Yes, it's the truth." And it is, I'm just telling you what you guys told me during my first loops when I couldn't get better, when we trained together to become better, when… we were more than squadmates.

"So don't close up, you're not worse for relying on others. As part of the military, we have to do all we can for our people, right?"

"Eh?" Eyes wide, she got tilted. Well, I kinda expected that reaction.

"Yeah, we gotta do all we can for the rest, and that includes our comrades, right?"

"… I guess… I guess so." She looks away, pursing her lips a bit.

"All of us are in this together, so don't hesitate to ask." Smiling at her, I then step aside. "Tama and Mikoto can lend you a hand when it comes to sniping. Right, guys?" Looking back at the smaller duo, taken aback a bit, they both nodded.

"Yeah, let's all work together, Ayamine-san." Tama comes closer, smiling her way. Mikoto also nods towards Kei, scratching her head.

"Well… I do need some help with my aim…" I knew having Tama help her would get Kei to agree. Meiya smiles, nodding at the exchange, while Chizuru heaves a sigh.

"Kei-san, maybe you should focus on your sniping for awhile? Your midrange seemed good enough to me on the monitor." Oh right, Kei's sniping sucks. Like, for real. She's as bad at sniping as I am at history.

"Ugh… I'll polish my good traits first."

"That is a fair strategy, indeed." Nodding twice, Meiya played with her fringe. "It wouldn't do any of us good to overcompensate in our less stellar areas."

"You say that because your sniping sucks too, don't you?"

"Wha… T-That is not true!" Pouting much, she folded her arms real tight.

"No, Shirogane-kun is right. Both of you were adept at CQC, so it is understandable that you're facing trouble now that the training is mostly against ranged targets at the beginning." Tapping her glasses, she smiled at Tama. "I believe Tamase could give you two quite some lessons tonight."

"Your sniping also sucks, leader." Kei narrowed her eyes with a smirk, Chizuru, who wasn't expecting the retort, was left with her mouth half open.

"Yes, but I am asking for advice on how to improve. Perhaps you should follow my example?" God, why can't you two have a peaceful conversation for once?!

"Please cease this petty argument, both of you." Meiya shook her head, then giving both of them a hard stare. "Such infighting will give us no boons in our trainings."

"Then Mitsurugi, what is your plan to polish our rough skills?" Chizuru tapped her glasses, arching a brow.

"I do not know."

"Huh? What is that supposed to mean?"

"That a single day of training isn't enough for me to formulate a definitive answer, I've had no time to analyze and ponder on the piloting as it is. If you wish to hear a biased emotional argument I can comply, yet I doubt that would do us much good."

Oh God, not this again. Chizuru is trying harder not to snap, drop the subject, or just use an order to end the argument, she only wants to help all of us improve. Meiya, who is even more dedicated to her training in this world, simply doesn't want to give her opinion when she feels it lacks substance and is upset at how heated this is getting. And Kei simply refuses to back down when she's seeing this as Chizuru's way of forcing us to see things her way.

"Guys, let's just all calm down." They look my way, lips plucked, brows furrowed. "I already gave this squad enough shit to deal with. If you don't chill down, I'm gonna tell the Instructor on you."

Shocked as Sumika was when I gave her my very first well cooked pizza, scared as I was whenever Meiya marched into the kitchen, they looked to the ground. Sigh… NotMarimo-chan to the rescue.

"Um… We can still try harder every day." Tama said, almost stuttering. "So, uh, if anyone wants advice I'm always open." Smiling as sweetly as usual, the air around us was cleared up as those three gave a nod in response. Thanks, Tama.

"Same here. If anyone wants my logs or any advice, just drop it on me and I'll see what I can do." Winking at them with a thumbs up, they all give a nod.

"Exactly, let us all work together from now on." Tapping her glasses, she smiled towards me and Tama. "The simulations have only just begun, and it will take much until we learn to properly pilot."

"That might be true, but it's also really fun to practice!" Mikoto, however, didn't give a shit about the conversation as usual and, smile plastered, began to gush out about her runs.

Hahaha… You're still as deliberately deaf as usual.

"Yoroi-san, don't start again!" Tama tried, in vain, to halt her stride.

"But it's the truth! Yeah, it shakes a lot, but the rush of speed is better than I thought it would be!" Smiling much, she was practically rebounding against herself again.

And they would be better if they had the XM3, though. Sadly, that's locked down for now.

"In any case, even if my sniping isn't as good as Tamase's or Shirogane-kun's, it is better than yours." Meiya and Kei couldn't help

but to narrow their brows. "What I have trouble with is with the rush Yoroi just mentioned. So, us three need to polish our weak points. Otherwise, the Instructor will either give us more assignments or make us run more laps before lunch." Then, the other four looked as grim as I did after receiving my math tests back in middle school.

"Huh? Why would she? I mean, if you're still making some progress, that's enough, right?"

"Shirogane, you have already reached Level C." Meiya couldn't hide the embers in her tone. "She will assuredly drive us to match your performance. We have to redouble our efforts, I for one have no intention to remain behind in the trainings." Then, all five of them nodded, fire burning within their eyes.

"Alright, you do you, just don't overload your engine or you'll get busted."

"Huh? Busted?" Here we go again.

"You know, exhausted?"

"… I see." Confused as always, she blinks in quick succession while folding her arms. Mikoto giggles, as does Tama, and Chizuru sighs. "In any case, we need to catch up to you, and quickly. As Sakaki said, I do not wish to bring upon myself further laps at noon."

"Oh, that means we should carefully shift our focus and put some accel in our stride." Mikoto says, chuckling to herself.

"Huh? Yoroi-san, what do you mean?"

"That you five gotta grip onto the training, or you're gonna slide off the course." Nodding at her, we both chuckle. Tama tilts her head, not understanding.

"Shirogane-kun, what are you on about?"

"Chizuru-san, we're merely saying that we need to gain some traction in the trainings."

"Yeah, we gotta be careful to not end up spinning on the road. Right, Mikoto?" She nods, both of us grinning.

"That's right. Otherwise, the Instructor is gonna push us to a wipeout."

"… Sakaki, do you understand what they're saying?" Meiya asks, arms folded and tilting her head.

"No, I've no idea." Tapping her glasses, she gives us a hard stare.

"Seems like the squad leader didn't catch your drift. What a shame." Kei joins in, smirking from ear to ear. Chizuru groans at her, but manages to not retort.

"Huh? Ayamine-san, you know what they're trying to say?" Tama asked, eyes wide.

"Well, kinda. I guess the transmission just failed." You just wanted to keep poking fun at Chizuru, as always.

"Yeah, the message just went under the hood." Mikoto and Kei chuckle, Tama and Meiya raise a brow.

"Stop with the secret code. Shirogane-kun, what are you trying to say?"

"Okay, don't get mad Sakaki. I'll give you a brake, alright?" Mikoto holds her mouth as she laughs, Kei snickers, Chizuru's brows are twitching.

"… I still do not comprehend what is going on here." Meiya shakes her head, oblivious to the joke.

---

*Same day. A few minutes after 7 PM.*

*(A hallway near the Food Storage.)*

---

Another day of delivering reports, the project seems to be going well. The training also started better than last loop, we managed to stop Kei and Chizuru from fighting again, and the girls agreed to let Takamura help them from time to time.

Having her watching over me hasn't given me much trouble so far, but you never know. Sensei didn't call for me today, I could work to my leisure, no one from the Guard approached me. Everything seems calm.

I again got D rank rations, so I guess Sensei is doing her thing. The attendant is still not even looking my way, but it is what it is. I'm starving, so I better get to Takamura's office quickly. She insists I eat with her, since it seems she has things to ask. Oh well, let's just keep the facade up.

As I was getting closer to her office, I obviously started to run into more and more people in the hallways, and that meant more and more whispers and mean looks. I tend to forget about it when I'm with the girls, since they're kinda chill now, but this world really is much different. I wonder why the hell it turned out this way. Maybe it was always like this but I was never 'on the other side'. Tsukuyomi-san and Meiya… were very rejecting towards me during the coup, to be fair.

I wonder if that's why you grew so hateful, so angry at the Guard. Did people treat you like this at some point? If this is how the UN is treating me, I don't wanna imagine what the Royal Guards would do to someone they deem a traitor. And yet, I don't feel that he completely hated them either, I don't feel the anger of the CCSE towards Takamura for example. Just what the hell happened to-

**THUD!**

Not paying attention as I walked near the wall, someone bumped their shoulder against me, almost like a tackle, and sent me to the ground.

"Oi, what are you doing? You should be careful we're you're walking, American."

A group of three soldiers, all Japanese, scowled at me. I was walking by the wall and there is plenty of space in the hallway. They did on purpose.

"… Sorry, sir. Won't happen again." Calm down… They want a reaction, and I won't give it to them.

"Tch… Damn scum…"

Narrowing their brows, they kicked my ration's pack towards a wall. Biting my lips, I stood up and picked it up, yet they didn't leave. They still were snickering at me.

"By the way… I thought you were under a punishment, right?" One said, raising a brow and a smirk as he came towards my right..

"Yes, that is correct, sir."

"Then, what the hell are you doing here? You should be going back to the cells." Another said, circling to my left.

"I was called by a superior to their office, so I shall be on my way." Taking a few steps back, I try to leave. But the last one stood in front of me, the one who kicked my rations away.

"Oh, really now? So you tackled a superior despite being called here outside of your orders, huh?"

"… I didn't tackle anyone. We just bumped onto each other."

"Huh? Are you blaming me for that, American? You were the one who wasn't even looking where you were walking, as if you owned

the place."

…

God… What is it with this world? What the hell are you trying to accomplish? We're losing a war and this it what our soldiers are doing. It's because of idiots like this that we never made progress. *To think they had to die to save the hides of these assholes is making me retch. None of you are worth the sacrifices we had to make.*

"And? Come on, say something! Maybe we should report this to your Instructor…" He smirks, they all chuckle.

Sigh… You people… *You really are not worth it.* But I can't snap, won't let this idiots ruin my efforts to right the leaks. *Restoring peace to this land takes priority over my urge to sink your teeth in.*

"Feel free to do that if you want. Now, could you kindly move aside?"

"Eh? Wanna say that again, cadet?"

"I asked you to move aside, because someone is waiting for me." His smirk gone, *the bastard* frowns at me. Well, what did I expect? *I am a stranger here.*

"Someone doesn't know his place in-"

"What is going here?" A female voice came from behind him. Takamura's voice.

Briskly walking up to us, squinting her eyes, she eyed the three men one at a time.

"Ahem… You see 1st Lt., this American tackled one of us just now. We wanted him to apologize, but he wouldn't-"

"Is that so? Then, why were you surrounding him just now?" Brushing some hair aside, if looks could cut she would have given them a deep one right now.

"Eh? Well, because we can't allow an American to-"

"Would you drop the pretending already? I saw how you surrounded him as he simply tried to leave after apologizing. Furthermore, I doubt Cadet Shirogane would have tackled anyone as you said. He was too exhausted, after all."

I mean, that's why I fell so hard in the first place. Haven't had anything to eat since morning. It's a miracle I'm standing and managed to not lose it just now.

The three of them exchange a gaze, their lips twisting as they did. Barely managing to return the look she was giving them, forced as my manners were their poker faces. She remains composed and cool, yet readiness oozed from her posture.

Is this all an act? Doesn't seem like one, though. Why would she be defending me? To build trust so that I don't doubt her? If not for that… *Why would a Royal Guard show me sympathy? What does she gain from that? Makes no sense.*

"He still tackled one of us before, that's why we were asking him to apologize properly."

"Oh, truly? Cadet Shirogane, could you show me your rations?"

"Huh? Oh, here."

After passing her the pack, she moves it around a bit. The small rugged part where it was kicked facing up, dust sticked to the package.

"If I'm not mistaken, one of you did this. If he tackled you then, how did this happen to the package?"

"Eh… Uh, you see, it was… He dropped it when he tackled us and-"

"I suggest you to not repeat this foolishness." Narrowing her eyes, taking a step forward, she sent a hand to her hair. "Otherwise, I shall

report this misconduct myself to your superiors. Shirogane, whatever does the XO do with those who do not follow her rules?"

"… You don't wanna know." For real.

But, like, damn, I didn't expect Takamura to, well, act like Tsukuyomi-san did. I guess our interactions did make me think she was being too polite… And she was, going by this. So she also has a menacing Royal Guard within herself…

"Uh, we… we were just…" All of them are sweating buckets right now, knees rumbling under the gaze of Takamura.

"We shall be taking our leave. Shirogane, follow me."

"Ah… Yes."

Walking right behind her, the three men seem to stay frozen for a second, then they seem to begin to argue with one another. Looking away from the sad spectacle, can't help but to bite my lips. Because people like that fill our army, because idiots like the gray haired bastard and that red haired bitch get to be in places they don't have the head to be in, things are as they are. Sure, they're just pawns in the end… But overlooking their conduct like this is a mistake. Though, forcing them to change won't help at all… Sigh… Just what the hell is wrong with this world?

"Cadet Shirogane, would you be alright?" Pulling me out from my head, Takamura gave me a worried glance.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just nettled about it all, to be honest."

"I see… It must be infuriating, to be treated in such a way."

"Nah, at this point I'm used to it. That's just how people see me here."

"… Well, but it shouldn't be the norm." The inner side of her brows coming down, her lips a small line, she held my gaze. "You shouldn't

normalize such behavior against your person."

"Most people are still talking behind my back, and I can't blame them after what I did. It is what it is."

"… You don't have to endure such treatment. I believe it best for you to speak of this with the XO, since she is your legal tutor."

Already tried that. There's nothing else to do. Haters are gonna hate, no matter what others tell them to do.

"It's alright, really. Thanks for helping me out, though."

"No, it was nothing. I thought you were going to bring up the XO to drive them away, or just walk past them if they grew more aggressive. Surely you weren't planning on letting them hit you?"

"Sigh… What else could I have done? It's cool, really. Thanks for helping out, and sorry for the trouble." Giving her a bow, her gaze drops like a brick on water. What's up with her now? "… Is there something wrong, 1st Lt.?"

"Well…. That it seems you have a very negative image of us, to the point that no words seem to dissuade you." Is she… going to report that to Yuuhi, maybe?

"They have the right reasons to dislike me. Taking it as I push forward is all I can do."

"That might be so, however, their behavior is not justified. We shouldn't… display such hostility towards foreigners after all."

We reach her office, entering it she sits in her chair behind the desk, a cardboard box to her left with her dinner at the ready. Taking out my rations, I sit down in front of her.

"Well, let us eat in peace for now."

"Yeah…"

"… Is there something you would like to talk about?"

"Um… 1st Lieutenant, you seemed really angry about how they were treating me, especially about how I had a bad image of you guys in general. Is there a reason why?"

Her words don't seem like a trap, for now. And seeing how she reacted then and how she's being now, I wonder what could make a Royal Guard, and someone like her, sympathize with me after what I did.

She looks at me, then at her plate. Grabbing a strand of hair, bringing some food to her mouth and munching it real slow, she then sighs.

"Because I used to be the same as them, so I can understand why you would begin to hoist animosity towards the Japanese within you."

"You mean… you used to be that harsh towards foreigners?" Grabbing a piece of dough fused together with peanut butter, I eye her as she eats, waiting for her to continue.

"Indeed. I was most abrasive whenever I had to interact with anyone that wasn't a fellow. In all honesty, when the railgun was first proposed to be a joint project with America, I vehemently refused it." She chuckles, ruffling her hair backwards. "During my stay at Yukon I learned… how foolish I was being. Therefore, I would like to show the rest what I learned, and is why I won't allow such hostilities to brew in my presence." Looking my way, she again gave me a serious gaze. "Please do not normalize this treatment, don't assume everyone here will be hostile to you. You have lived abroad, so you can show many the boons of cooperation with the world. Which is why accepting this treatment won't do you any favors."

"… I know. It's just… hard to deal with, to be honest."

"I can understand, I was…" Hanging her head, she sighs. "… undeservedly harsh to many when I first arrived at Yukon. In any case, you should not tolerate such obvious abuse from anyone."

"… I guess you're right. Thanks, 1st Lieutenant."

"No, as I said, it is nothing. I know it might be hard, to live under such harsh gazes, but while I do praise your composure, do remember you do not deserve further punishments." I nod, she then smiles. "Also, may I… ask you a personal question?"

"Sure, go ahead." Too hungry to scan her face and tone. She sounds honest, so no need to refuse.

"Why do you not retort when they called you an American?"

"Well, it would only have served to anger them more. No point in screaming into the void."

"Huh… I suppose. However, well, I still do not fully agree."

"May I ask why?"

"Well… There was someone like you in my past squad."

"How do you mean?"

"Someone who was shunned due to being an outsider." Her hands stopping, eyes almost closing, it sounds as if her mood fell down from a hive's monument. "You see, you reminded me of him when you spoke with such doubt towards how those men saw you. I do not wish you to fall to the same sinkhole he was in. After all… You are Japanese as well, there is no reason for you to be treated as an outsider here."

Looking straight at me, no delay in her last words, she wasn't lying or anything.

"Thanks, for real."

"There is no need. After all, you chose to come here alone instead of staying in Alaska. Surely your family must be worried about you back in the US, if they heard of your hardships here."

…

"… Family, huh."

"… Um, would it be troublesome matter for you?"

"No, it's just… Well, I don't know where my family is."

"Have you… lost contact with them?"

"No, I… don't even know if they're alive." Her widening eyes, the hesitation in her tone told me she wasn't hiding anything. So I sighed, munching my dinner for a while as I thought over what to tell her.

"Oh, were they in Alaska, then?" Grimacing a bit, dropping her gaze, a falling leaf would make enough noise on the ground to drown out her voice.

"No, it's not that either. I don't… I don't remember if they're still alive."

"H-Huh?! Do… Do you suffer from amnesia?"

"… Yes. I don't remember much from my past. I woke up on Alaska by myself, and no one could find anyone related to me so I've no idea if my parents are alive or not."

…

Thinking about it… I wonder what kind of people my parents are in this world. Why was Maya-san looking after little me, anyways? Where are they now?

"M-My apologies, I didn't mean to… Well…"

"It's fine. So, since I've no one to call family here, I won't bother telling people otherwise if they call me an American." And my Japan is so different to this one I might look like one to people here, just like how Tsukuyomi-san saw me during the coup. "Still, I'm here to help and it's why I won't react. That's all."

"Is that so? Well… That is the right thing to do, however, don't simply surrender yourself to be the recipient of needless violence if another situation like that one were to happen."

"Yes, Ma'am. I'll just drop Sensei's name and that should be enough."

"… Sensei?" Oh, here we go again.

The remainder of dinner was rather peaceful, me telling Takamura of how to navigate the floor, where certain rooms were, and recommending her to order her food from Kyozuka-san's PX, as well as her best dishes.

Luckily for me, it seems she doesn't have any ill intentions towards me for now. So long as the General doesn't talk with her, I think Takamura won't act against me. Though, seeing how she was before, if she ever comes at me I'm going to be in trouble.

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*Same Day. Near 9 PM.*

*(B5F, near the Detention Barracks.)*

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Going back to the detention barracks, the new guard salutes me, giving me a small smile, unlike the other one who didn't even look my way.

No whispers, no mean looks, no nothing. The man unlocks my cell and opens the door for me, saluting me again once he had to close it. Returning the gesture, he then nods and takes his leave.

Stretching my hands up, moving sideways and hearing my knees and shoulders crack, I then tense up my back, shaking the stiffness I had on me. Sitting down on the bed, I take off my boots and massage my feet again. Throwing myself back, I look at the ceiling as I yawn.

Family, huh. Whatever the hell happened to my parents in this world? I wonder if my own parents are alright over there…

But, thinking it through, this world's me wasn't in good terms with the Pickles, but when I saw them yesterday I didn't feel anything bad towards them. His squad was supposed to stay away from as many eyes as possible, I don't know any of his squadmates, and I still can't remember who Amanohara was.

If he was a Royal Guard, was our family different? How did Maya-san end up taking care of little me? If there were no records left… then, does Sensei know and she didn't tell me? Or, did she just forgot to ask me about them for some reason?

At least I got some diagrams done today about the weapons I wanted to make. Now, all I can hope is that I can get some good sleep. Ever since I came back from the island I can't seem to be able to rest well. This heavy feeling lingers around me whenever I sleep, even now I can feel it on the lower part of my back.

Well… Nothing much I can do about it. I'll just ask her tomorrow. Maybe the pillow will help me clear my head a bit.

" *Yawn*… I'll ask Kasumi… to see if she can draw out any memories about them. But for now… *Yaaawn…* I'll call it quits for today."

# Their Sacrifice

## Chapter 34: Their Sacrifice

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*July 25th, 1968.*

*(Saionji Main House. Hiroshima.)*

**[Hidekatsu]**

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Neither of us said a word, silence filled the air of the room. The tea has run cold an eternity ago, the manju remained untouched atop the table.

Father has died, and without writing his will. This means we now have to decide who will become the next head of the Saionji family. Me or Tsunemori.

"I believe we must move forward to a world of unity. Considering the threat of these things known as the BETA, and the benefits the Empire could reap from this war if we manage to acquire part of their technology, I believe we should strengthen our relations with both the UN and the US. Brother, my connections will give our family the greatest benefit in our trade and production efforts." Tsunemori said, with his usual confidence.

"And yet, that would mean to surrender even more of our soul to the foreign powers. The Empire needs no further aid from the US, we should try to encourage our own industry to grow, to increase our exports and means of self-sufficient production. We have many a great number of small factories that create pieces and machines that are needed on many R&D departments all over the world. Me and my fellows will give the Empire its own industrial might, and we will sever the umbilical cord the US has encrusted into our economy, so

that we never have to depend on any other nation for our economic stability." I return the glare, I will not flinch or back down.

To accept Tsunemori as the next head is to bow down to the Americans. Yes, we can make a great profit from opening our imports to American products and licensing their production, but in the long run that will make us even more dependent on them. We need to have at least one strong industry of our own. Yes, we cannot survive alone in these times, especially if the BETA are as fearsome as that report the UN sent us made them out to be. But we must not simply bow and obey, the Empire needs to rise once more.

"Hidekatsu, the Americans are the greatest power in the entire world. Only a fool wouldn't want to do business with them."

"As far as I know, kneeling down and giving head is not considered 'business' anywhere on the globe. I do not think that making us more dependent on them is what this nation needs."

"And trying to make a castle on the clouds is not what I'd call a solid plan. I believe we would reap bigger benefits licensing the Americans products and being the main distributors on the Far East, while also gaining more power within thanks to our relations with them." Your attitude disgusts me. What little love for our nation you have, choosing to see what is convenient to you.

"Brother, do you truly think the Americans see us as their allies? Look at how the Shogun is treated, it's nothing more than a figurehead these days. We're their pawns, puppets that move according to their whims. To give them even more power is to surrender ourselves completely to them!" I slam my hand on the table. Tsunemori narrows his eyes at me in clear disapproval.

"Hidekatsu, improving our relations with them does not equal a total surrender. We need them to finish the reconstruction of our nation, and we still don't know enough of these beings that were found on the moon. To bite the helping hand of the Americans might end up being our demise. We cannot decide our moves basing ourselves on

emotional arguments. I also wish for the Empire to be free from foreign influence, but we must first grow strong again, find our place on the global economy."

"Tsunemori, we have been forced into servitude. They have completely changed the way we live and are constantly pushing us further and further away from what we truly are. Is this how you wish the Empire to continue? As slaves of the Americans? I refuse to accept this dichotomy of remaining as their servants or march to a certain demise. There must be a way for us to turn the Empire into a global power while slowly, but assuredly, cleaning the influence the Americans have imprinted into our culture since the end of the war. We cannot lose their aid, but we must not bow to their every demand. And for that someday to be a reality, we have to start working for it now!"

"I believe so too, but we also must make ourselves indispensable to the world, and improving our relations with the US is the better and fastest way to do so in my eyes. Without their aid, our industry would get stuck, and trying to compete with them would put us in a very dangerous position. First we should accept our weakness, and once we have done our own R&D on their products, we can start to develop our own brand, with higher quality or better pricing to sway the market to us. Lasting changes don't happen overnight, Hidekatsu. Your vision would send us into ruin, and would make all the sacrifices, all the concessions, all the shame we had to endure until now go to waste. That is why I should be the next head."

Again silence fills the air. We will never reach a truce. He wants to continue to bow down to the foreigners, with the hope that the Empire might one day stand up again. I want to make it stand up yesterday, severing this bind that has been placed on us. I expected more of you Brother. All of my life, I have admired you. You always seemed to be unfazed by all the problems we had to face, and always managed to come up with a clever solution to aid Father and His Highness. Yet, even if you are my older brother, if you wish to keep us in servitude…

"I think we won't reach an agreement, Hidekatsu."

"So it seems, Brother."

"Then, I suppose we should settle this with a duel, as much as it pains me to do so. One of us will live and become the next head, the other will have to join Father and Mother."

"I expected nothing less. However, you seem to have made a mistake Tsunemori." I say as I relax onto the tatami, covering how my right hand reaches for the inside of my sleeve.

"A mistake?"

"Indeed. *The duel has already started.* " Without a single vestige of hesitation, I throw two shuriken at Tsunemori's throat. In a flash, he drops to a side, holding his neck in pain. Crimsoness dirties the tatami as he wails pointlessly. "It pains me so much, yet I cannot allow you to live any longer. You have committed treason against our Empire, you deserve no honor but I shall give you mercy." I draw my blade and quickly end my older brother's life, to spare him from further suffering.

… You had good intentions, but you've forgotten that they're not as honorable as we are. Even if we are to remain loyal, in a gesture of goodwill to improve our relations with them, as soon as they see a better economical partner, they'll discard us away without hesitation. Who would trust in someone like that? If we can't even expect them to come pay their respects one a year, how could you wish to keep depending on them? Tis truly a shame, for you to have chosen their side.

I whistle three times in an odd rhythm, sending the signal to my men. Soon after that, the sound of the battle reaches my ears. If you're going to do something, you have to follow through without hesitation. Even if it means spilling the blood of some of my fellows and retainers.

The screams eventually die down. A knock is heard on the outside. I get out of the room and see my shinobi awaiting for me.

"How has the mission go?" She bows down, I see she has some deep gashes on her back and left hand. Your loyalty won't be forgotten, my fellow.

"All opposition has been cleared, Hidekatsu-sama. All those who were loyal to Tsunemori-sama have been silenced."

"Good. Let us give them a proper burial then, in one last show of respect. Tomorrow morning we shall notify the Emperor of the result of our… duel, and I'll be officially recognized as the head of the Saionji House at long last."

I leave the place, heading to the main bedroom and office of the house. The place that now belongs to me. I will not fail, I shall make the Empire into a global power. I won't let all the blood I've spilled today to go to waste, for I am honor bound to triumph in my ambitions for their sake as well. Tsunemori, you can rest in true peace. For I shall work for the both of us and bring about that future we both wished for, even if the Americans corrupted your judgment into a vassal-like mentality.

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*March 18th, 1978.*

*(Imperial Palace. Kyoto.)*

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"Raise, Hidekatsu. We have much to talk about."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

I have been called personally by His Majesty the Heavenly Emperor to his private chamber. With the passing of Kujo-sama last week, it may mean he has selected me as the next Shogun. However, I should not get ahead of myself.

The room is decorated with many delectable paintings of our own roots, the walls painted in a dark shade of deep purple, and filled with many fittingly beautiful golden decorations of Japanese origin. Behind a veil lies His Majesty, as I kneel on lower ground. There's also the special guardians of the Emperor, the Royal Guards that are dressed in pale red-violet uniforms, standing by His side.

"Hidekatsu, you've done many efforts to revitalize our industry. You've given priority to the needs of the Japanese, and despite all the setbacks that it has brought you, you have not faltered in your anti-American stance. You have my most sincerest respect for your dedication to our nation."

"Your words are is more than what I deserve, Your Majesty."

"Nonsense. Regardless, I am growing old. While I have been forced to endure many hardships for the well-being of my people, I would like to leave knowing that there's someone who can aid my son in bringing our nation back on its feet. Hidekatsu, if you were to become the Shogun, what would you do to make your ambitions a reality?"

I lift my face and look in the direction of his voice. I take a deep breath, and speak up slowly but firmly.

"I would first revise the Fundamental Law of Education, to shift the focus of our schools and systems to cultivate more surface pilots, engineers and mechanics. I believe the Akebono Program launched by Kujo-sama will become the root of our revival. With our own militar force rejuvenated, with an elite army ready to take on the BETA at the frontlines whenever we are called to aid the UN or when the threat reaches our shores, our nation will gain a strong foothold in the entire world as elite soldiers. This is the perfect moment to break free of the American's shackles, since no one could object to us reinforcing our military now. And once the UN becomes aware of our worth, we will gain a crucial ally in our negotiations with the US. If we make ourselves into the vanguard of the world even Europe might take our side in exchange for our efforts in the war."

I truly believe this is a once in a lifetime chance. We must become one of the world's strongest armies, and for that we need an elite, loyal force that's ready to halt the BETA advance when they're called to duty. The foreigners have chained us to their whims, but now we shall chain them to us, they won't be able to refuse our terms after we save their hides from these monsters.

"And pray tell, how would you reform our systems? Would you search for the gifted among us? Perhaps a focus on aptitudes, rewarding the citizens that willingly choose to serve?"

"No, Your Majesty. While I do wish to cultivate the innate talent of our people, I believe loyalty to be much more important in an army. Give me a box full of sledgehammers, and I'll do all I can to turn them into the finest blades you've ever seen. Give me someone who fails, someone who struggles and desires to be better sincerely, and I'll do all I can to make them reach their full potential. I'll move Mt. Fuji with my bare hands to aid my fellows in their struggles, stand along them under the wildest rain, and hone myself to be the best commander they could have. For I know they won't back-stab me, I can count on them not leaving my side when the need calls."

I take a small breath and continue.

"However, if you give me someone, no matter how skilled he is, that I cannot count on, everything falls apart. Someone who I can't even expect to arrive in time to a meeting, someone who no matter what I do for him, would always either turn his back to me or show ungratefulness towards all of my efforts towards him, does not have a place by my side. I know I might be sounding very prejudicial now to you, however I have been burned by the fire of betrayal and disappointment far too many times since I became the head of the Saionji family. I believe order and trust are the most important things in the army, and the latter in any relationship. Which is why I believe that those who are worth my trust, regardless of their origins, should be given priority on our training system. I would reform our systems to give them the chance they deserve, for I rather spend double the time on someone that struggles to hone himself but that values all I

do for him instead of someone whose loyalty lies somewhere else and that I can't count on when I truly need his aid."

I finish and lower my head once more. After a brief moment, His Majesty speaks to me again.

"And how would you shape this army of yours? If all the ones that join the armed forces cannot be trusted, what would you do? If you had no choice but to cooperate with these untrustworthy people, which path would you choose?" He said, speaking as calmly as before.

The same dichotomy that Tsunemori once spoke about. That is a lie, the world isn't painted in black and white. There is always another road, even if it's darker and more dangerous than the obvious safe path that's laid out in front of you. And for the blood I've spilled I am obliged to triumph. Fear has no place in my heart, for I shall take this fierce, perilous road unwavering.

"I would look for those I can truly call my fellows. If I were to become the Shogun, I would reintroduce the Military Service Law, and send my most trusted men to scout and search for those who share my views, for the young ones whose hearts are looking for a new future, and I'll give them the best training this nation can produce. While I will have to coexist with those I cannot trust, I will not exclude them but I won't give them positions of power. I am sure you're aware of the many detractors that have resigned their title of nobility because they felt 'insulted' after we gave the just reward to some civilian families that had served us well, granting them the lowest title of nobility of our system."

Remembering all the talks I've had these last few months brings a bitter smile to my face.

"And it is most hilarious, how they spoke of our traditions and upholding the rightful honor, but then chose to do business with the Americans, selling their honor for some coin, becoming nothing more than dogs. It's that kind of people which I wish to expel from our

higher echelons. After all, the civilians they so much despised turned out to be more loyal to you than they ever were. Of course, I do not wish to instigate a persecution, but I believe that we should give an incentive to many small enterprises owned by civilians so that they can compete and eventually triumph over these sellswords' businesses."

It is a truly sad state of affairs, how easily money corrupted our fellows. Many people who I called friends turned upside down the second the Americans dropped bags full of that dirty green poison known as dollars in front of them. Much like Tsunemori wanted to, they wasted no time in kneeling before their new masters. It's people like them that I wish to purge from this nation. How could we ever become a stable, independent nation with traitors who are constantly doing the foreigners' work in all areas of our economy and education?

"I see. You raise many good points, Hidekatsu. But let me ask you a crucial matter. How will you finance your nation? If you refuse the aid of America, how will you maintain the current order that our nation enjoys today?"

"Simple, Your Majesty. I believe the UN to be different than the Americans. With their support we will show the international community all of our skills. Once the world can see us for what we truly are, the US won't be the only one looking to do business with us. And even then we still are the only ones who might be willing to do business with the US, they won't have it easy to oppose us. Allow me to say this, I wish for us to someday be able to stand side by side with US instead of our current position as their vassals. So long as they do not try to intrude on our sovereignty, I will not show hostility to them."

"And what will you do if the UN is indeed like the Americans that have brought us to our knees?"

"That cannot be. It must answer to the international community and the well-being of mankind as a whole. If they are so frail that the

corrupt faction within the US has a grip on their decisions, then mankind might as well be doomed to become the US's slaves. At which point their intentions of enlarging their influence over the globe would become apparent, and we would be foolish to simply ignore such a threat to our sovereignty. If such a case were to happen, I would first empower the military to be able to strike back at the slavers and drive them off our soil. I'm sure that the rest of the Eastern Nations would do the same, and I do not think Europe would simply allow the US to do as they please with their lands and people."

"Hmm… Becoming the first rebels against the tyrannical Americans? At that point, we would be left with very little choice indeed. Then, allow me to ask you my final question. You surely have noticed the increased hostility of the media towards the Royal Guard as of late. I am sure you agree it is due to the Americans' influence, trying to create a schism in our hearts. How would you counter this?"

"Tis a simple matter. While we most not reply to the provocations, we must take action to show the people we are worth their trust. With all due respect sir, I believe it to be imperative to allow commoners into the Royal Guard as well."

"Commoners? Hidekatsu, are you being serious?" His shock is apparent, but I must not falter.

"Yes, Your Majesty. Since we are on your private chambers, allow me to be honest with you. The shinobi that was assigned to me by my late Father was never one from a warrior clan. I believe all of our fellows deserve the same respect. It is not only a way to truly reward them equally. I believe that would greatly boost our sense of unity and appease part of the critics we always receive."

I take a short pause, clear my throat and continue.

"In the past, granting civilian families a title of nobility caused us much problems, but if instead of that they could earn it after many generations of servitude in both the Royal Guard and in a key part of

our economy or industry, I firmly think it would greatly improve the sentiment that the people have towards us, and it would allow for those with a desire to serve to come to us, instead of us having to look for them. In these times, what we need the most is to strengthen our bonds with the people, to once again have a common goal regardless of our differences. And I am willing to do everything in my power to make this future a reality, no matter what the Americans do to hinder my ambitions. I will dedicate every drop of blood in me to this cause, whether you choose me as the next Shogun or not. My life shall be dedicated to this land until my very last breath, I assure you of that Your Majesty."

I take one deep breath and exhale slowly. I spoke with honesty, regardless of the consequences. I have no regrets, for I will continue towards my goals even if I am not the next Shogun.

"Hidekatsu Saionji."

"Yes, Your Majesty?" I look up in attention. For Him to have used my full name… What will it be?

"… I hereby appoint you as the next Shogun of the Empire of Japan."

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*May 2nd, 1986. Around 6 PM.*

*(Training Grounds. Nanao Base.)*

**[Kageyuki]**

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"And to no one's surprise, Tiger Squadron wins today." The operators laughed in my view as the last enemy was shot down.

"Well, that will be all for today. Return to the hangar." The Major said as he gave us a nod, his usual stern expression remaining unfazed at our results.

"Roger!" All of us reply and their faces disappear from my sight, and after a brief pause we take off towards the base.

"But damn it, Shirogane. You stole the show again. Leave something for us too, you bastard!" The Captain said with a grin on his face.

"Yeah man, it's always the same with you. How many did he beat today? Four?"

"Five, actually. I stole one of the Captain's kills when he ran out of ammo." I say jokingly to them.

"You dastard, next time it won't go like this!" The Captain says continuing the joke.

All twelve of us keep joking around until we reach the hangar. I gotta say, I'm getting better than I thought I would ever be. Honestly it's all thanks to the Captain's support, otherwise a simple guy like me wouldn't have gotten past basic.

We're briefed on the results and our numbers once all of us got together. After the necessary decorum is said we're free to go changed and hit the PX at last.

"But really, who would have said you would turn out to be such a trooper. Remember when he couldn't even finish running on our first days during training?" The Cpt. just can't contain himself, can he?

"I really thought about dropping from the Surface Pilot Training Program back then, if not for your help I would have abandoned it to be an MP to be honest."

"Heh, as if I'd let such a hardworking bastard be demoted like that. Isn't it like Saionji-sama always says? We gotta stick together, folk like us. It's rare to find a group of honest, hardworking guys like you all. Even if we're at the backrow, we gotta do our part to be up to par with what's expected of us."

All of us give a nod right before we enter the PX. While I don't disagree with what the Captain said, I do find myself wavering from time to time. Thanks to Saionji-sama's clear anti-American stance many things have changed in these last years. The price of imported goods is skyrocketing, the price of home appliances is also rising quite a lot, and not to mention the costs of good medical care or housing. I already had a house on my sight, in Yokohama. I had almost enough saved to take a credit to buy it, but then the American real state agencies decided to raise their prices, saying they were too good for the Japanese standard, in a mockery to Saionji-sama's decision to give aid to the national real state sector, aiming to have more houses built with our traditional design instead of the American's.

I really wanted to drop out of the Training Program. I would rather be home with Miho and Takeru, if I were an MP I could get more off days, but being a pilot only leaves me with the weekend off every two weeks. But I need the money, Miho is sick and I can't force her to work when she has to take care of Takeru too. Considering I've heard that even the IJA is thinking of conscripting women I cannot leave the army, or Miho will be the one getting dragged into this shithole. And if I don't start making more money, we will have to keep living in the slums, and her health may take a turn for the worse. If only I could take her to a decent hospital regularly…

If I could at least get us an apartment in a nice part of the city here to move from Nakanoto… But I'm barely a 2nd Lt. for now, and even with my best efforts I do not see a promotion in the horizon. Really, how much of a dick can these guys be? I've been breaking their expectations time and again, and all I get is a pat on the back. Sons of a bitch… I would have dropped out now that I finished my obligatory service years, but no work could match this pay. Between Miho's treatment and our savings to be able to someday move out, adding taking proper care of Takeru…

It doesn't help that we're in the middle of a restructuring. Now that the creation of the MDF was announced, we still don't know under

whose wing we'll fall, and the worst of them is that I may end up getting sent to another base. And from what I've heard on the news, there's some tension brewing with the UN as of late for some reason. Something about them requesting to have a base under their command, and Saionji-sama refusing to do so for some weird reason. It was all over the news on the UN's channel, how distrustful the Empire had become as of late for some reason.

After finishing dinner and chatting with the guys for awhile, I go to sleep early. Waking up just a bit before five, I get in my fatigues and go report my leave. After getting the OK from the office, I leave the base and go towards the train station, and take a ride back home.

The town is still as it always was, desolated and run down. With how much the prices have been going up, I can't even rent an apartment in Nanao. Sigh…

Well, no getting depressed! Miho doesn't deserve to see me all gloomy. I reach our house and enter. It's early morning and I could hear someone on the kitchen.

"Miho? Are you there?" I see her slender figure preparing breakfast dressed in an olive green dress with her chestnut hair tied up in a hairbun once I go near the kitchen.

"Oh, Kage! Welcome home!" I approach her and plant a kiss on her forehead. Despite her wide smile, she does sound a bit weaker than last time.

"How are you feeling? Did the medicine make you feel better?"

"Y-Yes, I'm alright. So, how is everything on the base?" She smiles wryly at me, scratching the back of her head.

"Oh, you just won't believe it. Major General Ayamine ordered all the squads to do two runs every day and me and the boys have been dominating the mock battles since the start of the new regime, but

we haven't got a single raise or promotion yet." I wrap my hands around her, resting my chin on her shoulder.

"That sounds rough. Are you eating well? You're not getting hurt, right?" I'm the one who should be worried here, with how worn down you look.

"I'm fine, don't worry. So, how's Takeru being doing?"

"As usual, he's full of energy. He reminds me of a certain someone when he doesn't want to practice his writing." She smirks at me playfully.

"It's not my fault he took after you in that regard."

"Oho? What do we mean by that?" She quickly moves one hand to my butt and gives me hard pinch.

"Ouch! Sorry, I was just kidding!"

"Fuhuhu, I know you were, silly." She grasp my chin with her hand and we share a kiss, sucking on each other's tongue.

"… Dad?" Always happens… The little shape of my son, wearing a white shirt and blue shorts, sleepily made his way to us. His hair that reached to his shoulders is made a mess, he should get it cut soon.

"How have you been doing, Takeru? Come here, give Dad a hug!" I lift him from the ground, giving him a tight hug. "So, how have you been?"

"Good, Mom brought me some new books to read me." He says with his usual smile.

"That's nice, and have you been practicing your writing? How many hiraganas can you write?"

"… Not many." He pouts and looks away. I was the same when I was little according to my Dad, it's so funny to see him trying to hide it.

"Come on, you two. The food's ready."

We enjoy a breakfast in family, and after changing into my casual clothes I read one of the new books to Takeru. After he goes to watch some show on the small TV, I start helping Miho with some of the daily chores. The house isn't so big, considering the taxes aren't so high in this area it might not have been a bad idea to remain here but…

"Miho, are you sure you don't prefer to go live at Nanao?"

"Kage, I can't leave Mom alone. Even if she's being stubborn in not wanting to come to live with us, I can't just go somewhere else and leave her all alone here." Miho returns another annoyed glare at me.

"Look, I'm just worried about you. We could give you better treatment if you could go every week at one of the hospitals in Nanao. Since I would be closer during my off days, I could stay taking care of Takeru, or I could go with you if we can find someone to look after him for a little while."

"I know that, really. But…" Her voice trails off, her gaze digs itself into the ground.

We continue talking, as I tell her of what I can of my daily life on the base and she tells me of how she and Takeru have been doing these weeks. The little one seems to be full of energy thankfully. But as we finished and went with Takeru to just lay together relaxing, I couldn't help to let my mind wander to the worries that plague my heart.

My parents didn't approve of our marriage and disowned me for it, they couldn't stand me marrying someone 'poorer' than me. I decided to live with her here, but literally two months after that the laws got changed and I got conscripted into the IJA. Considering I'm making more money now I don't see it as something bad, but Miho needs me here. But if we don't move to somewhere else… If only I hadn't doubted, I would have bought that house in Hiiragi. Now with all the inflated prices I can't get us a decent house.

We are lucky the Shogun is looking out for us commoners, trying to make housing conditions better with all of these new incentives. I honestly can't understand how people don't get it. Saionji-sama is doing his best to fix this hell of a mess the Americans are doing and everybody is shitting on him and the Regent Houses. The leaders are all presenting a lot of projects from what I've heard on the news, and everyone is repeating the same speech of the media. I mean, I know we have to cooperate with them and all, but the Americans really piss me off. The few I've met during some mock battles are the biggest jerks I've ever met.

Sigh… I know we shouldn't spend our savings, but at this rate…

We spent the day simply resting, reading books and playing with Takeru. When was it that he stopped talking silly? When was it that he got so big? What wouldn't I give to be able to see him grow by his side. I really don't see us getting a raise on the IJA or the MDF or however we're called now. If only I was better at something…

*Ding!*

"Oh, who could it be? Kage, I'm preparing dinner, could you answer the door?"

"Sure. Takeru, you wait here." He tugs at me when I leave him on the chair.

"You're leaving?" Don't look at me with those eyes, it's cheating.

"No, of course not. I'm just going to see who's visiting." He slowly lets go, and as I go to the door he follows behind me.

*Ding!*

Oh, for fucks sake! It hasn't been that long to ring a second time! It better not be the Captain again because I'm gonna…

"Hello? Who is it?" Opening the door, a familiar face greets me with a smile. Dressed in a pale gray dress of the Royal Guard, with his orange hair combed backwards, my old friend waved at me.

"Hey, Kageyuki! Long time no see. Hopefully I came at a good time?" Giving me a small bow, Koetsu Kurosawa greeted me.

"Koetsu, the hell are you doing here in your Guard uniform?!"

"Hey, that's the first thing you say?"

"Look, you can't just come visit in… You even brought your limo?!" The driver gave me a nod as our gazes met. Sigh… Koetsu, what the hell are you thinking? Poor Kobayashi-san, having to drive you here.

"Hahaha, what were you expecting? I can't just take a train now, can I? I was relieved of my duties for the day and I decided to pay you a visit, since I remembered you told me you would be free today. Can I come in?" He shows me a box by his side and a suitcase. What did he bring now? Always marching to your own drum.

"Of course, we don't really have much to offer though." I scratch my head, dropping my gaze to the ground.

"Hey, don't be so down. I did brought some souvenirs for you all. Hmm? Oh, is that Takeru?" Takeru was peeking from behind me, looking at him curiously.

"Takeru, why don't you introduce yourself?" I pet his head slowly, moving him from behind me. He looks at Koetsu and gives him a small nod.

"I'm Takeru. Who are you?"

"Pfft! Hahaha, he really is your son." Sigh… Much to Miho's disappointment he also took after me in how he speaks. "I'm Koetsu,

an old friend of your Dad. Nice to meet you, Takeru." He grabs his tiny hand and shakes it slowly.

"Well, come in. Not everybody likes the Royal Guard here." His gaze turns serious as he looks around, and we spot a few onlookers who scatter as they realized we noticed their presence.

"Yes, let's go inside. Kobayashi, I'll call you when I'm ready to depart. You may leave." Kobayashi-san gives a nod, I smile and wave at him. And with a smile he speeds away.

We enter the house, with Takeru asking Koetsu many questions about who he was. But seriously, why did he have to come in his dress? Maybe he isn't used to be near people that are hostile to the Guard but he should be aware of the current situation.

"Miho, we have a visit."

"Visit? Who is… Oh, Kurosawa-san! Good evening."

"Good evening, Miho-san. Please, I think I told you to just use my name. So, here. I brought us some nice food to enjoy today." He brings one of the boxes he was carrying, showing us a nice assortment of sushi.

"Koetsu, you really didn't have to…"

"Come on, don't look like that. It's been ages since we got together, why can't we enjoy something nice every once in a while? And don't worry about how much it cost, it's on me." Sigh…

"If you say so, I'll take you up on the offer."

It's been so long since we could talk with each other. Ever since the new military law was passed, we have had less and less time to meet. With me on the IJA and he on the Royal Guard our schedules have not matched up for a long time.

We enjoy a calm evening, sharing stories and just laughing as we ate. Strangely, Takeru ate all the natto rolls. When Miho tried to find one, he was already eating the last one. I should remember to never underestimate Takeru's appetite, the boy is a true omnivorous.

"Takeru, when did you ate all the natto ones?" Miho looked at him worriedly.

"But they were tasty." My hearts melts as he looks at us with an apologetic expression. Just look at those tiny, shiny eyes of his, how could anyone get angry at him?

"Don't worry, Takeru. It's good to eat what you like, but you should eat something different from time to time." I stroke his hair and he giggles a bit.

"Hahaha, the little one seems to be healthy thankfully." Koetsu looked at Takeru as he grabbed yet another roll of sushi and kept eating.

Thank the Holy Emperor that he's so simple in that regard. No matter what Miho cooks, he always eats everything according to her. And anyways, her cooking is awesome so it's totally understandable. No one could refuse this homemade heaven.

"He never complains about food, but I can't believe he ate all the natto rolls by himself." Miho sighs as Takeru looks at her, munching sushi.

We watched some of the kids shows as we finished eating, and then Miho took Takeru to his room giving us a wink. Thanks for being always so considerate, dear.

"You could have called to tell me you were coming, you know?" Koetsu laughs as he opens a bottle of sake.

"Well, I wanted to surprise you. And there is another reason for that, actually." He got serious now, I wonder what he meant.

"Do the Guard not allow you to meet with members of the IJA?"

"Oh no, not that. It's a more… delicate matter. Say Kageyuki, you're not happy with your current position, right?" He looks at me in the eye as he pours each of us a drink.

"Of course not. With how much everything is rising in price, I can't find a decent house for us, and when I do the owner starts to put logs in the way, and suddenly they say the price might change due to 'market values' flowing up recently. It's the same in all areas of Nanao. Those damn American agencies that bought most of the land lots are abusing the loopholes in the law again."

"I thought that was the case. And how's Miho-san's health?"

"Just as it looks like. We can't take her to the hospitals in Nanao as often as I'd like, so she's receiving treatment in the local one. But well, you know how it is with the priorities in the chain of supplies." He nods as he sighs, and then drinks a bit.

"So everything's still the same. So, about why I came here without calling you." He straightens his posture, looking at me square in the eye again. "Kageyuki, would you like to join the Royal Guard?"

…

Wait, what did I just hear?

"Koetsu, did I heard that right?" He nods.

"Yes, I'm offering you an induction into the Royal Guard to my squadron." He takes out some papers from the small suitcase he brought with him. "You see, the people I work for in Osaka are in need of some more talented surface pilots for their test squads. Since we're in need of trustworthy people that are also skilled we have been searching to fill the spots, but of course it isn't an easy task. Inducting a civilian isn't out of the question but it's also not something that happens often. You, however, are a very capable

pilot from the reports I've read, I asked your base's CO and he complimented you a lot. I believe I could manage to convince my superior to get your approval. I know this isn't something that you can answer easily, but I'd like you to think about it."

"… You do know that would mean being away from my family for a very long time, right? Royal Guards only get a break once every two months, and I would have to go with you to Osaka, right? I don't… I don't know if I could leave Miho alone like this." I drink from my small cup. This is a nice offer, and I know how much is at risk here. Koetsu is putting his honor and reputation on the line for me, and I have no words to thank him for this gesture. But…

"I know that. But you must know that our pay is much more better than what you're receiving on the IJA right now. And while you won't get promoted so easily, I assure you your skills won't go unrewarded. The Royal Guard values loyal people like you, I know you won't disappoint. Actually, I honestly believe you're already better than some of my squad's men, and that's with a base Gekishin."

"Don't think that I'm not thankful, Koetsu. It's just… I have barely been able to see Takeru grow, Miho needs me close to her. If I can only see her once every two months…"

"It's your choice. I owe you much for helping me when we were in school and everybody got against me for being a noble, I know you're someone I can trust. You haven't changed despite all that's happened to you, and I really respect your stance with your parents and your struggle to take proper care of your loved ones. I believe you would make a fine Royal Guard, and with the money you earn you could buy yourself a house. I'm willing to move some strings and call some people to make sure you can get a nice place, even if you don't accept my offer."

"Koetsu… I don't know what to say, really." He smiles as he leans back.

"You're one of the few people I can call friend, and I want my friends to be safe. It is truly infuriating seeing what the Americans are doing to our nation, to see how most people blame us for our current hardships despite the economic boom we're experiencing in some areas. And while the pieces have fallen in order for me to give you this chance, I just wanted to come and tell you that if you ever need anything, I'm here for you Kageyuki. So, I'll leave the papers with you here. I'll go talk with you at the base in a week." He pours more sake into his cup and drinks.

"And exactly what would I have to do if I join? I know you can't tell me much about your standing but, well, any hints or anything?"

"I think I did told you my family serves the Koubuin, right?" I nod, he did told me that when we were in high school. "Well, the new head is being more firm regarding our involvement on the war. What we're trying to form is a test squad to develop new maneuvers and tactics using the JIVES and some new data. The top performing surface pilots will join Koubuin-sama's personal squad to eventually be loaned to the UN when they ask for our cooperation." Wait… Why would we send a personal squad of a Regent House?

"Koetsu, if it's classified you don't have to tell me but, why are we not sending a Company or a Battalion from the IJA to the UN? Why send someone from the Regent Houses?" He sighs again as he looks at the ceiling.

"Because it seems like the UN is fooling with us." I didn't miss the tint of anger in his answer.

"What happened?"

"To us? Nothing, yet. But the horrible support they gave to Europe during last year was a mockery. If it weren't for the South American troops that were going to the UK in a show of friendship all the civilians would have gotten eaten by the BETA. It's funny that America did more for Europe than the UN."

"What?! America did… I didn't see anything on the news about this, save for the numbers of people that managed to escape before the BETA destroyed Lyon."

"Well, the Americans left a large Battalion of Thunderbolts to deal with the BETA. But most of them died and the BETA kept advancing, and the South American army barely made it in time to aid the Spanish forces that tried to go to Lyon in answer to France's rescue signal. It happened in a flash, as far as I was told. France was split in two after that, the northern forces got isolated and all contact was lost just a few days after that. It was a massacre. And the UN's French branch was more busy playing politic when they should have given a fast response to the threat." He closes his eyes as he slowly shakes his head.

"… Are you sure it's fine to tell me all of this?"

"Don't worry, this is all from an unofficial source." He gives me a small smile.

"Unofficial? Were you there when it happened?"

"Well, what can I say? Why do you think I was given those papers to induct you? We had some meetings with the British, and we shared some insight to aid each other's projects. Of course, we didn't let the UN on this since it seems to be slowly turning into a puppet of America. All the bravado they showed during the war of the '82 seems to have vanished, probably due to pressure and lobbying from the US. You know, the UN did ruin their plans to get more oil. Well, I simply helped someone very important and they now owe me quite some favors. I expect my uniform to change to the white one in a few months, and it's the reason I now have a squadron under me."

"Wow, just… Wow. You're really doing the hard work. Who would have said that laid back guy could be so serious?" I smirk at him causing him to laugh.

"Like you're one to talk. You were always fooling around, and now look at you. Despite everything, you're a model soldier and a responsible parent and husband at that. But it is a crazy thing, how quick time flies."

We pour some more sake into our cups and drink, reminiscing the times we shared at school before all this madness started. Neither of us ever thought we would be piloting these giant robots to fight aliens. Everything seemed so shining, like the future was opening up, full of possibilities for progress. And then, out of nowhere, a plague struck and we're now forced to endure all these things. I can't even start to think on how hard it's truly for him, having to go negotiate with foreigners and come back to be badmouthed by the general population.

Miho eventually managed to make Takeru fall asleep, and us three enjoyed some time chatting before Koetsu left. I couldn't bring myself to tell her of this offer in front of him, after all I don't really know if I should accept.

After we cleaned everything up, I went to Takeru's room. Opening the door slowly, I enter his small resting place. I silently get close to him and knee by his bedside. Ruffling his hair slowly, I remain like that for a long while. Unaware of what's happening to the world, he sleeps peacefully. I feel my hands tremble a bit as I tighten my lips, taking one long breath.

What kind of future do I want for him? I don't see any promotion on the IJA coming, and if things keep going like they have… And if we don't treat Miho properly… And yet, for that I would have to leave them alone. Even if I would send them most of my pay, do I want to be an absent parent? What would Miho do if she ever had a problem?

…

I rest my head by his side, how much has he grown without me noticing. What do I want to give him? I want to see him learn to write,

to see him enter school, to give him what I was given. And yet… to let him have that life…

I bring him closer to me, resting my chin on his head, silently staying with him like that. Taking deep breaths to stop the shaking of my hands, my eyes start to show hints of water. What should I do?

…

… As time passed, the moonlight reached us. Opening my eyes and cleaning the tears, I move slowly towards the window. The sky is as beautiful as ever tonight. Seeing it like this… brought back a memory of Grandpa I had forgotten for some time.

*"Grandpa, why is Father angry?"*

*"You see Kageyuki, people don't always get along. It's normal for anyone to fight from time to time." He said, petting me.*

*"But I don't like it."*

*"Well, what can you do to help?"*

*"I don't know. They don't want to talk."*

*"Come here, Kageyuki. Look at the sky."*

*"The sky?" I looked up, seeing a dark sky without the moon and filled with stars.*

*"See? It's really dark today, isn't it?"*

*"Yes."*

*"But you can still see the stars, right?"*

*"Yes, they're always shining up there."*

*"So, you have to be like them." He said, petting my head again.*

*"Like the stars?" He lifted me and put me on his lap, and then pointed again to the sky.*

*"Yes. You see, even in the darkest night the stars will be up there looking out for you. And like them, you have to try to give your light to others when they're lost or feeling bad. If someone you like is in pain, it's up to you to try to make them smile. Even if it isn't much, give them a hug, be by their side, look for a flower they might like. Sometimes you'll have to be like the stars, giving them your light from far away. But so long as you try to help and listen to them, you will be able to make them smile once more. Just know that people fighting and putting some space between them isn't something bad."*

…

Making them smile, huh?

That's right, I want them to be happy above everything else. So… even if I have to be far away… My light will reach him, no matter how far apart we are. I won't leave him alone even if I'm not by his side. What wouldn't I give to see him grown, to see hear you learn and turn into a man.

When will we able to live in peace together? Am I an idiot for keeping a frail hope within, to someday be able to just be with you two living a simple, mundane life? For how much longer will I have to be apart from you?

And yet I'm not the only one. The Captain also has a little kid, and yet he can't go see his family until his next leave. Even Major General Ayamine must stay on base despite the fact that he also has a daughter around Takeru's age.

No one deserves this shit. So… If I help the Royal Guard, I would be helping my comrades too, right? Going to the place where I could have the biggest impact, right?

Going to him one last time, sowing his innocent face deep into my heart, I plant a kiss on his head and remain again close to him, our foreheads touching.

No matter where I am, the fact that I'll be living for them won't change. Everyday I'll stand up for you two, and no matter what happens I'll come back. Regardless of the distance between us, I'll make sure my light reaches you and Miho. And this fight isn't just for me, it's for all the people that helped me get here. So that someday we can all stop pretending to not care, so that someday we can cry our sorrow with our loved ones. And for all of those far away, who are stopping the BETA from reaching here, because it's thanks to them that I can spend this time with Takeru.

Even if the darkness comes to the Empire, I will brave through it. I'll endure any hardship, if it's to give you two the life you deserve. Because if your future is crying, it's up to me to make it smile.

I pat his head kindly and leave his side, going to our room. I stop right behind the door, thinking of how to approach her. No matter how I phrase it, I'm leaving her alone. My hands shake a little as I went for the doorknob, I inhale twice with my nose. A thin veil of sweat forming on my palms, I lick my dry lips as I open the door slowly, so slowly. Come on, Kageyuki. Have some balls for the first time in your life.

"Took you long enough. I thought you were going to end up sleeping with Takeru." Miho says with a playful smile, patting the side of the bed. As all the times I come home, she's wearing a thin dark night gown, making it hard to not look at either her bosom or the hints of her waist. Focus, dammit!

"It was a tempting offer to be honest." I chuckle as I sit by her side and she wasted no time in wrapping her hands on my chest, slowly rubbing them up and down. Resting her chin on my shoulder, she whispered into my ear.

"You're so mean, Kage. Today I feel fine for once, you can only be with me four days a month, and you choose Takeru over me?" I could feel the pout from her tone as I felt her breath on my neck.

"Are you jealous of your own son?" I look at her over my shoulder, she gives me a smile and whispers again.

"I just want to have you all for me tonight." She then starts to nibble my ear softly.

As tempting as this is… We need to talk.

"Miho, we can't do this right now." I grab her hands and face her, she looks at me rather puzzled.

"W-What is it? Don't worry, I'm on the pill silly."

"Oh yes, that. W-Wait, that isn't what I want to talk about. Please listen closely and let me finish, yes?" She nods, now looking concerned.

I tell her of Koetsu's offer, of what it would mean for us, of what I want for them.

"And that's the whole thing. I will give it some more thought but, well, I think this is a chance I shouldn't miss." Miho had her gaze looking at the sheets, her shoulders trembling a bit.

"So you won't be home for… almost two months?" Her voice creaked as she got closer, resting her palms on my chest.

"Yes, that's how it would be if I accept." I place my hand on the back of her head and pull her closer, embracing her.

"And you're accepting, right?" She looks up at me, her eyes turning moist.

"I haven't really… Well, I do want to give you two something better than this."

"Kage, don't lie. I know that once you set your mind to something there's no dissuading you. Takeru is just like you in that too, both of you are so stubborn."

"S-Sorry, I just… I know I'm leaving you alone, but… I want to finally get us a nice house of our own, and I want you to go to a good doctor, just in case." She grimaces as she closes her eyes.

"And what about me?"

"I mean…"

"What am I supposed to do alone for such a long time? I can endure this, I know you'll be near, that if anything happened you're just a train away. But going to Osaka? Coming home once every two months? W-What do I do if anything happens to me or Takeru?" She hugs her sides, gazing at me with frail eyes.

"Miho, I'll be sending you most of my pay and you'll be able to move to a nice part of the city. I know you don't want to leave your mother behind, but I don't want to see your health getting worse again." I place my hands on her shoulders "Please, I don't want to be away from you either, but to give you two a good future, I think I… should accept this offer."

"… I'm not changing your mind, am I?"

"I… well, I mean…"

Miho brought both of her hands to my face and with a smile, she lunged forward. Assaulting my relaxed mouth, her tongue danced on its insides, dragging mine along. Moving her tongue from one cheek to the other, so slowly, time and again dancing along mine. It took a serious effort to put my hands on her shoulders and pull her away, forming a string of saliva connecting our mouths.

"M-Miho, please stop. I'm trying to-"

"It's fine. You can join the Guard." She gave me peck this time, then kept gazing at me with a kind look.

"R-Really? You're not… angry?"

"I could never get angry at you for this. You're always thinking on our well-being, and I can see how much this pains you. I want to plead you to not go, I want to keep you here, but I know that… this is probably for the better." The shaking of her voice was slowly becoming more subtle, yet her eyes betrayed that effort, dropping a single tear down her cheeks. "Just… Just promise me one thing?"

"What is it?"

"Promise me you'll stay in that training squad. Promise me you won't join the squad of the Regent House." She bore her eyes into me, as she trembled again for a brief moment.

"That's beyond me, but I don't think they'll allow a commoner into the private squad of the head of a Regent House." She looks down for a while, but then returns my gaze again.

"Then promise me something else."

"What do you want?"

"That you will come back. That you won't have to stay there permanently like some of the rumors say. I've heard that some Royal Guards have to be always serving, without getting breaks." She clawed at my shirt, I pat her head to reassure her.

"I am coming back. Even if it's only once a month, I will come back to you. I swear it."

"… Then, you can go. But… You will come back, right?" It's so painful to hear her shaking voice, and those quivering eyes tear me apart from within.

"Yes, don't worry. If I choose to join, I'll return for sure. You're my family now Miho, I'm not abandoning you." She relaxes and slowly begins to caress my neck again.

"That's not… what worries me."

"What do you mean?" She exhales the pressure off her chest, and looks at me shaking a bit, fear clouding her eyes.

"I'm thinking about Takeru. If anything happened to me, he'll have to stay alone."

"Miho, don't say that. Nothing will-" She raises a finger and closes my lips.

"Kage, promise me you'll always take care of him. Please."

"Sigh… You really are an idiot." I hug her tightly. "I will always be here, for both of you. So don't go saying sad things like that again, got it?"

"Yes. But…" She kisses me again, first softly, then a bit more fiercely, and she ends up on top of me biting my lips. "Well, I'll believe you. So for tonight… Let me have you some more."

"You really like to be on top."

"Only because someone is too dense to not notice how badly I want him. And who knows when you'll be coming back this time. So Kage, you better get ready to give me all of your love tonight, and every night you come back to me. Every. Single. Drop of it."

"As if that's any different than what we usually do." I kiss her again, and slowly we let our hands wander again, resetting the ritual.

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*August 28th, 02:12 PM.*

*(Train Station. Nakanoto.)*

I sigh yet again just before the train's doors open. With heavy steps I leave it behind and start walking towards home. I receive some weird glares, and a guy shouted an insult at me but he ran away when I sent him a glare. I have no time to deal with motherfuckers like you, coward.

I'm still not used to this dress. It's so unpractical to wear, it has so many different pieces, and it feels so, so bad to use it in the summer. How do they remain so calm all the time on this thing?! Do they have ice on their veins?

I finally reach my home. I have good news, bad news, and awful news to give them. I gulp and put the key on. It feels so heavy right now, I can barely twist it around. Hearing the sound of the lock surrendering to the key I exhale loudly and open the door. Calm those hands dammit.

I set foot into my home. The sound of footsteps approaching soon greets my ears.

"Kage, is that you?" Miho's face peeks behind a turn, her eyes widening as she seems me.

"Hey, I'm back. How have you been?" I slowly approach her, she recovers from the initial shock and gives me a hug as we kiss.

"Welcome home. But what are you doing on your suit?"

"We aren't allowed to leave it around. We must keep it with us at all times, even if we are not going to be wearing it. I did leave the katana back in Osaka, though. So, how have you been?" She breaks eye contact as she digs her face on my chest.

"Fine. Everything's fine."

"Miho, what happened?" Her frail tone gave her away, the way she seems to be trying to make herself smaller being a most obvious

hint. She looks worse than last time too.

"… Mom died."

Oh… Oh, shit.

"Did she suffer?"

"No, she died in her sleep. Peacefully as anyone would rather die. It… doesn't make this any better." I wipe the single runaway tear that escaped her eyes, and give her a soft kiss on her forehead. I wrap my arms around her and we remain still for a while.

"So, feeling better?"

"Y-Yes. Thanks, Kage. I've missed you. A lot." She gives me a peck as we break our embrace.

"So, how has Takeru being doing?"

"Oh, fine. I couldn't bring myself to tell him what it means to die, so I told him Mom went on a voyage somewhere. He was really sad for weeks but he's alright now."

"Where is he?"

"Watching Chop-kun's show. Why?" I look at her straight in the eye, letting out a sigh.

"I have some things to tell you."

"Serious things?"

"Yes. Let's go to our room."

Miho nods and goes tell Takeru to be quiet, but the little one dashed to my side as he saw me with his eyes turned into stars. I gave him a tight hug and a kiss on his cheek.

"How have you been, Takeru?"

"Good. But Dad, what is this thing?" He says as he tugs at my black dress.

"This is Dad's new uniform."

"Ooh… Why is it black?"

"It's just my color, that's all." Explaining to him all the reasoning behind this would take too long, and he wouldn't get it either.

"But it looks like the ones the samurai rangers that appear on TV use. Are you a samurai, Dad?"

"Oh, yes. Something like that." His eyes sparkle up, filling with stars.

"So are you one of the black samurai? Do you help the blue ones?"

Sometimes I don't know if he's just very good at guessing or if he can actually see through me. Kids can be really sharp when you least expect them to.

"I guess? I'm not the only one though. There's many people were I work with the same uniform helping the blue samurais." He's looking so surprised I couldn't help to let out a laugh.

"Dad, you're great!"

"Hahaha, maybe I am." I give him a pat on the head, ruffling his hair tenderly. "Takeru, Mom and Dad have to talk for awhile. Can you stay here watching TV?"

"Yes." He nods and after I give him another hug he goes back to the TV.

"He missed you a lot, you know?" Miho says as she leans on me.

"I know. I missed you two a lot, too."

We slowly make our way to our room as we tell each other of our daily lives.

"So you're on Kurosawa-san's squad?"

"Yes, thankfully. It's been hard, adapting to the protocol."

"I don't see you speaking formally to anyone, Kage." She smirks at me, bringing one finger to her lips.

"I don't. I can't speak in Keigo to save my life. People just have gotten used to me being 'the rude commoner' of the squad." I drop my shoulders a bit as Miho giggles.

"Well, we're here." She opens the door and we go inside. She sits on the bed, I remain standing. "So, what is this about?" Her gaze and tone turned serious as she looked up at me.

"First, the good news. I made a deal with a landlord and got a nice apartment for you in Yao. The rent and the taxes are a bit expensive, but we'll be closer like this."

"Are you sure? What about saving for our house? And how did you get the owner to negotiate?" Thank Koetsu for that, he can be very 'persuasive' when he wants to.

"We just sat down and had an honest talk as adults." She gives me a side glance, not buying my excuse. "Well, that's that. So, then we go into the second thing." I couldn't keep the bitterness out of my voice, and that made Miho's face get filled by anxiety.

"What is it?"

"I… got the approval to stay in Osaka."

"Really?! But that's good, Kage! It means you're now officially part of the Guard!" Her smiling flowers suddenly vanished as she saw my face.

"It isn't so simple. You see… Apparently, some important people took notice of my piloting skills. And they decided to place me under the Osaka Guards. Which means a bigger paycheck, but it also means that… I'll only be able to take a week off in the entire year." Miho gasped at my words, color draining from her face.

"Only a week? But…"

"And the last bad news is that… The Osaka Guards is another name for… Koubuin-sama's personal squad. Since the Koubuin family is tasked with protecting the Osaka Castle, their Main House is close to it. Well, they're the ones who rule over Osaka and some neighboring prefectures for the Emperor. So… that means I'm now part of the House's vassals."

"… So, if the Koubuins have to go to war… you'll be going with them?"

"… Yes, I will have to march to the frontlines with them." Miho's eyes finally stop resisting and tears cascade down her face.

I get close and hug her, she grabs my arms tightly as her sobs pierce my heart. All the teachings of poise leave my mind as I cry alongside her. Sorry, to do this to you now of all times.

"… B-But the war is still far away, right? You won't have to fight now." My eyes meet with her, and as much as I'd like to lie to her, the gash on my chest flares up, telling me to be honest with her.

"Miho, we may get sent to aid the UN in the future." Her face froze, as if trying to understand the meaning of my word.

"Why?" After a moment of silence she asked. "Why are you being sent to the UN?! Why can't they do something about this themselves?! What are the Soviets or the Chinese doing?!"

"Miho, please calm down!" Her frown grows bigger as she grits her teeth.

"Why?! Where are the Americans or the Europeans?! Why do we have to go fight their war?!" She got closer and clawed at my dress, staining it with her endless tears. I embrace her tightly, pointlessly trying to stop her and my tears.

"It's our war too, Miho. If we don't team up all together, the aliens will tear us apart. And I do not want to let them get here. I won't let them take you or Takeru away from me."

"And what if they take you away from us?!" She looked at me, her eyes shaking as she wailed. I took a deep breath and returned her gaze.

"Miho… If that's what awaits me, I'm willing to die for you."

"Kage… Don't say that…"

"I'm willing to step into the battlefield, to put my life on the line if it's for you and Takeru. It doesn't matter what comes after me, I won't let them lay a finger on you." Her knees buckled and I had to hold her to prevent her from falling.

"Don't say that… Why do we commoners have to go fight?! We're just normal people. What can you do there?! Why do you have to go?!"

"Because… I ended up being a good pilot. Sure, when I started I was a failure, but… thanks to all the people that had patience with me, that lent me their shoulders, I became who I am now. So, while my fight is mainly for you and Takeru, I'm also willing to fight for those who have helped me. For Koetsu, for all of the guys of the Tiger squad, for my Instructors and my teachers. I thought I was useless back in the day, but this is what I can do best. For my friends, and for you two."

"But… What am I gonna do if you die? I can't… If I'm alone, I can't…" I lift her chin upwards and give her a peck.

"Miho, you're stronger than you think. And I'm not leaving you alone, because I'll always be with you. I'll leave behind as much as I can, so that you can keep Takeru safe." She wraps her arms around my neck, embracing me tightly.

We stand there, hugging each other as we silently weep. My heart is thrown into a tempestuous sea, typhoons roaring within. Every sob, every tear, eat at me. Please don't cry, Miho. I can remain strong because you always gave me the strength to move on, you're the lighthouse that guides my travels, that bright light which I always use to remind me that all of this isn't pointless.

Your brown eyes, teary eyes force me to bite my lips. Even if I'm chasing a gentle lie, even if in the end the BETA come here and devour us all, I just want… Please let me fight without regrets. I can barely breath as my lungs shrink, a tight chain wrapped on my stomach.

"Miho, please. It's not like I'm marching to war tomorrow."

"But you might have to."

"You know I want nothing more than to stay with you. I rather spend my days here with you and Takeru, teaching him all I know, working and coming home to you, to share kisses and jokes as before. But…"

She again rests her head on my chest as I stroke her hair.

The door creaks, startling us both. Peeking from the opening, Takeru's tiny eyes stared into the room.

"Dad? Mom?" He entered the room slowly, looking at us with worry. Miho broke the embrace and turned to him.

"Takeru, we're talking about something important. Go back to the living room."

"B-But…" I don't like this. I don't like the look on his face.

Miho is right. I might have to leave before I can see them again. This might be… and all the following visits… might be the last time we see each other. I go towards him, crouching by his side.

"Takeru, Dad has something really important to tell you." His eyes locked onto me, forcing me to hold back the tears.

"Why are you crying? Did you get hurt?" He rubs my cheeks with his tiny hand. That soft, gentle hand paired with his worried look is picking at my resolve. Get your shit together, Kageyuki. You have to be strong for him.

"You see Takeru. Dad is going to have to go with… the other samurai rangers to fight some bad guys in the future." His eyes open wide, clearly surprised.

"Really? Are you gonna win?"

"Y-Yeah, that's the idea. That's why I have this new uniform. But since we need to train a lot, I won't be coming home as often as before. But I want you to know this, I'm going to be always thinking about you." I grab him and embrace him tightly. "Dad is going to go beat those bad guys someday, and then we will be able to live together. So… please be a good boy and help your Mom, yes?"

"Yes, I'll be good. But when are you coming back?" The arrow pierces my heart, I ruffle his hair and give him a kiss on the forehead.

"I don't know. We might have to go help the other rangers any day, but you don't worry, okay? Dad is going to do his best and I'll be back here before you know it."

"You promise?"

"Yes, I promise. Because I have the strongest power in the whole squad, you know?" He again opens his eyes wide.

"What is it? What power?"

"Love, Takeru. Love is the strongest power in the whole world. That's why I always give you so many hugs. You give me strength, Takeru." I hug him again and this time he returns the hug.

"So hugs give power?"

"Yes, when you give them to the people you like. That's why… give your Mom lots of hugs for me when I'm gone, yes?"

"Yes, I'll give her a lot of hugs!" He smiles as I lift him, holding him close to me.

"So, now that we told you that, how about we go read a book or two?"

"Yes!" His honest, innocent gaze heals my tired heart, thirsty for this affection. Even if it's just for today, let's forget about the war. There's so much I want to ask you, so much I want to tell you.

"So, go find a book you like and wait for me by the table, okay?" I lower him to the ground and with a nod he dashes off towards his room.

…

"Please don't cry anymore, Miho." I wipe the tears off her face as she calms down.

"What do you want me to do? It looked like you were saying your goodbyes to him."

"You did say that I might be sent to war any day, so… I want to give him as much as I can while I'm still here. Tomorrow… might be too late, after all." She grasps my chin and gives me kiss, first kindly and

then more passionate. I'm not the only one thirsty for affection, I'm sure she must be juggling a thousand emotions now.

"Please be careful, Kage. Please." I hug her again, softly this time.

"I will. Don't worry, I have no intentions of leaving you two behind."

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*November 14th, 1988. Around Noon.*

*(Osaka. Near the residential district.)*

**[Mami Kobayashi]**

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"Sir, if I may, why are we going to this apartment? What business do you have with the commoners here?" I ask Kurosawa-sama as I look out the window while we're being driven to an apartment complex.

Kurosawa-sama had a hand of his placed under his chin, dressed in the white attire of the Guard. He looked at me and smiled, crossing one leg over the other.

"We're going to lend a hand to a fellow."

"What do you mean, sir? Is there an outpost of the Guard nearby?"

"No, a friend of mine lives here."

"And… why are we meeting up with this person?"

"You see, he's going to move to a new house, one that was on his sights since a long time ago, but his wife has not been well as of late. So, we're going to help him with the packing and other matters."

"Kurosawa-sama, forgive my rudeness, but you cannot use the resources of the Royal Guard for personal matters such as these. I might be your retainer, but I will have to notify Koubuin-sama of this." I cannot believe him… I knew Father was too lenient with him.

Kurosawa-sama, how can you make such an obvious miss? Your honor will be stained for this careless action.

"Oh, you might want to see this before you do."

He produces a paper from a suitcase he had and passes it to me. I read the words carefully, my grip loosening the more I tried to comprehend the meaning of the phrases that formed before me.

"… Are you telling me Koubuin-sama allowed us to come to this person's aid?"

"Yes, that is the case. I know you're still fresh out of the Training Program, but Takahisa-sama does tend to do these… seemingly irrational acts once his mind has been made up. So, I expect no more complaining from you." He smiles at me, taking the page from my hands softly.

"Forgive my insolence, Kurosawa-sama."

"Now, don't be so extreme. I am relying on you to keep me updated if anything does require my attention today, Kobayashi. By the way, did we receive word on the MDF's testings?"

"Yes, sir. The Northern Squadron was pleased with the F-15's performance even during this harsh weather. Once its elbow joints were strengthened it could very easily manipulate the Type-74 Blade, even when it started snowing strongly."

"I see, it seems we will end up adopting the Eagle in the end. Haha, Eiji is going to be mad at this turn of events." He looks out the window, laughing quietly.

"Eiji? Who do you speak of, sir?"

"Nothing you should worry about, Kobayashi. Now, let me ask you a question. Are you good with children?" He combed his dark orange hair backwards, resting his chin against his softly coiled hand.

"… I believe you already had a fiancee, sir?"

"No, I didn't meant it in that way. I meant dealing with grown children." His brows lower, but his smiles doesn't grow smaller.

"Oh… I don't really know. Being the younger of the family, I never had to deal with little kids. Why do you ask, sir?"

"Well, our fellow has one very active boy in his home. I will be asking you to help me deal with him until we finish with the packing."

Am I to nanny a peasant? I am afraid I do not know much of their customs or what they find entertaining. I don't watch much TV myself and I've been living in our bunks for the last three years during my training to be admitted into the Royal Guard.

It's thanks to all this sacrifice I have proved myself worthy of wearing this gray dress, prove that I am indeed worthy of my birthright. But I fear I might not be able to fulfill the orders Kurosawa-sama is tasking of me, I know next to nothing about how to properly deal with children. Sigh… Why must you always give me so difficult tasks to complete, sir? I rather be your test pilot or spend the afternoon behind a PC, but taking care of a kid…

"So, am I to look after this boy? Might I ask who are we helping?" I move my hair behind my ear, awaiting his answer.

"1st Lt. Shirogane of the Osaka Guards."

"Huh?! Shirogane… That Shirogane? That coarse member of Koubuin-sama's squad?"

"Kobayashi… You might feel however you like within, but I would be very grateful if you minded your language when talking about my friend." Kurosawa-sama's eyes folded inwards brushing away his calmness, replaced by the bluntness of anger. I quickly bow, it is rare to see him be this openly upset.

"My apologies, sir. But… I have not heard good things of Shirogane."

"Well, many hold a grudge against him. A commoner that's better than trained nobles… A peasant that's praised by Takahisa-sama more than our royal fellows… Surely you can see why such ugly rumors spread?"

"So, is he not as barbaric as described?" I have heard many unpleasant stories about the man.

That he never uses honorifics, that he doesn't follow our formations on the field, that he hasn't learned calligraphy despite the efforts to teach him, that he tends to oversleep and miss our morning meetings… And those are only the ones that come to mind as of now.

"He is rather rude, by our standards. But he has a golden heart under that rough exterior."

I don't know… Maybe he's only near Kurosawa-sama to take advantage of him. Using his skill within a cockpit, he worms his way into the Guard… The man might even be a spy of the IJA. I must remain vigilant, it might not have been half a year since I officially joined the ranks of the Royal Guard but I cannot allow someone like that man to suck our blood out.

I caress my hair as I let out some air. My face reflected in the window, my hair cut in its usual bowl shape with its light brown color, my violet eyes mired by tiredness thanks to our recent endeavors, and yet he asks of me to look after a child.

As I let my mind wander, I look at the scenery before me. The buildings outside my window reflect a state of life that one would not expect. Stores filled with technological appliances, others offering the most varied clothing options, large bookstores with both foreign texts and mangas… Yet, there is a part of our society that cannot even allow themselves one of such luxuries, that painstakingly trudges on just to make ends meet by the end of the month.

The Empire progresses, but for whose sake? What good is all this opulence for if our people are still suffering from the same problems of decades past? If the common folk fail to see we are the cause behind our current peace, instead some taking the side of the Americans… What a regretful state of affairs, such ignorance to have made nest in the people's hearts. And the same for this arrangement… What reason is behind bestowing Shirogane such special treatment? What has he done to deserve such deference?

The rest of the ride passed in a few minutes. Kurosawa-sama, me, and others of his personal servants dressed in their casual clothing arrived at the place. A large green building with many individual apartments, nothing out of the ordinary.

We have to take the elevator, and, after getting out and confirming the area is safe, I allow Kurosawa-sama to come into the hallway.

"Kobayashi, I am thankful for your protection, but I believe this might be a bit too much."

"Nonsense. As your retainer, it is my duty to ensure your safety." He sighs, shaking his head as he smiles.

I walk by his side, looking up at him and at what is around us as he goes towards the door with the name we're here for. After ringing the bell and waiting a moment, a man in a red and white sweater opens the door. He's almost as tall as Kurosawa-sama, with dark brown hair down cut short. Unlike Kurosawa-sama, however, his build was more resembling a soldier, muscular and lean. His gaze was a relaxed one, however. Or is he faking being amicable, perchance?

"Hey Kageyuki! How's everything?"

"Koetsu, I told you it was fine. How are you going to justify this to your superiors?" Hmm… It seems he's a reasonable person, he doesn't seem to be lying going by his tone.

"Don't worry, I got the approval of Koubuin-sama right here." He smiles as he hands this Shirogane the paper he showed me before.

"You have got to be kidding me…" The man's brows twitched, then he let out another sigh. He's honestly surprised, but there's also tiredness in his reaction for some reason. "I told you all this was my own problem. You don't have to do this. And… why did you bring this many people?"

"What are you talking about? Fellows support each other in times of need, right? Now, let's go in. There is much to do, I'm sure." Kurosawa-sama says, making this Shirogane sigh.

"Well, I can't just send you away after you all came here. Please, come in." The man bows to us, not as deeply as I would have liked, and we all enter his home.

It's a rather nice house, if I say so myself. A small A/C, a larger than usual TV, a good kitchen… Oh, and what of these books? Most of them… seem to be good choices. Hmm… At the least they have a good taste for literature.

Many boxes were on the floor. It seems the man was putting his belongings away by himself until moments ago.

"Sorry for the mess, I'm not even half done yet." Shirogane said, scratching his head and burying his gaze into the floor.

"Well, you leave this to us. You have to go to the hospital, don't you?" Kurosawa-sama said, the severity he usually displays when I give him sour reports present in his voice. What's this about a hospital?

"Hey, I can't just leave this to you all."

"Miho-san is waiting. Go, that's an order as a Guard."

"This is a personal matter, Koetsu. You know that she might-"

"Don't worry." Kurosawa-sama patted Shirogane's shoulder. "She'll be alright. You go on, I'd do her well to see you before the last treatment."

… What is this about? The man is just going to leave? We, public servants of the Empire, made nothing but the maids of a commoner? And, this must be about his wife. Whatever happened to her? They're supposed to be moving but she's in the hospital. With the salary he earns, his wife is in such delicate state?

"Sorry, Koetsu."

"Don't apologize, Kageyuki. Come on, go get ready. Everybody, start packing everything with utmost care. By the way, where is Takeru?"

"Oh, he's in his room. He says he doesn't want to start packing without Miho." Shirogane sighs, cracks spawning within some of his words.

"Alright, leave him to me. Kobayashi, follow me. Kageyuki, please don't worry and hurry to the hospital." Kurosawa-sama folded his arms and returned a bright smile at him, the man nodded after taking a deep breath.

"Yeah, I'll do that." Shirogane then looks my way, giving me a short nod. "Oh, and thanks a lot for helping out Kobayashi-san. Is Benmaru-san doing well?"

"Huh? You know Father?"

"Yes, I met him way back in high school." He smiles, his words filled with a breeze of sunshine. So he was fond of Father?

"Kageyuki and me go way back, so he met your father all the time when he went to pick me up."

"I see… Well, Father is doing fine. He's in good health, thankfully."

"That's good to hear. Tell him I said hi the next time you see him. Well, please be patient with Takeru. I know he might be… too rude for you." His face grew tense and tainted, as if an ink stain permeated his paling white complexion.

"Don't worry, Kobayashi might not look like it but she is very patient. Isn't that right?" Kurosawa-sama, I am thankful you think so of me. However, dealing with children is not part of the job description I signed up for.

"I will do my best in looking after him." I give the man a small, court bow.

Shirogane thanks me and goes into his room. The rest were already putting his silverware and books inside the boxes, some with clear, understandable displeasure rising in their faces.

"Well, let's see how he's doing." I follow Kurosawa-sama as he goes to a door to our left. Opening it, a small shape was laying atop a bed with blue and white sheets within the darkened room. "Takeru, how are you?"

"… Uncle Koetsu?" The boy rose from the bed as Kurosawa-sama went to open the blinds.

"Hey, how are you?" He got closer to the boy and ruffled his short hair. "So you finally cut your hair, huh?"

"I liked it more when it was long." The boy looks down, tightly gripping his sheets.

"Hahaha… Well, why are you not packing? Miho-san will scold you when she comes back."

"… Is she coming back?" The little one's voice became as small as his stature, his gaze crumbling in slow motion.

"Of course. Kageyuki just went to pick her up. Come on, let's start sorting everything."

"But… But if we pack before she comes back, nothing will be here…"

"Takeru, we're not leaving without her. But you have to be a good boy for her, yes? Let's make sure everything is ready when she comes back, then you'll have dinner without worrying about any more boxes." Kurosawa-sama hugs the boy, sitting by his side on the bed. "Don't worry, she hasn't left anywhere. So, let's help out with packing your stuff. What do you say?"

I didn't… I didn't knew Kurosawa-sama could be this soft with children. I am so used to him goofing around, but also being clearly serious when the need arises.

"… Okay. But Mom is coming back, right?"

"Of course. So, what do we start with? Let's put your toys in the boxes first. How do you want to order them?"

I see… By engaging him in this way instead of ordering him to do it, the boy might be more willing to pack his belongings.

"Kobayashi, come and help us out."

"Yes, sir. However, please let me handle this task. As your retainer, I cannot allow you to lower yourself to this meager work."

"Please don't be like this. I came here to help, not to stand looking at the rest. What would that say of me, forcing my men to work but standing comfortably to a side?"

"I understand your wishes, but as your subordinate I must voice my objection." He sighs, rubbing his forehead. Father was truly too lenient with you.

"… Uncle, who is she?" Guh… I had noticed his manner of speech, but to address an adult in such a way? I know he is but a child,

however, he should have been taught better.

"She's Mami Kobayashi, she's like my assistant." I'm more than that, sir. I didn't train three years to be merely an assistant to you.

The boy got down from his bed and came up to me, fidgeting a bit.

"Hello Mami-san. I'm Takeru." He held out his hand to me and I took it, shaking it softly.

"Hello, Takeru-kun. I would rather you address me as Kobayashi-san, if you could."

"But your name is Mami…" He squints his brows, puffing his cheeks a bit.

"Takeru likes to address people by their names, Kobayashi. Please, he's a kid. Let him call you in the way he likes." Kurosawa-sama, we're the Royal Guard! We can't let someone address us so informally, why can't he use my surname?

"… Sorry." The boy pulled his hand away from mine after he seemed to notice my displeasure, looking down in silence afterwards. He looks most positively saddened now. Kurosawa-sama narrowed his eyes at me as he rested his chin on a hand, sending chills down my back.

"Ah… No, it is alright. So Takeru-kun, you may address me by my name if you like." He looked up again, his eyes imitating the dawn sky. "So, what might we help you with?"

Then, we both helped the boy pack his toys and books, despite my complains at Kurosawa-sama. Despite his rude attitude, Takeru-kun seems to be a friendly fellow with the quirks of a healthy kid. He is thankful despite his manners, so I can see he was raised well. And… I do wonder why he refers to us as 'samurai rangers'. Though, it is refreshing to hear a kid praising the Guard in these times, regardless of his manners.

"Mami-san, what kind of books do you read?" Takeru-kun asked as he ordered some stick figures before putting them in a box just opened.

"Me? I prefer long novels myself."

"How long?"

"Oh, the longer the better. I have very little free time myself, so I welcome an immersive world to dive into. It is fascinating to see all the details of the work when all the connections are explained." I say, caressing my hair behind my ear.

"But isn't that really, really long?" He said as he placed a book in the box. "Isn't it boring to read through all the conversations?"

"Has someone read a book of this kind to you before, Takeru-kun?"

"Uncle tried to read me one about pirates once, but it was boring." He puffs his cheeks a bit. "It was all about the past, and what the guys were doing before getting to this island full of monkeys… It was more funny when it was about the puzzles of the island." He says, making Kurosawa-sama chuckle.

Yes, he also recommended those novels to me. And while I generally welcome long stories, that one was a surprise indeed despite being about pirates and the simplicity of its wording.

"I found it good myself, truth be told. I know you might not like books of such magnitude, but I suggest you to review your opinion of it. I believe you'd be well served in asking your parents to read it with you whenever you can."

"You speak weird sometimes, Mami-san." He said, giving me a pout. I forgot he was five… He might not have understood me.

"Haha, Kobayashi remember that Takeru is just barely six."

"I know, and that is why I am suggesting him to not dismiss the book just because of its length." If his father is a Royal Guard, this boy has the chance of also gaining an induction if his academic performance is good enough. He is rude, but I can see why Kurosawa-sama holds them in high esteem. The boy has good intentions, he just lacks manners.

"But it was a lot… Who would read a book with so much stuff about the past? Everybody is going to end up bored." He said in a pouty voice, his cheeks puffing with the slowness of a moving cloud.

"Sigh… Well, it might be boring to you, but I enjoyed it much. When you enjoy something, you wish to share it to others, don't you?"

"… I don't have anyone to read with. The boys at school don't really like me, and Mom has been sick for a while." His gaze wanders to the floor, his shoulders wandering downwards like leaves in autumn.

Oh… I see… People here do value our traditions dearly. Someone so rude would most assuredly be looked at harshly by the rest. And those who dislike the Guard might also hold a grudge towards him due to his father's standing.

"Don't worry, Takeru." Kurosawa-sama patted his head. "You'll find good friends in your new school."

"Really?"

"Yes, you will. If I may, why don't you give that book a try again? Then you could talk about it with Kobayashi."

"Huh? Sir, we don't have time for-"

"I'm sure we can get a small break every now and then, can't we Kobayashi?" Guh… Why do you look at me so, my liege? Why go so far for this kid? I can see he at least has been raised with good values since he's thankful and polite, in his own childish way. But why go so far for him?

"Well, it is true that we could… However, our free time shouldn't…" Takeru-kun looked down again, Kurosawa-sama sighed deeply.

"You can exchange letters, recommending each other books you like. That won't be too much for you, right Kobayashi?"

"If it's an order…"

"No, it isn't. It's a suggestion."

"Uncle, why are you angry?"

"I am not, Takeru. I think Kobayashi needs someone to talk to, just like you do. So, why not have you share letters and books?"

I need someone to talk to? What is this about? I fold my arms, narrowing my brows as I inhale through my nose slowly. Pondering the idea as I lick the inner side of my lips, the currents of thought bring no answer to the shore of my mind. Why do I require of someone to speak to? No, why must that someone be this kid?

"Takeru, we'll go get some snacks. You wait for us here, okay?" Kurosawa-sama pets the boy again, Takeru-kun nods and Kurosawa-sama signals me to follow him out of the room. He then stands up upright as we walk into the kitchen, stopping near the fridge. Directing his gaze straight into mine, once more making me conscious of the difference in stature between us, he pours himself some water into a glass. "So Kobayashi… You seem to have something on your mind."

"Why are you recommending me to engage in such endeavors, Kurosawa-sama?"

"I said so just now. You need someone to talk to." He slowly drinks from the glass, closing his eyes.

"Why must that someone be Takeru-kun? What good could come out of this?"

"… Haven't you noticed what you lack, 2nd Lt. Kobayashi?" He folded his arms, addressing me as if we were in his personal office. "What is your most blunt side?"

"My most blunt side? I believe I have showed him enough patience today, sir. And I have engaged him in these talks about his toys repeatedly as we sorted his belongings. What do you speak of?" He sighs, shaking his head like the cup of a tree when a sudden gust comes its way.

"You are being held back by your prejudices, Kobayashi. You're looking down on peasants all the time. Do you think I haven't noticed it?"

"We nobles know more than them, so obviously I think they shouldn't speak up as often or as rudely as they do. Especially some of those 'experienced' NCOs from the IJA."

Kurosawa-sama shakes his head yet again, taking a few steps towards me. His gaze grows as harsh as winter in Hokkaido.

"Kobayashi, I cannot have a retainer that looks down on others based on their social status." His voice lost his ever present shine and friendliness, in it the fangs of my commander showed itself as clear as dawn. "I firmly believe you'd do well in trying to see their point of view. That's why I want you to do this book exchange. You'll be able to see what Takeru sees, what a commoner's child sees, how he sees our nation from his young, inexperienced eyes. You are going to be working for the future he will live, so you need to start thinking on how to address the people that you and I will affect with our work." He takes a breath, his eyes narrowing further as he sees my growing frown as doubt litters my shores. "If you value status so much, if you think we shouldn't try to understand what our common fellows see and think… Should I transfer you to the Horn Battalion?" A sting piked my heart of hearts, my pride and soul.

"K-Kurosawa-sama! I… I would never go as far as those serving House Ikaruga are willing to go. I am loyal to you, and to House

Koubuin. I… I merely… Why did I spend these three years without learning of such an approach, if it is so vital to our endeavors?"

"Because General Makabe doesn't believe it to be important." He says, squinting his eyes. "However, I believe you'd do well in trying to bridge your misconceptions of our peasant population. Just because you received higher education at an earlier age, just because you had the honor of being born into the nobility, that doesn't make you any better than them. Remember that some of our common folk are more devoted and loyal to the Shogun than some of our noble fellows."

"Yes… I can see your point, sir. However…"

"… Kobayashi, did I ever tell you I was scorned back in school?"

"Eh? Scorned?" His gaze sails away from mine, a grim smile appears on his face.

"Yes, that was the case. Since I was a noble many were the people that didn't think too highly of me. Back then I also was a low ranking Tozama, so I wasn't allowed to attend to the private schools of the nobility. So, care to guess who stood up in between them and me when they wished to harm me?"

"… I suppose that Shirogane did, sir?"

"Yes, that's the case." He leaves the glass on the table, going to grab some cookies. "Kageyuki got truly upset at how people were unfair with me. He was the only one for those three long years I could call friend in that place. Even if after that life's roads took us to different places, I will never forget what he did for me. He taught me that commoners aren't all 'rude, uneducated sheep' that need to be guided by us, the high nobles. The praise we are given, the status we are born into, the honor and reverence we receive daily… If we don't manage it well, it may become a poison that will twist our vision into performing acts of madness. I am sure you have read about… the dark side of our history, and what this exacerbated, misguided

pride made our grandfathers do." I nod, holding the urge to bite my lips. "You'd do well in learning to keep your ego in check, Kobayashi."

"… I see. However, why do you want me to share letters with this boy?" I can see the importance of your words. But that is something I can work on by your side in our daily endeavors under yours and our fellows' gaze.

"I am sure you saw it when you spoke with him. Takeru doesn't have many friends. He… doesn't have that someone his father was for me." Grabbing two packs of cookies, he looks towards me again with half closed eyes. "If you can learn to see what our common fellows see, and if Takeru can gain someone to talk with, even if only once in a while, I see no reason to not do this. That's why this isn't an order but a suggestion."

If this is so important for Kurosawa-sama, it would do me well to be receptive of his advice. If he believes I am lacking, then I could try this out. It is merely a letter a month, it isn't such a demanding endeavor. And, who knows? Maybe some of Takeru-kun's recommendations might be interesting to read.

"Then, I will try. I can't promise you he'll like my suggestions, but I'll do what I can."

"I see. Thanks, Kobayashi. Come on, let's go back."

We return to the room. Takeru-kun had filled the box with his toys, and was now sorting some books.

"Here, some cookies Takeru." Kurosawa-sama hands him one pack, and they pick some from it after it was opened. "By the way, Kobayashi agreed to share book suggestions with you."

"Eh? Really?" He then got closer to me, again looking as happy as a puppy.

"Yes, if you'd like to we could share letters."

"Yay! Thanks, Mami-san!" He then leaped at me, giving me a hug.

"Um… Takeru-kun, my uniform will get-"

"Haha, Takeru does like to give hugs." Kurosawa-sama, lend me a hand here please! How will I explain my appearance when we return to your office?

"So, what books do you want to talk about?" Takeru-kun said, smiling as brightly as the sun now.

"Well, I suggest you to read that novel we were talking about before."

"Huh? But it's so long…"

As we finished tidying up his room, he told me what he thought of the book, and of all the books we saved as we ordered the boxes. He seems to be more focused on what happens rather than in the teachings of the books, but he also can sometimes say interesting things, especially regarding how he justifies the hero's actions.

"But there's one book I really, reaaaally don't like." He said, moving his tiny hands up and down.

"Which one?"

"This one here." He goes to pick up one of the books we had yet to put in a box, and he then comes to my side, holding it with both hands to me.

"… Mayal's Gift?" A picture book? I fail to see what can be conveyed in such simple manner. What could this be about?

"It's really, really sad. It's so cruel…" He squints his eyes at the book, plucking his lips.

"We're almost done here. I'll put his clothes in the last boxes, why don't you read it together?" Kurosawa-sama said, smiling at the kid.

"Sir, as your retainer, I-"

"Then it's an order." He turned his back to us, going to the small wardrobe of the child. Sigh…

"However, what would it say about me if-"

"Kobayashi, did I just heard you don't want any more soy sauce in your lunch?" He said, smiling like a hyena at me.

"N-No, sir! I said no such thing."

"Then, you know what to do."

"Mami-san, what is this about soy sauce?" Takeru-kun pulled my sleeve, tilting his head to a side.

"Nothing you should worry about. So, you think this book is sad Takeru-kun?" I sat down on his bed and he came to my side.

"Yes, it's really sad. I don't like how it ends."

"Well… Let's see what it's about."

…

Mayal, a small fairy, lives alone in a forest without any memories of the past… meets a girl from a nearby village…

They become friends and begin to play together, the girl bringing more friends to play… But, eventually, the kids grow up and stop visit Mayal, who, as a fairy, matured slower than humans.

They were too old to play with the child fairy anymore. But the first girl didn't forget about the fairy and she kept visiting her.

And then, Mayal remembered something. And so, the fairy gave her first friend one last present. One final…

"Goodbye."

That's because Mayal was the fairy of farewells, fated to teach the little kids that visit her the meaning of those words. She had forgotten her role, and so, people lived on without knowing how to say goodbye.

And so, the girl moved on. Knowing that word, it is said she became the kindest person in the land. And Mayal is left once more alone in the forest, knowing that no matter how many good friends she makes, she will always have to be left behind in order to teach them… the meaning of farewells.

…

"See? It's so cruel… The fairy ends up alone, everybody just left her in the forest." Takeru-kun pouts at the last page of the book.

"I… don't think so."

"Why?"

"I think this book actually showcases a very important teaching. One must not be afraid of change."

"Afraid of change? What change? They just left the fairy alone in the forest! They're so cruel!" Takeru-kun puffed his cheeks, squinting his eyes.

"How can I explain it to you?" How would he understand? This is actually a very nice way of explaining this matter to little kids… But he missed the message entirely. "Let's see… You're going to be leaving this house soon, won't you?"

"Yes, but there's no fairy here."

"That's not the point… Moving forward is what you always do. That kid that still went to visit Mayal didn't want to move on. She had to grow up, but she didn't want to."

"Why can't she be an adult and visit the fairy?"

"It's a way of saying that once you grow up, there are things and places you won't be able to return to. And, even if you do, it won't be the same. Let's say that in ten years you tried to go to the same swings you go now, you wouldn't fit on them anymore, right?"

"Yeah…"

"Does that mean you abandoned the swings?"

"… But that's not the same. The swings aren't people." Sigh…

"But you won't be able to play with them anymore, right?"

"Yeah, that's true."

"In that way, the kids couldn't play with Mayal anymore once they grew up. That's why they had to leave, to say goodbye." I say, fixing my hair.

"But that's sad."

"It may be so, but people have to grow. One day, you will have to move on from your house, from your school. When that day comes, you will have to leave your own Mayal behind."

"… I don't get it." I pat his head softly, smiling at him.

"That's okay. When you're older, try reading this book again and see what you think of it then."

It is a very nice piece of advice. Someday, he will have to move on. All of us have to.

Leaving our innocence behind, marching on without looking back. It isn't rare for someone to wish that happiness to last forevermore. Even if one's childhood could be extended to eternity, even if that wish could be somehow fulfilled, it would only be a matter of time before reality wakes you up from it. Holding tightly onto it, refusing to let go… it will only chain you down.

No one can mature without losing something. And trying to avoid that loss or to reclaim it, trying to extend that eternity you so desperately wish to never end, will never lead you to a good fate.

All of us had a Mayal that we had to abandon, some earlier than others. As a member of the nobility, my family's warmth was quickly replaced by the fierce competition to see whether we were worthy of inheriting the rank of Tozama. Takeru-kun will also someday have to leave his own Mayal behind and accept that part of his life has come to an end. This shimmering time called childhood is precious because it is short, we can't live forever in it. And the same can be said for all stages of life. One day, he will have to leave his parents behind to live his own life, whether it is by choice or by fate.

"I still think it's cruel. Why can't they send a letter to the fairy?" He's still pouting, resting his chin on both of his palms.

"Sometimes you'll be far away from your own Mayal. It's not like they didn't like her, but they had to leave."

"… That's sad for the fairy."

I guess… if you're the one getting left behind, it is sad. In a way, it is the same for our own endeavors. Those left behind by the world… must live their days in agony.

"But they could say goodbye. So, the fairy won't be so lonely now that she remembers. What would you do if there was a fairy here, Takeru-kun?"

"I wouldn't leave, it would be cruel."

"But what if your parents leave without you?"

"I'd convince them to not leave." He retorts quickly, puffing his cheeks.

"And if you can't? What if your family has to move elsewhere due to your father's job with the other samurai rangers?"

"Then… Then I'll send letters!"

"She's a fairy, Takeru-kun. The mailman won't give her letters, and you might have to go somewhere far, far away where letters wouldn't reach here."

"… That's cruel. You're so cruel, Mami-san." I hadn't noticed it, but he was slightly shaking.

"Sorry… But all of us had to go through something like this. Sometimes, all you can do is say goodbye."

He remained sulking in silence, I suppose that he's too young to understand. Once he grows, I'm sure he'll realize how dear the teaching of this book is.

We finished packing what was left of his belongings, the rest were also finished with their tasks. Being already late into the afternoon, Kurosawa-sama dismissed them, asking me to remain behind with him.

He ordered some food and we ate as we waited for his parents to come back, watching kids shows. Before the clock hit the 1800 hours mark, the sound of the door spurred the little one's feet to action.

"Mom! Welcome back." He threw himself towards the woman.

A petite, slim, and… very pale looking woman, with her hair in the same color as Takeru-kun's done in a hairbun. She looks very weak… Frail as paper, might I say.

"Hello, Takeru. Have you been good?"

"Yes. How are you? Does it still hurts?" The boy rubbed his mother's stomach softly in circles, she giggled at his worry.

"I'm fine, don't worry. Oh, Kurosawa-san… Thank you for your help." The woman bowed to us, Kurosawa-sama smiled wryly at her.

"Miho-san, I told you Koetsu was fine. So, I ordered some food already. Serve yourself something."

"You didn't have to, Koetsu." Shirogane says, scratching his head and lowering his gaze.

"Don't give me that. Kobayashi, help me warm the food."

"Yes, sir."

We spent some more time with them. The woman couldn't eat much due to her medical prescriptions, but she still showed much thankfulness towards us. They're truly warm people, despite the males' manners. Shirogane apologized to me time and again about this turn of events, with Kurosawa-sama telling him to stop repeatedly. He doesn't seem to be as bad as the rumors portrayed him to be, and he also doesn't seem to be trying to take advantage of Kurosawa-sama.

After chatting for a moment, Kurosawa-sama decided it was time for us to leave and contacted our men to rendezvous where we had left our rides.

"Well, I hope life in Hiiragi can be better for you two. And, if you need anything, my phone is always open." He said with a small smile towards the Shirogane. Kurosawa-sama, I am the one who has to deal with phone calls. Don't make this harder please.

"No, we can't keep bothering you for everything…" The woman said, smiling weakly. "Kobayashi-san, thanks again for your help and for

keeping Takeru company."

"No, it was nothing."

"Mami-san…" The little one came up to me, offering me his hand. "I'll try to find a book you might like."

"Yes, I will too." I shake his hand slowly. "Well then, goodbye Takeru-kun."

"No." He pouted.

"Huh?"

"I don't like goodbyes. So it's see you later, because we'll see each other again. See you later, Mami-san." He shook my hand with more vigor than me, smiling widely.

"I see… Yes, see you later Takeru-kun."

"Yeah!" His smile flourished, a sunrise in his eyes.

"Be a good boy for your mother, Takeru." Kurosawa-sama crouched down and hugged the boy tightly. "I'll see if we can make some time to go visit you for your birthday. If I can't, I'll send you something nice instead. So be a good boy and don't fight with any other kids, okay?"

"… But the others are all bad."

"Haha… Just do your best, yes?"

"Yes… See you later, Uncle Koetsu." The boy strengthened his hug, they remained like that for a short while, and then Kurosawa-sama patted his head and stood up.

"Well, I gotta go. Kageyuki, we'll see each other eventually in the halls. Tell Takahisa-sama to stop sending trouble my way, if you can." He laughs, folding his arms while Shirogane sighs.

"I doubt it'd be possible to convince him of anything once he gets an idea in his head." How can he speak so casually of Koubuin-sama? There is not an ounce of tension in Shirogane's posture. "Thanks a lot, Koetsu. I'll repay all these favors someday, I swear."

"There's no need. Now then, stay safe. And you know, if you need me… All you gotta do is call." He shares a handshake with Shirogane, I bow towards them, and then we leave towards our ride.

After checking the elevator, and later the lower hallway, was safe, we made it to the street, and we walked to our limo as I kept watch around us. Our men were all rested after getting their free time, so we took no time to depart.

"So, do you still think the same about Kageyuki, Kobayashi?" Kurosawa-sama asked, looking out the window as the limo started to move.

"No, it seems the rumors were baseless." Even if he is less respectful than I would prefer. A surprise, to be sure. "I do wonder how should I deal with these letters you asked me to write." Takeru-kun is a young child, I will need to mind my wording and prose.

"Hahaha… Well, just do what you can. Remember to make an effort to see his point of view too."

"Kurosawa-sama, if I may… Why are you so insistent on aiding the Shirogane? From their words, it seems you've been helping them much."

"I told you already. Kageyuki helped me greatly when we were younger."

"That cannot be the only reason. I am sure you know what will be said about you if word of this gets out." And not only about your honor. Others might go as far as claim that you have other… interests in play, considering how you're delaying your marriage.

"Well… Can you keep a secret?" He closed his eyes, resting his head on the seat.

"… What kind of secret? If it's something I should report then-"

"It isn't, calm down. It's a personal matter, something that's been on my mind for a long time." He runs a hand over his face, letting the exhaustion he managed to hide seep away. His eyes dropping like trees to an axe, his tone weary like a traveler in the desert.

"Fine, I can promise you I won't speak of it in that case. What is troubling you, Kurosawa-sama?"

"I want to break my engagement."

"Huh?! But… But your fiancee is from a Shinpan House! Your standing would suffer-"

"Rank isn't everything, Kobayashi."

"… Then, why did you accept in the first place?" I don't know what kind of woman your fiancee is, but making such a vow isn't something to take lightly. I don't think he's the type to play with a woman's heart, however…

"I didn't. My father gave her my hand without my consent. For the longest time, I thought that I had no choice but to do what my father told me to, to follow the path that was expected of me… But, thanks to Kageyuki, I can now see the light. I don't want to marry that woman."

"… And what did Shirogane do for you?"

"He just did what he thought was right, and his acts showed me I had another choice available to me. Seeing him sacrifice so much of his own life, all to tend to the ones he loves…"

He looks out the window, his tone growing hoarse, almost regretful.

"His parents disowned him, he got conscripted into the IJA, then joined the Guard, and now Kageyuki spends so much time away for them while he sends them most of his pay so that Miho-san can take care of her health instead of being forced to work. All that sacrifice, all of it is for his family. All for his love. That's why I want to support him, because he taught me it isn't a crime to follow your heart." He inhales deeply, entwining his fingers. "So… I decided to break off my engagement, and then I'll see if the woman I love still thinks me worthy of her affection."

"… I see. I… don't know what to say. My parents are also planning an arranged marriage for me. Being nobles, we should put our own interests to a side in favor of our house's one. However, if you wish to do this so strongly… I doubt your chosen one will reject you."

"Haha… I hope you're right."

"Why were you scared of doing so, if I may ask? I know hostility might brew between your houses, but who are you after Kurosawa-sama?"

"… Someone of common birth. I'm sure you know that I tend to look her way in our office much, since you scold me all the time when I do. I suppose you can see why I'm still shaking in my boots at the consequences."

I shivered at the words. Rejecting a member of the Shinpan, those who serve directly under the Regent Houses and the Shogun as our red guards, for a peasant… I doubt this will be taken well by whoever his fiancee is. It's as if one were to spit directly in their faces after drinking sake, it's tantamount to throwing mud towards the name of their house. To be chosen to marry someone of the Shinpan and discard her for a peasant… Kurosawa-sama's standing will be jeopardized, some might even push to lower his rank as well…. Or to remove him from the Royal Guard altogether.

"Keep it a secret for now. We have more pressing matters to attend after all. By the way, did we receive any reports?" He hunches over,

looking forward.

"Yes, it seems your design of the elbow joints for the Eagle was the most well received overall." I say after looking at my PDA.

"That's good to hear. Sigh… I wonder how much time will take us to finish working on this frame…" He relaxes again, stretching his legs as he folds his arms.

"I understand the need to make our first TSF a machine up to the standards of the 3rd Gen., but are the requirements so steep, sir?"

"Yes, after all we'll have to rely on this frame for a good two decades, if not more." His tone grew slower and slower, weary as a dry leaf. "And we already have trouble brewing, what with Takahisa-sama and the other heads wanting to request a project to make a different TSF for the Royal Guard instead of sharing models with the IJA."

"Is that so? Oh, is that the reason behind our collaboration with the IJA for the Kagerou's joints?

"Indeed. The Royal Guard is evaluating making an enhancement at large of the frame, or the F-16, to base the successor of the Zuikaku on it."

"However, wouldn't it be for the best if we used our domestic frame for it, sir?" He sighs, truly heavily, while I curve a brow at his reaction.

"It would, but the IJA has kept the project under wraps for too long, and it has been delayed many times already. The TSF resulting from the Youkou Project has to be able to fulfill all roles we might need it for, so testing is, and will likely continue, to be hell until a working prototype that satisfies all parties involved is presented. And that's not even delving into the new OS it will need, we can't just expect to use this frame with our current system. It's getting delayed more times than I could count with my hands, so it also needs to be worthy of the time we spent on it. However, because of said setbacks, some

within the high echelons of the Guard are casting doubts towards the results the project could bestow us."

Going by his low tone… I suppose that there are other matters revolving in this choice. Perhaps because of ill blood between the Guard and the private industries making this domestic frame?

"I understand, sir. Let me remind you that there is a meeting scheduled for-"

"Kobayashi, please let me rest until we arrive home." He briefly covered his eyes with a hand, letting a long, heavy sigh out. "So, what did you think of little Takeru?" He recovered his good spirits in a matter of seconds. I suppose there will be another time to discuss this subject.

"He was quirky, but too rude for his own good."

"Yes, that is true sadly. But it was good to see he's still fine despite everything." He smiled softly, curving his eyes with a glow in them reflecting affection I've almost never seen in him.

"… Do you like kids, Kurosawa-sama?"

"Yes, he is truly funny to be around. I know that we're at war and that I might get in a lot of trouble by breaking my engagement, but I am looking forward to being a parent someday. I hope you can learn to deal with children by then, Kobayashi." He grins at me, resting a cheek on his palm.

"Sigh… I will try, sir." And I will not let them end up as rude as Takeru-kun, and I certainly will not be as lenient as my Father was with you.

Though… It wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. Looking after your children… It will be an experience to look forward to, and a valuable lesson for when it is my time to give my house some heirs.

In that way, perhaps this book exchange could help me grow in that regard as well. I do wonder what kind of books he would prefer, however.

"Kurosawa-sama, might I ask if you know of Takeru-kun's literary tastes?"

"Hm? Well, he certainly prefers action mangas, with samurais if possible. Also, folk tales seem to entertain him much."

"I see… Perhaps I should instead recommend him something he hasn't learned yet?"

"That would be a good idea, but do keep in mind he is barely six." He smiles, then returns to looking out the window.

Hmm… Something that could interest him, while also bestowing him a teaching as that picture book did. Perhaps something that could polish his manners? In any case, I shall go to the library when I have some free time. Perhaps I should ask Father for advice, considering he knew Shirogane when he was young.

… How a common child sees the future we're building, huh? The mere act of entertaining a thought for this book is enough to bring forth how little I know of our common fellows. Sigh… I shall try to not disappoint. And, for all I know, Takeru-kun might recommend me an interesting book.

Reading the mails on my PDA to later inform Kurosawa-sama of their contents, the sounds of our ride back home became but a pleasant background noise as time went on.

# Turning Points

## Chapter 35: Turning Points

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*January 9 th . A bit past 8 PM.*

*(Hospital Hallway.)*

**[Kageyuki]**

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I quickly move towards the place Haruna-san mentioned. I didn't even bother getting out of my uniform, I took the fastest train that could get me here. Thankfully, Takahisa-sama allowed me to come here. If he had refused… I was ready to quit the Guard then and there.

"Please remember that she is very weak. Remember to speak softly to her." A nurse that was accompanying me told me.

"I know that well, thank you very much."

Room 147… I softly bite my lower lip as I stand outside of it. I close my eyes, wincing as if in pain. It isn't entirely false, my heart is killing me right now. I never had a gash on me, but this is what it must feel like. After a moment where my hands twitched when going for the doorknob, I inhaled slowly and opened the door.

Miho was laying on a bed, frail, fleeting… As if she were made out of snow, made to melt as soon as winter ended.

"Miho… How are you?" I slowly got closer to her, she looked my way and gave me a pained smile.

"Sorry, Kageyuki… I made you all worry." Miho tried to rise from her position, but I stopped her.

"Don't be stupid. What happened?" I sit by her side, softly clasping her hands. Her cold, soft hands.

"I was just going to start preparing dinner… Then, all of a sudden, my chest started to hurt…" She grimaces as her head again lowers onto the pillow. Her voice resembled a bird chirping away, further and further away. "I tried to scream, but my throat shut close. It hurt to breathe… Everything was spinning… I don't remember anything else. I woke up this morning here, and I didn't know how I got here, or how much time had passed."

"She was very weak so we had to provide her with some imported medicine. She has reacted well to it so far." The nurse tells me.

"I see… Do you feel fine now?"

"… I still feel dizzy. But I'm fine, don't worry." She smiled, trying to lift her spirits a bit.

"What about Takeru?"

"Haruna-san came by earlier, she said she has him staying with her. Please go see him, Kage. Tell him I'll be back in a few days."

"… Yeah, I will."

We talked a bit more, me telling her I was fine and that my life back at Osaka was going well. Visiting hours soon came to an end, so I had to say goodbye shortly after.

As I got out, the doctor that was in charge of Miho told me he wished to discuss something with me, and so we went to his office.

"Please, sit down Shirogane-san." He said, pointing to a chair. "Well, I'm sure you've noticed, but your wife's condition isn't a good one."

"I believe her records should be available, Doctor. When do you think she'd be well enough to go back home?"

His eyelids descended, he gathered some papers and handed them to me. I had gotten used to seeing her medical reports, but I fail to see the difference between this and the other times.

"Doctor, these are her usual numbers. I don't see how this explains anything."

"We told you we used the best medicine we have at our disposal. Her treatment last night was the most that we could do for her. As you know, this hospital has many specialists in heart diseases… However, her condition barely improved."

"… What are you getting at?" I felt a tremor similar to the one of a shaking cockpit in my gut.

"Frankly, I am afraid to tell you that Miho-san's condition won't improve, on the contrary… I fear it will only get worse from here on out." He closed his eyes and spoke in that detached tone doctors take when bad news come pouring.

"Eh? What do you mean? The last doctor that saw her before moving said… They said she would get better! That she would be able to live a normal life!" I hit the desk with the papers he gave me, unable to restrain my voice from resembling a scream.

"Please calm down, Shirogane-san. Read the papers again. Her condition was improving, but… her heart seems to be getting weaker and weaker. If she had started to receive this treatment before, I am sure she would have reached the point where a single pill was all the she would need to live a normal life. But as things stands now, I cannot guarantee that she has the time for the procedures to heal her body."

"… What do you mean? Do we need a more expensive medicine? Will she recover if she's transferred to the Capital's hospital?" He shakes his head, making a knife pierce my throat slowly.

"If she doesn't suffer from any more relapses, she will slowly regain her health. However, in her body's current condition, after so many years of not receiving the proper treatment…" He closed his eyes, his hands tightening and softening in a small rhythm. He exhaled slowly through his nose, and opening his eyes, but not looking at me, he continued. "Please remain calm to what I'm about to tell you. If Miho-san's condition doesn't improve in the next few days… The chances that her heart will stop working are very high, and in her current condition… we might not be able to do anything to save her, since she might not survive another operation."

… Huh?

Miho's heart will… stop? And there's nothing we can do about it now?

I felt my insides being emptied, that feeling when you have a lapse in your memory forming in my head, I couldn't accept what I was told.

Every since we moved her from Yao to Osaka she had been receiving the best treatment we could pay for. Sure, she still didn't improve as much as she could due to how the neighborhood was. She couldn't stop worrying about me, thanks to the political climate of Osaka, and she wasn't welcomed there either, due to her upbringing as a peasant. That's why the doctor recommended us moving away from that environment, for her mental health to truly improve. But this month in Hiiragi she… she said she was feeling better than ever. Why… Why now, of all times? I can't help to tighten my fists so much it hurts, gritting my teeth at the words the doctor spoke. It feels as if the floor had vanished and a TSF was falling on my shoulders.

"But… But… But the specialist in Osaka said she was going to be fine, that all she needed was to take her medicine to help her heart pump blood as it normally should! That if she could find an environment where she felt at ease, everything would be under control."

"Yes, that was the case in her last visit. However, as I told you before, they gave her a medicine made here, in Japan. While in the vast majority of cases it would have been enough, Miho-san began her treatment in adulthood. The signs of her heart problem were not detected until she was pregnant, if the records are correct."

"Yes, that is the case. We both were surprised when we found out." Miho was never very athletic, and I always had to take it easy on her during sex and do most of the heavy stuff back home, but I always thought that was just how she was. That's why I always insisted on moving away and on having someone help her out in the daily chores, but she didn't want to. She wanted us to save all of our money for Takeru's future in case I ever died in the battlefield.

"If she had started treatment at an earlier age, she wouldn't have gotten to this point." The doctor said, looking to the ceiling. "And, had you treated her with this American medicine at least a few years ago, her condition would have improved much faster. However, as it stands now… Her heart is growing weaker and we might not have enough time for the medicine to affect her before it's too late."

"Is the pacemaker she had until now not enough anymore?"

"There is little a pacemaker can do when the heart stops beating completely. She is alive now thanks to it, that's why she managed to arrive here alive after she fainted. However, considering the strain that she was put to endure… Let me remind you that CRT does not cure heart failure, and in her case, I believe she has lasted longer than what any doctor would have expected her to live. I know this is cruel to say… But I believe Miho-san won't make it to February."

You gotta be kidding me… I knew this day would come, we both knew it. But she was getting better, the medicine and the pacemaker had made her so much good…

"We will do all we can to treat her, but please keep in mind what I've told you."

"… I will. Thanks for your honesty, Doctor." I bow to the man and, after taking one breath, exit the office.

All the way back home, I could do nothing more than stare at the ground. My gloves might tear up any second now, since I'm clawing at my hands so strongly. The floor might be crumbling away for all I care, I feel as if I would turn to dust the second anything hits me with some strength.

… I was ready to die. I was ready to march to my death, knowing I had left you two everything I could. I always hoped you would get better, at least to be with Takeru until he was old enough to learn to take care of himself.

… But how am I supposed to live without you? How am I supposed to carry on? What will I tell Takeru? If I die now… He'll be sent to an orphanage. Thanks to being in the Guard now, I was able to learn a few secrets about… our bureaucracy. Not all orphanages are warm places… Many are run by people that have to make sure no kids get adopted, all to ensure the IJA has enough fresh recruits in a few years, all to allow the people with money to save their children from the obligatory conscription.

… How can I keep fighting… if everything I've done until now… is going to crumble down when your heart fades away…

I got out of the taxi I called, my house comes into view.

I inhale through my nose a few times, looking up to the sky. Feeling my chest filled with the cold air, I clean off the tears that wanted to run away. I open my mouth and draw one final, long breath. You gotta be strong, Kageyuki. Now, you can't die. That's all there is to it. Takeru needs you, so get your shit together. You know how hard it is, to live without your parents. So, stop being pathetic… Hic… I just gotta survive if I have to fight. That's all I gotta do.

… Takeru will need me by his side, though. I guess that means… my journey in the Royal Guard has come to an end. Leaving now, when

I established myself as a core member of Takahisa-sama's squad… might be seen as treason.

Who gives a shit? My son comes first. If it wasn't for the stupid arguments with the Americans, Miho would have received the better medicine and…

"No… It's not their fault… Sigh… How the hell am I supposed to take care of Takeru like this?" I exhale, shaking my head as I bring a hand to my forehead.

Come on, you were prepared for something like this since a long time ago. You gotta do what a man's gotta…

No. I have to do what a father has to do. You can cry on the way back to Osaka, but for now… You have to be strong for Takeru.

I went to the Kagami's door with heavy step, each one feeling as if I were stepping in mud, as I was going to slip and fall at the moment my attention dulled for a second. I gulped again before ringing the doorbell.

A short moment was all I spent in wait.

"Kageyuki-san! Did you made it in time?" Haruna-san came out in a rush after seeing it was me.

"Yes… Is Takeru still awake?"

"Yes, please come in."

I enter her house, the difference in temperature making me shiver a little. Soon after entering, the sound of the stairs guided my gaze towards them.

"Dad! Where is Mom?" Takeru rushed to my side, almost falling at the last steps.

I crouched and hugged him, holding him in silence for a moment. Caressing his back, I felt my chest tightening as I held back my tears at the sound of his voice.

Come on, Kageyuki. You can… You have to do it.

"Are you okay, Takeru?" I say, ruffling his hair softly.

"Yes… Where is Mom?"

"Mom is still in the hospital. Don't worry, she's fine now. Will you go visit her tomorrow?"

"Yeah! But… She'll come back home, right?" He looked up at me, his creaky tone driving more knives in my gut.

"Takeru, listen closely to what Dad has to say…" I licked my lips, softly letting some air out. "Mom will have to stay in the hospital for some time again."

"Eh?! But… But she said she wasn't sick anymore!"

"… It seems this winter… was too harsh for her, Takeru."

"Is it because of the snow?"

"… We don't know. The doctors are doing all they can to help, so let's be positive about this, okay? You gotta smile for her when you go see her tomorrow."

"Y-Yes… I'll cheer her up and give her lots of hugs. Are you coming too, Dad?" His grip on me tightened, and despite how tender his hands are, I could only feel a crushing force piking at my heart.

"We'll both go at morning. After that… I have to go back to the samurai."

"Eh? But… But Mom is sick!" I know… Please Takeru, don't make this harder on me.

"Yeah, but… The samurai are the ones who allowed us to take Mom to the hospital, Takeru. But don't worry…" I again pat his head, biting the inner side of my mouth strongly enough that it began to hurt. "I will do all I can to talk with them, and then I'll come back home. We'll wait for Mom to get better together."

"Really?"

"Yeah, I promise. So, you gotta go to sleep early today. Let's go home, Takeru." I stood up, grabbing his hand. "Haruna-san, can I ask you to look after him while I'm gone? I can leave you some money if-"

"Don't you finish that!" She said, pointing a finger at me. "You can leave Takeru-chan in my hands. We'll keep him company until Miho-san gets better. Right, Sumika?"

"Yes… I'll help too." The little one nodded, despite how her hands were trembling.

"… Thank you. Really, thank you."

"It's nothing. I'm sure you need a good rest. Takeru-chan already ate, so don't worry about that. There's still some food leftover if you want."

"No, it's alright." I don't think I can stomach anything right now. "Well, we'll be going. See you tomorrow, and thanks again for helping Miho yesterday. Truly… I can't thank you enough."

She nods and we go towards the doorway. Takeru hugs Sumika before saying his goodbyes. As he did, I approached Haruna-san and spoke in a hushed tone.

"Haruna-san, I'll come back once he's asleep. Is that alright?" She nods, giving the kids a look.

We go out into the street and return home. I take Takeru to his room and got him into his bed.

I remained by his side until he fell asleep, he didn't even need a story. All he asked from me was to hold his hand, and now he doesn't seem to want to let it go despite being asleep. I didn't make much effort to release myself, instead I started caressing his forehead and fringe. Slowly, calmly, he sleeps. And now that he can't see me, a few tears get out from my eyes as I bend over and kiss his forehead.

What will I say to him when Miho dies? Can I… tell him that she's dead? He's seven, he isn't that little anymore. But Miho always kept him from the news, and we never remained in contact with our relatives. How do I explain to him… what it means to die? How will I answer when he asks me if I'm going to die too?

That last thought was enough to make me choke on empty air. I feel as if I had swallowed hot sand, and then tried to clean my mouth with boiling bleach. Rubbing my chest in circles, I release my hand from his and again clasp his cheek. I simply sat there looking at him, as the minutes went by, as the clock disturbed our silence, as I stopped feeling pain and it turned to hollowness.

After some time, I left his side and went towards my neighbor's house once more. Once inside, she made some tea for both of us and explained to me what had happened in detail. How she found Miho, that the kids were the ones who found her first, what the doctors told her, and how Takeru was today.

"I know it's a personal matter, but… how is Miho-san's health?"

"… The doctors said she doesn't have much time left."

"Huh?"

"They said she was lucky to live so much despite her condition. The doctor who treated her told me… she probably won't make it to

February." Every word drains a bit of warmth from my world.

"… Oh, I didn't… I didn't knew her condition was…"

"Sorry. Could you look after Takeru until I return from the Guard? Again, I can leave you enough money for around a week. And no, I am serious. If you hadn't helped her… Miho would have already died." She grimaces, heaves a sigh and drinks some more tea.

"… There's no way I wouldn't have helped her. You all did much for me in the short time you were here."

"Huh? Really?"

Her gaze lowers, losing itself in her cup of tea. While I haven't spoken much with her, she and her daughter seemed like very warm, bright people. To think her face could be clouded in such grief… Sigh… All of us had it hard at some point, what am I saying?

"Sumika was… being bullied very badly at school." Her tone cold as snow, her gaze unmoving from that cup of tea. "I also didn't have anyone to talk to here at the time. But when your family moved here, Takeru-chan helped Sumika in school, and thanks to that she recovered her smile and no one bullies her anymore now. As a mother, I cannot express how much I thank your son for that."

She looked at me, smiling faintly as the radiant warmth returned to her tone.

"And Miho-san has been very kind to me, sharing their house and food with us despite me not being able to contribute as much to the dinner when cooking together. She never said anything about it, she sympathized with us when people brought up my husband's death, she was always… so positive and nice. I truly… I truly think of her as a good friend, despite the short time we have know each other."

She closed her eyes and smiled, drinking more tea. She then returned my gaze, again in a serious way.

"So, please don't worry. I'll look after Takeru-chan while you're away, Kageyuki-san. I assure you that he will be safe with me."

"… Thank you, Haruna-san. Really… I have no words to thank you enough."

"Please, stop that. Is there really nothing that can be done?"

"No… We already did everything we could. Before moving here, she was in the hospital for around a week. The doctors there told us she would be fine from now on, as long as she took the medicine. Sigh…" I run a hand over my forehead again.

"I see… Well, in any case, you can trust in me. Takeru-chan will be safe until you come back." I nod, finishing my tea.

"Thanks. Oh right, let me tell you my base's number. If anything happen, call for me and I'll try to come as soon as I'm able."

After noting down the phone number, I thank her again and go back home.

I carefully got out of my suit and, without energy left, I slowly changed into my pajamas, that Miho still kept washed and clean in case I ever came back on a break. I then collapse onto the bed, barely managing to get under the sheets. And yet…

This absence of heat, this void I feel when my hands move forward… The emptiness by my side didn't let me fall asleep as fast as my fatigue made me think I would.

The coldness of the bed made me claw at my sides.

The thought that this will be the way I'll sleep for the rest of my life was too much to bear.

Knowing I'll never feel her breath on my neck, the comfort of her closeness at dawn, the sight of her eyes before me whenever I wake

up gone forever, I simply remained still, eyes closed as tightly as the knot forming around my neck.

Crying in silence, somehow, I eventually fell asleep.

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*Next Day. 09:18 AM.*

*(Hospital. Miho's Room.)*

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"Mom, how are you?" Takeru walked up to the bed, giving Miho a hug.

"I'm fine, Takeru. Mom is just a bit dizzy."

"Really? Then, are you coming home soon?" Miho's smile vanished for a moment, quickly returning in a dulled way.

"… I don't know, but you be a good boy until I come back, okay?"

"Yes." He nodded, holding her hand.

"Miho, how do feel today?" She looks at me as she slowly caresses Takeru's hair.

"I am feeling a bit better. Don't worry so much, Kage."

We spent a little time chatting, Takeru telling her he was fine with the Kagamis, she apologizing for 'falling asleep on the floor', and me telling her Haruna-san was going to be looking after Takeru until everything got back to normal.

I asked one of the nurses to watch Takeru for a while, to give us some space.

"… What is it, Kage? What happened?" Her tone finally stopped lying, decreasing in vigor and speed as suddenly as a summer rain.

"Well… The doctor told me you were informed of your condition as we were coming here."

"Yes… It seems I'm… short on time." She then laughed weakly, moving a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Well, we don't know that… You still might have more time than what the doctors think. After all-"

"Don't, Kageyuki." She looked into my eyes, and despite her weakened complexion her eyes were sharper than what mine feel. "Holding out for a miracle… is only going to make it worse. There won't be any more 'See you laters' between us. This… This time it will be 'Goodbye'."

I closed my eyes, drowning a sob under the back of my throat. I know… I know that it will hurt me more… But you can't just kill my hope like that, dammit. And using Takeru's words, too.

"Then… How am I going to carry on without you?"

"You told me before, remember?" She slowly raised a hand, I got closer so that she could reach my cheek without effort. "You're stronger than you think. It will be hard, I'm sure. But you can do it, Kage. You're still healthy after all, and you're part of the Royal Guard too."

I clasp her hand that was caressing my cheek softly. I close my eyes, simply feeling her warmth, her fading, distant warmth.

"Miho, I… I'm going to quit the Guard. Takeru needs his father close by, and if you get better somehow you can't keep taking care of everything yourself." Her eyelids lowered, she sighed and returned my gaze again.

"… Then, what about work?"

"You don't worry about it. Focus on getting better and don't worry. Everything will be fine, I will be here from now on. And if I am called to fight and die, you know what will happen to Takeru. So… You leave it to me, I'll-"

"Kageyuki, you… you shouldn't do that. Don't quit the Guard."

"Huh? But then-"

"If you do, many will call you a traitor. Then, you won't be able to find another work that pays as good as you would need to keep living in Hiiragi. I know you're not good with numbers, but even you can see that, right?" She smiled, giggling at me.

"… Then, who takes care of Takeru?"

"You always insisted on hiring a nanny, didn't you? Well, you can do that now."

"… You always opposed that. If we had done that before you-"

"Kage, don't." She put a finger on my lips, and this time I couldn't prevent a few tears from running away. "It's fine… The doctors said it too, right? I lived more than what one would expect. I got to see Takeru grow up, even if it's a shame I won't see him become a man. You gave me a life better than what I ever expected to have. So please, you have to do my share from now on too. You can't quit the Guard."

"… If I die, that's it. No nanny will prevent Takeru from being taken to an orphanage."

"I know… Couldn't you ask Kurosawa-san to help, in case the worst happen? I think you said he-"

"Koetsu broke his engagement last week."

"Huh? Is that so?"

"Yeah, the whole House was in an uproar. Koetsu seems happy now, despite everything. But he himself told me he was going to wait some time before proposing to the woman he loves." I am happy for him, to have taken that step. The amount of trouble it brought him, and he still rejected the 'proposal' to throw everything under the rug if he backed down and accepted to marry his former fiancee.

"But then, that's fine. So far you weren't called to fight. Don't be so negative, Kage." She again caressed my cheek softly.

"… Sigh, I'll try. Anyways, at the least I'll ask for some time off. Takeru will need me with him if… the worst happens. And I will need to look myself for someone trustworthy." I can't bother Haruna-san with this, even if I would welcome them looking after Takeru.

"I see… Please look after yourself, Kage. And don't worry, I'm fine for now. You already… did more than enough for me." I caress her hair softly, kissing her forehead.

"Don't worry, Miho. Nothing is set in stone yet. Well, I have to go back to Osaka for now. I'll try to be back as soon as I can." She nods and, after caressing her cheek one last time, I stood up and went to the door. I stop by it and look back. "You just rest and get as better as you can, okay? See you later, Miho."

"Yes… Have a safe trip." She slowly waved at me.

So… You don't want to say it anymore…

I get out and slowly walk away. What should I do, Miho? You told me to keep working… but who will look after our Takeru if I'm not here?

Resign myself to keep being a pawn to safeguard his future. Risk becoming a traitor to heal his heart.

… I guess in the end it's up to me. My honor or his smile, which one would I rather lose?

*January 10th. Around 5 PM.*

*(Osaka Castle Guards' Outpost. CO's Room.)*

**[Takahisa Koubuin]**

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"Rejected."

"May I ask why, Takahisa-sama?" Shirogane retorted, tensing his brows and looking rather upset.

"You are a key part of my flight. I cannot have you gone on such a short notice. We have many important trials against the soon-to-be adopted Kagerou, and I require your presence in them, Shirogane. That is all."

"Then…" He inhaled deeply for a moment, his lips moving in an odd manner. "If you won't allow me to take some time off, I suppose I should present a formal document requesting my detachment from the squadron?" His words almost generated a reaction in my face, for him to be this adamant in leaving his post.

"What are you saying?!" Kazora loudly said, rising from his seat. His turquoise eyes seething with venom, his tone mired by blazes. "You want to simply turn tail and leave, Shirogane?"

"My son needs me by his side. I have made myself clear enough. If I cannot get your approval for a small time off my duties… I suppose my stay here has come to an end."

"Pah… All you peasants are the same." My retainer folded his arms, driving his turquoise gaze into Shirogane, who didn't flinch. "You received much from the moment you were admitted here. How can you be so selfish when all you have now is thanks to the Royal Guard?"

"I understand that well, Col. Tsukuyomi. However, my personal situation is one that requires me to be by my son's side now. Please, I believe I am making myself clear on this matter."

Kazora and me both lowered our brows, Shirogane almost never is this court and stiff with us despite how much he's been reminded to use formal speech in my presence.

"Should you decide that I cannot return to his side while I am serving in the Guard, then I believe it best for me to simply leave. It wouldn't do Takahisa-sama any good to have a pilot whose mind is elsewhere during these trials, would you not agree Col. Tsukuyomi?"

"You speak the truth, however, you should be aware of your position in our ranks." Kazora continued while I brought a hand to my chin, carefully watching their exchange. "You are the sole commoner in the squadron's permanent members. This honor that has been bequeathed onto you is a rare one, and in these days we are in need of your abilities. Yet, you wish to abandon your position in such a hasty manner… I can't see this as anything other than treason." He again folded his arms, his tone severe as the swings of his blade. Shirogane, however, remained as collected as if he were receiving his customary morning briefing.

"It is regretful if you decide to see it as that. I will not back down, however. My son needs his father, so I shall be by his side."

"That is not for you to decide, 1st Lt. Shirogane." Kazora said.

"You also cannot reject my resignation from my post, Col. Tsukuyomi. See it as you will, I have notified you of my situation and of my plans."

"Hmph… Such insolence, it seems that training you was a waste of resources in the end." My retainer folded his arms again, scowling.

"Should I take your words as the formal answer, Colonel?" It is not rare for me to relay orders through both Tsukuyomi brothers at times.

However, this is something I cannot do this time.

Shirogane is not such a serious person. He dislikes formal speech as much as I dislike Yohime getting inside a kitchen. I already asked about this matter, I know of his wife's condition. In spite of this, I cannot bestow him this favor for my House requires Shirogane by my side for the trials to come. We need to determine the new strength of the IJA, to further enhance the Zuikaku as needed. And he's one of my best men, the thought of losing him… If House Koubuin is the lone House that loses in these trials, our standing will suffer.

However, should I use my standing to keep him here, the unyielding resolution within his eyes tells that such a course of action will only make everything worse. Hmm… Whatever shall I do… I cannot turn a blind eye to my fellow's plea, yet I cannot allow him to go to his son's aid…

… A moment, why is it that I cannot do both? Hmm… Yes, what exactly prevents us from having Shirogane visit his son while also being here in time for the test battles? Logistics? I can have him use one of my personal trains, and it's not like I cannot deal with a few issues coming from letting him use it, for they're mine to command.

"Shirogane, am I correct to assume you do not wish to leave the Guard?"

"… I do not, Takahisa-sama. However, if left with no other choice, I will place my son's well-being first."

"So, were we to find a method that allowed you to be near your son, you would have no more reason to present these papers of resignation, am I correct?"

"My liege, I am sure you know Shirogane's son is in Yokohama. We do not-"

"Tsukuyomi, our private trains are more than enough for this task, are they not?"

"Sir, we cannot let a commoner use them! Even less so for this matter. What would it say about you if word gets out you're using the House's resources for the private matters of a commoner?"

"A commoner that happens to be a core member of this House's pilot squadron. My resources are mine to administer, and I deem Shirogane necessary for the following tests. Are you questioning my judgment by any chance, Tsukuyomi?"

"No, sir, I would never." He closed his eyes and bowed shortly.

"Then Shirogane, what do you say of this arrangement?"

"I mean… Ahem, is it alright, Takahisa-sama? I do not wish to bring trouble to you or the House." Sigh… It is strangely uncomfortable, hearing you being formal.

"I said it is fine, and so, fine it is. I do try to not delve into my fellow's private matters unless they come to me for advice, but I suggest you to focus on what shall come. The Koubuin House needs you for the tests that will come in only a matter of days, but allow me to cut to the chase. What will you do after your wife passes away?"

He did a good effort to conceal it, yet his lips curved unnaturally. An ever so slight tremble of his fists, happening with the hastiness of a humming bird's wing flaps. Shirogane is holding his facade well, but it is clear as daylight. If I fold my hand on this matter, I will lose a good fellow.

"… I cannot say what I'll do, not when my feelings have not been sorted out." Finally, his gaze receded from ours and retreated towards the ground.

"Hmph, what kind of man are you?" Kazora said, the sting of a scorpion in his tongue. "You are a father and a husband, you should

already have an answer ready, Shirogane. It is most shameful to hear you display such weakness."

"… If that is what you think of me, I suppose there is no more reason for us to exchange words." Shirogane's gaze narrowed again, meeting my retainer's.

"Now, now, let us not be hasty." I extended a hand and direct a gaze at my retainer, so that he calms down before words that cannot be taken back are pronounced. "Shirogane, I wish for you to stay in my squadron. While the following months will be busy and you won't be able to visit your son as often as you'd like, I can look for someone trustworthy myself that can take care of him in your absence. Of course, I will keep your income in mind, but I can guarantee you he will be in good hands."

"Sir, I am grateful for this… However, this is a personal matter. Col. Tsukuyomi is right, I do not deserve this deference."

"The one who decides whether you do or not is me. I am the Head of the House and your superior, the one who decided that your services as a permanent member of my squadron are required as of now, and I would be wishing for you to start seeing yourself as a permanent vassal of my House. It has been brought to my attention that some of our fellows do hold… some conflicting views towards you, however you are one of us nonetheless. And as your lord, it is my responsibility to assist you in your hour of need. What would it say about me as a Head of a Regent House if I treated you as nothing but an expendable piece?"

"Even so, looking for a caretaker is something I should do. And I wish to be by his side, I-"

"Then, all you need is someone who can properly take care of your son, someone who will put your mind at ease. Then, you won't have to leave your post."

"However, that isn't the only problem…" His gaze lowers and sinks, filled to the brim with the depths of a trench.

I suppose he worries that, after his death, his son will be sent to a certain type of orphanage. If we are called to fight, that might as well be the case.

… The code would normally bind my hands. We should not show favoritism towards any of our fellows. Yet, I cannot help but to sympathize with his plight. He does not know of it, and yet, his worry for a son that will be left alone is similar to mine towards Meiya.

Were I to die, Yuuhi would become the next head. I already made that clear and wrote my will in advance for it to be a reality. And yet… If I die, only Raiden will be left to look over her. And he also has not much time left. Furthermore, Meiya will be fated to forever live in isolation as a pawn of the Shogunate, forced to be a body double for Yuuhi, stripped of any freedom or joys. I am the only one that can lift the accursed brand I put above her head the second she was born.

Going as far as he can for the sake of his heir, disregarding social norms without missing a heartbeat. I wonder, could I do the same for Meiya? To give her something for herself, something besides living in the shadows? It is a mystery to me, how could my ancestors cut away their sons and daughters with such ease? Or, perhaps, I am the one in the wrong? Am I giving my heart too much importance?

And yet… I cannot help but envy your freedom, Shirogane. Family customs notwithstanding, I sent Meiya away despite Yohime's pleading. If you have taught me something, is that there is always a solution where you least expect it to be. Your peculiar maneuvering has proved vital in many of our mock battles after all, and your honest and forward demeanor, despite being coarse at times, has made me realize how many foul adulators used to surround me in my inner circles.

So… This conundrum feels less like aiding him with these problems, and more like Shirogane is but fate's mirror showing me the inner, uglier side of myself. That side I wished to seclude deep inside my mind, the cold side that doomed one of my daughters to live trapped in a cage.

"… Shirogane, allow me to say this." He looks up, I entwine my fingers slowly, inhaling as a weight comes off my shoulders, giving me a so foreign feeling of stillness. "If you were to die in the field, I will do what is in my power to make sure your son doesn't fall in the wrong hands. I assure you of this."

"Takahisa-sama, what are you saying?!" Kazora's eyes were widening, the trembling of a leaf as a ladybug lands on it present in his tone for but a moment. "You should not show such gestures to anyone. More so to someone who is but a inductee, someone from a family without a history of service to our House. What would be said about you if-"

"In the worst case scenario I am describing, Shirogane would have served me well, up until his death. That would give me enough reason to look after his descendant, as the heir of a fellow of mine."

"Well, that is true, however-" I again interrupt Tsukuyomi, narrowing my eyes and taking a slower, clashing tone similar to my blade strikes, making him take a step back.

"And must I remind you that Shirogane is a permanent member of my squadron, something I myself have decided. To oppose this would mean to oppose me directly, which I cannot have one of my retainers do, Tsukuyomi." He nods slowly, bowing in apology, his gaze repositioned upon the floor. I lean back on my seat, smiling again and dulling my edge. "If I recall correctly, Saionji-sama is always insisting on keeping one's most trusted fellows close. I am just following the Shogun's advice, if anyone ever poses a question towards my actions."

"But my liege, he's but a peas-"

"His status matters not. He is one of us, Tsukuyomi. So Shirogane, you can rest assured. Do give me some time to find someone worth your trust to take care of your son."

"Um… Takahisa-sama, I am thankful for your worry. But I believe-"

"Do you happen to know of someone better than me to take care of this matter?" I say, leaning forward. Unlike Tsukuyomi, however, Shirogane shows no taint of apprehension or fear in him. Only his gaze lowers, and with the same worry I once saw in mine as I left Meiya to her luck.

"No, however, my son needs me by his side. What would it say about me as a father to abandon my son in this way?" His words cut a gash deeper than any blade ever could. A vile taste spreads on my mouth, I close my eyes and take a moment to inhale through my nose.

"If I allowed you to leave, people will assuredly begin to see you as Tsukuyomi said they would. Even if I tried to clarify the matter, many shall say you're a traitor, especially in this climate we're living."

Many are the ones who do not like the adoption of the F-15, even more within the Guard at the prospect of it becoming the successor to the Zuikaku as well. I myself am not entirely pleased, but one must be aware of one's own limits and shortcomings. Sadly, this schism won't be going away any time soon, not while American troops remain stationed in the Empire. As much as I'd like to support our domestic frame, I must avoid furthering the tensions. And to that end, I need to maintain my position while I continue to provide results. And to make results continue to appear, I need all of my fellows in top condition. So, I cannot simply let this rest.

"While it seems you see this as a black or white choice there are many options available to you, Shirogane. You do not have to choose between remaining on the Guard or safeguarding your son."

"… May I ask why are you willing to go so far for me, Takahisa-sama?" He lowered his head slightly as he asked the query. I place a leg over another, a strange shiver spawning on my neck at his forced manners.

"I said so before, you're a fellow of mine. My House requires your services, and, as your superior and lord, I cannot turn a blind eye to your hardships. I would suggest bringing your son back to Osaka, but it seems he has found good fellows in Hiiragi. As such, fret not and do rest easy for I will find someone that can watch over your son while you continue to work here. I suppose, you do not have any other reasons to wish to leave your post, am I right?" I ask the sole doubt that could be claimed against him, yet I see no wavering nor ripples in his eyes as he returns my gaze. The honest, frontal Shirogane has never been found lying, not even once. And that is one of the reasons I cannot lose you, my fellow.

"Of course not, sir. I am truly thankful for all you've done for me since I arrived, and for even considering inducting me in the first place."

"I see. Then, please do return to your activities for the day. We can have another talk at large tomorrow. Tsukuyomi, please go look for the number of the child care services."

"Takahisa-sama, are you serious?"

"Did I stutter, perhaps?" I narrow my eyes, Kazora gulps, shakes his head and then gives me a small bow.

"Um… So…" Shirogane rose a single brow, folding his arms. "Regardless of who you send now, will you truly… look after Takeru if I do die in battle?" His words were as heavy as Mt. Fuji, it seems it took a severe effort for him to ask that.

"Yes, I assure you of that. As your lord, I will extend a hand towards your son. Of course, there is little we can do once he's taken to an orphanage, however I'll make sure we can have a talk with him before that happens. You're one of us, Shirogane. And it is my duty

and obligation to look after my fellows as the Head of the Koubuin House. Worry not, your son will be safe." Again, the facade almost broke off. He bowed to me, stiffness permeating his whole body.

"… Thank you, Takahisa-sama. I… I don't know what to say…"

"It is alright, you may rise. You've been through many a great hardships these days, return to your room for now. We shall continue this conversation tomorrow."

"Yes, sir. And again, thank you very much. I swear I'll redouble my efforts from now on, Takahisa-sama." He bows deeply to us again, and then goes his way out of my office.

I sigh, content to have seen Shirogane honestly relaxing into his usual posture before he left. Leaning back on my seat, my gaze wanders towards my retainer, whose face twisted around into a frown.

"… What do you wish to say, Kazora?"

"Takahisa-sama, you cannot do this."

"And why would that be?" I close my eyes, resting my interlocked hands on my chest.

"First, Shirogane is still not a fellow of us. He's but an inductee, regardless of his position in your squadron." Sigh… His efforts have earned him that honor, why does everybody opposes him so strongly? It cannot be only because of his manners. "Second, to involve yourself this deeply into his private matters is not a wise move. Would you do the same for the rest of your fellows?"

"If I recall correctly, we have given many loans to the Fudai and Tozama families that serve directly under us so that their endeavors could bear fruit. Some of their heirs are now part of my squadron as well, others serve us in other areas beyond military matters. I believe this situation is actually a rather simple showing of appreciation

towards Shirogane compared to what we've done for others in the past." Kazora's eyes narrow, his head slowly shaking from left to right.

"Those families proved themselves trustworthy after generations of serving. Even those who rose from the peasantry were tested before such gestures were given to them."

"And I've tested Shirogane's character many times already. He keeps almost no money for himself, he sends most of it to his family. He has no desire to leave, he is merely stricken with worry for his son. And he has never asked for any preferential treatment or any reward for his services, not even once. And let's not forget that he has maintained a composed behavior since he arrived despite all the unplesantry that is said behind his back. I believe he is to be trusted." I met Kazora's gaze with the serenity of a pond's surface. Closing his eyes for a moment, a hand rose to his chin as a few fingers softly ran over his thinly shaved beard.

"And my last concern is…" He starts, then looks upwards towards nowhere. "I believe Shirogane is right. The boy needs his father, especially so at a time like this."

"… Oh, I see. And, pray tell, why is that?"

"They're peasants, Takahisa-sama. Their families mean the world for them, probably more than what the Emperor or the Shogun mean in their hearts. No caretaker will ever replace the gaze of a father, the warmth of a mother. And furthermore, to claim you'll look over the child after his father's passing… is the same as saying you'll put him under your care, my liege."

"And whatever is the problem with that? We look after the heirs of our fellows all the time."

"However, Shirogane isn't a noble. The weight of the other's looks will surely make the child's life here undoubtedly hard. The freedom

he will lose, the hardships he hasn't been prepared for that he'd have to face…"

Kazora sighs heavily, his gaze squinting with the intensity of the blazes that follow suit after Yohime enters a kitchen.

"I do not believe the child deserves any further troubles, not after what he's going through as of now. Leaving him in the freedom of the peasantry is what would do him better. The boy will crumble under the pressure of the expectations he'd have to meet, maybe even start to resent us for forcing him to lead such a life."

He takes a pause, I remain as calm as always. He clears his throat, placing both hands behind his back.

"You should know it well, Takahisa-sama. Commoners have freedoms we cannot enjoy. And to take that away from the little boy… The ways of life of peasants and nobles should not mix, each of us has a way to serve, a way to live unique to our standing. While you can act to make sure the boy doesn't get sent to a cruel place if his father were to die, I believe he would live a happier life alongside his commoner fellows."

"… Your personal experiences wouldn't be hampering your judgment, would they Tsukuyomi?"

"Of course not, my liege."

"I see. And, may I ask why did you not speak in this way with Shirogane? I may be the Head now, but you're still my retainer. I would have welcomed this honesty as opposed to the hostility you displayed during our talk." I move my fringe away from my eyes as I look at him well. He averted his gaze after a moment.

"… I believe we nobles must remain steadfast and stoic, never to waver in front of our fellows. We are those who embody the soul of the Empire, we cannot show cracks."

"Showing emotion doesn't make you weaker, Tsukuyomi."

"I stand by my words, my liege. And even so, you cannot allow yourself to send a caretaker to his home. If such an arrangement were to be tracked, some of our rivals might use that intel against you."

"Sigh… So, what you're saying is, I have to send someone nobody can track? Hmm… Thanks for the suggestion, Kazora."

"No, I wasn't-"

"Now then, in that case, that means we need to find a way to aid this little boy without anyone detecting our moves."

"Takahisa-sama, please listen. We shouldn't-"

"Which means, we need to send someone we know won't divulge this intel, someone of our inner circles."

"My liege, something of the sort would-"

"However, I can't just send someone I already have employed in another project. Kazora, do you have any further suggestions?"

"… I am not going to dissuade you from this course of action, will I?" He says, placing a hand in his forehead, rubbing it in circles.

"Did you not say just now that we nobles should not waver?" I smile, leaning into one of my palms.

"That is not what I meant. Sigh… I believe Yohime-sama would know better, since she watches over the Main House and all of the vassals there alongside the Grand Chamberlain."

"Yes, a good idea. Alright, I shall discuss it with her tonight. By the way, has Bazora sent his report already?"

"Not yet. I believe the meeting with our fellows has not yet ended."

"I see… Well, little we can do. Let us go check up on our crew. It is rare for me to have free time, after all." I get up, making my way towards the door. "Oh, that's right. Would our private train be in working condition?"

"… Yes, if you require it. Where do you wish to go, Takahisa-sama?"

"To pay Raiden a visit." Kazora's turquoise eyes filled with ripples, his face blooming with wrinkles similarly to when we spar in the dojo.

"Sir, there were no reports coming from Raiden. There is no need to-
"

"I wish to visit him. Is there a problem with that, perchance?" I cut his words as if I were using my blade, he stands in attention and bows.

"No, my liege. Shall I order the train to be prepared?"

"Yes, I wish to depart after dinner. I do need to speak with Yohime about this little matter as well. Let us go."

I open the door and walk out, towards the different offices in my care. It is so rare, for me to have a bit of free time. I almost always get reports from both Tsukuyomis, so I rarely see the state of things in the castle and my house with my own eyes. This should be a fun end to the afternoon.

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*Same Day. 09:51 PM.*

*(Raiden's House. Living Room.)*

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"Welcome, Takahisa-sama. What can I do for you?"

"Please, Uncle. Nobody is here to spy on us." Raiden stops bowing and smiles, holding a chuckle.

"I see… So, what has brought you here today? I believe I have relayed all of my reports through the Tsukuyomi brothers."

"Yes, and they have reached me. And I am pleasantly astonished at the result of your endeavors. However, today I am not here to discuss business. I have come to you for another matter. Let us have some tea, we need to talk."

We both go to the table, where a warm kettle was waiting already. He pours the tea into our cups, and as he sits I drink a bit. Looking around, I see what Meiya calls home. A house with very few windows, filled with our classical decorations and furniture befitting of Uncle's station, but surrounded by tall walls on the outside. Unlike Yuuhi, who sometimes accompanies us to our travels, Meiya has never set foot outside these walls. This small house is her whole world…

"So Takahisa, what is the matter?"

"How is your health, Uncle?"

"Haha, I am as sane as a young horse. Banish all worry in you." He puffs his chest, laughing a bit.

"Yet, you're not the one tending to the house anymore."

"Well… Being alone is harder than I thought." He says, with the longing of a buried seed for spring to come. We drink some more tea, us both directing a gaze at a drawing of his late bride, the original heir of the Mitsurugi House.

Raiden Koubuin, my father's younger brother, was forced to give up his last name to avoid any succession discussions by his father, my late grandfather. Luckily, he and Father were always in good terms. Unlike me and my late brother.

"If I may, what do you say of letting someone watch over Meiya's learning from time to time?"

"Hey, pampering Meiya is my last joy. Don't you dare to take that from me, Takahisa." He smiles as he reaches for his cup once more.

"Hahaha, I wouldn't dare to do such a thing. I merely think you need some aid, that is all. By the by, how has Meiya been?"

"… There is nothing to say, nothing ever happens here." His tone somber, like the shadows of a full moon night. "She sometimes asks what lies beyond the walls, but those questions are becoming more rare and distant with each passing day. I believe she might be coming to realize she is never setting foot outside of the house."

"I see… What of the teachers you assigned to her?"

"All of them are under secrecy, do not worry. She's progressing as well as she should. Though, I can't say I enjoy her listless gaze towards the sky at night." He then drinks slowly, extending the silence in the house.

"… Say Uncle, what do you say of having one of the younger Tsukuyomi come here as a retainer to Meiya?"

"Huh?… Are you serious? This is a taboo, a twin must never be recognized in the Koubuin Family."

"I am the Head, and I am the law in the House."

"Your cousins won't agree with you, you risk getting into an argument with them. It may fracture the House's unity."

"If they were in my position, I am convinced they would agree. And I am not saying I'll allow Meiya to return to the House." Not for now, at the least. "However, it is clear you are in need of a helping hand. And what better person than one of the Tsukuyomi?" Uncle closes his eyes, stroking his beard. For a moment he ponders in silence, I drink some more tea as I await his answer.

"Hmm… However, our fellows won't take this kindly. They will ask where you sent the one you choose. I am glad to hear you worry so about Meiya, but you should ponder this once more."

"If you say so, that I shall do. In any case, my orders are absolute. And I can keep this arrangement as a secret mission of sorts." In the same way I'll need to keep Shirogane's situation. I finish my tea, relaxing for a moment. "Well then… Before I leave, may I ask a troublesome favor out of you?"

Uncle's brows lower slowly, taking a moment to delve into my gaze. After folding the inquisitive stare, he nods. I take a second to inhale and fill my lungs, to relax the cicadas in my knees, to banish the snakes circling in my neck.

"Can you take me to her room?"

"… Are you sure of this? What if she wakes up?"

"It is past the 2200 hours, I doubt she'd awaken this late in the night."

"You do realize the damage it'd do to her to see you, even if only for a moment? How will I explain this to her? She's still too young to learn of her banishment."

"… Then, we only need to carefully survey her room. If she's sleeping soundly, would you allow me to see her?"

Uncle again stares at me, a silent barrage coming from within his eyes at me. Again, we remain in silence with only the tickling of a distant clock tainting the calm night.

"… Very well. However, I'll enter her room first. There's next to no light there, so you won't be able to see her well. Is that alright?" I nod.

"Shall we?" I stand up. Uncle Raiden sighs with a smile as bitter as the gash in my heart, then he guides me to a set of stairs in the

farthest side of the house. Stairs that take one to the basement.

Descending the long set of stairs, at the end of it a steel door awaited us. A door resembling those found in prisons, robust and sturdy with a small rectangle at the top to see further into the room. Uncle unlocks it and opens the door, we walk into the large room with the serenity of a feline.

What first greets my view as the dim light was turned on was something that resembled a living room. A book shelf, a small table with four small chairs, a sofa, a fridge further in, lodged in a corner. A table with a Shogi board and pieces lined up and ready for a game, a few paintings on the wall, a music box… A rather well decorated room in extravagant blue as Uncle likes his decorations, as in the rest of the house.

"That door to the left is the way to her room." Uncle guides me, opening another of those bulky steel doors.

A long, dark hallway extends forward. Grey walls and floor, concrete without any paint out in the air, just a few dim, muffled lights on the ceiling shine our way. A smaller, normal door was at the end.

Uncle unlocks it and brings a finger to his lips. He carefully opens the door, as carefully as if he were practicing his calligraphy. A moment of loneliness assaults me as he entered Meiya's personal chamber.

After so long, after so many years… I'll see her features once more. I have no right to feel these cuts all over me, in my chest, my neck, my palms. It's as if I could feel a subtle pulse of electricity all through me. The daughter I banished is only a few meters forward…

Uncle comes out and signals me to enter. I gulp and exhale, a heaviness in my boots far more severe than the few times His Highness has called for me to a private meeting. I delay my entrance by a second, closing my eyes and recalling what she once was all those nights ago. One deep breath later, my feet trespassed the veil that my heart was still doubting to pierce.

I slowly step into the room, lighted only by the dim shine from the hallway. I couldn't make out my surroundings at first. The room was mostly empty. A smaller bookshelf, a wardrobe and a bed, and a small wooden table with a lamp near the it.

And within the darkened sheets… A figure slept peacefully.

Imitating the speed of falling snow, I approached her side. A small face rested one of its sides against a pillow, her hair loose and a bit messy.

I crouched, and with the hesitation I once had when I raised my blade to the BETA in my first simulation, feeling as if my fingers had been tied one to another, I eventually reached her hair. And stroking it softly, my lips betrayed my mind.

"… Meiya."

Nothing but a whisper. What if not my melting heart.

The small shape stirred softly in the bed, welcoming the kindness atop her head. So peaceful and serene, just like a calm night in new moon. Despite the low light in the room, I could somehow make out her features. She truly is similar to Yuuhi… However, something was different in her resting complexion. Yuuhi tends to sleep with a faint calmness. Meiya on the contrary was clutching her sheets close to her chest, as if she were afraid of the shadows that surrounded her.

Terrified of the solitude that awaits her every time she enters her own room, at the prospect that perhaps no one will open the steel door in the hallway. Terrified of being abandoned within the darkness.

… Why did I wish to see her? A blade hits my arms as I release her head.

If I had the power, what would I do for her? The blade now hits my abdomen.

Were it possible… Would I set her free? The edge pierces through, reaching my heart.

When a child needs it, a parent should be there. Shirogane didn't doubt, not even in front of me, the Head of a Regent House… If he is able to display such bravery, despite his heart being so gravely wounded… What it is that generates this fear in me? Why did I let some old prejudice tear me apart from my daughter?

I stand up, moving like a leaf on a stream away from Meiya, away from my daughter without knowing when it is that I'll see her again, away from that lonely shape and towards the door.

"Uncle, do you truly think it impossible to break this taboo?" I ask as he closed the door, locking Meiya away from me.

He says nothing, and so, we walk through the hallway.

"… You would need to perform a feat that is valued by the Shogun, a feat that gives the House a great benefit or honor." He said in the middle of the way. "Only through it your relatives will bow down to your wishes. That is our way of life, honor and standing is what makes you a Head, a leader. Should you desire more power, more influence… Then you must elevate the House to further heights."

"… Forgive the inquiry, it was most foolish of me." I reply, the stillness replaced by a new, slowly surging heat in my chest.

We leave the hallway and climb the stairs once more. Before I took my leave, however…

"Uncle, do take good care of Meiya."

"You don't need to tell me that, Takahisa. And don't worry about me, I don't need a retainer here. My attendants are enough."

"That might be so, but still, they're close to being admitted into the Guard. Furthermore… I believe it will do good to Meiya to get

acquainted with our teachings."

"… Are you determined to release her from the taboo?"

"Yes, I am. Look after her until I gather enough feats to my name, Uncle. I swear to you now, Meiya will one day return to her rightful place. I will correct mine own mistake myself. Until then… I will keep counting on you."

"I see… I hope you are aware of the consequences that await you should your cousins reject her return."

"… No one will be able to speak of it. I do have an idea on how I can perform a feat no one has managed to claim."

"… And what is this feat, Takahisa?"

"Forcing the UN to recognize the might of the Imperial Army. If I bestow victory to them, if I bring glory to our nation through a successful international mission… Who would dare to speak against my wishes?"

"While that is true, am I sure you know what you would have to fight against. The missions the UN will ask of you as a Head… they won't be something to scoff at. You will be sent to the frontlines, probably as a Vanguard."

"I am no amateur, I already had a small tour thanks to those meddling Americans. Fear not, Uncle. Our endeavors will soon bear fruit. Believe in my words, for I am not one to lie."

"That I know well." He smiles again, faintly so. "I wish you good luck, Takahisa. Until we meet again." He bows slightly to me as I take step outside of the gate.

"Yes… Until next time, Uncle. Take care."

*January 22nd. 05:07 PM.*

*(Hospital. Patient's Room.)*

**[Miho]**

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"Mom, are you really okay?" Takeru grabbed my hand tightly, his gaze darkened and shaky.

"Yes, don't worry. I only need some more time to rest." I stroke his head slowly, feeling his warmth.

I am so thankful to Haruna-san… If not for her, I don't know what would have been of you, Takeru. His lips twist, he lays his head on my arm.

"Then, when will you come back home?"

"… Mom has to be careful. I don't want to end up sick again. So, you be a good boy and behave well, yes?"

"Yes, I know."

We stay like that in silence for a moment, me petting his head, he hugging my arm. I slowly exhale, feeling the faintness of the tip of my fingers. For one last time… Let me feel his warmth, let me see Mom in his gaze.

"… Takeru, come on." I say and he looks up. "You have to go back home, don't you?"

"No, I'm staying with you until you get better." He pouts at me, Mom's stubbornness in his gaze.

"You can't do that." I ruffle his hair once more, going down to his cheek slowly. "You have to go to school and study. You promised me you'd do well in school, remember?"

"Uuh… But-"

"Now, now…" I place a finger on his lips, smiling. "Mom might have to stay in the hospital for a while longer… And I might need to go somewhere for some time." Foolish as it might be, I just can't bring myself to tell him I will die.

I'm sure he will understand once he grows, time will heal his heart. But I fear he will suffer much from this truth, that I will never be by his side again. He doesn't need to know now, there is no need to make this worse.

"Where? Where will you go?"

"You don't worry about it. Takeru, promise me you'll be good and that you'll study much, okay?" He nods, not letting go of my arm.

I know he isn't that smart, but still, I can't help but to hope he somehow manages to be spared from this awful war. Even more considering Kageyuki is in the Guard now, Takeru might end up enlisted in their ranks. I shudder to think what harsh conditions he'll have to face considering his attitude.

I hug him, bringing him close to me. If one wish could be granted to me, I would like for this moment to be eternal. The calmness of having him in my arms, I could nod off right now. Despite how cold I've been feeling as of late, despite how hard it gets to breathe sometimes, all of that is gone. As if a warm blanket was now covering me, as if I was suspended in between cotton.

"Promise Mom you'll stay smiling, okay Takeru?"

"Yes, I will. But when are you coming home?"

"… You don't worry about that. You study hard and do your best. You now have a lot of friends with you, right?" I keep ruffling his hair, taking a moment to look into his eyes again. "Keep being a good boy

and getting along with them, yes? And no more fighting. Don't give Dad any more trouble while I'm gone."

"But the other boys are-"

"If you're bad, I will get really angry when I go back home." I fake a pout, pulling one of his cheeks softly. "So, be nice from now on even to those you don't like too much. The samurai don't like people that are mean, you know."

"So if I'm good you'll come back faster?"

"… Maybe. I'm sure things have been rough while I was gone, but you need to keep doing your best. Remember to be nice to your friends and Sumika, and always listen to what Dad says, okay?" He nods. "And what do you have to say when someone is nice to you?"

"… Thank you very much." He says, puffing his cheeks. It's the only thing I managed to teach him to make him be polite… Thankfully he hasn't forgotten it.

"Yes, that's right. So, remember to show thankfulness when you receive help, okay?" He nods and I pet his head.

"But can't I give hugs to the people I like when I'm thankful?" He asks, tilting his head.

"Hmm… You can, but only to those you really like." I never thought Kageyuki's words would make him start giving hugs so often. I only hope he realizes he doesn't have to do that all the time.

"Okay, I'll do that then."

"That's good to hear." I again bring him to me, hugging him as I ruffle his hair. "You keep being a good boy, Takeru."

"Takeru, it's time." Kageyuki entered the room again and got closer to the bed. "Mom has to go for another checkup."

"Eh? But…" He looked up at me, his hands tightening around me.

"Don't worry about me, Takeru. It's getting late, you have to go to school tomorrow, right? What did you promise me?"

"… I know." He slowly lets go, then he gets closer and gives me a kiss on my cheek. "Get better soon, Mom." I ruffle his hair one last time, and give him one last kiss on his forehead.

"Yes… Goodbye, Takeru."

"It's not 'Goodbye', it's 'See you later'." He narrowed his eyes at me, bitter as when I made him do his history homework.

"Yes, that's right…" I lick the inside of my lips, a tremor spreading on my chest and not because of my sickness. I know I shouldn't, but I do not want to tell him the truth. This must be how a flower feels as the last of it's petals is plucked away, it feels as if my body was pierced by many hooks. All of them pulling at me in different directions, I can barely keep my smile up when I returned his gaze. "See you later, Takeru." He smiles and gives me one last hug. Then, he released himself and went to Kageyuki's side, who directed Takeru towards a nurse.

After our son left the room, Kageyuki sat down near the bed. No longer having to lie, he grimaced and let his shoulders fall off like a rock slide.

"… Why do you not want to tell him, Miho?" His voice barely reached my ears, almost as if he were the one being hospitalized.

"Can you allow me one last selfish wish? I don't think it will do Takeru good to learn of death now of all times. Once he grows up, I'm sure he'll understand."

"He isn't a little kid anymore."

"But I don't want to have him hurting because of this. Takeru is too attached to me, and you have to stay in the Guard." His brows lowered, the space between them disappearing. "Just give him some time. I don't want him to be as sad as he was when I came back after I was in Yao's hospital for a few days. Can you do that for me, Kage?"

He takes some breaths, running a hand over his face. Shaking his head a bit, he rests his arms on his knees.

"If that's what you want, I'll do it. Though, I still think I should quit the Guard."

"The laws say you have to keep serving, so even if you somehow managed to find a job at Hakuryo Base you will end up being scorned as a traitor. No more of this, Kage. You have to-"

"Sorry… If only I had taken you to Yokohama sooner…" His gaze sinks, I hear a few muffled sobs coming from him.

"Kage… Kage, please…" I reach out to him and he gently grasps my hand, moving his chair closer. No longer hiding his tears, he brings my hand to his face and gives it soft kisses.

"Sorry… Sorry…"

"There's nothing to apologize for, Kageyuki. You always did all you could for me, even when I didn't have anything to properly repay you."

"Don't be stupid… I love you, and I don't regret anything I've done." His tone got a bit louder, muddled by the tears. "You and Takeru are my happiness, I wouldn't trade you two for anything in this world. I don't care if I could have been spared from the war of if I would have gotten rich if I stayed with my parents, I don't regret anything. Expect for not having a helper in the house, or moving to Hiiragi faster."

"Then don't apologize. Let us say goodbye with a smile on our faces, Kage."

"… I don't think I can do that, Miho."

I move a bit, enough to put my arms around his back. Letting his scent fill my nose again, planting a kiss on the side of his neck, I simply let time pass as I enjoy his closeness.

"Kage, the doctors said it will happen soon. I can feel it too, it's getting harder to breathe every day, the pain is becoming too much when it appears. There will be no miracle."

"I know… I know…" His hands grasp me tenderly, as if I were an injured pigeon. "But I'm scared. How will I take care of Takeru? How can I keep fighting with all I've got if you're not there for him?" His voice creaked like ice during the last days of winter, his hands trembling as he grabbed my back.

"… Can't you talk with your parents again?"

"You know it. Last time we talked they screamed at me as soon as I mentioned having them visit you in Osaka."

"I see… Can't you ask anyone to look after him?" That is the only regret I have left. If Kage is sent to fight and dies, Takeru will be left alone. And in this day and age… That means a life full of suffering every single day.

"I don't know. I can't bother Koetsu with all he's dealing with now, and I don't know if he'll be in a position to take care of a kid when I'm called to fight."

"Last time you said something about Koubuin-sama offering his help to you. What happened with that?"

"Oh, that." Kage breaks the embrace to face me, wiping his tears away, some staining his black suit. "Takahisa-sama again insisted

that he would look after Takeru if I were to die, but frankly I doubt he's being serious."

"Is he someone that tends to lie often?"

"No, all the contrary. I just don't see why he would go so far. He only wants me in the squad for these trials, he's just trying to make me calm down."

"Kage, stop being so negative. Takeru sometimes gets like this too. Why can't you accept that he might value you much? Didn't you say he insisted on having you in his own squad of the Osaka Guards?"

"I mean, yeah… But I just… Considering how both Tsukuyomi brothers think, how much they value their honor, standing and image, I doubt they'll let him help Takeru. At least, I don't think they'll save him from the orphanage."

"Sigh… But they said they would help him, right?" I grab his face and force him to look at me, with those eyes now clouded and reddening.

"… Yes, that's what he said. That he'll extend a hand to him, that he'll make sure Takeru is safe in thanks for my services as his fellow."

"… Then, that's enough for me." I know Kage can be too dense, especially when he gets down. If a noble said that, they wouldn't be lying. Takeru will be safe… I sigh, lying down again. I feel as if I was just released from a heavy chain on my back, like when I bring a lot of bags from the super. The weight that was crushing me is gone, nothing but a gentle, relaxing breeze spreading on me.

"Are you okay, Miho?"

"Yes… I'm fine now. Don't worry, Kage."

"Sigh… So… You think it'll happen soon?"

"Yes, I can feel it. Kage, don't look so sad please." I raise a hand again, he leans onto the bed and lets me reach his face once more.

"All these years… I've been very happy. Even if we were apart most of the time, I am truly grateful for all you've given me. So, please be strong. You still have your job and someone will take care of Takeru."

"It's not going to be the same and you know it." He grasped my hand again, his lips shaking.

I slowly rise and hug him again, feeling his breathing by my ear.

"One of these days, I will leave. Remember when you had to leave for the Training Program and I had to stay behind? You told me everything was going to be fine so long as I remained strong." I can hear his muted sobs as his grip on me tightens slowly. "This time, you'll be the one that has to remain behind. You'll be the one looking after our Takeru, so you have to do my share too."

"… I will. I swear I'll be there for him when he needs me, even if I have to leave my post in a hurry."

"Hehe, you'll get in trouble for that. You and Takeru really can't follow the rules."

"Hahaha… It can't be helped I guess." His laughter mixed with hiccups, he rubbed the back of my head.

"… All I ask is for you to keep your promise. Be careful out there, my love."

"Yeah… I'll do my best to return alive." He breaks the embrace, grabbing my chin. He gives me a soft peck, which turns into a slow, warm kiss. "… You have no idea how much I'll miss you, do you?"

"As much as I've missed you when you were away." I give him another peck, this time on his cheek. "Thanks Kage, for looking at me, for choosing me when I had almost nothing to my name, for always coming back home."

"… No, thank you. Thank you for seeing more than just the son of a wealthy family in me. And for teaching me what a real family was like, Miho." Again, we share a warm kiss as we indulge in one last hug, running our hands on the other's back.

We delayed our separation, we stalled fate for but a fleeting moment. However, every pigeon has to fly away before winter comes. And like how the sun always has to leave, our embrace came to an end.

I wiped his tears, he leaned on my hand. I caressed his cheek, he played with my hair.

"Takeru is waiting."

"I know that." He said. Leaning forward, he gave me a final peck on my lips. Running his hand through my hair as he did, then to my cheek, and finally grasping my chin on his hand. His eyes locked onto mine, they wavered for a second.

When I noticed he wasn't able to move away, I clasped both sides of his face and, with an effort too painful for my heart, I pulled his face away from mine. I smiled at him, and gave him a soft hug. Then, in a small whisper, leaning on his body to speak to his ear, and to hide my tears from him, I said what would end our time together.

"Goodbye, Kageyuki. Thank you darling, for everything."

Unable to say his goodbyes, Kageyuki cried on my shoulder for a minute until he could regain some composure to leave. Between sobs, apologies, and tender words he managed to say it just once. And so, after kissing my hand one last time, he took his leave.

You'll be fine, Kage. You really are stronger than you think. Not all men can be so open about their feelings after all. And knowing Takeru will be in good hands even if something happens to you…

… Means that I can now finally stop worrying. I can leave to Mom's side without fear.

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*January 28th, 06:22 PM.*

*(Hiiragi. Graveyard.)*

**[Native Takeru]**

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The sun is already going down and it's really, really cold. Dad took me to this place, there are people bringing flowers to these rocks… This is all so weird. But there's something that's even more weird.

"Why does this rock has Mom's name written on it, Dad?" I pulled at his hand, he was looking up so I couldn't see his face.

"You see Takeru…" I could see a tear running down now. Why is he sad? "Mom went on a voyage."

"Huh?"

"She was really sick, you see." His voice sounded like when I got a radio close to the TV once. "So, the doctors said it would be for the best to take her somewhere warm and nice so that she can heal faster."

"But… But why couldn't she wait until summer? Is she coming back soon?"

"Yeah, once she's completely cured she'll come back. It's bad for her to end up in the hospital so often after all."

"But… Why didn't she say anything?" It feels as if something was poking my chest right now. Like when those mean boys at Yao threw small pebbles at me once.

"Well, the boat was going to leave soon."

"… Can we call her then?"

"No, she's… We should let her spend her time alone." Dad rubbed his eyes and crouched by my side. "So, we have to wait for her patiently, okay?"

"Okay… But where did she go? Did she go with Grandma?"

"Grandma?"

"Yes, Mom said Grandma went on a voyage once, but then she always said she was too far away for our calls to reach her." Dad's lips move weirdly as he pats my head.

"Yes… Yes, that's right. Mom went with Grandma, so you don't worry about it. Let's wait together until she comes back." He then grabbed me and hugged me really, really tight.

"Dad… Mom didn't leave forever, right?"

"… Of course not, Takeru."

"Then, why are you crying? Why did she leave so soon without telling us?" His hand ruffles my hair, slowly caressing my head.

"Well, she's going to be away for a long while… Even if she left now, everything is going to be alright." He rubbed the back of my head, giving me a kiss on my forehead. "So, you be a good boy until she comes back."

"Then… Where will I stay? Are you coming home with me?" His eyes grow smaller.

"… I have to go back to the samurai, sadly. I will be busy with work for a while, but I'll try to come back more often from now on. Haruna-san will be looking after you for a while, so please be patient and don't give her trouble."

"… Really? You'll really come visit more often?" I grab his black dress, he rubs my cheek as he smiles.

"Yes, I'll try to be home more often. Dad will have to hire someone to look after the house while me and Mom are gone, so you're going to have to be nice to this person."

"Hiring?"

"Yeah, someone will have to clean and do stuff in the house. You know, it would get dirty otherwise."

"I see… Is that someone going to stay home?" His eyes grow smaller again, his lips pluck in a weird way for a second.

"I think." He hugs me again as he lifts me off the ground. "Please be patient with Dad, Takeru. I'll do my best to take care of the house." He sounds really sad now.

That's weird. Dad is never sad. He sounds like Mom when Grandma went on a voyage. Mom… Mom didn't leave us. So, why is Dad so sad?

"Yes, I'll be good."

"That's my boy." Dad smiled and gave me a kiss on the cheek, then he lowered me to the ground again. "Let's go home, Takeru." Softly pulling my hand along, we left the weird place.

These days I've been staying in a room in Sumika's house, with Haruna-san saying I could stay there until Mom came back.

But now that Mom is on a trip… When will I go back home? Will Dad someday stay with me? Who is this person he'll hire to take care of the house? When will Mom come back?

As we made our way back home, I hugged my sides. I don't like this. Something feels weird… Mom was weird the last time we went to the hospital and Dad was as sad as he's been today. Mom would have told me she was leaving on a trip, she wouldn't have left without telling me. Something is really weird here.

Mom… didn't leave forever, right?

I shivered a little when I thought about that, it felt as if someone gave me a hug after touching snow.

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*February 5th, 08:16 PM.*

*(VIP Room. Hotel. Kyoto.)*

**[Kurechika]**

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The small room was dimly lit by a small set of lamps, the small circular table between our sofas adorned by one such lamp atop a small white and olive green mat. The walls of the hotel room were just like the ones one could see on those five-star hotels that sometimes appear on the American channels, nothing like our traditional inns.

"Trust me on this one, Sakaki. If you lend me your support, we can make big things happen in this country. You come with me, and I bet we can get you a nice position during next elections. With your skills, you might end up as the Prime Minister on the near future." Hoshimori, an old politician wearing a black suit and matching trousers spoke as we finished our coffee.

"It is a most tempting offer." I tap my glasses, resting my cup on the table. "However, what makes you think we have any chance to turn this wheel around? You must know more than I do, and I doubt things are looking pretty from high above. There's also the matter of our adversaries. I am sure you must have heard of Hikami's raising popularity." I entwine my fingers, feeling the coldness of my ring as I do.

Ever since Lyon fell, the war took a turn for the worse. It looks like Africa might fall next if things keep going like this. Saionji-sama also completely overhauled the Fundamental Law of Education last year

as the situation in the Eurofront worsened, preparing to further bolster our army with new recruits.

And to make matters even worse, the UN is split between the demands of improving the living conditions of refugees or cutting off certain areas to form better defense lines. I've heard Britain is pressuring the UN to allow the BrArg Army to get deployed to the Arabian Front, and considering that I've heard they wish to use some experimental weapons to boot… The war is soon to turn ugly, rearing its head at all of us.

And on the inside, our skirmishes are not easy either. Between those who wish the old entitlements to be restored, those who desire the Empire to free itself from the shackles of America to stand by its side as a partner and not under it as a servant, and those who voice their opposition to that, saying it is for the best for us to remain under their protection, that we should instead further develop our relations with them in all areas, our people have been growing more and more distant.

The common folk seems to look at the nobility with distrust, and they do little to placate those prejudices. The Royal Guard may be the last remnant of our glory of old, they have to act resolute and unwavering to light the fire in every Japanese soul, but sadly, not all nobles follow the same principles. And some people are not pleased with their privileges, many are the ones that have spoken against them in recent years. Some have gone as far as raise their voices at the limos, demanding them to do more for the Empire.

"Hoshimori, I truly don't know what can the Empire do in such a situation. The US has been rolling out new machines and advancements with great speed, and even the Soviets have managed to develop many domestic TSFs, tanks, and… other especial technologies of their own."

We both take a pause to drink, since there is the possibility that there are mics on this room. Regardless of anyone's opinions, the psychic dolls are, without a shred of doubt, the most impressive piece of

weaponry developed by the Soviets, despite the… controversies that come with them. Resting my cup atop a cloth, again tapping my glasses, I look at the paintings of our own nation on the walls, some resembling what one could buy at a gallery as opposed to a renowned piece befitting of the room we are currently in.

"Us, on the other hand, only have the Zuikaku to our name, and a few contributions to decade old projects. Our army is made up mostly by F-4 models and already aging tanks and support vehicles, and the replacements are being delayed time and again." While in some aspects there are new models already adopted, they are not yet enough to properly replace all of our units, and the new tanks were delayed for next year, yet again. "We wouldn't be able to make a difference on the war as things stand now. Many are the ones that are beginning to think that we should desist on these endeavors of trying to make our industries thrive on their own, instead seeking aid from America. What do you have in mind to change this situation?" He leans back on his sofa, looking at the ceiling.

"There is much in need of change, I won't deny it, and as far as I know Saionji-sama thinks the same. It seems he found a key to reach his goals, despite losing more and more power every day."

"And how do we play into that? The unrest has been growing for some time, the common folk don't see the BETA as a threat for now. To many of our fellows they're a far away problem of the Europeans. I've heard quite a few that believe that they're nothing more than an American ploy to keep intruding on our sovereignty." His eyes narrow briefly before moving his shoulders up and down a few times.

"Well, we know it's not like that, and it is our responsibility to ensure the worst case scenario doesn't come to pass. What we require as of now is a way to get the UN on our side. Regrettably, Saionji-sama's plan to revitalize our army didn't follow through with the expected dates of deployment, so we will be importing some F-15 from America to buy us some time, as well as other armaments." I suppose more MLRS and Apaches along the maintenance gear, since our industries didn't quite manage to develop affordable

alternatives to those. "His Highness negotiated for a truce to the hostilities in exchange for a few favors. The Americans don't want to ruin their relations with us, as much as they dislike our prideful way of doing things." He then laughs quietly as while standing up to pour himself some more coffee.

"Some favors?" For Saionji-sama of all people to have resorted to the Americans… What kind of deals have been sealed?

It's true most people now see most foreigners, not just the Americans, quite negatively after all the reforms His Highness did to aid the people and were met with a wild competition by the American companies that do business here. The involvement of the Royal Guard on keeping the peace in many areas has cleared the image some people had of them, but the schism is there.

And Hikami has voiced his opinion a few times, enough that many are starting to openly agree with him and use the same words in their speeches. While the man does wish the Empire to stand proud by itself, Hikami does believe we should we should try to sign varied projects with the American companies as opposed to continue to struggle to procure an all-domestic defense force. All to get insight on their technology, to then have our industries be able to deliver better developments in the future. This was his approach to convince the right people in the IJA to import another TSF despite the opposition once the TSF-X Project was again delayed.

I also agree with the motion, nothing good will come out of isolating ourselves. However, how can we convince our people that making peace with the foreigners does not equal surrendering our resources to them?

Hoshimori clears his throat after drinking some coffee, and then looks straight at me.

"The Americans asked the Empire to lend a hand to the UN in their efforts to maintain the Far East Frontline. Plans to send a Task Force are being made as we speak. However, the Shogun hasn't

surrendered himself to them. We have one ace up our sleeve to turn this around." He smirked, the glint of all the eyes of Orochi rekindled in his eyes.

"And what would that be? All of our current plans seem to lead to a dead end. Europe is in tatters, Africa is doing all it can to stop the BETA, and I believe nobody wants to let the South Americans enter a battlefield ever again now that the rumors of them wanting to deploy some Top Secret weapon have been going around for some time. Our relations with Australia and the Oceania block aren't what I'd call pleasant, and there are a few countries in the COSEAN block that still hold their fair reservations towards our nation. Also, we're technically still at war with the Soviets. So, how do we strengthen our position? And, what can we do to help our nation?" His lips curve upwards, looking like he had a Royal Flush and I had decided not to fold.

"It's true that Plans A and B have ran into many obstacles, but we have a *fourth* plan at the ready."

"A fourth plan?" Whatever happened to the third one, then?

"Sakaki, allow me to tell you something that Saionji-sama always says. The world isn't painted in black and white. Even if at times it might look like you're at a crossroad between two choices, you have to look further than what lies beyond your eyes. There is always an *alternative* road available to you."

The word wasn't lost on me. Fourth… Alternative… Is the Empire going to bid for the hosting of the next plan?!

"And do we… have some groundwork done?"

"Yes, we do. It's still rough, but we're working hard day and night to make a firm proposition. But we are running into a roadblock as of now. A certain nation also wishes to make its vision into the fourth plan." His squinted eyes as he looked at the decorative flags that were hanged on the wall were full of venom.

The flag of the US, that was what he was looking at. We're going into a diplomatic war with the US for the right to host the next Alternative Plan… Of course, Saionji-sama wouldn't let this chance pass him by, if we manage to convince the UN of this and we succeeded, we'll turn this situation upside down. The recognition, the funds, the support we would gain… This is the turning point we as a nation have been waiting for.

"But the fact that you're calling out to me means that things aren't going so smoothly, right?" He nods slowly.

"Indeed. I'm aiming going to run in this year's elections, I want to become the next Prime Minister. And when I make it there, I will need support. You have many allies, a good image, and are neither too young nor too old. I believe you would make a fine addition to my team. I know our goals coincide in this matter, so that's what I wanted to tell you today."

"I see. But… What are our chances against them? Can we… Do we stand a chance to win the bid?" I entwine my fingers and look at the flag once more. The US would be our biggest ally, regardless of our complex relation. Going against them would leave us in absolute isolation.

"Their plan is… controversial, to say the least."

"… More than the Soviet one?"

Hoshimori nods as he folds his arms, leaning forward. I do the same, and then he continues in a hushed tone.

"Europe won't go along with it, the Middle East and the rest of the Asian nations also won't. The Soviets are against it, for obvious reasons. That's where we come in. We can appeal to the European nations, and try to make a truce with both Canada and Australia, who also seem to wish to place a bid. If we sell ourselves as what stands between them and the American plan, they might consider backing off. The lobbying of America has been going strong for some

time now, if any other nation goes against the US for the bid… Chances are there will be… certain inconsiderate actions towards them."

Certain… Inconsiderate… Actions, huh? He stops to drink some more coffee, leaning back into the sofa.

"So, if we manage to… dissuade a sector of the Americans into lending us their support, we have a good shot at this." Smiling once more, he looks at me. "And if the US ever wishes to back-stab us all we have to do is deliver results. America won't be able to act against us if the rest of the nations are backing us within the UN."

"It sounds like we have a… solid foundation done. I have heard nothing of this, though." A rumor of this importance would have been kept shut behind a thousand doors, but this sounds as if we were almost ready to place the bid.

"We have a solid groundwork done, indeed. I want you to know that we aren't making castles on the clouds, we have hard data that needs just a bit of polishing to convince the UN's Security Council. But I have overstayed my welcome here. I know this is a sudden proposition, but I want to make this clear. I want you in my cabinet, Sakaki. I know that… you are also a parent, but I do think you would make a fine candidate in the future to replace me. I'll say it again, I want you to be my dolphin, Sakaki. I shall be awaiting your answer."

He raises from his sofa and, after sharing a handshake, I open the door and he leaves.

I return to my seat, crashing down onto it as I run a hand over my forehead, letting out a long sigh. The next Alternative Plan… with us as its host. This is a one in a lifetime chance, but… am I up to skill? Hoshimori did seem confident in me, and of course I know many people that would be delighted to lend us their support and funds for the campaign. And yet… That would mean us leaving Hiiragi. No, I would be the one leaving. Sigh…

The sound of footsteps brings my gaze upwards. Saeko was standing on the hallway that lead to our room, leaning on the wall. Wearing her night attire with her long brown hair tied up, she took some steps towards me.

"Kurechika, what was that last talk about?"

"Nothing, dear. Just sharing some pleasantries as a way to show friendliness." She crosses her arms and moves to sit in the sofa that was in front of me.

"You promised me you would remain as a member of the Congress, that you wouldn't go any higher."

"I know, and this isn't about that."

"Then, what is this about?" She throws an accusing glare at me as her lips tremble a bit.

Of course, I can't tell her of the Alternative Plan. But then, how do I explain it to her? An arrow pierces my chest as I try to find an answer, and am forced to look away from her eyes.

I promised I'd be more present in the house, that I would put our family before my political career. But now duty is calling for me, Hoshimori needs my help in the Diet. We need to become the host of Alt. IV at all costs, and yet… Am I willing to sacrifice my family to this goal?

No, if we don't make it a reality, we will have a very dark future indeed. What am I compared to our whole population? If my sacrifice serves to water this seed of hope, then I am willing to follow through.

So then… Why are my hands shaking? Why do I feel a shiver on my back? Why can't I look at her eyes?

"Kurechika… If you… If you go back on your word, I will ask for the divorce." My throat tightens at her words as my gaze digs itself into

the floor. "You said we'd make this work, you told me you would help me so that I could keep working. I can't be the only one trying to make this boat sail."

I gulp and run a hand over my hair. I can't tell her no matter what, so I don't really have a justification if I decide to accompany Hoshimori besides platitudes. Seeing I was keeping quiet, she let out a long, heavy sigh. Shaking her head, she locked her eyes onto mine.

"So, give me a clear answer. Are you going to commit to our relationship? Or, does this end here?" The blades on her words made a gash on my ears and an even bigger one on my heart.

"Look, Saeko. This isn't… This time it's different. The scene has changed and we must react accordingly. I am only pledging my support to what I believe is our most tangible solution to our current dilemmas." Her frown turns into a scowl as she now clearly bites her lower lips.

"Do you think you can dissuade me with pretty words? Are you going to run for the Parliament or the Diet? Yes or no?"

"I… I don't know yet."

"Don't lie to me!" She hit the table, letting me see her gritting teeth. "I'm always alone back home, you always come back late into the night. All I asked of you was one day, for you to stay home with us one day."

"Saeko, please. I've been doing what I can to support our relation."

"Oh, really? Where were you during Chizuru's last birthday?"

"The session extended for over ten hours, I couldn't-"

"And where were you from then on? You don't even ask me how I'm doing as of late. It's as if you didn't even care anymore about us." She narrowed her eyes at me, her tone littered to the brim with

gasoline. She was holding a match in her hand, ready to explode at me any second.

"I always come back as tired as you do. And I bring dinner home half the time."

"You think that is enough? You haven't kissed me in months, you don't spend time with Chizuru at all, you barely even talk with me. And now this… What's next? You're going to brag about coming home once a month?"

"Sigh… What? You need to vent this at me now? You knew we were coming for a meeting, I told you I would discuss important matters with my fellows."

"I've been saying this for months, MONTHS now, Kurechika! Looks like someone isn't even paying attention at his wife's words." She runs a hand over her forehead. "If you won't start doing meaningful things for our relationship, then have the balls to tell me it's over!" Her words pike at my heart. Feeling a vile taste fill my mouth, I cross my arms and furrow my brows at her.

"I have been doing many things for us! I cut my meetings short, I lost many opportunities to scale the inner ranks and forge many connections. I come home after nine, when the sessions don't extend past midnight that is, I am as tired as you are. Why can't you see all I'm doing for you two?" Some of my words tainted by Chin poison, I glare at her.

"Oh, so now I'M the one who doesn't see your good deeds? It's my fault now that things are the way they are?" Her scowl grew larger, Mezuki incarnate in her gaze.

"No! God… Why are you being like this? I stay home during the weekends, don't I?"

"Sleeping! You barely help with the chores, you barely spend time with Chizuru, you're always on the phone, and we always have to

eat what YOU like!"

"Again with this? I told you I don't like tonkotsu sauce."

"Well, you could try it once. Like I've tried everything you wanted me to. But no, it's always the same with you." Sighing heavily, licking my lips slowly, I grab my cup and finish the cold coffee in it, that seemed to be boiling compared to her glare. "So, what comes next? You're running for the Diet? Is that it?"

"… I was offered that, yes, it's true. And things are different, this time I have to think it over."

"Think it over? So you were planning on accepting…"

"I… No, I was… You're being unfair, Saeko." Fully endowing the poison, my heart maimed by her distrustful gaze, I squint my eyes further.

"Oh, I'm the unfair one now?" She folded her arms, the sting of a hundred snakes filling her words.

"I pay the taxes, I pay the rent, I pay Chizuru's school. I sacrificed many chances to escalate further in my career until now for you two. Yes, I am not a perfect father. But I do what I can."

"You know that's not true. You could spend some more time with us, you could talk with us more, but all you do is worry about your job. I need my husband with me, your daughter needs her father!"

"And what do you want me to do? I… I can't just not work. My job is as important as you two. Now more than ever, you should already know how this is!" I narrow my eyes at her, she does the same.

"And I'm telling you, I'm tired of this!" Every word slashing at me like the Murasame, cutting my heart wide open with ease. "If you won't try to make this work, just say you don't care about us anymore!"

"How can you say I don't care after all I've done?!"

"You're absent most of the time, and when you're home you barely talk as of late. You do nothing for our relationship. Nothing, Kurechika!"

"I pay for almost everything, I gave you the house you live in now. I supported you how I could, why do you have to be like this when it's about my job?"

"So now I'm the one who isn't supportive, huh?" Again, her scowl grew larger. The monster spawned in her complexion resembled none of those found in our folk tales. A darker, sharper beast with narrowed, watering eyes and gritted fangs. "All I wanted was to have you with us, and even that seems to be too much for you."

"You knew who you were marrying. Don't you dare feign ignorance. You always knew I was a politician, you knew what kind of path I was on."

"And you promised me you'd be there for me. And look at you now, running for the Diet!" Screaming like a banshee, she pointed a finger at me.

"I have been trying!" I hit the table, returning the scowl. "And I told you, the situation has changed. That's why I have to think this through. Be an adult, Saeko. Screaming over nothing but a doubt… God, how immature can you be." I know you're on your mid twenties, but please… At your age I was already living by myself, working in the town council.

I get up and go pour myself some more coffee. I work day and night, I do all I can to be at home for dinner, I reserve my weekends to be there at home so you can rest… And this is what I get? Is this how you repay me after all these years?

"… I am the immature one?" Her voice low, nothing but a barely audible whisper. Her hands extended limply to her sides, fists coiled tightly. Her face, however, remained unchanged, scowl and fangs sharpened further. "How can you say that… How can you say that

when you're the one who's never around. You're the one who's constantly shirking his own responsibilities as a father and as a husband!"

"I work all day for my daughter! And for you too!"

"Well, being a parent is more than bringing money to the table. You're completely useless when it comes to everything else!"

Useless… I am not… I am not useless. My fists begin to shake, my brows lower and curve, revealing a hidden Gozuki in my face. I am not inept, I am not useless… How dare you… How dare you spout such insults at me after all I've done for you.

"I am not useless." I take some steps towards her, she holds my gaze unmoving. "I have done all I could, I literally can't cut any more time from my work."

"Oh, sorry mister politician. It looks like nobody told you your wife needs your help to raise our daughter! You never help in anything regarding Chizuru, and I can't do everything by myself while I work every weekday. You don't even realize that isn't enough, that's why you're a useless father, Kurechika!"

Shut up… Don't you dare… to call me like that…

"… Well, maybe you would have been able to keep working normally if you hadn't got me drunk that night!"

"What? Are you blaming me for this now?!"

"As if what happened was my fault! You got both of us drunk, that's why I didn't wear protection."

"We were dating for three months and it was my birthday! And you were the one who pushed me into the couch!"

"You invited me over to your apartment, you got undressed as we drank vodka, and you didn't resist when I started caressing you!

Don't play victim with me now after all this time, you weren't a little girl anymore!"

"Victim? I'm not playing victim! I'm asking you to do your share as a father, since you're so inept at it. Why did you even form a family with me if you don't want to do your part?!"

"Because maybe I wasn't planning on forming a family with you in the first place!"

"… Eh?" Saeko's face lost color, her stride halted she left her mouth agape.

"Don't give me that face. We were only starting out our relationship, we hadn't seen whether we could live together back then. I did like your hard to approach persona, but we didn't have time to see whether it was real love or not between us. That's why this doesn't work, because we've been winging it this whole time. Neither of us wanted to have Chizuru at that time, you know it." I drink my coffee and sit down back in my sofa. I run a hand on my face, biting my lips. Unable to stop, I spit out one last drop of venom out of me."… And there's no more love between us after all this time, it seems."

There, I said it. Come on, scream at me again. It's always the same as of late. All you do is bitch at me regardless of what I do. When I'm home, because I don't talk much. When I'm not, because I'm absent. When I try to talk, you're tired. When I'm tired, you complain I ignore you two. I'm tired of this stagnant air that fills my house…

Where is that strong, resolute woman I admired so much? The one who used to face me unflinching, that understood my burdens? Crumbled to dust, its remnants scattered by the wind.

This is the price we pay for being foolish, for being careless. Sigh… There should have been no reason to get to this point if we had been responsible adults.

"… I do love you."

"Huh?"

Saeko's eye lost all edge and glow, the eternal night of yore mired her complexion now. Hanging her head and holding one of her elbows tightly, all draconian bravery was gone from her voice, nothing but the wails of a small, wounded imp were left in her words.

"… I know you're always busy. I always liked that serious side of you. How you could seize someone with just a gaze, how you could always know how to deal with large groups."

"What is this abou-"

"I do love you, Kurechika. But I can't go on like this anymore." Tears bursted out of her eyes as she held herself tightly. Shivering in place, she sat down again, as slowly as the last leaf falling off a branch. Words fused with sobs, cheeks tarnished by tears, and marked rivers in her complexion. "I know how important your work is, that's why I don't interrupt your calls, that's why I don't bother you at home when you come home late. I know you're working hard everyday, and I am truly thankful for what you do. But I just can't do this anymore."

She sobbed in place, I could no nothing but stare. I have never seen Saeko cry. No words could describe the piercing pain in my chest, I feel as if my tongue was retreating into my throat, as if I would gulp it down if I lost my focus. I winced at her words, yet I couldn't look away.

"They keep cutting our budget, they keep making us work more and more… I'm exhausted. Last month the army kicked us out of Hakuryo High School because they were going to make a base there. I tried to shield some of our students as they forced us to leave and I got a bruise on my arm… Hic… You didn't even ask me how I got it when you came home that day…" One hand grasps her face, the other rests atop her chest, trying pointlessly to calm its oscillation.

"You had a bruise? I didn't… I didn't notice…"

"Hic… I always loved you, Kurechika. I wouldn't have let you into my house if you were just a pastime to me. But I can't do this anymore…"

Now, holding her sides, she looks up at me. No sign of the monster from before, a wounded animal trying to reach a source of water amidst a barren wasteland, that's what she looked like.

"People at school keep telling us to change the curriculum, we're being paid next to nothing while having to work twice as much. I have to get out in a rush to go pick up Chizuru, do all the chores by myself, and when you come home you don't even greet me, you don't even talk… I need you, Kurechika. I need my husband by my side. I can't endure all this by myself…"

She hunched over, hitting the table with her forehead softly, burying her head in between her arms.

"I'm tired of holding out for something, anything. If you simply don't care… Hic… Stop giving me hope that someday you'll start caring. Just be honest with me, Kurechika. Because I… I can't take this… U-Uuuhh…" And then she started crying without any semblance of restrain.

… A whole armory was thrown at my heart. No longer looking for water, Saeko cried in agony. The desolate cries, similar to those of an infant pleading for the mother to arrive. In her case… She was pleading me to notice how she was suffering. A deep crack in a wall being treated with a trebuchet, that was what just happened here. Me being the trebuchet, of course.

I never noticed anything. All I did was focus on my job, on the agreement we had established so long ago.

Saeko was strong, she doesn't need me lending an ear to her worries. She's always so confident, she never asked for advice

during our first years together. That's why… I assumed she could take anything, just like how I can take stuff in silence.

She's there, she isn't saying anything so she should be fine.

She always takes care of the chores, she doesn't need help with that.

I don't know anything about teaching and she doesn't like politics, so there's no point in talking of our jobs.

So I never asked how her day was. Since she always took care of her own problems in stride I assumed she was fine, or at least not bothered by it.

… And I screamed at her when she was trying to tell me she needed me by her side, not only physically but in mind as well. She wanted my heart and gaze on her and Chizuru… And I… I…

I stand up, slowly moving towards the door.

"Kurechika?" I don't stop at her call. "Kurechika, where are you going?"

I don't mind her words and slowly go to the door. I need to get some air, I need to clear my head. God… What have I done?

I feel a tug, almost hesitant, on my arm.

"I'm sorry… I'm sorry for screaming at you…"

"You don't have to apologize, Saeko. I'm just going to get some air."

"Please!" She hugs me from behind, clawing at my chest. "I'm sorry… I… I'm just tired. Please don't leave me… I wasn't being serious."

"You and I both know you were." And I can't blame you. I deserved every single word you hurled at me, and then some more. You went

easy on me, I know you can be more poisonous when you so wish. And you had all the reasons to do so.

"No, I wasn't." I feel something wet on my back, Saeko was still crying. "I won't complain anymore… So please don't leave us." Raindrops filled her words, raining over wetness. What she was holding on released itself as her grip on me tightened. "I can't take care of Chizuru if you leave me… She needs you, Kurechika. I need you… I'm sorry… Hic… I'll keep taking care of the house, I won't complain anymore, I swear." Every word is another knife into my chest. Now I'm the one on the receiving end of the trebuchet. I made Saeko hurt like this, so I shouldn't complain.

But… It's clear she doesn't deserve this. Saeko did nothing to be apologizing to me in this way. I should let her rest and we can talk this out tomorrow before going back home. This is clear as day, this… this relationship is over. Saeko doesn't deserve this.

"I'm going to get some air, Saeko. Let me go."

"… I'm sorry, Kurechika. Please don't leave us… I…" I release myself slowly from her grasp, I hear her hiccups increase.

I grab the doorknob and open the door. Again her hand reaches my arm.

"I love you, I really didn't mean to scream at you. I know…" Her voice trailed off, turning into a distant echo, a fissure dwelling in every word she uttered between sobs. "I know I might not be enough for you, I know I may not have been who you wanted to marry but… Chizuru needs us, both of us. Kurechika, let's… Let's talk this out once more, please?"

"I'll be back in a while." I move away and she doesn't try to stop me. As I close the door, I hear her crying once more.

Dragging my feet and gaze, I make my way to the mini bar. I can't believe it… This time I deserve the word in full force. I am useless.

No matter how much I apologize, it won't change what I did, what I said, or how I've been feeling. And considering what's at stake… It might be for the best to end this here.

I took my time, slowly gazing out the window, looking at the Capital from the height of the floor. If I accept Hoshimori's offer, I would have to start living here. Forcing Saeko to either live alone in Hiiragi or quit her job to come to Kyoto… Biting my lips, no good outcome comes to mind were I to ask that of her.

…

I guess… this relationship truly is… over.

As I reach the place, I found someone there besides the bartender. A Royal Guard, one in a black dress with trimmed dark hair, was sitting drinking something.

"Oh…" The man noticed I was staring. "I thought I would be the only one drinking alone at this hour." He smiles wryly. A fellow commoner, huh.

"Forgive me, I was just in need of some air. Bartender, a beer please."

The man opened a can and served me a glass. I drank it slowly, feeling the coldness down my throat.

"Must have been a long day for all of you, huh." The bartender said as he chuckled.

"Yes, the negotiations… were very tiring." Not as much as what just happened to me.

"I didn't have much to do, just watching over the building." The Guard said. He looks worn down, however. His speech is… peculiar for a Royal Guard.

The man in question finished his drink, sighing heavily. His gaze lost in the infinite loop of the cup's rim, cheer shining in his eyes due to its absence, the Guard's features reflected emotions of anguish as he grimaced slightly, eyes and mouth growing smaller every passing second.

"Did the negotiations not go well for your side, my fellow?" I ask the man, trying to clear my head.

"Huh? Oh, no. I think that went well in the end. What troubles me is… a more personal matter." Unlike the other Guards this man feels… common. Normal. I don't feel that pride, that arrogance some members of the Guard display at all times.

"Love problems?" The bartender asks, the Guard nods. It's as if the night was adamant in not allowing me to run away today.

"I am not the best person to deliver love advice, sadly." I say as I chuckle bitterly, drinking some more beer to clean the taste in my mouth that refused to leave.

"Haha… Love advice is not what I need."

"… Did you already break up?" I couldn't contain my lips. I thought I had seen some resemblance of me in the man, but the way in which his eyes closed, as tightly as a lock in a bank, proved me wrong.

"No… My wife died a few days ago."

"… Sorry, that was insensitive of me."

"No, it's alright. We could say our goodbyes, so it's not like I had anything bottled up…" He gestures for another drink. The bartender serves him what he was drinking and he goes for another sip. "If that's all there was to it, this wouldn't hurt so much."

Seeing the man hold the cup rather strongly as he kept drinking, the bartender leaned on the table.

"What troubles you, my fellow? Was something left unsaid?"

"No, it's…" The Guard sighs, shaking his head a little. "My son was left alone. I can't be with him due to my position in the Guard."

"Do you not have anyone to leave him with?" I ask, to which the man nods.

"Thankfully I do, but that's not the problem. He needs me by his side, and yet here I am. What a useless father I am."

"… I don't think you deserve such a strong word. You are worrying about him, after all." Unlike me, who didn't even think of Chizuru these last few days. So long as she's in good health and scoring good grades… I never truly cared to get closer to her.

"Still…" We both finish our drinks, the man looks up lost in thought. "Back when I joined the Guard, I thought I was ready to die. I thought I could face anything the world threw at me for my family." The passion was apparent in his words and in the way he clenched his free hand. "But I never expected something like this to happen."

I see… If he dies now, his son might end up in an orphanage. Luckily, women are not going to be conscripted into the IJA, or so it seems for now. Even so, I can buy Saeko and Chizuru an exemption draft with some effort. They will never be dragged into that side of the war.

"If I'm not by his side, how will he be at ease after all this?"

"Even if you're not there, you can talk with him if he's not too young." I say, tapping my glasses. "A parent has to do what he has to for his child, doesn't he?"

"Yes, I agree. However… My absence will hurt him more than anything else." The man's words piked at my heart. "The feeling of being left behind will leave a scar in him that no time will ever heal. He needs me there, and I am here."

Being… left behind? Ending up abandoned, ignored by those you love when you're in pain… Saeko, is this how you felt all this time?

"You can ask for some leave time, right?" The bartender asked.

"I already have, these months will be full of activity so I can't take any time off."

Yes, the testing against the Kagerou are soon to come. Such a saddening state of affairs… He seems to truly value his child, yet he cannot be with him. I, on the other hand, have neglected my daughter while having the chance to spend my time with her. And now… it might be too late for me.

"I won't be able to face Miho if anything happens to him while I'm not there."

"I believe you shouldn't punish yourself needlessly." I say, leaning my arms onto the table. "You do what you can, that's… how it is sometimes."

"That might be so, but it isn't enough. If his future is crying, it's up to me to make it smile." Huh? If his future… What an odd phrase. Yet… Some of it resonated like a scream in a cave within me. "And yet here I am, drinking in a bar while he's probably sleeping alone."

"I agree with the man here, you shouldn't be so hard on yourself." The bartender said. "All of us have had to make conflicting decisions sometimes."

"Yes, that's true." I say, rubbing my forehead. "I believe your wife wouldn't blame you for this, not with how strongly you feel about it."

"… Thanks. Sigh… I do wonder if I'll ever be able to move on from this." His gaze sinks again into the cup, his shoulders descending like snow.

"Were you two in love?"

"Yes, she was all I ever wanted. She made me feel cherished for the first time in my life, she didn't like me because of who I was or what I had. And now… There are words and jokes I will never be able to say again. There's food I'll never have again, there are things I won't be able to do for anyone else, things no one else but her would appreciate. She's gone…" Then, closing his eyes, he grimaces. "And I wasn't ready to be the one left behind."

The man was valiant enough to pour out his heart raw in words. I wouldn't be able to do that, not in a hundred years. To lose that closeness forever… To lose your partner, to be forever forbidden from saying and doing things one enjoyed…

**Beep!**

"Oh, seems like I'm being called back. Sigh…" The Guard slowly stood up. "Sorry, I didn't meant to dump my troubles onto you two." He bowed to us, grimacing again.

"No, a bartender's job is to hear the customer's woes too."

"It was a surprise to see a Royal Guard in such honest fashion. Don't apologize, you've done no wrong. Your heart is in the right place, my fellow."

"I see… Thanks, really." He pays up his due, and leaves after a short, polite bow.

"Another beer, please."

My cup is filled and again I drink. I close my eyes, going back to those days. When I was but a fresh member of the local council.

Back then… Back then I only saw Saeko as a sort of prize, of prey. She was very prideful and snarky on the meeting I met her while I was working on Hiiragi.

I thought she was too prideful and I wanted to prove her wrong. I wanted to show her our position was the right one. Eventually, somehow, that turned into me wanting to… well, fuck her. I wanted to wipe that smirk of her face, to see her flushed face in embarrassment as she undressed for me.

Sigh… I do not envy my younger self's motives to do things.

The more she rejected me, the more I desired to bring her down to all fours. I wanted to make her admit I was right, to see her admit defeat. It was a power struggle on both sides, she did tell me she wanted to make me acknowledge her position in front of the rest of my colleagues, that's why she put up with me at the time. Of course, she had no sex in her mind.

I was too prideful back then, I only saw her as a meat bag to bed, an adversary to defeat. Her words had no place on my ears, she was just another opponent to surpass, another meat bag to fuck.

… Turns out our literary tastes were similar. I once ran into her in the library, and we tried to outsmart the other with our knowledge. From time to time, we met up there by coincidence and I found myself enjoying our talks. Instead of confronting her or trying to seduce her, I found myself earnestly asking for her opinion and giving her my own, no layer of sarcasm or double meanings in my words.

When was it that we started hanging out to talk about books? Our discussions about the teaching politics she was pushing became smoother, we could debate without the other snapping, without her making any snarky remarks, without me making any sexual comments or dismissing her opinion.

… I don't even remember how that matter of the school policies was resolved in the end. All I know is that we kept 'running into each other' in the library, and ended up talking about books for a while.

… Eventually, I realized I wanted her, but not like before. Well, I still desired her, but not in… that way only. I wanted her to accept me,

not to force her to knee. I wanted to see her smile more, not just to use her to satisfy my own urges. I began to like Saeko, to earnestly like her company.

It almost feels like a time lost to me so long ago. As if the river were we once stood was eroded and now a cliff was in its place. I don't think I was being serious back then. I wasn't thinking on marriage, I simply wanted to be with her, to enjoy our time together.

It took some mutual effort for both of us to come out of our masks, after a year of… not dating but dating, of meeting up to talk about books and then going to eat together. We both had different views on how to tend to the house, on how to deal with life. I admired her resolute way of dealing with her problems, but I thought that… maybe she wasn't the right one for me.

She wouldn't be able to live by my side if I were to continue on the path I was at the time. We both tried to make it work during those months, it wasn't bad. I did have my doubts on whether I wanted to go further with her, but all of that went out the window… when she told me she was pregnant.

I pay the bill and go back to my room, slowly walking on the hallways as I gaze outside the windows. The city looks so small, so bright from here. As distant and beautiful as those days are to me now.

The first years weren't bad. We made our agreement and worked well under it. Dealing with Chizuru when she was a baby was… a challenge. Waking up midnight wasn't something neither appreciated, but we somehow survived that by clearly establishing who got which days. And me coming home late wasn't bad then, I was still high in adrenaline after the sessions so I could take care of Chizuru, allowing Saeko to rest well.

I supported her so that she could go back to her work as a teacher, she didn't want me to sustain her life. I liked her prideful opposition, her determination to not rely on anyone for her own life. So, we formed our new pact. The one we're still using today.

Saeko gave me a reason to look forward to coming home, a reason to not stay overnight in my office. Something besides my work, something that cannot be measured in any kind of value scale. Those first three years… were truly happy ones.

… Things started to get worse once the new education laws became more and more twisted due to the war. Saeko never asked for help and my meetings got longer.

I promised her to be home early, so I had to deal with as much as I could before that. These last years have taken their toll on both of us, and we never tried to talk with the other about work. I thought she was fine, she was always prideful and never asked for help.

In between her sobbing, she said she didn't want to bother me because I was tired, despite how I've been neglecting her these last months. Knowing her, her heart is probably in tatters right now. The profession she so much loves is being bastardized thanks to the needs of the war, her pride smashed to pieces as her hopes of being self sufficient vanish into thin air. She wanted to ask for help, but didn't. Because she held the hope I would notice? Because she wanted me to make the first move? Because she didn't know what to do?

It doesn't matter. I wasn't there for her, that is the truth.

"… If their future is crying… It's up to me to make it smile, huh."

Now that I think about it… I didn't ask that Guard his name. Damn…

The man had his heart in the right place. If I leave her alone… What will Saeko do under the pressure? She knows she can't take care of Chizuru with her salary alone, if I leave her… even if it is for the good of the Empire… even if I keep sending them more than enough money…

There has to be a way for me to help Hoshimori while remaining with her. It's the least I can do. If… If anything happened to her, and

Chizuru ended up alone like that Guard's boy…

*"You're just a useless idiot! You'll never get anywhere in life, you dumbass. Now shut up and go get me another beer!"*

My father's words return to me, making me grimace. I run a hand over my cheek, there is no bruise on it now but the sting of the belt is still there. A gash no time will be able to heal, huh?

Saeko made my home a place I wanted to come back to. She and Chizuru… mean the world to me, they truly do.

Regardless of the platitudes I use to excuse myself, I would be abandoning them by accepting the offer I was given. And that… is something I cannot do.

Reaching my room, I delay my entrance for a moment. Taking a deep breath, looking at my hands, there's a second of hesitation as my feet wanted to remain firmly planted where they are. Smiling at my foolishness, I exhale through my nose. I then take one step forward and open the door.

Saeko wasn't in sight. I went to our room, a figure was under the sheets. She slowly rose up, looking at me.

"… Welcome back." She said, her tone similar to a tree in winter. Dry, lifeless, dulled.

"Saeko, we… need to talk."

"Yes, we do."

I sit on the edge of the bed, I feel her getting closer. Before I could sort out my thoughts, she wrapped her hands around me.

"I'm sorry. Kurechika, I didn't mean all I said."

"Stop." I grab her hands to prevent her from keep rubbing my chest. "Saeko, you don't have to do this." I turn around to face her, she was

shivering slightly.

"I'm really sorry… I shouldn't have screamed at you in that way. Forgive me, please." She lowered her head, her hands together by her waist.

She looked up at me, awaiting my answer. The shifting light of a candle battered by wind, that was what her body's movements resembled as she stared at me, with eyes that retained traces of red.

In the past, I would have jumped at the prospect of such a docile Saeko being in front of me. Now, however, I can only reprimand myself for allowing this to happen.

"You have nothing to apologize for. I was in the wrong, your worries were fair and your points valid. I have not been doing what I should have as your partner. I'm the one who should apologize."

"Eh? You're not… angry?"

"Not anymore. I was tired and reacted inappropriately. I am the one at fault here. I'm sorry, for leaving you alone all this time." I grab her hands and kiss them softly. "Can you give me another chance, Saeko?"

"… Are you being serious? You're not upset? You won't leave us?" Her quiver made me bite my lips, I pulled in, wrapping my arms around her shoulders.

"No, I won't leave. I won't run for the Diet either, I'll find a way to help my fellows while remaining close to you and Chizuru. So… Could you forgive me for being so insensitive towards you two?"

She slowly returned the embrace, ending up clutching my back strongly and once more softly, silently crying on my shoulder.

I remain there, simply hugging her. After some time, she calmed down and ended the contact between us.

"Kurechika, you truly… will stay with us? You'll try to be more present from now on?" She looked up at me, eyes still filled with uncertainty but having regained some of her sturdiness.

"I'll try, and if I don't make it just nag at me like you used to. Remember?" I smile at her, caressing her cheek and cleaning the remnants of tears in her eyes. "I won't ask you to forgive me now, but please be patient with me. I'll make an earnest effort from now on to be a more present parent and husband."

"Then… You'll stay with Chizuru during the weekends instead of being on the phone?" Part of her usual inquisitive stare returned, grabbing my chest.

"I will have to make calls, I'm sure. But I'll be by Chizuru's side from today onwards. I don't know as much about her as I should actually… But I'll take my time to get to know her better."

"And you'll help me with the chores? You won't complain about the food I make?"

"So long as you don't ask me to cook, I will. Cleaning the dishes, buying groceries or doing the laundry is nothing I can't do. And if it makes you happy, I'll try out any food you make for me, Saeko. Just… don't overdo it with the sauce."

"And… And can I… Can you listen to what I have to say? Will you start looking at me from now on?"

"… Yes, I'll make a conscious effort to be by your side. And even if I don't notice, come and talk with me. I might be tired, but that doesn't mean we can't talk things out."

She did her best, narrowing her eyes tightly, yet the tears ran away regardless. I hugged her kindly again, she returned it as well.

"I'm sorry for saying something so hurtful before, Saeko. I truly do not deserve someone as patient as you. So please give me a

chance to right my wrongs."

"Kurechika… I have to ask… Did you ever love me?" She asked, the monster resurfacing again. Her eyes now squinted, the sadness subdued slightly. "Be honest with me. Don't say these kind words just to please me. Did you ever-"

"Yes, I did. But not in the way you think."

"What do you mean?"

"I… I really enjoyed our talks about books. When we officially started our relationship, I had my doubts about us to be honest."

I close my eyes, leaning onto her.

"But during our first years together, even after Chizuru had grown, I admired how you dealt with everything. My work and my own assumptions made me close up and look away… And I am sorry for that. The frustration of our quarrels of late made me forget why I chose to marry you instead of just acknowledging Chizuru as my daughter."

I move back to look into her eyes. Holding out some of their defiance like a small fence against a rainstorm, she returned my gaze.

"I love you, Saeko. I love how you challenge me to be better, how you face everything unfazed, and how you can deal with so many heavy burdens on your own."

I run a hand over her cheek slowly, feeling the minute quivering in her, wiping the tears from right under her eye.

"I used to think you could take it, that's why I didn't ask if you were fine. And seeing you waver… made me think less of you sometimes, I admit. So all I ask is for you to give me another chance to regain your trust. However… If you deem me unworthy after what I've said… I won't oppose your wishes."

She closed her eyes, bringing both hands together. Her lips moving and twisting, she then held my gaze in complete seriousness.

"… You will be back home early, right?"

"Yes, I will."

"And I can rely on you to help me in taking care of Chizuru?" I nod. "And you'll take care of her no matter what happens between us?"

"Of course I will."

"… Even after I'm gone?"

"What are you saying? Are… Are you sick, Saeko?"

"No, it's just… You won't leave Chizuru alone if anything happens to me, right? You won't do that, right Kurechika?"

"Your doubt hurts me. I know I said many hurtful things to you tonight but I would never abandon our daughter. I know it wasn't enough, but I have been living with you two in my mind." I didn't want to have a daughter at the time. Chizuru wasn't in my plans. But that doesn't mean I'll abandon her. I won't be like my own father, I will keep my daughter safe.

"I see…" She looks away for a moment, rubbing her hands together. "And… you will… start taking our relation more seriously? I can… believe you, right?"

"Yes… I don't know how soon I'll reach what you need of me, but I will do my utmost effort to support you from now on, and not just with money. Can you give me another chance, Saeko?"

She looks away, pursing her lips. Bringing her hands together again, she took a moment to look at me again. When she did, she grabbed my face and kissed me.

"… If you were lying…. I swear you'll pay for giving me hope again." Her body still doing hiccups, her eyes seemed to have a few tears left in them. I hug her, our foreheads touching.

"I wasn't. I promise you I'll start to properly support you from now on, dear."

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*February 10th. 08:36 PM.*

*(Head's Private Room. Koubuin Main House. Osaka.)*

**[Takahisa]**

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"Regarding the negotiations, we have received confirmation from Tamase that he has arranged a meeting for next Thursday with some members of the UN's High Council." Bazora notified me of the news.

"That is good to hear. Who will be coming with us?"

"Takatsukasa-sama, General Makabe, and a small retinue from their families."

"I see. Hopefully this can be a pleasant meeting. What else?"

"Tomorrow you have a meeting with the representatives of Mitsuhishi Industries. Some of the parts our fellows have designed for the enhancement of the F-15 were chosen for the final model, and so, you have to be there for the customary bureaucracy."

"Well, that is also good to hear. Anything else of note?" He shakes his head, placing his notebook under his arm. "Now then Bazora, about… my request of some days ago…" I entwine my fingers and rest my elbows on my desk. He sighs, then ruffles his emerald hair softly.

"Yohime-sama has already arranged both matters. Mana shall be going to tend to the Mitsurugi girl while Maya has been selected as the caretaker of Shirogane's son."

"Oh? Is that so? I was convinced your daughter would be the one sent to Hiiragi."

When Yohime told me she thought the young Tsukuyomis would be good candidates for the tasks I needed to be tackled, considering both of them are part of our most trusted fellows, have been trained to be our counselors were we to need their guide, and they're used to looking after little ones due to also having to take care of their younger siblings from time to time, I paled at my shortsightedness. The answer was in front of me and I didn't see it, at all. Thankfully, I have my dear Yohime with me, for whenever I make such obvious blunders.

However, I was convinced Mana was to be the one selected to take care of Shirogane's boy. Maya has been influenced by Kazora's prejudices, after all. He has imprinted into her that unnecessary habit of bottling up feelings, of separating oneself from our common fellows. Yohime has decided it, so I shall trust in my lady wife's judgment. There must be a reason for this arrangement.

"Yes, I was also of the same opinion, my liege. However, Mana has developed some… troubling habits as of late."

"Troubling? Has she become colder to our peasants?"

"No, nothing of the sort. She seems to… wish to have a more close relation with her sister. She has tried to make Mion refer to her in less formal ways for some time now."

"Forgive me Bazora, I fail to see how this could impede Mana from performing the task I asked of her." I send a hand to my short ponytail, caressing it as I ponder once more his words, yet find no answer within. My retainer's eyes squint, his lips twist into an uncomfortable shape.

"Well… As it stands, Mana seems to wish to… be able to display her affection more openly. When in her trials, she's still as unwavering as she always was. However, thanks to those books she reads, she has expressed her disagreement over how I continue to further push Mion to hone herself." I reiterate, I cannot see how this could be an obstacle for her. "In fact, she has been showing a propensity to embrace Mion quite often. The little one has not yet been up to what I expect of her, I fear Mana has become too soft."

"So you believe she would spoil the boy?"

"Yes. She has said she wanted to be closer to Mion, and I don't doubt she would pamper the kid if she were to be put in charge of him. My apologies, Takahisa-sama. I have been careless as a father, I let Mana be swayed by these cheap sentimentalism displayed in those pages." He bows to me. Bazora, you're as resolute as ever I see.

"Now Bazora, don't be so extreme. I see no wrong in Mana wishing to express her feelings in private. While I do agree she has to learn when and how to do so, I see no need to show such restlessness over this. Do try to have a talk with her when you find the time, so that she doesn't forget when to draw the line."

"If you so order, I shall try to speak with her about this." He again stands upright, the bull back in his gaze. "However, I do have something else to mention."

"What is it?"

"Are you sure sending Mana to the Mitsurugi girl is wise?"

"… Are you doubting my judgment?"

"Yes, I am." He narrows his eyes, folding his arms behind his back. "Twins should never be recognized in the Koubuin House. The risk of entering into a succession dispute is very high, our unity would be put in jeopardy. Learning from the mistakes of the other Houses, we

have been stalwart in this matter. Were Mana to grow attached to the girl, and if the girl were ever to desire to regain her heritage… Your scar in your left hand should remind you of the risks you're playing with." I grimace, instinctively clenching my left hand.

"Tsukuyomi, that will not repeat itself. I have told you I wish to have Meiya rejoin the family. She will not be a hazard."

"We do not know that, my liege. We cannot foresee how she might react, how she might feel inside. If she were to rally some of our fellows against Yuuhi-sama, our power would be diminished. We cannot allow House Koubuin to crumble in these times."

"Meiya will not do anything of the sort. She has been raised well, and I will be here to guide her."

"… Your brother also had your father guiding him, and he still raised his blade at you when you were appointed as the next head."

"Me and Jinkuro never were on good terms. It was an obvious outcome. Meiya harbors no such foul feelings in her."

"For now. We cannot allow that to repeat itself, especially considering their resemblance. Think of all the problems that would cause Yuuhi-sama if the Mitsurugi girl were to plot against her integrity."

"That will not happen. Raiden has been raising her well."

"Surely you know what is said of twins. One gains all the good qualities while the other is left with only the foul traits. Considering how Yuuhi-sama is everyday…" He closes his eyes, leaving his words unfinished.

"You say Meiya is truly the shadow to Yuuhi's light?"

"Precisely."

"Then tell me Tsukuyomi, whatever shall I do? How do you suggest I should proceed in this predicament?" I lean back into my seat, sharpening my tongue against the inner side of my teeth.

"I have already voiced my opinion on this matter, on the night they were born." His brows tense downwards, as do mine knowing what he's about to say. "There is only one solution to this problem, only one path will ascertain the stability of the House. You have to kill Meiya before it's too late, before she either rises up against us or she is manipulated by other Regents to suit their agendas."

"I refuse. Do remember you're speaking of my daughter, exiled or not."

"Do remember you're speaking of a cursed child, do not forget what you yourself went through. Me and Kazora took your side, but we lost many of my own family in that struggle."

"You need not remind me, I know full well Jinkuro had the vast support of the Tsukuyomi elders. I know what you two had to do during that night. But this time it's different, we're united as of now."

"… I fear Mana might bring cracks into our hearts, my liege. No, anyone who gets attached to that girl will become a hazard to the family. Takahisa-sama, even if you desire to keep her alive, there is no reason to send anyone to her."

"Then, what happens once Raiden is too old to take care of her?"

"… There is a vast network of dungeons in the underground. We have many places to keep her locked up where she can't harm the House, where we can discipline her to fulfill her role as a body double." He said with remarkable aplomb, as if his own veins were filled with the night gale of December.

"And what has Meiya done to deserve such a fate?!" I hit my desk, rising from my seat. "Can't you see that this attitude is what will cause her to despise us? This unnecessary paranoia is what forced

Father to drive away Jinkuro during his early days. That is why he despised me, my brother felt that he didn't have a place in the family. He… His final words were not ones of greed, they were those of hatred and sorrow." I close my eyes, pain returning to my left hand as my brother's bloodied, crying face in his last moments returns to my mind. Such was the reason why he sought the dark parts of our story, why he embraced the accursed legacy of the shinobi that my late Father had pledged to forever seal. "I will give Meiya a place in this family, even if it's the last thing I do in this life. I won't let her heart be corrupted by the isolation I forced upon her in my weakness. And if you oppose me…" I put my left hand in my waist, moving the handguard of my Minaru Kamui upwards with my thumb. "I will remove you from my side, Tsukuyomi."

"There is need for such hostility. I am loyal to you, Takahisa-sama." He bows down deeply, remaining still and undaunted. "I cannot help but to bring this matter to you in this time. If you still desire to follow through, it is your decision. Just know that what I described might one day come to pass, so you should first meet the girl to see for yourself who she is. Yours, Yohime-sama's, and Yuuhi-sama's well-being will always be my priority, but I shall follow your orders on this regardless."

"… Sigh. I am thankful for all you do, Tsukuyomi. For all you had to do for me." I sit down, sheathing my blade. "But please understand. I want Meiya with us, I want to break this taboo. Are you with me, Tsukuyomi?"

He looked at me, narrowing his eyes. Giving a firm now, standing as firm as a mountain, enduring my gaze without so much as a quiver. The currents in his eyes showed no ripples nor taints, shining as clearly as the morning sun.

"To my last breath, my liege."

"I see… Thank you, Bazora. And please do try to… see Meiya in a different light. She has committed no sin, she's but a little girl left to her own luck." By her own Father, no less.

"… I cannot make any promises. But I will see with mine own eyes her worth if such a time comes."

"That is good enough for me. Now then, there was nothing else to tend to for today, was there?"

"No, nothing else sir. Dinner should have been prepared, do you wish to go now?"

"Yes, let us. I do need to speak with Yohime about how she'll relay the news to both Mana and Maya."

"Are you not going to do it yourself, Takahisa-sama?"

"Remember that we have the tests in the afternoon. I wish to spend some time with my squadron before the fights. Now then, let us go."

I stand up, letting out a long sigh. I always knew both Tsukuyomi brothers did not agree with me leaving Meiya alive. After all we went through when Jinkuro tried to usurp the position of Head that night… All of our fellows we had to bury… Even my own shinobi turned against me. I look at my left hand, where the wound I suffered that day lies. The wound my most trusted fellow once inflicted me in hopes of letting Jinkuro score a certain hit to my throat.

Meiya isn't my brother. That little girl won't be like him, because I won't leave her alone like my father left my brother. I will not allow you to fall to the darkness, Meiya. And that is why… I pray for Mana to be able to become someone Meiya can trust.

Sigh… Now, all that is left is to see how Maya adapts to taking care of Shirogane's boy.

# His Sisters

## Chapter 36: His Sisters

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*February 11th, 1989. 0 7:36 AM.*

*(Head's Room. Koubuin Main House. Osaka.)*

**[Maya]**

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For Yohime-sama to have summoned me personally, I wonder what does she need of me? Maybe she's going to assign me as Yuuhi-sama's retainer? As calm as I want to be, I cannot stop sighing, clenching my hands or continue to throw glances at the doorway.

It is true me and Mana have come toe to toe in our efforts, even as TSF pilots, and that the possibility of both of us being assigned as her retainers was being considered, yet there is part of me that wishes to finally come out on top of her. We have just been accepted into the Royal Guard, and placed on the Security Forces no less. I honestly had my doubts, I thought they would most certainly test us first, even if we are part of the Shinpan I was sure we would need some years in service before being assigned as guardians of the main house. I do not negate that being entrusted with this duty fills me with a warm feeling, yet it feels surreal to have attained it so quickly.

A sound makes me tense up, making me stand in attention. The door opens and Yohime-sama along the Grand Chamberlain enter the room. I stand up and give them a bow.

"Good morning, Yohime-sama, Grand Chamberlain."

"Good morning, Maya. I thank you for coming to meet me in such a short notice. Please sit down." Yohime-sama says as she stops by

my side.

I sit again as they go to their usual spot. Yohime-sama was wearing her usual long, cyan kimono decorated with white patterns of flowers. Her cascading lily hair done in her ponytail, she sat down and stared at me with that gentle smile she always has on her face.

"First, let me tell you that I have nothing but praise for your efforts in your trainings, Maya. The results you and Mana have achieved have left me and many others pleasantly astonished." It is rare for her to give honest praise so openly, even more considering she called for me alone to this meeting.

"Thank you, Yohime-sama. It is an honor to know I am up to par with your expectations."

"Haha, you're going far above them, my dear. Now that I have made that clear, let me tell you of the reason why I have summoned you." Her smile subdued, her amethyst eyes met mine unwavering as her gentle voice spoke slowly. "I have decided to entrust Mana with the duty of being Yuuhi's sole retainer."

I couldn't help to grip the edges of my dress and to gulp as the meaning of the words sank in. She surpassed me. What it is that I did wrong? What is it that I lack?

"It is a shame. May I ask what made you take such decision?"

"Well, Mana is more calm and kind. You take everything much more seriously than her, and she has a… certain trait that made me decide for her." Yohime-sama closed her eyes as she finished speaking, a troubled sigh escaping her lips.

"I see. Regardless, I shall continue to serve you as I have been doing so far." I bow again to them, they must be testing my resolve.

I cannot negate that I am upset. No, scratch that. I am most positively angry. What is this trait of hers that makes her a better fit

than me? All of our results are similar, I have been sparring with her for as long as I can remember, I even developed my own twist on our lessons with the Mugen Kidou to be able to defeat her someday. And yet…

"Now, Maya. That isn't the sole reason I called for you today. I have a special mission for you." I look up, she was again staring at me gently. Her calmness, that sweet smile she always has, she isn't lying. She still has a special use for me? Maybe… being the Mitsurugi girl's retainer?

"What would that be, my liege?"

"There is someone else I wish you to take care of. You shall depart immediately as soon as this meeting is finished." I knew it. She's sending me to aid Raiden-sama. "You shall head to the Hiiragi district in Yokohama, to protect a certain someone for an undefined amount of time."

Huh? The Hiiragi district? Yokohama? Why is she sending me to a commoner's slum outside of our area of influence? Oh, I see. An undercover mission! Of course, I am more fit to be on the field than Mana.

"Understood. And who would this person be?" It must be a VIP to send someone of the Security Forces as its backup.

"You shall be this boy's retainer. I consider you to be the best fit for this situation, and I expect you to take good care of him." The Grand Chamberlain hands me a folder. As I opened it, I felt a frozen cascade fall on me, just as it did during my training with Daizaburou-sama back on that mountain.

… They're sending me to take care of a commoner's child? Me, a member of the Tsukuyomi family, one of the personal guardians of the Koubuin Household, sent to be the retainer of a peasant?!

Where did I fail? What caused this punishment to befall me? This stain… This humiliation… To be sent to be the nanny of a baseborn… What have I done to deserve this?

"You seem rather displeased, Maya. Is there a problem with the mission I have entrusted to you?" Yohime-sama looked at me with narrowed eyes, sharpening her amethysts at me. When? How? What did I do to upset you so, my liege?

"Yohime-sama, why am I being sent to be the retainer of this peasant? Am I not part of this House's Security Forces?"

"Because I believe you to be the most fit for this task. While he is a commoner, he's the son of a member of our ranks, so I wish you to take care of him." Even if one of his parents was inducted into the Guard… "You shall be there not as a member of the Guard, but passing as his caretaker. The rest of your briefing shall be available to you on the documents that will be given to you before you depart. That shall be all."

"Excuse me, Yohime-sama. What do you mean I won't be sent as a member of the Guard?" It cannot mean what I think it means…

"That you will not go dressed with your uniform and won't take it with you, and obviously you won't have your katana with you. You shall pass as a commoner while you're there."

… Am I being kicked out of the Guard? Sent to mingle with commoners? This is… Father said me and Mana could coexist, that we could work together, and the same for Shion and Mion. And yet… Maybe they'll contact me with the real mission once I'm there? Please tell me it is so.

"I see. I acknowledge my mission, Yohime-sama. Is there any goal I have to achieve while I'm there?"

"No, your sole objective is to take care of that boy. Nothing more, you shall go meet the Captain of the guardians here, he'll give you

the rest of the details. That will be all." She signals to the door. I stand up and give her one deep bow, probably the last I'll ever give her.

It seems like I have been discarded. As painful as it is, all I can do is follow my orders. I can only pray that Shion manages to triumph where I have failed. I slowly leave the room with heavy steps, I cannot lift my gaze from the ground. Shining rays seep from outside, contrasting with my shadow full of gloom. What have I done to deserve this? Where did I fail? Why?

"Oh, you look most certainly down my cousin." Mana was coming towards the room I had just left, bearing her usual small smile. My fists clenched at the sight of her, I couldn't help but to look away. No, do not snap. The blame lays solely on me.

"Good morning, Mana. If you'll excuse me, I am busy right now."

"Hm? What is it? You look troubled, are you sure you're fine?"

I stop after a few steps, this may be the last time we will ever talk with each other as equals. For as much as I resent that she was the chosen one, I cannot negate that our rivalry is what made me who I am, what made me search for another path in the way of the sword. Even if all of it was pointless…

"Mana, allow me to speak frankly with you for just a moment." She opens her eyes wide, clearly surprised at my tone. "All of our bouts have been nothing but a pleasure to me. It was an honor to be able to spar with you all these years. I thank you from the bottom of my heart." I bow to her, which makes her flinch.

"M-Maya, what's the meaning of this? Why are you-" I face her again, unable to pronounce the words I wish to say, as a tickling sensation makes its way to the back of my head.

"I wish you the best of luck in your endeavors from now on. Now then, I must leave. Farewell, Mana." I take one last look at her in the

eye and resume my way. I did not stop when she called out to me, for I have no more words to give her. You shall get your answers in mere moments.

'You have bested me. Congratulations.' As foolish as it is, I couldn't bring myself to say those words. My lips refused to part, and a pair of shadowy hands kept me in place.

Is this truly how it ends? All my efforts… just to be sent to take care of a commoner?

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*Same Day. 07:44 PM.*

*(Hiiragi District.)*

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I make my way to the house I was told he lived in. If he's alone, why wasn't he sent to an orphanage? Why am I being sent to him, instead of placing another commoner to be his caretaker? No, why is Yohime-sama concerned with the well-being of this baseborn peasant?

Am I a fool for holding onto the hope that this is all just a cover, a smokescreen to avoid a leak of intel? This ungraceful dress I have been forced to wear, this coarse crimson cloth shouldn't even be considered a dress. This morning I wore our red uniform proudly and yet now… I arranged my hair on two bums, instead of leaving it free as I always did, and picked a different pair of glasses. I brought just the minimal necessities, despite being told that I should take anything I wanted with me. It truly felt as if I was being kicked out.

Let's see… This should be the place. All of its lights are out, I wonder if the little one is asleep? Is there anyone taking care of him at the moment? I ring the doorbell and wait, yet the minutes pass and no one answers, no matter how many more times I press the button and hear the noise.

… Did I came to the wrong house? I didn't take a wrong turn, did I?

"Excuse me, miss." A rather energetic voice addressed me.

Looking to my right I saw a small, slender woman with vibrant red hair at shoulder length, dressed in a crude cream colored blouse and orange worn down pants.

"What is it?" She doesn't seem to mind my stare and approaches me slowly.

"Do you have any business with the Shirogane?"

"Yes, I do. Who would you be?"

"Hello, I'm Haruna Kagami. I was good friends with the Shirogane when they were here, I still have the number of Kageyuki-san with me if you had any business with him." The woman spoke amicably and without a grain of respect. Do all peasants speak in such a crude way?

"Forgive me, but I do not have any business with him. I am Maya Tsukuyomi, I have been sent here as the caretaker of Takeru Shirogane. Do you know if he's here?"

"Oh! So that's what it was!" The woman clasped her hands together, drawing a huge smile for some reason. "If you're looking for Takeru-chan, he's in my house right now. Since his mother passed away last week, I've been taking care of him, thought it's hard to do so alone." She sighed and looked worn down for a second, but quickly recovered a bright smile. What a weird fellow.

So his mother died… And why am I being sent to take care of him then? Just send him to an orphanage, why do I have to waste my time here? No, focus Maya. This may be some sort of test.

"I see. Allow me to take this burden from you, I shall be taking custody of him from now on."

"Custody?" Kagami-san made a complex face, narrowing her eyes at me. "Hey, I don't know who you are or where you're from, but you better take good care of Takeru-chan!" She raised a finger at me. The gall… How dare she speak to me like that? A mere commoner telling me what to do? And so rudely too? Where are her manners?

"Kagami-san, please refrain from hurling words that could be misunderstood. I am his caretaker and I will be keeping watch over him. I do thank you for looking after him." I give her a small bow, which seems to ease her temper a bit. "Let us waste no more time. Can you bring him here?" The less time I spend talking with her, the better. It's enough that I will have to endure living with this child.

"Hmm… Why don't you just come on in? We were about to have dinner, and I don't think there's anything on the fridge on their house. If we're to be neighbors let's start with the right foot. It's a pleasure to meet you, but you better not hurt Takeru-chan, you hear me?" She briefly narrowed her eyes at me, trying to intimidate me with the small embers that came out from her orange eyes. Sigh… What have I done to deserve this?

I nod at her, choosing to remain silent. She shows me to her house, it's nothing more than a simple construction based on the American's houses painted in white. The inside of the house was painted in light green, with only the minimal furniture on it. Some simple sofas and a small rack with books on what should be the living room, further in there was a small square shaped table with four small chairs lined up on each side of it, and nearby there was the kitchen with nothing out of the ordinary about it. A 14" inch TV was placed on a small wooden rack near the table, it was tuned to a news channel where they were badmouthing the Royal Guard once more. So she's that kind of person…

"Hm? Oh, is something the matter?" The woman asked me, as I noticed a single hair of hers twirl somehow.

"No, nothing. I was merely focusing on the news." I look away from the screen, setting foot into the dining room.

"I'll go call the kids, please wait a while." She goes up the stair and I can hear some shouting above. She said kids, so I suppose she must have a little one too. Well, it doesn't matter to me anyways.

A few moments later, Kagami-san comes back with two small shapes hidden behind her.

"Come on, don't be shy! Why don't you introduce yourselves?" The woman patted their backs, and after looking at her they came out towards me.

"H-Hello, I'm Sumika Kagami, miss." Her daughter seems to have learned some manners.

She was wearing a matching attire with the same colors as her mother's, though she has longer hair and it's tied with a yellow ribbon. She seemed to be scared of me as she fidgeted in place. The other one however stared at me firmly, with a look that mixed anxiety and expectation. He has his hair at shoulder length, just like in the picture of his profile. He's wearing a black sweater and blue pants, as he looks at me directly he takes a single step forward.

"I'm Takeru, who are you?"

I cannot… How rude can a person be? You're telling me the person that raised this boy is now working on the Royal Guard? This is… Sigh, how immature of me, to get so worked up at a child.

"I'm Maya Tsukuyomi, your new caretaker. We will be living together from now on."

"Caretaker? What's that?" He looked at me with a confused expression.

"It means I'm tasked with your well-being, think of me as another relative of yours."

"You speak weird." Ugh, to have to endure such insolence. How dare he speak like that to an adult?

"Takeru-chan, this lady came from far away to be with you, you know?" Kagami-san crouched near him, patting his head. "You have to be good with her, yes?"

"I know." He pouts at her, rising both of his hands that were clenched into little fists.

"Now, don't get upset. You have to thank her for coming to be with you. I'll start serving dinner, so you talk with her a bit, yes?" He gives a nod and Kagami-san sends me a smile. She then goes to the kitchen.

Now, how should I approach the boy? He seems to be really rude, so I may have to reeducate him in many areas. I was told I also had to supervise his homework, so hopefully he-

"Um…" The boy came to my side and tugged at my dress.

"What is it?" He looks down for a second, but then looks up once more

"Where did you come from?" I doubt he knows what the Regent Houses are at his age. Hmm…

"I was employed in a similar place to where your father is working now. I was then tasked with taking care of you, for an undefined amount of time." The boy made another conflicted face.

"So, you were working with Dad? Is he coming home too?"

"No, I was in a similar place. I have never met your father, so I do not know whether he'll return or not." He looks down again, I suppose he must want to know of his whereabouts, but I cannot tell him that his father might not be able to come see him more than a few times a year, if at all.

"And for how long you'll stay?" Again he stares at me as his lips tremble a bit.

"I told you that I'll be with you for an undefined amount of time."

"Undefined?"

"Sigh… It means that I'll stay with you until further notice."

"So you won't leave?" His eyes shone a bit, looking at me expectantly.

"Not for the time being. I shall be keeping watch over you, so I expect you to behave accordingly." He pouted at my last words.

"You speak weird." I will have to change this rudeness of his.

"Shirogane, I would like you to address me with the proper respect. Surely you were taught how to speak to an adult?"

"Takeru." He said, rather angrily.

"Hm? What is it?"

"My name is Takeru. Don't call me Shirogane, I'm Takeru." Sigh… A kid being a kid, what did I even expect?

"Fine. Takeru, do you promise to behave correctly?"

"… Yes." He didn't sound honest and he broke eye contact.

"I'll have you know that Takeru-chan is quite the troublemaker. He's always doing something, can't keep himself quiet for a second!" Kagami-san says as she severs the dinner, some rice, miso soup and some simple vegetables with fish as a side dish. All synthetic obviously. So he's a troublemaker, my luck couldn't be worse.

Dinner was surprisingly not bad, though Kagami-san kept making up random arguments about the food's origins and some of the news

that appeared on TV. I should be patrolling our residence, not being stuck here with this peasants. I finish my dinner and prepared myself to leave.

"Well, thank you for your hospitality. I shall not burden you anymore. Takeru, let us go home." He tensed up as he looked at the little girl. She was holding his hands quite tightly.

"Don't worry Sumika, we'll see each other tomorrow and go play at the park!"

"… Really?"

"Yeah!"

They seem to be close, even if he lived here for a bit more than two months. We go towards the door, he says his goodbyes after giving a hug to Sumika, and then comes towards me. I give a court nod at Kagami-san and we leave.

As we entered his house and flickered the switch on, I found a similar state to the other one. A small table with four chairs, a small TV by the wall, a small normal kitchen. So this will be my home for… for how long? Until when do I have to stay on this shack?

"Um…" The boy pulled my sleeve, looking at me worriedly.

"What is it?"

"Um… You seem sad. Are you okay?" Sad? I suppose he's more perceptive than I thought, or was I being too obvious?

"I am fine. Now then, Takeru. I was told there was a small spare room here."

"Oh, the one in the back. That's where Uncle Koetsu stayed." He points towards the hallway beyond the stairs. After following him, I find a really small room with a futon and a small wardrobe. Well, simple is best as they say.

"Takeru, where is your room?"

"Mine is up, the one by the window. I always talk with Sumika there before going to sleep." He gives me a small smile.

"Hm… I see. Well, I suppose you should head to bed, we'll check everything tomorrow." I turn around but he tugs at my sleeves again.

"Um… Can I call you Maya-nee? I always wanted to have a brother or a sister." He says as he looks at me, again with a weird glow in his eyes.

"No, you shall call me Tsukuyomi. I am not your sister."

"But you said you were like family before." He seems a bit upset as he slightly puffs his cheeks.

"No is no. You shall call me Tsukuyomi. It would be troublesome for me if people thought we were related. Now, be a good boy and go to sleep." Honestly, how rude can he be? Are all peasants like this?

He lets go of my sleeve rather dejectedly and without another word he goes towards the stairs. Sigh… I was not ready for today. I awoke on my room on the Koubuin Household, being called by Yohime-sama to a private meeting. And I'll go to sleep on a common futon on a peasant's house, made into nothing more than the nanny of a baseborn.

I sit down as I leave my bags on top of the table and bring once hand to my forehead. Where did I go wrong? Why was I sent here? This year I turn eighteen but I'm still technically a minor, if not for the special permission I got I shouldn't even be able to be here taking care of him. I should be defending my liege, not this boy. I only hope he behaves accordingly and doesn't give me much trouble. Now, let's check what's in this house, I might need to buy some new things with the money I was given.

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*Around a week later. 05:37 PM.*

*(Street.)*

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"Maya-nee, don't pull me!" I was again holding his wrist and taking him home by force.

He insists on calling me that. People of the neighborhood already think I'm truly his sister, or a cousin at best. He's been nothing short of a bother. His grades are bad, his attitude is awful, he's always trying to run off to a nearby park. And he hasn't learned anything about poise or respect. I have tried to teach him how to properly address people, but my efforts are wasted on this boy.

"Maya-nee, why can't we go to the park?"

"Because you're behaving horribly. You got into another fight with that Gouda yesterday at school and you failed a test. You do not deserve to go to play, we shall be studying until you have to go to sleep."

"Eeh?! Don't be mean, I'm bad at math!"

He kept complaining until we reached his house. The only good trait he has is that he eats pretty much anything without complain, though I suppose peasants do not have much choice on what they eat. This synthetic food is truly disgusting, even if it is Rank C. Even if this is a rather nice part of the Hiiragi district, it's still a far cry from anything remotely decent. Add to this all the rude peasants and it becomes hell. I can't believe people here blame the nobility for everything, they blindly believe what the media says. Such insolence…

"Guh…" Takeru was groaning as he read a book.

Much to his displeasure, I had him practice all the things he got wrong, and put him to do all of his homework too. However…

"I don't get it! This is useless!"

"Takeru, history is not something I'd call useless."

"But it's boring." With such disrespectful peasants it is no wonder our nation is crumbling. I can't believe that most people here have a bad image of the Regent Houses and the Shogunate.

We're the ones that are taking care of you, providing for your needs. Yet, they speak like the Americans, saying that we should have 'more equality and freedom'. Pah! If you wish to have privileges you have to earn them. The Shogunate and the Royal Guard are the vanguard of the Empire in many areas. Trade, research, industry, militar security, all of it is thanks to the nobility. Only a few peasants have managed to reach the intellectual level of the nobles to be admitted into college according to Father. For how much longer will I have to stand this punishment? I wish to believe Yohime-sama is using this boy as an excuse to have me here without arising suspicions, to get a clear view of our people's hearts.

Takeru is slumped on the table, pouting. He's a waste of time. Nothing more than a waste of resources and effort. I cannot understand why I was sent to take care of him, I have received no words, at all. I got some funds deposited on a bank account, but nothing else.

I shouldn't be here… I didn't train for this… I can't help but frown, grabbing the knife tighter as a feeling like having ants crawling all over me made its way to me.

"Takeru, finish your homework."

"I don't wanna. This is boring, and I have until next Wednesday anyways."

"Takeru, that is an order. Finish your homework." I send a glare at him, making him rise from the table again, but he keeps staring at me.

"It's almost eight already. I did a lot today! I really did my best!"

"No, Takeru. That is the minimal effort that is expected of you, you should always be striving to be better. Becoming complacent just because you can solve what's put in front of you is something you must not do. You have to always try to be some steps ahead, especially when it comes to your education. And your grades are horrible, you need to start scoring better numbers or you'll regret it later." I spoke seriously to him, giving him honest advice.

"That's impossible! I can't do so much homework everyday!" However, my efforts are wasted as always.

"Regardless, you have to finish this today."

"… But I'm tired." He slumps into the table again.

"Sigh… Fine, do nothing if that's what you want." Why do I even try anymore?

…

"… Maya-nee, are you angry?" He comes to my side as I was cutting some onions.

"No, and I told you to not address me in such manner." It's humiliating enough to have to be here, I do not want people to keep assuming I'm a peasant.

"… But you said we were like family." Sigh… If only you had one praiseworthy quality, I could see some meaning behind this.

"Takeru, I am your caretaker. And while I am here to protect you, I am not your family. Now, if you won't continue with your homework, put everything in its proper place and wait for me to finish dinner." Looking to the ground, he goes and picks up his stuff and puts everything on his bag, and then goes his way back to his room.

I turn on the news, choosing a decent channel. It seems that there's a heated discussion on which TSF the IJA is going to buy next. The F-15 versus the F-16, huh. It is an obvious choice here, the F-15 is the better machine and is close combat ready. The journalists go on and on as they debate, passing over many topics in a very simplified manner.

Well… This is about done. To think that I would settle for something so simple… Anyways, I can only do my best. I'm sure Yohime-sama wouldn't leave someone like me here for too long.

*Ring! Ring!*

Hm? The phone? At this hour? Who could it be?

"Hello, Shirogane residence."

"Good evening, Maya. I hope everything is fine?"

"Y-Yohime-sama! Forgive the rude greeting!" S-She called me! Finally, my new orders! Can I return at long last? I can't keep my hands from grasping the receiver tightly and close to me as they shake a tiny bit.

"Do not be so alarmed, I have taken no offense. Now, Maya. Can you tell me how have you fared until now?"

I meticulously inform her of everything that has occurred in my time here. From the important details such as Takeru's awful performance in school and his usual routine, and my and Takeru's relation with the peasants, to the more mundane ones like the peasants opinions and customs, and the attitude of the boy towards my teaching efforts.

"I see. I thank you for your efforts, Maya. Please be more patient with the boy, I can sense you're displeased with him but do not let that get in the way of your work." She says with her kind, silky tone.

"Yes, Yohime-sama. However, allow me to ask you. Until when will I stay here? When will another caretaker be sent?"

"No other caretakers will be going there, Maya. Why do you ask this?" Her tone changed to an astonished one.

"I was referring to my stay here, my liege. When will I return to my post in the Royal Guard?"

"Maya, you seem to be misunderstanding something. You won't be returning to the Guard."

…

Huh? I must… I must have heard that wrong.

"Excuse me, Yohime-sama. Did you just say I won't be returning to the Guard?"

"Yes, that is what I said. You're Takeru's caretaker. I won't send a replacement nor will I call you back." Her words left me apalled. I'm no longer… I'm no longer…

My shoulders dropped, the cold cascade again fell on me. Despite having my glasses on, my vision grew blurry. I parted my lips but no sound came out from them.

"Maya, I entrusted you this duty. I believe you're the most fitting person for this task, so please do not be so shocked." She said in a matter-of-fact way, almost… almost as if she were scolding me.

"… Why? Why have I been sent to be a peasant's caretaker? Was I not trained to be one of your guardians?" Please, tell me. If you give me a reason… If I failed to meet your expectations, then I'll surrender to my fate. But please…

"Maya, please be calm. You seem to have taken offense at this mission so allow me to tell you, you should not be ashamed of this, for it is a task I can only ask of you. Now, my time is running short.

Do not worry about money, I will be sending you the same amount every month. Do take care of the boy. That shall be all. Goodbye, Maya."

…

She was clearly upset. I angered her. Something she can only ask of me? Something only a reject of the Guard could do? No other member of the Guard would disgrace its name with this task.

The dead tone resonated from the receiver and into me as I stood there in silence. After a few moments, I put it back and went to the table. Slumping into a chair, I buried my face between my arms, hitting the table with my chin. The ants again start crawling all over my back, I quiver in place trying to bite back the frustration.

I'm not even worth a confirmation. For someone of the Tsukuyomi family to be such a failure… They must want to erase my records, leave no trace of this unworthy student. All I'm good for is to be the nanny of a peasant. When? When did I make a miss?

…

Drawing a long breath I somehow calm myself. It could be worse. I could be dead. Or sent as a 'comfort corporal' to a base. All I have to do is deal with the boy. But, what about his father? Why hasn't he come to take care of him? Maybe the man… asked for me? Was I sent here as his next spouse? The idea made me clench my fists in anger.

… No, banish the thought out of your head. I'll never allow a peasant to lay a finger on me, much less the father of that crude boy. I'm not… I'm not…

"Maya-nee?" Looking to my left, I saw Takeru looking at me, eyes downwards and worry painted all across his face.

"S-Sorry. I was just resting my eyes. Dinner is ready, allow me to-"

"You're lying." He said glaring at me, slowly getting a bit closer.

"Takeru, it is rude to interrupt people when they're talking. Haven't I told you that?"

"You're crying. Are you hurt?" He didn't budge and remained looking at me with worry. He's right, however. For me to be so weak to shed tears… Maybe Yohime-sama saw this weakness of mine and that's why she sent me away? A blade that bends so easily cannot be trusted, perhaps.

"That is none of your concern. Come on, let's have dinner." I stand up and try to go to the kitchen, but Takeru stops me as he grabs my arm. "Takeru, let me go. I cannot serve us our food if you-"

"I do care." He says as he pulls my arm, clearly angry this time.

"What?"

"You said I didn't care, but I do. Why were you crying?" His tiny hands grasp my arm tightly. Sigh… Don't make this more difficult.

"As I said, you shouldn't worry about that. Let go off me, now."

He slowly lets go of my arm, but after that he hugged my waist, laying his head on my stomach. I try to release me from him, but she grabs my dress strongly, not wanting to let go

"Takeru, stop this foolishness at once. If you don't, I will have to hit you." You're usually a bother, but this is too much. All because of you… If you weren't here…

"Maya-nee, why are you sad?" He looks up at me, furrowing his brows. Why does he care? It's because of you that I'm…

"I am not. And for the last time, I am not your sister. Takeru, let go off me. Now." I push his face away, but he starts struggling.

"I won't let go until you tell me." His tiny hands tug at me with surprising vigor.

Why do I have to waste my time with you? Why won't you listen?! I always… I trained… I lived for… I didn't spend my whole life training… to end up as the servant of a coarse peasant!

*"I told you to release me!"* I raise my hand and slap his face away. He falls back with a loud thud, the sound making me conscious of what I just did.

I smacked him seriously. I hit a children. There was no reason for me to do so, I could have got him off me easily without resorting to violence. The ants again crawl on my back as I shudder.

I'm calm and composed all the time, I didn't knew I could… Yohime-sama must have seen through me, she must have noticed during my bouts with Mana how I bottled up my feelings, how someday they would release, and decided that I wasn't fit to be on the Guard.

If I snap so easily, and at a children no less, how could I ever protect Yuuhi-sama? Or anyone of the Koubuin family? I always thought it was my best trait, that I could remain cool regardless of the situation I was confronted with, and yet now… I truly am not fit to be on the Guard. I'm… When did I…

Takeru was rubbing his cheek on the floor. As I tried to take a step towards him, my throat dried up. He looked at me trembling as tears started to come out of his eyes. I tried to speak up, to move towards him, and yet my body didn't react to my commands. Until the noise pierced my ears.

"Oooh… Waaaaaaaaaaah!"

He started crying, quite strongly at that. W-What do I do? How do I calm him down? A stinger struck on my heart, making my chest hurt. I go to his side and I place my hands on his shoulder, telling him to calm down. However no words seem to reach him.

All I was taught to do was to get results. I was trained in every thing a Royal Guard or a retainer might need to know. Dealing with sad children is not something I was taught, feelings were never part of the equation. I was not taught how to overcome this kind of situation. I learned how to aid others in case they were troubled, but it was related to my mission in the Guard. How to guide Yuuhi-sama, or the Mitsurugi girl, to her full potential, to support her from the shadows, and to be her consultant when she needed advice.

However, I was never taught to deal with a crying children. I can't just send him to sleep. I can't just tell him to stop crying, and there is no advice to give him. What… What can I do for him? Is this… the trait that I lack? Am I too cold to be a retainer?

"Takeru, please… forgive me. I didn't truly wish… to hurt you. Please don't cry."

"Oooh…. Waaaaaahh!" He remains on the ground, crying nonstop.

What can I tell him now? My mind searches pointlessly for words, my arms feel heavy all of a sudden. I wasn't trained for this. I… How can I calm him down? There isn't a surefire way to… Wait… Right before I hit him, he was…

I slowly sit by his side and wrap my hands around him, pulling him to me. He puts his tiny hands around my neck as he continues to sob. I never really gave a hug to anyone so I don't know if this is enough to calm him down, but I have no other idea right now. I'm such a failure… to release my frustration onto a child…

"Takeru, it's alright. Please don't cry, I won't hit you again. Please… forgive me."

"Maya-nee, are you going to leave too?" He didn't break our embrace, so I could hear his tattered voice right on my ear. I do not wish to cause him more pain, and I'm not going back it seems.

"No, I am not leaving anywhere."

"Liar." He sniffed, I patted his head and broke our hug, bringing him to face me.

"Takeru, I won't be-"

"You said you wanted to go somewhere on the phone." He looked at me, hands and eyes shaking.

… He was listening? I doubt he knows what the Royal Guard is but… He must have heard me complaining about him. He may have seen how apalled I was after the call. Is that why he approached me?

"See? You're leaving, right?" He clawed at my dress, and once more tears ran down his cheeks. I gulped as I closed my eyes. I have to give him some reassurance, I did enough wrongs today. I clear my throat and speak up in my usual, calm tone.

"Takeru, I am-"

"Is it because I'm bad? Do you hate me?" He kept staring at me worriedly as his voice seemed to break again.

"No, it's… Sigh… It is true that you leave much to be desired. But I-"

"Please don't leave!" His scream froze me mid speech, I couldn't look away from his pleading eyes as he cried, grabbing my dress. "I-I'll get better! I'll study more! So please don't leave!" His voice was muddied by the tears, his hands trembled on me. The stinger fell deeper, making my chest hurt more with every word he uttered.

I was careless to say I wanted to leave on the phone, but I never expected him to be listening. But what can I… D-Don't look at me like that.

"T-Takeru, I'm not going anywhere. So don't cry anymore." I pat his head, talking to him slowly. But his tears don't stop and he doesn't let go.

"Dad said the same. A-And he left too."

"Your father will come back."

"When?" A knot forms on my neck as his eyes stared right back at me. "See? He left too." His tears fall down unrestrained.

I have no idea where his father is. For all I know, he might really be dead. Then, what can I do? He doesn't seem to be listening.

"Takeru, I don't know where your father is, but I am not leaving."

"Liar! Mom said the same, Dad said the same. You're gonna leave me too! Ooh… Waaaaaaaah!"

I once more try to hug him, but his wailing doesn't stop. His trembling frame on my arms, how sad he sounds… How did I not notice this? How did I not see how sad he was?

During this week we spent together I wasn't truly looking at him. I'm sure there were signs in his behavior, signs I didn't pick up. No, the very first day… He asked me if I was going to leave him. And he insisted on treating me like his sister, he always did everything he could to go play with his friends. It was in plain sight, he didn't want to feel alone. And all I did… was push him away. And yet, he still worried about me after hearing me wanting to leave him, and then I harmed him. I… I truly am a failure if I couldn't see something so obvious, letting my frustration control me.

"Takeru, it's alright. I'm not leaving you." He looks at me, his eyes made a tempestuous ocean.

"R-Really? You promise?"

"Y-Yes, I promise. I won't go anywhere. So please, calm down."

He again hugs me, but his sobbing is now more calmer. I don't know how much time passed, I just remained hugging him, sitting on the ground, stroking his hair slowly in silence as the stinger drove itself

into my heart. At some point I also had to start taking breaths to calm myself down.

"Takeru? Have you calmed down?" He nods. "Forgive me. I didn't… mean to hurt you. I am not used to… well, dealing with other's feelings."

"So you won't leave?" He breaks our hug and looks at me, his eyes reddened as the mark of my hand on his cheek.

"No, I will stay with you. C-Can you forgive me for hitting you? I swear I will never harm you again."

"Yes." He said between sobs, and then he moves back and rubs his eyes slowly.

"Well… Let me go warm our food. Please wait a moment."

He didn't speak up, not even when I served him his food. We ate in an awkward silence, since I'm now used to him always talking about something at the table. When he finished he took his plate to the sink, and then came to my side hesitantly.

"Um… Thanks for the food, Maya-nee."

"I-It is alright. It's my duty to take care of you." I never thought talking to a child could be so hard.

"Um… You really won't leave?" His eyes again locked on mine.

"No, I'm not leaving." He took a step forward, rising his tiny fists up and spoke up with a creaking voice.

"I… I'll get better. I'll really study more, and I won't fail any more tests! So… So please…"

"Takeru." He flinched when I addressed him with my usual tone as I tapped my glasses.

"Y-Yes?"

I shouldn't chase after dead ends. Yohime-sama was clear, I am not returning to the Guard. Even if I mend my mistakes, even if I grow from this experience, she may already have made her decision. So… If I am to remain here, I shall perform my orders to the best of my abilities. For a Tsukuyomi, failing like this is nothing short of a punishment in and of itself. However… I found a stain on me. And I do not like this side of myself I saw today.

So, my first step to overcome it is to help him honestly. I pat his head and return his stare. I am his retainer and guardian, regardless of who he is I have to try my best. And… baseborn or not, I was trained to protect my fellows, I won't keep dirtying the Tsukuyomi name with my inexcusable behavior.

"If you wish to get better, you can rely on me. I am here to take care of you, I am your guardian. So, forgive me for harming you today. Let us do our best together from tomorrow on." His eyes regain a bit of light as he nods.

"Yes, I'll do my best. So… Can I keep calling you Maya-nee?" His stare again changes to one of worry. I suppose… that trying to give him some emotional support is going to be my first real challenge.

"Yes, you can. I… will not object to you calling me that."

"R-Really?"

"Y-Yes, really. You can… refer to me as your sister, Takeru." He jumped at me, hugging me tightly again.

"T-Thanks, Maya-nee! I love you!" He may be a kid… But it's still embarrassing to hear him say that so honestly.

"A-Alright, it's fine already. Calm down, please?" He nodded and let go. "It's really late, so you go to sleep. I'll clean the plates. Even if

tomorrow is Sunday, you shouldn't stay up late. So, don't cry anymore. I will remain with you."

"Yes, I won't cry. So you don't cry anymore, Maya-nee. A-And if you feel sad, just tell me. I'll give you lots of hugs when you feel bad." Hugs? Did his mother gave him hugs when he was sad? I… suppose physical contact does work as a form of reassurance.

"Takeru, why do you like hugs so much?"

He looks at me confused at first and then rather annoyed, and puffing his cheeks he answered something I did not expect him to say.

"Because that's how I can give you my love so that you can feel better." Wha… What did he just…

"L-Love? Takeru, why do you… No, who taught you of this?"

"Dad did." Ugh, what was the man even thinking?! "Dad told me that hugs give people the power of love, and that I should give hugs to the people I like to give them strength when they're sad." Huh? Strength? Was this his father's way of cheering him up?

"And you'll give me strength when I feel sad?" Such a childish idea. Though I suppose that for them their families and friends are all they have. But still…

"Yes, because I love you." He doesn't even know what he's saying, but even so I deserve no sign of affection from him. How can you show me kindness after I… "You're always talking with me, you always cook super good things for me, you help me with my homework and you're my sister! So I don't want to see you sad. A-And I will do my best in school too! So please smile, Maya-nee." Is he… praising me? Despite his shivering frame, he still looked at me with the same kind light his eyes had all these days.

"Smiling is… something I don't do. I do thank you for your compliments." It is nice to hear he isn't ungrateful. I suppose he was taught a good thing or two. Despite what I did to him… he still…

"But you never smile and you always look so sad. And after the call you were crying. Why? Did someone you like go away?" Go away? He did say that he didn't want me to leave him… Is he talking about death, perhaps? Did his mother cry in front of him before passing away?

"No, no one has left. But… Why do you ask that?"

"Because Mom cried a lot when Grandma left somewhere, and Dad cried a lot when Mom didn't come back from the hospital. They took me to this really weird place and there was a rock with Mom's name. Dad told me she went with Grandma." His tone changed and grew small, as it was clearly painful to him to say this things. I slowly stroke his hair for a brief moment.

"Takeru, do not worry. I was… merely shocked. It was a grave mistake on my part to have harmed you. Can you forgive me?"

"Yes. So… You really won't leave?"

"No, I will keep living with you here. Don't worry, I'm not going anywhere."

"And you're not sad or angry?" I give him a nod. I won't falter again, I will not let my temper hinder my judgment ever again. And I definitely won't harm you or let you cry again.

"I am not. Now, let's go to your room." I grab his hand and we go to the stairs together. He grabbed my hand very tightly and leaned on my arm. He refused to let go and asked me to stay by his side until he fell asleep. I remain by his side, softly stroking the cheek I hit him with the back of my hand.

I can't believe myself… Takeru, I'm sorry. I won't… I will do a better job in taking care of you. Regardless of my standing, I have a mistake to mend.

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*A Saturday around month later. 07:12 AM.*

*(Takeru's House.)*

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Breakfast is almost ready. The news drone on the same usual stuff with their anti-nobility propaganda. How do the common folk not get tired of these blatant operations?

"Takeru, breakfast is ready."

…

Why isn't he answering? I already woke him up. Sigh… Is he upset that I made him do so much homework yesterday? I go to his room and knock on the door, but he doesn't answer. I open it, and yet I'm met with an empty room showered by the light that comes from the window.

"Takeru? Is he asleep again?" I go towards his bed but… those are just his sheets and pillows tucked together.

I look inside his closet, under the bed. He's not here. W-Where did he go?!

… Did he run away? What am I… What will I do if anything happens to him?! I have to find him! No, deep breaths Maya. Maybe he went to the Kagami's house because he was bored.

As I go down the stairs, just before I went to grab the keys, I noticed the door to the backyard was slightly open. As I went towards it, I could hear something hitting the ground. Looking into the backyard

from the opening, I saw Takeru holding a wooden sword, one that was too big for his tiny hands, trying to swing it very awkwardly.

"Takeru, what are you doing?" He flinches at my words, as he turns to look at me I see him tense up and his hands trembling a bit.

"N-Nothing. Just playing outside."

"And when did I allow you to do so?" I say, tapping my glasses. He looks down to the ground, as he speaks up in a low tone.

"… You didn't told me I couldn't go outside." Sigh… Takeru being Takeru. At least tell me you're going outside.

"So, you were playing with a sword?"

"Y-Yes." He averts his eyes, slightly moving the wooden blade to a side.

What am I gonna do with this kid? Imagine what he could do with this if he took it with him somewhere. I can see him attacking someone in one of his random fits of anger.

"Takeru, give me that sword. I do not know where you got it, but you have to give it back." He takes some steps backwards, hiding the blade behind him.

"No, it's mine." He says firmly, returning an angry glare.

"Takeru, do not lie. I know there is no such thing in this house, breakfast's ready too so hand that over to me now." Why, you're always causing trouble. I'll have to lock the backdoor too. I can't believe I made such a miss for so long. What would I do if you got hurt with that thing?

"I'm not lying, Dad left it for me!" He pouts at me, puffing his cheeks. His father?

"What are you saying? Did your father practice kendo?"

"Kendo?" His looks at me curiously as he tilts his head sideways. He doesn't even know what that is?

"I'm asking you whether your father knew how to use a sword."

"Oh! Yes, he did. He told me that Uncle Koetsu taught him when they were in school. He said that he thought that the samurai rangers were really awesome, and that's why he learned to use a sword." He says with a smile. Are this 'samurai rangers' the Royal Guard? So his father admired them, huh. I thought he would be like the rest here, who despise the nobility.

"So, you admire the samurais? Did your father also look up to them?"

"Yeah! He told me once that the blue ones are the smartest and strongest people in the Empire! And that the purple Grandpa is the one that takes care of all of us!" Did he just…

"Takeru, you can't call the Shogun a purple Grandpa. It is extremely rude and unproper to refer to our ruler in such a way." How did you get raised to end up like this? Going from admiring the Guard to badmouthing the Shogun… That's par for the course for you, I guess.

"But he looks like a Grandpa and is always dressed in purple…" I tap my glasses again, making him flinch.

"Takeru! I do not wish to hear you saying that again, understood?" He nods nervously twice. At least he listens sometimes now. "Anyways, breakfast is done. Let us go back inside." He looks at me fidgeting a bit.

"You won't take my sword away?" Sigh… Why did his father left him that blade anyways? Did he not think all the problems it could cause? I mean, I'm sure he knew his son better than me.

"No, I will not. Come on, let's go." I go up to him, grab his hand and take him inside again.

As I took him to the bathroom to wash his hands, I noticed his arms were full of bruises again. I didn't see those when he got back from school yesterday.

"Takeru, where did you get hurt like this?" He looks away pouting as he drops his wooden blade near a wall.

"… I was practicing and fell over."

"Why were you practicing with it? Do you want to learn to use a blade?" He looks at me as we enter the bathroom, eyes shining.

"… Maya-nee, do you think that I'll see Dad again if I'm good with a sword?"

"Why do think that?"

"Dad told me he was going to fight with the samurai rangers, and that only people that are reaaallyyyy good with a sword can go with them." So that's what he told him about his induction in the Royal Guard. "So if I'm good, do you think I'll be able to see Dad again?"

… The chances of him joining the Guard are nonexistent, with his bad attitude and average skills. Yet, who am I to crush his dream?

"Maybe, if you train enough. But just like with your homework, if you don't put in effort daily you won't truly excel at it."

He washes his hands, looking to be thinking about something. Hmm… Couldn't I use this to motivate him a little more? It's not like I lose anything by trying.

"Say Takeru, would you like me to train you?"

"Huh? Train?" He closes the water and looks at me confused.

"I could teach you how to use a blade properly. That way, you could get closer to seeing your father again."

"Really?!" He comes up to me, staring at me with stars in his eyes. It took some effort to speak up under his gaze.

"Yes, but only if you promise to be a good boy, do your history homework and reread your lessons everyday with me. What do you say?"

"Yes, I'll do it! Thank you, Maya-nee. I love you!" He jumps at me and hugs me tightly.

How many times have I told you to stop doing this? He seems to be truly happy… so I suppose I can let this go this time. I certainly didn't expect him to start showing his thankfulness in this way. I pat his head slowly as he looks up at me.

"Alright, you can release me now. We can start your training after we eat."

"Yes, I'll do my best!"

We went to the table and as usual he devoured everything in his plate. Now he looked honestly happy, unlike the first week were he was happy but also somewhat sad, and I didn't got a clue. I suppose I could try to teach him the basics of swordsmanship, but I should take it slowly. I do not think he could learn how to fight with the necessary skill, he's too rough, has not an ounce of grace on him, and with his temper I cannot see him being able to attain the mindset needed to truly master the sword. But it might do him good to learn what discipline is. And I prefer him when he smiles like this, even if it means more hugs.

"Thanks for the food." He says as he finishes and then leans back on his chair, eyes closed.

"It's good to see you never lose your appetite."

"Um… Maya-nee, you really will help me train?" He again stared at me with those glowy eyes again.

"Yes, I shall train you. But I expect you to be serious about it and to keep your promises. Are we clear?"

"Yes! Thank you, Maya-nee."

"Now, let's go to the backyard." He nodded in excitement as he followed behind me.

Though, it is a relief to have learned that his father saw the nobility with good eyes. I suppose they did check his background before inducting him. Takeru will eventually have to serve in the army too once he gets older if the situation doesn't improve, so this might be a nice chance to give him a head start.

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**A few hours later…**

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"Sei! Hya!" Takeru cried as he kept swinging the sword.

… I can't believe my eyes. He's… He's good. At first, he was truly rough, his movements were as unconnected as they could get, his footing was nonexistent, yet after seeing me move twice and heeding my advice… By the late afternoon, he's already following a pattern on his slashes, his steps now are somewhat coordinated, even if his overall stance is still rough. He learns fast but most importantly…

"Urya!"

He doesn't seem to want to stop. Determination is the core of everything, but it alone isn't enough. Yet… Seeing him right now, swinging that sword despite how tired he seems to be, I somehow think I might have lacked motivation when I started. However, as his guardian, I have to prevent him from overworking himself.

"Takeru, this is enough for today. You did very good for a first day." He smiles at me as he comes closer.

"Really? So, you'll keep training me?"

"I suppose. Will you start studying history seriously?" I tap my glasses, which is something that usually scares him, but this time he smiles widely at me, stars filling his eyes.

"Yes! I'll do it!" How odd, to see him so motivated. But it is good, I found his trigger.

"Then we have our deal. I shall train you, Takeru."

"Thanks, Maya-nee!" And again he hugs me. W-Well, if it makes him happy…

"Well, let's go back inside. You need a bath and I have to prepare dinner."

He nods and we return inside. It truly is surprising, he does have potential to be a decent swordsman. That alone is not enough to join the Guard, but I suppose that it's enough to keep him motivated. He has been doing an effort to study more so with this I'll round up all of his weak points. Fixing his manners does seem to be an impossible ordeal though. Sigh… If only he could show a tiny bit of respect… Well, he's still a kid. I'm sure he'll change once he matures.

*Ring! Ring!*

"Hello, Shirogane residence." I said as I picked up the receiver, but the voice who replied was one I certainly didn't expect.

"Maya, is that you?"

"M-Mana?! Why are you calling?!"

"Why are you so surprised? D-Did I call at a bad time?" She sounds concerned as she spoke in a hushed tone.

"No, it is fine. But why are you calling me?"

"Ahem… Well, Yohime-sama ordered me to call for you. She wishes you to return to the Main House tomorrow."

"… Huh? She wants me… back in Osaka?"

"Yes, that is what she said. I wasn't told of where you were or what you were doing, but I suppose it must be an important mission. I'll be waiting for you at the train station with a limo, just tell me at which hour you-"

"Mana, I'm… I wish to speak with Yohime-sama, if it's possible."

"Um… She's in a meeting right now. I was told to get confirmation from you, so will you call us back or-"

"I have a… report for Yohime-sama. I wish to tell her of this before I return." What am I saying? Why… do I feel the stinger on my heart again?

"Understood. I will inform her of it. And, you're alright I hope?" Always so kind. Now that I think about it, she might have been a better fit to be his retainer than me. No, that would have meant me staying with Yuuhi-sama. Sigh… She was better after all.

"I am fine, yes. How is Shion?"

"No changes. She's still beating Mion soundly and is still giving us quite many problems. You were the only one she ever listened to, so she's been very quick to show her anger as of late." That is nice to hear. Shion coming out clearly on top is a good sign, even if her temper is still giving her problems.

"Thanks for the data. Well, I shall be awaiting my call. Goodbye, Mana."

"Yes, goodbye." She hangs up and I rest the receiver down.

… Why did I refuse to go back? Because of Takeru? I mean… I just found a way to motivate him, he's showing decent results on his studies, and today's training was…

His crying face resurfaces within. The stinger picks at me, making me bite my lips.

I promised I wouldn't leave him alone. Despite how much I loathed being here, he taught me a valuable lesson and he has been doing an earnest effort to be better. And… I do not like it when he cries, and if I leave he will cry like that again. It is most foolish, I resented this from the very beginning and now that I have been given the chance to return to my old life…

No, all these days we've spent together left a mark in me. All that came before that should stay aside, for I must decide whether I wish to… to remain here with him. I mean, if I was called back to Osaka there are two different outcomes. One, she's calling for me to pick up my belongings and to never return, or she wants me back in the Guard.

But in the second, what will happen to Takeru? My trembling shoulders, my tense breathing… I let out a sigh as I drop my shoulders. Why do I feel a knot on my chest? Why can't I stop tightening my lips?

Deep breaths. I will worry about that when-

*Ring! Ring!*

Seems like now's the time.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Maya. Mana told me you had a report for me?" Despite her voice sounding with her usual silky tone, I could feel a hint of annoyance lurking behind.

"Yes, Yohime-sama. I wished to inform you of what has transpired since our last talk." I told her of what happened this weeks, yet I couldn't bring myself to tell her that I hit him.

"And Maya, why is this worthy of my attention?"

"B-Because you're calling me back to Osaka, my liege. What will happen to Takeru while I'm gone?"

"I thought you didn't want to be there?" She replied instantly, showing her blade through every word.

"… It is true that I did resent this mission you've given me at first. But these days I've begun to see some merits in the boy. I believe he may be worth the effort. As I said, he adapted very quickly to my teachings these last few weeks. And, if I were to leave, who would take care of him? Will his father come back?" Her tone remained slow, but now I felt no anger in her.

"So, am I right to assume you wish to remain as his retainer?"

"I… I just wish to know who-"

"Maya, if I ordered you to return to your duties in the Guard right away, what would you answer?"

… Is there no middle ground available? Isn't this an irony? If… If it's one or the other, then this is my chance to return to-

*"Please don't leave me!"* His voice echoed within me, making me clench my fists bitterly as I bit my lower lip softly.

He taught me much, he isn't an ungrateful boy like the other peasants, to leave him alone… The damage it would do to him… I…

"Yohime-sama."

"Yes?"

"Are you… telling me to choose between returning to the Guard or remaining as his retainer?"

…

"That shall be enough, Maya." Eh? What is she- "I shall be expecting you to visit me tomorrow. I wish to speak with you here. You can bring the boy if you wish. That is all."

"W-Wait, Yohime-sama. What do you-"

"Maya, you shall remain as the retainer of Takeru. However, allow me to tell you that I used your doubts to test you. You were never kicked out of the Royal Guard."

"Huh?! T-Then, why was I sent here?!"

"I shall answer that question tomorrow. Well then, I will be expecting you two. Goodbye, Maya." She hung up before I could interject.

I was never… kicked out? That means… I lashed out to him unnecessarily? I put the receiver in place, breathing a large sigh.

What a fool I was. I truly was blinded by my pride. In a way, this might have been for the best. If I ever had to deal with peasants I would have reacted very aggressively to them. But now that I got to see and interact with them, I can see them a bit differently. And more importantly, I learned that just because I thought I was better doesn't mean I actually am.

Takeru is in a way stronger than me. From his eyes, he lost all of his family and when I hit him instead of growing resentful, he tried to apologize for a wrong he didn't commit, and once I started to properly support him he began to show results. He's also very kind, most of the time I have to go make him sleep, if I don't he would just stay talking with Sumika all night long. The Kagami already know Sumika's father died during an accident on his base, and Takeru is always keeping her company. He's also lonely and yet he's always

doing his best to make others smile. Giving others strength with the power of love, huh. As foolish as it sounds, he does seems to be able to do just that.

Well, enough introspection for today. Dinner has to be made, and tomorrow we have to go to…

…

For the Holy Emperor, I have to take Takeru to the Main House. He's going… He's going to go around greeting people like he usually does, maybe even giving them hugs. No, what am I going to do when he calls me sister?! Considering what I heard of Shion, if she hears him calling me Maya-nee or sees him hugging me… or both…

"Sigh… Tomorrow will be a tough day…"

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*The Next Day. A bit over noon.*

*(Osaka Train Station.)*

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"So, where are we going Maya-nee?"

"Takeru, please. I told you to not call me that for today." He pouts again. What am I gonna do with you?

"But you're Maya-nee. And where are we going?"

"Sigh… We're going to meet the person that sent me to be your caretaker. So please be polite and behave well. If you don't I won't train you."

"Eh?! Why?"

"No more questions. You be a good boy today, yes?" He seems troubled as he gazes at me but he gives a nod.

We leave the station and I look for either a limo or Mana. Nothing's on sight. Maybe they're still not here?

"Maya-nee!" Takeru pulls at my sleeve.

"Takeru, I told you to-"

"Look! A samurai ranger!" Hm? What did he-

I see towards where he's pointing and see Mana walking to us dressed in her red dress of the Guard. Compared to her, I must look like a… No, banish those thoughts.

"Long time no see, Mana. We're ready to depart." I greet her as she got closer, but her eyes weren't focused on me. Is she… Is she blushing?

"Maya… Who is that?" She spoke in a hushed tone, staring at Takeru.

"Hm? You weren't told of him? He's Takeru Shirogane, am I currently his retainer. Takeru, introduce yourself."

"I'm Takeru. Who are you?"

"Takeru…" I tap my glasses, he flinches and gives Mana a bow.

"M-My name is Takeru Shirogane. Who would you be?" Finally. See? It's not that hard to be polite.

"… I'm Mana Tsukuyomi, I'm a cousin of Maya. It's a pleasure to meet you, Takeru." Mana spoke to him softly, smiling and blushing all the while. What is wrong with her?

"You're Maya-nee's cousin? Maya-nee, are you a samurai ranger?!" He looks at me with stars in his eyes. I told you to not call me that! Sigh… Takeru being Takeru.

"Sigh… Yes, one that was recruited not so long ago." His eyes widen as I see a galaxy on them. It's… surprisingly hard to endure his glistening gaze of adoration.

"Maya-nee?" Mana looked at me in shock, with her mouth slightly open.

"Ahem… You see, Mana. Takeru likes to address people informally, and despite my best efforts he does not want to change his ways of speaking. He also decided to call me that and no amount of scolding could change his decision." I tap my glasses as I spoke. Mana switched glances from Takeru to me.

"I see. Well, let us go to the limo. This way." I nod, and grabbing Takeru's hand we go towards our ride.

We enter and we start making our way towards the Main House. Takeru tried to stare out the window, but I grabbed him and kept him in place. With two rows of seats opposite to each other, Mana was in front of us giving her back to the driver, as I tried to keep Takeru in place.

"So, Maya. Can you explain to me what is the reason for you being his retainer?" Mana seems… weird. She was slightly leaning forward, clearly staring at Takeru.

"I wasn't told. Yohime-sama said she would explain that today."

"Well… Takeru, do you like living with Maya?" He drew a big smile and, without surprise, he hugged me again.

"Yes! Maya-nee is the best sister ever!"

"… Sister?" Why is Mana looking at him with that weird glow on her eyes?

"Y-You see, he said he wished to have a sister, so I agreed to let him call me that."

"… So Takeru, can you come here?" Mana patted the side of her seat and Takeru slowly made his way to her. She started to stroke his hair with a smile as she gazed at him. "Takeru, can you tell me how's your life?"

He nods and starts telling her of what he usually does. Surprisingly, he said only good things about me. It is… truly nice to hear him describe me as someone 'awesome'.

"And yesterday she taught me how to use a sword!"

"Oh, I see. So you want to learn swordsmanship?"

"Kendo." He corrected her instantly.

"Yes, indeed. Say Takeru, can we be friends?"

"Yes! Let's be friends, Mana-nee!" Sigh… Of course he would call her that. The boys knows no-

"Ah! How cute!" Mana's reaction left me speechless. Her face filled with flowers, she stroke Takeru's cheek with a wide smile on her face.

"Mana-nee, it tickles! S-Stop…"

"Oh, did that tickle? Forgive me, Takeru. Say, can I be your sister too?"

"Yes! So I can call you Mana-nee?"

"Why, of course you can!"

…

"Thank you!" Takeru went and gave her a hug.

"Just look at you. What a cute, soft, little cinnamon roll you are." She tightened her hug as she pulled Takeru closer.

"M-Mana-nee, it hurts…" Reacting to his words, she loosened her grip on him, but didn't let him go.

"Takeru, are you alright? Sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you." She spoke to him softly, slowly stroking his cheek.

"Y-Yes… But you hug to strongly. Hugs have to be soft, you can't give people your love like that!" He scolds her, pouting. He had to go and say it. Sigh…

"… Giving love?" Mana's eyes shone with a weird glow again. Takeru then explains her the same he said to me. "I see. Then, can you show me how to give a hug properly?"

…

"Takeru." I sent him a glare, tapping my glasses. Then, I pat my side. Takeru comes to my side again as Mana sent me a bothered glare.

"Are you angry, Maya-nee?"

"No, I am not."

"You look angry though."

"Takeru, I am not upset. That being said… Mana, a Royal Guard cannot act in such a way. Please, do try to behave according to your rank." She returned the glare, just as she did during our bouts.

"Maya, I am just being friendly with little Takeru." What is going on here? Why is she acting like this with him? "So Takeru, can you teach me how to hug?" He looks at me, I let out a sigh and give him a nod.

Takeru goes again to Mana's side, as she smiled widely. He put his hands over her neck, and just like he does with me he slowly tightened his grip. "See? This way it doesn't hurt." Takeru's innocent voice contrasted with Mana's flushed face, she looks like she's in Heaven right now. What… is wrong with her?

"Y-Yes, you're right. You're so smart, Takeru." As Takeru broke the hug she started petting him, smiling like a fool. "You're so cute…"

"Takeru." I call him as I tap my glasses, he flinches and comes back to my side.

"He's a very good boy. You must be so happy to be with him, Maya." Mana smiled sweetly at Takeru. I didn't knew she was like this.

"Yes, he has been making good efforts everyday."

"I was referring to receiving his hugs though. Sigh… I want a cute little brother too." Her shoulders dropped as she kept gazing at Takeru.

"You want… to have a brother?"

"Yes, just look at how cute he is! Mion is a good girl, but she's too polite. She's always so stiff and formal with me. And even if I have had to look after her since you left, Shion is… well, you know." I nod slowly in acknowledgment "I would like to have a cute brother like the ones in the mangas. I mean look at how affectionate he is! I couldn't get Mion to give me a hug even if I asked her." She now looks genuinely sad. Considering how much she works… I suppose everybody has their own ticks.

"And what is this about manga?" Mana slowly strokes her hair as she looks up.

"Well, it's one of my hobbies. Reading cute mangas is one of the few things that I use to loosen up. You do not have hobbies?"

"Cooking, I guess? In my case, I just rather read a history book if given the choice." Mana sighs shaking her head.

"That does sound like you. But well… Ever since I've started reading manga, I started to want to have a more affectionate relation with Mion, but Father is teaching her very harshly since she never wins

against Shion. You have no idea how jealous I am…" She said as she gazed at Takeru, who was now hugging my arm again.

After some more time the car stops, signaling our arrival at the Main House. We got out from the limo and passed through the gates after the security checkup. As we approached the building Takeru gazed at the place in wonder.

"Maya-nee, why do they have a pond there?"

"It's for decoration, Takeru."

We arrived at the main entrance to the house, where a few guards in black greeted us. Behind them right besides the door were Father and Shion waiting for us.

"Welcome back, Maya."

"Good afternoon, Father. How have you fared since we last spoke?"

"I have been fine, mostly. Let us go inside." He shot a glare at Takeru, who was holding my hand. Of course they wouldn't approve of him. As we went inside, Shion kept looking at me and Takeru with a frown on her face and fire lurking within her eyes. I knew they wouldn't see him well, but then, why was I sent to him?

We reach the head's room and Father nods at me. I go to the door, and taking one last breath, blinking a few times, I open it and go inside along Takeru. Within the room Yohime-sama was waiting for us, and sitting besides her was Yuuhi-sama. Both of them wearing a matching white and cyan dress.

I go in front of them and bow, petting Takeru's head to make him do the same.

"I have returned, Yohime-sama."

"Good afternoon, Maya. You may sit." I do so and Takeru sits by my side, looking at them curiously. Please, don't say anything rude.

"First, you're Takeru Shirogane, right?"

"Y-Yes." He looks at her in awe, maybe she reminds him of his mother? "W-Who would you be?" Sigh… He did it, for once.

"I am Yohime Koubuin. I'm the one who sent Maya to you, and this is my daughter. Yuuhi, dear, introduce yourself." Yuuhi-sama gives Takeru a bow before speaking up softly.

"My name is Yuuhi Koubuin. I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Shirogane-sama." Perfect. So graceful, so serene…. Yuuhi-sama is truly a wonderful example of-

"Don't call me Shirogane, my name is Takeru!" Aah! He had to do it!

"Takeru, do not be rude!"

"But my name is Takeru. Yuuhi got it wrong." He pouted as he crossed his arms.

One thing is to scold her because you don't like to be called by your surname, but you can't call Yuuhi-sama by her name without any honorifics.

"Takeru, you shall address Yuuhi-sama with the proper respect." He narrows his eyes at me, pout still in place.

"But she isn't an adult."

"Takeru…" I tap my glasses, making him flinch.

"Now, Maya. There is no need to scold the boy so."

"Yohime-sama, Yuuhi-sama, please forgive his rudeness! He's too used to speak informally." I bow at them, and again I make Takeru bow too.

"Um…" Yuuhi-sama tried speaking up as she stared at him. "Forgive me, Takeru-sama. I didn't mean to insult you." She gave him a bow.

She's so well mannered. She's just perf-

"Takeru is fine, Yuuhi. I'm not an adult." Why must you scold her like that? Don't give me that pout.

"… I see." Yuuhi-sama said and remained staring at him silently.

"Well, why don't you tell me of how you have been these days? Now that we're comfortable, tell me the details." Yohime-sama said as she smiled at us.

I send a gaze at Takeru, to tell him to remain quiet. He tenses up a bit, and I proceed to tell her of our daily life and answer the questions she sends. I can't help to notice that Yuuhi-sama kept firmly staring at Takeru as he looked around the room. When he noticed her stare, he waved at her, making her widen her eyes and try to imitate him. Yohime-sama raises her hand, signaling me to stop.

"Well, that was enough from you. Now then, Takeru-kun?"

"Y-Yes?"

"Can you tell me how you felt living with Maya?"

"Maya-nee was really kind to me." He had to go and call me that. "She was really sad at first, but she was always good. I'm really happy to be with her, she cooks really tasty food, she always helps me with my homework, and she's gonna train me. She's the best sister ever." I am happy to hear him say that… But I do not know how they'll react to the training.

"Train you? What is she teaching you?"

"How to use a sword! I wanna see Dad again, so I have to learn to do Kendo." He says smiling brightly.

"Maya, what is the meaning of this?" I explain to her what happened yesterday in detail, and instead of growing angrier I saw her complexion soften. She gazed at Takeru sweetly as she smiled.

"And he showed decent progress for a first training session. I believe he has potential." Takeru smiled as he hugged my arm. Sigh…

"So Takeru, would you like Maya to keep training you?"

"Yes! I wanna learn!" His instant reply made Yohime-sama giggle a bit.

"I see. Maya, how about you come back here once a week to train in the dojo?"

"Huh?! B-But… But the dojo is for-"

"It would be more fruitful to train there, wouldn't it? And you could spend some time with Shion again, she has been very upset since you left." I know it would be better, but to allow him to train there… Takeru isn't one of us. He's a commoner, I doubt the rest will treat him well. And… I do not know how I would react to that.

"I can see what you mean, my liege. But he isn't one of this House's vassals, many people would-"

"Do not worry about that. His father has been performing above our expectations, so I believe this is nothing more than a just reward."

"Dad? You know where Dad is?!"

"Takeru, do not raise your voice!"

"But…" Don't give me that sad look, I do not like it on your face.

"Maya, be at ease. Takeru, I do know your father but he isn't here. He'll go to meet you sometime in the future." His eyes shone brightly at her words.

"Really? He'll come back?"

"Yes, I promise. So, would you like to come train here?"

"Yes!"

"Takeru, what did I told you about manners?" I tap my glasses and he opens his eyes wide. He then gives Yohime-sama a bow and asks her again, this time a bit more politely.

"I see, then you can come here to train with Maya. Now, Takeru. Can you keep Yuuhi company? I have to speak with Maya in private." He nods and Yohime-sama stands, gesturing towards the doorway.

We leave towards the garden as I hear Takeru approaching Yuuhi-sama and addressing her as rudely as always. Takeru, please do not hug her.

"So, Maya. It seems you have grown attached to the boy." Her smile melted my defenses, I had no retort to her sudden words.

"Huh?! That's…"

"You see, his father was broken when his wife died." She looks towards the garden, speaking slowly as we walked. "He was very adamant about dropping out of the Guard to go back to his son. But Takahisa-sama did not wish him to leave, for he is a crucial part of his squad. It took us a great effort to convince him to stay."

"Excuse me, Yohime-sama. Takeru's father is a member of Takahisa-sama's personal squad?"

"Yes, he is his favorite Strike Vanguard. Kageyuki Shirogane was truly a surprise, despite his rough manners he has a natural talent to adapt himself to new situations very quickly." So Takeru is just like him, huh. "So, of course he wished for him to stay. But we couldn't leave his son in the hands of someone untrustworthy. We needed someone who could protect him, tend to his needs, support him in his studies. That is why I suggested sending a retainer to him, and why I chose you in particular. Someone as serious and dedicated as you would make a great retainer for the boy, who was innocent, inexperienced and probably as rough as his father. While you took

offense at it, I decided to keep you in the dark. I had never seen you showing displeasure so openly, so I thought that perhaps you could use this as a learning experience."

"I see. It has been a nice experience indeed." She stops and looks at me again, with shadows emerging from her otherwise kind eyes.

"But I had my doubts after our last talk. I contemplated who could I send instead of you if you were to grow resentful towards the boy. So, that is why I made Mana call you yesterday. However, it seems my worries were unnecessary. I am most grateful to you for finding patience for him." She smiles kindly at me. No, Yohime-sama. He was the one who had the kindness to forgive me.

"So, I am to remain as his retainer?"

"Yes, I shall rely on you to take care of him. It is rather refreshing to have people like them around, compared to all the buffoons we have to deal with daily, who only try to shower us with compliments." I guess… I can see how it is nice to have honest people around, even if their manners are coarse.

"Understood. So, when will I be allowed to come to the dojo?"

"Hmm… How about during weekends? You can either come at night during Friday or early during Saturday, and leave on Sunday. We can arrange your transportation so do not worry about the train schedules." Even if he is the son of a promising Guard… And even if I see talent in him…

"Yohime-sama, why are you giving him this privilege? Is there a reason I don't know about?" She gazes at me softly, closes her eyes, and then returns her gaze towards the room.

"Takahisa-sama simply told me to aid the child, so I decided to do what I could for him." Yohime-sama is going overboard again. Even so, he might… truly accomplish his dream this way. I couldn't have hoped for a better outcome.

"I see. I will do my best to aid him."

"I surely hope you do. Now, let us go back to the children. I wish you to take him to the dojo, and maybe you could introduce him to Mion and Shion. Shion in particular has missed you much."

"So I was told." We make our way back to the room, where we found a surprising sight.

Takeru had somehow managed to bring a spinning top with him without me noticing and was showing it to Yuuhi-sama, who stared at it in wonder.

"See? You need to put some force in your fingers to make it spin more, Yuuhi." Did he just… call her by her name without any honorifics again?!

"Takeru!" He flinches at my voice, his eyes widening in shock as a drop of sweat went down his forehead.

"Maya-nee? Why are you angry? You didn't tell me I couldn't bring toys."

"Well, yes, I didn't… But let's leave that for when we go back home. Takeru, you have to show Yuuhi-sama the proper respect." He furrows his brows at me.

"But-"

"She's a noble, Takeru. She's the daughter of one of the blue samurai you like so much, so you have to-"

"Really?! Yuuhi, you're a blue samurai?" He looks at her with stars in his eyes, ignoring me completely.

"Um… My Father is one, I'm not a samurai. Takeru-san, do you like the samurai?" She spoke to him without signs of being offended. Yohime-sama patted my shoulder and put a finger on her lips, gesturing me to remain quiet.

"Yes! They're amazing, right? I mean, they're the most awesome people here. But I told you to call me Takeru."

"But it would be rude for me to-"

"If you don't call me Takeru, then we're not friends." He pouts and looks away. Yuuhi-sama looks down as clouds appear on her eyes as she hangs her head down. She then hesitantly spoke up with her silky voice looking straight at him.

"Then… Takeru? Can we be friends?" He immediately looked at her with his usual smile and nodded.

"Yes, let's be friends Yuuhi!" Yuuhi-sama in turn smiled widely at him, her eyes regaining their usual shine.

"See, Maya?" I looked at Yohime-sama, who was smiling as she looked at the kids, who were again trying to make the toy spin. "Takahisa-sama saw in Shirogane someone worth our trust despite his origins. And I think that his son might be someone who Yuuhi can rely on when she grows into the head of the Koubuin House. She will need as many trustworthy people by her side as she can get. So, can I entrust him to you?"

"You wish me to train him to be one of Yuuhi-sama's retainers?"

"No, I just wish him to be her friend. A confidant, if you may. If he's as skilled as his father, then he might be a good addition to our guards, but we already have many retainers with you four. However, you will need people you can trust, and if he sees you as his family, then I suppose he may become someone you can rely on to protect Yuuhi when the need calls." She then gazed at the kids kindly again.

Of course, the future does not look good. If things continue like they are… But… This still feels wrong. Using his dream to see his father to induct him into the guard? I mean, if he wishes to fight… I look at him as a strange oppression finds its way to my heart. He looks so happy, teaching Yuuhi-sama how to use the toy.

"See? It's really fun once you can make it spin fast, then you can see which one stops spinning first, and if you guess you keep the candies!"

"Candies?" Yuuhi-sama tilted her head to a side, making Takeru look at her rather surprised.

"Yuuhi, you never ate candies?"

"No, what are they?"

Yohime-sama laughs as they continue to talk. I have never seen Yuuhi-sama being so curious about someone, I certainly didn't expect her to like him despite his usual attitude.

"He really is very relaxed. Maya, just to be clear, I do not wish to force him to enlist into the Guard. Only if he wishes to join us we'll induct him. However, even if he doesn't become our fellow, I wish him to be someone who Yuuhi can consult. I'm sure you realized how far apart we are from our common folk during your stay in Hiiragi." She says as she caresses her ponytail slowly.

"Indeed. So you wish him to be a bridge?"

"Yes, sort of. Well, I suppose you should go to the dojo now." She approaches the kids and pats Yuuhi-sama's head. "Yuuhi, Takeru has to go now. Say your goodbyes." Yuuhi-sama looks a bit sad as she looks at her mother, but then looks back at Takeru and grabbing his hands she says her goodbyes.

"Thanks for visiting, Takeru. Goodbye." However, he frowns at her words. Takeru, what are you going to say? Please don't give her a hug.

"Yuuhi, that's wrong. This isn't goodbye. When you can't play with your friends anymore, you say 'See you later', because you'll see them another day to play again." He put his hands above hers and smiled brightly. Yuuhi-sama seemed astonished at his words, even

Yohime-sama was looking at him a bit surprised as she brought a hand to her chin.

"So you'll come visit me again?" She asked meekly, blinking in wonderment.

"Yes! Maya-nee, can we come visit another day?" Sigh… Look at him, being his usual self with the daughter of a noble. I guess his kindness is his best trait after all.

"Yes, we can come visit someday." He smiles widely and then faces Yuuhi-sama again, moving his hands up and down.

"See? So it's 'See you later', not 'Goodbye'. Oh right! Yuuhi, I'll give you the top. You didn't have one, right?"

"Eh? You would truly give it to me?"

"Yes, don't worry I can get another next birthday. And Jouji has two, so we can keep playing. So this one is for you." He grabs the toy and places it on her hands. Yuuhi-sama remains looking at the toy, eyes filled with stars.

"Thanks, Takeru. Um… When is your birthday? Mother, can we give him a present then?"

"Why, of course we can." Yohime-sama was watching their exchange with a pleased smile. "Takeru, when is your birthday?"

"Um… It's on December 16th." Huh? But that day is…

"My birthday is also on that day." Yuuhi-sama said as she got a tiny bit closer to him.

"Really? Then, let's celebrate it together!"

"Takeru, what are you talking about?" He looked at me with a wide smile so clearly happy one could see flowers around him.

"I mean, we can come visit and then we can have a party, and share cake, and then we can play together!" How do peasants celebrate their birthdays? I mean, we are given a small present and we do meet up with our close relatives, but it's nothing like a party and there is no cake.

"Mother… Can we have our birthday together?"

"Haha… Do you want to, Yuuhi?" The little one fidgeted a bit, looking at the toy in her hands. Then she looked at her mother and nodded.

"Yes, can we… can we celebrate our birthday together?"

"Well, if you want to. Takeru, will you come visit us during your birthday?"

"Yes! My friends can't come visit me back home because they live far away, except Sumika. So can we celebrate together?" He looked at me and Yohime-sama. I sighed while she gave him a nod. "Yay! Then it's a promise! Let's celebrate our birthday together from now on, Yuuhi." I shouldn't be so surprised at his usual… Wait, from now on?!

"Yes, let's have our birthdays together. Um… Thanks for being my friend, Takeru. I will find a nice present for you." Yuuhi-sama… I've never seen her smile like that. She's genuinely happy.

Now that I think about, she never had 'friends' in the same sense Takeru has. She only interacts with Mion, Shion, and the sons and daughters of the people that come to the meetings here. No one has been this openly friendly to her. So, Takeru is her first friend. I didn't think… she would need something like this. I had Mana as a rival and later as a form of confidant, but Yuuhi-sama didn't have anyone who treated her like an equal.

"Don't worry, I'll bring you a nice present and then we can play together!"

The kids remained talking happily for a while, Yohime-sama didn't want to interrupt them so we waited until they said their parting words. Giving people strength with the power of love, huh. Yuuhi-sama never looked as happy as she did now. He might be rude and stubborn, but he's a good kid deep down. He does show thankfulness and he's kinder than I originally thought he was.

My protegee, huh. As we make our way to the dojo, Takeru is happily humming a song. I suppose… I could get used to being his retainer.

… And his sister.

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*March 17th, 1989. Near 5 PM.*

*(Koubuin Main House. Meeting Room.)*

**[Mana]**

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I stood in front of Father, who was sitting behind a desk. Words seemed to have ran out between us, the air in the room was so stagnant it could be sliced with a knife.

"Mana, my dear daughter, how many times must I remind you to stop this foolishness?" He had his hands entwined, leaning back onto his seat.

"I do not believe I am being foolish in the slightest, Father. Praising Mion's efforts is not a mistake."

"She has done nothing worth of praise so far. Her veneer so easily bends when in front of Shion, her voice is barely audible as she suffocates in her own insecurities during the lectures. What can I do, other than make her realize her own shortcomings?"

"Mion is doing a great effort to measure up to Shion every day. Her scores are not that far behind her cousin's in the subjects she

surpasses her in. In most of their classes, they are evenly matched. And Mion never gives us trouble, Shion's anger is an issue we have no idea how to solve. The teachers of the school say she tends to get upset at the smallest details, you should know how many times Kazora-sama has been called by the Principal. I believe you're being unfair with her, Father. Mion deserves our support, she is not as spineless as you believe her to be." I tense my brows downwards. He does the same, letting some air out from his nose.

"Shion is still the one on top, and her personality isn't an inconvenience to me. She has to learn to restrain her temper, that is true, however she is what all members of the Tsukuyomi House should aspire to be. Imposing, resolute, and above all… unforgiving. We are guardians of a Regent House, we show no mercy to our enemies. You should know that well, my Mana."

"However, what would we gain by pushing Mion so harshly? You barely speak to her of matters not related to her studies, you keep her in the dojo after the lessons end when she's exhausted… Why must you do so, Father? You were not such a relentless teacher with me." He was harsh, he put great expectations on me during my time in school and in the dojo. I managed to pierce through my weaknesses and answer to them, earning his praise.

However, the current situation cannot be compared to what I experienced. Maya was never as aggressive towards me as Shion is to my sister. I never was harmed during our bouts, yet Shion has left Mion with bruises on many occasions when you and Kazora-sama made them spar without any protective gear. To continue to push her so… What good can come out of this? Mion won't improve with more shouts and berating, if she's bending under the pressure it is because she's being overwhelmed. She needs your acceptance and support, Father. You cannot make that something she has to earn.

"You know it well, my Mana. We are few in the Tsukuyomi House, therefore all of our heirs must be as capable as they could be to guide and support our leaders." He sends a gaze upon me, what but a myriad of arrows flying into my eyes. "If Mion is lacking, I, as her

Father, must force her to redouble her efforts. Undeserved praise will only make her complacent, it must be made clear to her that she's disappointing us with these meager results."

"Father, with all due respect, I do not think her efforts are such a let down. Shion is merely ahead of her, and if you compare Mion's to mine own efforts at her age you'll see she is progressing fine." I bow deeply to him, clawing at my palms. "Please Father, could you kindly consider revising your approach to her training?"

Father closes his eyes and vanished the storm clouds in his face. Breathing in tranquility for a moment, his eyes opened and he leaned forward slowly with the serenity of a leaf down a river.

"Mana, dear, can you tell me what boons you think your proposition would bring us?"

"As I said before, it would lift a great deal of unnecessary pressure off her shoulders. Mion already knows how important her training is, by further pushing her to match Shion's performance we are only eroding her self-esteem. Mion does not need to fight like Shion, just like how me and Maya found our own styles and preferences. There are certain aspects and details that she does better than her cousin, but those are ignored by you because the end result she gets is not as good as Shion's. Mion needs to hear, to see you accept her. Her place in the family cannot be tied to her performance." Father shakes his head, grimacing.

"Winning is everything, Mana. The will of those who lose is forgotten by history. Our Empire would have been a different land today had our ancestors not prevailed on the Battle of Sekigahara. If Mion is not up to skill, I shall push her further. Until I see her cleaving through her own phantoms, I will not recede."

"What good will it do to her to receive more abuse, Father?"

"She should know we do not tolerate failure here. Mion will be trained as I ordered until she attains the necessary skill."

"… Mother wouldn't have agreed to this." An effort equal to enduring my first time in a sim pod I had to make to restrain my tongue.

"I am the one who decides how to train my heirs, I am the one with Tsukuyomi blood in his veins. I am your father, and you should know better than to use an emotional argument against me, Mana. Is this how you plan to defend our rulers? Shame on you!" His eyes squinting, fire stronger than the sun's burned my stance, melting the plating of my resolution. Before I knew it, I had bowed in apology. I had surrendered to him. "Good, looks like you understand."

"No… Father, please reconsider. Why won't you heed my words?"

"I do heed them, I am not dismissing your worries after all." He folds his arms, the sun setting in his glare. "However, I must make you two strong. My lack of determination almost costed Takahisa-sama his life when his brother betrayed us. And…" Taking a moment to breathe, his hands constricted as if he had touched a source of electricity. "It was my own lack of skill what caused your mother's death. My hesitation took her from you and Mion, when the little one was but a year old. You surely remember all we've been through since that fateful day of treason."

"Father, do not continue to punish yourself. That… Nobody could have defended the House against such amount of adversaries. That you protected Takahisa-sama and our fellows was a great feat in an of itself." To employ such an attack, under the guise of a duel, was nothing short of madness. To think all of our cousins in the Tsukuyomi House took Jinkuro's side… It is truly a miracle that Takahisa-sama's faction was the one to prevail.

"And yet, I lost my partner forever that night. You two lost your mother forever because of my shortcomings and complacence." A full eclipse reached his gaze, his brows tensing strongly as his fists. "It is my obligation as your father to make sure you two are as strong as you can be before I pass away. I am sure you have heard many a great deal of unpleasantries being said about you behind your back during your brief time as a Guard."

"… Yes, that is true. But that has nothing to do with-"

"Yes, it does my dear. You two are women and our fellows will not admit to you being superior to them so easily. Those of your same age may not hold such prejudices in their hearts, but those who are older won't look kindly at you. I must ready you to guide Takahisa-sama and Yuuhi-sama for when I am gone. And if I have to harm the gifts your mother gave me to prepare them for what is to come… I shall do so unwavering."

"You will not change your mind, Father?" He closes his eyes again, letting a sigh out. After a moment of pondering, he opens them again and locks his gaze onto mine. This time, however, I resist the recoil and return his stare.

"I suppose you could try to show me if your ideas are right." He raises his hand, extending a single finger upwards. "One month, that's all I'll give you my Mana. You have one month to prove to me my approach is mistaken. If Mion doesn't show positive signs, I will continue with the current regime once more. Do we have an agreement?"

"Yes, thank you very much for giving me this chance Father." I bow to him, he gestures me to raise not a second after.

"Now then, regarding this matter of the Mitsurugi girl… Why do you wish to take more books to her again?" His tone sharpened this time, hands entwined yet again he leaned forward.

"As I have said before, Meiya-sama needs to know more of the world if she is to play her role one day."

"Yes, you said so last time. However, aren't the books you already took more than enough?"

"I find her education lacking in the matter of common sense. It would be quickly noticed if she were to not know of something that is obvious to anyone who has lived in contact with society. For that

reason, I believe I should teach her about how to deal with people outside of formal meetings and the customs of our peasantry."

Father narrows his eyes, staring at me in silence. Shards of glass danced around my hands, making them quiver. Nonexistent pebbles found their way to my feet, some to my throat. A pressure tantamount to the cascade where Guren-sama once had me meditate falls upon my head as Father extends the silence.

"… Mana, you know well who that girl is."

"Meiya-sama is someone we must protect."

"No, she is someone we must keep under surveillance. She might one day bring ruin to this House, just like how Jinkuro did. You should keep your heart locked, my Mana. I do not wish to see you being led astray by that accursed child."

"Father, with all due respect…" Enduring the waterfall, I feel a geyser surge from within. "Meiya-sama would never do such an atrocity. Her kindness is just like Yuuhi-sama's."

"Mana, you risk making the same mistake I once made. What would you do if she ever wishes to become the Head of the House?"

"Meiya-sama needs a guide, were she to harbor such thoughts. Scorning her for a sin she didn't commit will only drive her to despise her roots. I am of the opinion that she needs to learn our values, so that she is never led astray by anyone wishing to use her against us."

"Is that so?" He narrows his eyes at me, resting his chin on his hand. "You wouldn't be influenced by those strange books you've been indulging in as of late, my Mana?"

"… Perish the thought, Father. My hobbies are just that, pastimes to entertain myself with. Nothing more."

"Good. Regardless, I shall review myself the books you desire to take to her. And, as much as it pains me to say, you should remember something my dear." He stood up and walked up to me, staring at me with a scowl on his face. "Were you to take that accursed girl's side in rebellion, I will not hesitate to end you in mere seconds. Do not forget where your loyalty lies, Mana."

"And you would do well in not judging a little girl with the same eyes as you would a traitorous pig. Meiya-sama is not Jinkuro, she will not be a traitor. I myself will make sure she remains on the right path."

"… I see." He holds my gaze for a second, the sun burning my skin. My eyes started to hurt under his stare yet I refused to blink or look away. "Then, that will be all. Mion should be returning from school soon. I will be leaving her in your care for the coming month."

"Understood. I shall take my leave then." I bow to him and then exit the room.

… I let out a long sigh, my mouth remaining open. Why, Father? Why must you despise Meiya-sama so strongly?

She hasn't done anything to deserve anything of the sort, nothing but kindness lies in her heart. How could I convince him of her innocence?

I go towards the gate, sitting by a window as I await for the two little ones to return from school. I look up, this day has been buried under clouds just like this last week for my endeavors. Maya left somewhere, I wasn't told why or where, I have been tasked to monitor Meiya-sama, and I also need to oversee Mion's and Shion's trainings after they come back from school in our dojo. Sigh… I know this is what is expected of me, but it is tiring.

I have been trying to show kindness to my sister yet she remains as stiff and formal, afraid of upsetting me. And Shion doesn't listen to me. Kazora-sama also is at a loss on what we should do. She's getting good grades in all subjects, her efforts in the dojo are going

well. Nobody has anything to complain about her, yet she's always in a bad mood.

The sound of the wooden door being opened pulls me from my worries. Our retainers bring them both to the entrance. Mion was, as always, looking down with not a hint of emotion on her face. Shion was the opposite, her brows arched and her lips plucked, she walked with strong steps as she had her arms tightly folded.

"Welcome home, Mion, Shion. How was your day?" I say, opening the door and stepping outside. Both of them bow to me.

"I am back, Sister. Today was another good day." Mion's voice resembled our weather. Her eyes could not meet mine.

"It was the same as always, Mana-sama." Shion said, displeasure floating in her unchanged expression.

"I see. Come on in, the dojo should be getting ready as we speak."

After they leave their bags in their private quarters I take them to the dining room, and us three are served a light meal.

"Tell me Mion, how were your classes today? I believe you had a group project to present today." A brief, isolated tremor assaulted her hands.

"… It went well, Sister."

"Liar, you scored below 90." Shion said with the same poisonous sting of Maya's anger. Mion's head lowered again, her hands halted movement.

"Now Shion, if she passed with a good score isn't that good enough?"

"Father says we need to be at the top. Mion again failed to be in the top ten of our class." 'Failed'. Why does she insist on using that word?

"Shion, that is no failure. You two go to the most prestigious school in Osaka. If she's scoring good grades there, she's already meeting our expectations."

"Father says the opposite. Bazora-sama also says the same as Father. I scored a 96, Mion is the one who isn't studying enough." She says with a wide grin, rising a finger upwards. My sister's lips began to twitch.

"Mion, it is alright. You only need to keep improving. Have you scored a higher grade than your weakest performance?"

"Yes, I have. My lowest in geography was an 83, I got an 88 today." Eyelids falling like a rock slide, her head crashes down in the depths of a canyon. "I'm sorry, Sister… I still didn't score what I should. Some of my partners got an answer wrong during our presentation and our total score got lower because of that." I see, all members of the group share the same score… Even if she did her part as good as she could, blaming her for other's faults is pointless. And regardless of that, an 88 is a marvelous score for how harsh her course is.

"You should not apologize. It is a good score, Mion. Your efforts were not fruitless." I smile at her, nodding in approval. Mion recovers a faint smile, and as slowly as dawn break fills the land with light she starts to eat again.

"Excuses won't get you anywhere. Shame on you." Shion's frown got bigger, and, just like Father had done to me, she was staring at Mion with a gaze that could melt mountains. My sister avoided it and looked down, sweating a flood of tears, eating in silence.

"Shion, that is no excuse. Mion did well and you would be well served in not being so adamant in finding faults in others." Why is she like this? Maya is very critical, but only when asked for her opinion. She rarely shows her harshness so openly.

"I did better than her, I am the top of the class. And I study with the same books she uses."

"Stop comparing yourself to her. You are not Mion, each of you have your unique strong points."

"I always score better grades. Mana-sama, Mion doesn't deserve special treatment. We should both be compared using the same rules." She pouted, despite keeping her manners she was still pointing that lone finger around.

"Sigh… It's not special treatment Shion. You two are different, that is all. Mion doesn't have to match your performance. Your attitude leaves much to be desired, you should know better than to be this hostile to your family." She frowns, looking away. "Mion, do not take Shion's words as an insult. You still have room for improvement, use this small pebble that got in your way today as a learning experience. Next time, you would be well served in aiding your partners so that this doesn't happen again." I smile at her, gazing into her eyes.

"Yes, Sister. I will try harder from now on." She sits up upright, her gaze again not meeting mine. Sigh…

The rest of our time in the dining room was spent in silence as I watched the news while we ate. Once we finished and the girls had some time off in their rooms, I took them to the dojo. However…

"Sei!" Shion shouted as she again sent a barrage of swift attacks at Mion.

I had told Mion to not overworry before, that she should just focus on trying to counter Shion's moves. Looking at her stance, Mion is again doubting. Her feet are distancing themselves too far from each other, her posture isn't as it should be. She's barely parrying the attacks… Shion then took a step forward and knocked Mion to the ground with one downwards slash.

"Alright, that will be enough." However, before I could even more…

"Stand up!" Shion shouted. "You weakling… Stand up, the match just started!"

"I already gave up! You won this match." Mion said, not standing up and covering her head with a hand despite how she's wearing the protective gear.

"Stand up already. I'll show you what a good performance is like, Mion." Shion's eyes took a hawkish tint, as when me and Maya do when we become truly upset.

"Shion, you're behaving horribly. Shame on you, how can you be this coarse?" I go to Mion's side, sending a glare at the turquoise one. "The Mugen Kidou should never be employed to harm others or to further one's own goals, it is used to protect our fellows. You should not let your emotions cloud your actions."

"Why are you scolding me? I won! I'm better than her!" I approach her and place a hand on her shoulder, shaking my head.

"Winning isn't everything. The method that takes you to victory speaks volumes of your inner self." Biting her lips, she held my gaze. "Is this how you wish to live, Shion? Screaming at everyone else? Harming your fellows because they are less than you? We taught you better than this, you should know this isn't the right path." Hanging her head, she clutched the bamboo sword tightly. The frown and wrinkles spread like wild fire within the headgear.

"… I'm the better fighter. Why do you scold me, Mana-sama? Mion is the one who isn't good enough."

"Shion, Mion is doing what she can to measure up to the gap in skill. You, on the other hand, are not keeping your poise and have not yet learned to restrain your strength. This is not your limit, I know you can keep your emotions in check. No one is faulting you for your

performance, Shion." She, however, shook off my hand and walked away back to her position. "Mion, can you stand?"

"… Yes, Sister. I can still fight." Mion stood up slowly. She dusted her red gi and took her position again, retaking the Mugen stance. Despite the visible quiver in her hands, her feet were firmly planted on the ground.

"Shion, please manage your strength this time around. Was I clear?"

"Yes, I heard already." She was again gritting her teeth. Why is she so upset?

I take some steps away from them, returning to my position. Shion is obsessed with high grades and power, if she continues in this way she'll end up being a close minded, prideful person. This month's task is not only for Mion, I must also try to aid Shion in her troubles.

Sigh… If only Maya were here to aid me…

"Alright… Begin!"

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*Some time after that.*

*(Yohime's Room.)*

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"So Mion can't even force a draw?" Yohime-sama asked, combing her hair.

"No, she couldn't. Shion also was unable to restrain her anger once Mion seemed to be getting her off guard." She again tried to harm Mion's arms, thankfully I had them use arm-guards in case this happened. When I scolded her, Shion once more began to scowl at me, saying I was being unfair. "I do not know why Shion is obsessed to such degree with results nor why she dislikes Mion so strongly. If it

weren't for her temper she would be a role model. I cannot see what causes her to flare up in such a way."

"Do not worry so, Mana. I do not believe this issue to be tied to her grades or training, it seems something is troubling Shion's heart. If only her mother were still here… However, that will soon no longer be a problem. Mana, here." Yohime-sama handed me a small piece of paper. It had some numbers written on it. "Please contact Maya and tell her I wish her to return here tomorrow."

"I see… Yes, so I shall do Yohime-sama. However, where is Maya at the moment? Should I use a secure line?"

"Yes, you should. Her mission's details are a secret but you should limit yourself to informing her of my order." She finished tying her lily hair once more. "Now Mana, might I ask how your endeavors with Raiden-sama have been?" She closed her eyes, resting her hands on her lap.

"They have been fruitful, Yohime-sama. The Mitsurugi girl is learning in a similar pace to Mion and Shion in her sword lessons, I have confirmed her education has been progressing as fine as what one would expect of her. Worry not milady, she is learning as well as she should."

"I see. Takahisa-sama will be pleased to hear that. Now… How is she on her everyday life? Is Mei… the Mitsurugi girl healthy, I hope?" Yohime-sama bit her lips as she halted her speech, her eyes were still closed, her hands softly intensifying their hold atop one another. If you suffer so for her, why must it be this way?

"She is well accompanied, Raiden-sama is always keeping watch over her. She's a healthy young girl and she herself has said she is pleased to be with her grandfather. In these few days we've spent together, I could see she is a very kindhearted soul. Very curious about the smallest details but also surprisingly stubborn once she gets an idea in her head. Mitsurugi is in good hands, Yohime-sama."

"That's…" She finally opened her eyes, inhaling slowly, submerging the ripples in her complexion. "That is good to hear, Mana. I shall report this to Takahisa-sama. You can go now."

"Yes, milady." I bowed and exited the room.

This is such a sad state of affairs. Yohime-sama does not wish to keep Meiya-sama away from us, that much is obvious to me now. If Takahisa-sama sent me to aid her, it means he also isn't entirely pleased with this arrangement. If only we could surpass this old superstition… Well, I shall do all that's in my hands to aid Meiya-sama.

Now, I am to call Maya. That day… She was most strange, going as far as saying she enjoyed our sparring sessions. It is so odd to have her be open about how she feels, Kazora-sama has imprinted his stoic side into her since we were little after all.

I can only hope she is alright and that my call comes at a good time. I dread thinking that I might be interrupting her when duty is calling, even more to receive news of her being injured or worse. Well then, I shall know soon.

After going to our private phones and making sure everything is in working order to not leave traces of this call, I dial the number I was given.

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*Next Day . Around 3 PM.*

*(Koubuin House. Dojo.)*

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"Shion! You're putting too much force in your swings. Mion, focus on your footing."

Yet despite Mion's attempts, she again finds herself overwhelmed by Shion's assault. Nothing has changed. Mion is still doubting, I can't

break through her facade. Shion's temper has been flaring up as usual, but today she is in an even worse mood. Seeing little Takeru with Maya must have struck a wrong nerve.

… You do not know how much I envy you, Maya. To be by that kind boy's side… I wish I could have managed to reach Mion's heart, what wouldn't I give to be able to give her such reassurance. I do not know how you did it… but I wish to learn how you managed to get that boy, a peasant no less, so attached to you. I sigh as Mion once more succumbs to Shion's attacks.

"Alright, that is enough. Mion, are you alright?"

"Y-Yes… Do not worry about me, Aneue." She slowly stands up using her bamboo sword to support herself.

"No, that I cannot do. Are you truly unharmed?"

"Yes, I am fine. Forgive me, I cannot give Shion a good duel." She bows deeply, as she always does. Raindrops reverberating in her tone, afraid of seeing disappointment in my face, just like in Father's, she cannot lift her face.

"Sigh… Very well. Shion, I believe we had a talk about how you should fight." She looks away, clicking tongue.

"… Why am I the one who always gets scolded?"

"You know it well, you are too aggressive in your approach."

"But I win. And I get better results than her. You should be praising me!"

"… If you only care about the result, then you are right. We should be praising you." For a moment, I think she smiled behind her headgear. "However, that is not all that matters. The way is almost as important as the goal, if not more."

Shion looks down, gripping her blade tightly. Why is her so fixated with results? If only she wasn't so prideful… What could I do to aid you in this matter? To see beyond this, to allow you to understand why you can't be so individualistic… What can I say to you when you have reacted badly to any and all advice I've given you?

My thoughts are interrupted as the door to the dojo opens. Me and the little ones stand in attention and bow to Kazora-sama as he enters, Maya and little Takeru following behind.

"Mana, how has the training been going?"

"… As usual, Kazora-sama." He sends a look at Shion then shakes his head.

"I see. Yohime-sama has ordered for Maya and the boy to train briefly with you today. I shall be overseeing this myself." He then shot a glare at Takeru, taking some steps from us.

A moment… The boy will train with us? I look at them, Takeru was curiously looking around, his mouth slightly open. Looking back, Mion was staring at him while Shion once more was letting a frown spread in her face.

"Well… Maya, what's going on here?" I ask, getting closer. She taps her glasses and takes a moment to inhale.

"You see Mana, Yohime-sama has allowed Takeru to come train here on the weekends." Simple and direct, as if she were talking about nothing but a formality.

"Eh? Truly? Why has she decided such a thing? Is he well trained?" Maya's lips pursed for but a second.

"… He has potential. So, since we shall be coming every weekend here, she suggested that we took this chance to give Takeru a taste of what's to come." Every weekend… However… What happened to you? Saying you're his retainer, bringing him to train here… This

feels as if I had been awakened by a splash of cold water, I just cannot compute how she's keeping her composure at this turn of events.

"Maya-nee…" Takeru pulled Maya's sleeve. "Why are those two in that armor?" He pointed towards Mion and Shion, who were taking off their headgear and getting closer to us. Shion was still frowning at him.

"That is the gear that one must use when practicing Kendo, Takeru. You will be using it too from now on." Maya answered with her composed tone, making little Takeru puff his cheeks.

"Why? It looks hard to move in that."

"Takeru, the gear is there to protect you." I say, crouching near him. "If you were hit with a sword it would hurt much, wouldn't it?"

"Yeah…"

"So, that's why you must use it. Did Maya not tell you about it?"

"No, Maya-nee only told me she would train me. Maya-nee, will I use one of those things back home?"

"No, Takeru. You will only use them when you come here."

It is… rare to see Maya like this. Being this patient with a kid that uses the commoner's speech. He also insists on calling her Maya-nee, and she isn't opposing him doing so. Sigh… How come you, the cold and direct one, could attain such closeness with an unknown face and I cannot do so with my own sister?

"… Well, should we start the training Maya?"

"I don't see why not. Takeru, let's get you inside your gear." Maya grabs Takeru's hand to guide him to the changing room that's nearby.

"Maya-nee, who are those two?" He asks, looking at the two girls who were now right behind me.

"Oh… I suppose we should introduce you to them." I step towards them and direct a finger when referring to each. "This is Shion, Maya's younger sister. And this one is Mion, my younger sister. You two, your greetings."

"Good afternoon, I am Mion Tsukuyomi. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance." Mion stepped forward and gave him a bow.

"… Sister, who is this crude peasant?" Shion, however, had not an ounce of patience for Takeru.

"Shion, I believe you were introducing yourself." Maya said, tapping her glasses. Shion stood in attention, still glaring at Takeru, and gave a short bow.

"… I'm Shion Tsukuyomi. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"Hi, I'm Takeru. Let' be friends!" He stepped towards them and gave them a handshake full of vigor.

Mion was befuddled, eyes wide open at the clear show of friendliness and the little care the boy had for her personal space. Shion…

"I'm not your friend. I am a noble, a member of the Tsukuyomi Family. Who do you think you are to be like this towards me?"

"… I just told you I'm Takeru." He said as he narrowed his eyes at her. I had to drown a chuckle at the way he answered. Maya let out a sigh, bringing a hand to her forehead. "Maya-nee, why is she this angry?" Shion's brows twitched, her lips shook for a moment.

"I've told you many times you have to be polite, haven't I Takeru?"

"But she isn't an adult."

"Takeru… Sigh… Shion, please do not mind him. He simply refuses to be polite." Maya said as she got closer and tenderly put a hand on the boy's head, forcing Takeru to do a short bow.

"Sister, why are you with this… peasant? Why does he refer to you in such a way?" Shion stared straight at her, Maya closed her eyes for a moment.

"… I have been tasked with the duty of looking after him. I am his retainer as of now." Shion's eyes slowly widened, she dropped her blade. "Takeru refuses to be polite and proper regardless of my efforts in teaching him to speak properly, so please do forgive his rude speech."

"I'm not rude, I'm just being friendly!" He says, pouting at Maya. Her eyelids slowly descend as she ruffles the boy's hair.

"Sigh… Regardless, you two shall be joined by him in your weekend trainings from now on. I hope you can treat him as well as you would to another fellow."

Shion silently lowered her head. Maya then took Takeru to the changing room. It seems Kazora-sama said something to her when she was near the door, she stopped and threw a glare at him before entering.

… What is the meaning of this? Maya never liked our common fellows much. Regardless of what I was told when we went to speak with Yohime-sama, why was she tasked to look after a commoner? Even if his father is a member of Takahisa-sama's squadron… It is rare. She didn't even mind his displays of affection when we were coming here.

Shion is staring right at the door to the changing room. Seeing Maya being this supportive of a peasant, after how she's been acting these days… I gulp once and approach the little turquoise girl.

"Shion, you-"

"I know. Don't get angry, don't lose your poise. I know, Mana-sama." She folded her arms tightly and shook my hand off her shoulder.

"Shion, you shouldn't be like this. Maya has been tasked with this mission for a reason."

"… That boy is a peasant. What can he know? Why was he calling Sister in such a way?" She looks at me as her tone creaked like an old door that needed oil.

"You shouldn't judge a book by its cover. I'm sure Maya can explain why this is the way it is."

"I wonder about that…" Kazora-sama said, folding his arms as he got closer. "It does look like you two are too soft."

"… Kazora-sama, whatever do you mean?"

"Heh… Do not play dumb, Mana." For a brief moment we stared at each other, his squinted eyes saying what Father said without pronouncing a single word. "Shion, face that peasant with all your might. Show Maya she's wasting her time with him."

"Yes, Father."

"… And what do you expect to gain from this course of action, Kazora-sama?"

"… My daughter. Maya should return to her duties as a Royal Guard, it is an embarrassment to the Tsukuyomi Family for her to be turned into nothing but the nanny of a baseborn. I am merely going to show her the boy doesn't belong here, that it is better for him to not involve himself further with the nobility. Shion… I am expecting you to perform as you should." The girl stood in attention, readiness in her stance as if she were to pounce upon prey at a moment's notice.

Shion will end up misguided… Mion is looking down, not saying anything. Sigh… What will Maya do when Takeru gets hurt by

Shion? I do not believe the boy is as skilled as these two. Should I stop this? If I do… Kazora-sama will assuredly report my 'misconduct'. What do I do?

They come out of the room, Takeru is still complaining about the gear.

"I can't see well, Maya-nee. How can I train with this?"

"You'll get used to it eventually." She said as calmly as always.

"But why do I have to use a skirt? I'm not a girl."

"To conceal your legs' movements. I shall tell you about it later in detail." She said, patting his headgear and leaving his side. "Well, should we start? Who will Takeru face first?"

"Shion shall be his opponent." Kazora-sama said, going towards a wall. "Let's see if this Shirogane is worth our time."

"I'm Takeru! Don't call me Shirogane." The boy loudly complained, moving a hand towards Kazora-sama. Maya sighed yet again.

"Very well. Takeru, you do remember what I told you?" He nodded at Maya twice in quick succession.

"Yeah, don't worry." Maya then handed him a bamboo sword and he took his pose, an unpolished version of Chudan.

As Maya comes to my side, I get closer and speak in a hushed tone.

"Maya, are you sure this will end well?"

"Of course not. However, Takeru is very stubborn. I doubt he'd give up even if Shion defeats him soundly in mere seconds." She said as he tapped her glasses.

"You sound… strangely confident in him."

"… Do I now? What do you mean?"

"It's as if… you had changed. You didn't speak in such a way when you were training Shion before."

"Well… I've learned a few lessons while I was away." She layed her eyes upon the boy, who was trying to do his pose well despite how uncomfortable he seemed to be.

"He might end up hurt. You know how aggressive Shion can be."

"Mana, there is no need to worry. I think… No, I am sure Takeru won't be intimidated by a few hits. He is in the protective gear, there is nothing to fear. Shion might have trouble with her temper but I refuse to think she would lose herself in anger to the point of harming someone." Well… It is true she hasn't injured anyone. So far. However, if she says as much…

"Well then… Begin!" I shout and Shion goes on the offensive not a moment later.

The boy barely manages to parry her first two attacks, but then Shion manages to break through him and delivers a strike to his chest. Takeru ends up on the floor, rolling to a side.

"Uuh… What was that?!" He loudly complained as he tried to get up.

"Is this all you can do?" Shion looked at him, resting her sword on her shoulder. "Sister, why is he so bad? He doesn't even know how to wield a blade!"

"Maya, if he's a novice I think it would be for the best if he didn't-"

"No Mana, you are mistaken." She narrowed her eyes at me, then she directed her gaze towards the boy. "Takeru, are you giving up?"

"No, I'm not!" He was already back on his feet, taking his pose again. "I didn't lose yet!"

"… You think you can defeat me?" Shion took some steps back, taking the Mugen Kidou stance this time.

"Maya, they boy might truly get hurt at this rate."

"Mana, I am thankful for your kindheartedness. However, you shouldn't underestimate Takeru. Defeats are more empowering than victories, after all." She said, smiling for a second.

"… How have you trained him? What is the secret to have such bond with your trainees?" If I could do the same with Mion… If I can show some results before this month passes… Maya, just what methods did you employ?

"I am afraid you are asking the wrong person." She said as she tapped her glasses.

"Eh?"

"Mana-sama, should we begin?" Shion asked, as impatient as ever.

"… Yes. Begin!"

… Takeru kept challenging Shion, yet he kept losing in mere moments to her. He was able to parry a few of her strikes by the end, but it couldn't be called a good result. That being said…

"One more time!" He got up once more, pointing his sword at Shion.

"Fine… Just one more." Shion returned to her position. I looked at Maya, who gave a nod, then I sighed and allowed them to begin yet another duel.

This time, however, Shion's attacks took a slower approach. Going for his left side, she delivers a softer than usual blow. Allowing Takeru to reply and attack for the first time, they start exchanging a few blows.

However, when Takeru when for a frontal strike Shion took a step back, just like Maya does, and then lowered her blade as she did. Pressing forward, she sent a rising slash at the boy. His sword knocked away, Takeru staggered backwards. Shion didn't let up the pressure however, and before we could stop her she took one step forward and sent a downwards attack at the boy. Hitting his head, she sent him into the floor.

"Shion!" Maya hurried along me to their side. "There was no need to push for another strike, you had already defeated him." As I scolded her she avoided my gaze.

"I merely did my best effort. Shirogane should have known when to quit, he should have seen I was better and that he stood no chance of winning."

"Shion is right, Mana." Kazora-sama said, smiling faintly. "This only proves the boy shouldn't be allowed to train with them, he would only hold them back."

"Kazora-sama, with all due respect, there is no reason for such hostility. This is setting an awful example for both Shion and Mion. Would you have them treat all peasants in this way?"

"… If they challenge us, we should remind them of why we have a position of privilege. Shirogane has nothing to do here, he shouldn't be allowed to train alongside us."

"… Father, did you order Shion to do this?" Maya slowly stood up, helping Takeru. I felt as if a trickle of cold water were running down my back. Maya's eyes were sharpened as blades towards her father.

"Do you have a complain, Maya?"

"Yes, I do. As Mana just said, it is embarrassing to see this… petty vision of yours and how you try to taint Shion with it. Should I report this to Yohime-sama?" Kazora-sama flinched at her words, his arms slowly undoing the cross they were in.

I couldn't help but to stare at her just like Shion was doing, Maya never contradicted her father before. Never, no matter how harsh he was nor what he was ordering her to do.

"Maya, what is wrong with you, my daughter? Can't you see he's but a peasant?"

"A peasant that managed to deflect the attacks of Shion after mere minutes of sparring with her."

"Anyone could parry a strike or two, we do not fight with deadly intent in our style."

"I have to agree with Kazora-sama, Maya." Feeling as if a chain was pulling at the nape of my neck, I could no nothing but lower my head as my lips moved to produce my words. "While I do think he doesn't deserve this treatment, I do not think it wise of you to wish for little Takeru to train here. This won't do him good." He'll end up like Mion if she forces him to train here. That sweet, kind boy… I do not wish to see him getting hurt. We should look over our fellows, and we shouldn't push unnecessary burdens onto them.

"Takeru is still not giving up. Isn't that right?" Maya's tone was brimming with confidence, with such fierceness as if she was a recently lit bonfire.

I looked at the boy and was surprised at his expression. Furrowing his brows and puffing his cheeks as much as he could, his nose full of wrinkles and his eyes returning Shion's gaze squarely.

"Yeah! That hurt a lot… But I'm not giving up! I just need to get better and that's it."

"… Just get better?" Mion perked up at his words. "You barely can lift your sword, what can you do against Shion?"

"Maybe not today, but someday I will win! I'm not giving up. You just wait, with Maya-nee training me I'll beat you one of these days

Shion!"

Shion's hold on her blade again tightened, not longer able to stop it from shaking. Mion was left with her mouth agape, as I am, at the boy's defiance and sheer confidence. Or should I say foolishness? Maya remained as composed as usual, however.

"You heard him, Father. Takeru is not giving up yet. So, since he still wishes to train… I see no reason to not allow him to try."

"… You will make yourself responsible for him, I suppose?" Kazora-sama squinted his eyes at her, Maya nodded. "Then it's none of my business. Shion, one last match."

"… Yes." She again took her stance.

"Takeru, are you sure of this? You might get hurt." I do not know what is wrong with Maya, but I can't just let this continue. He's but a common kid… He might get injured.

"Don't worry Mana-nee, I'll be fine." He returned a smile my way, coiling his small hands into fists.

"… Mana-nee?" Mion again reacted at his words. She first took a glance at me, her lips trembling as much as a ladybug's wings when they fly, then she gazed at him, narrowing her brows in confusion. "Why do you call them in such a way? You're not related to us."

"Huh? Maya-nee is my sister and Mana-nee said it was okay." He simply answered. Such simplicity and warmness is something I would welcome in my daily life, however… someone wasn't that pleased with his answer.

"Pah! What have you been teaching him in this month, Maya?"

"Father, please keep quiet. The match should have began already. Mana, if you would." She glared at me, tapping her glasses with only one finger right in the middle.

"… Takeru, you truly wish to keep fighting?"

"Yeah, I'll keep trying!"

"… I see." I take a few steps back once more. "Then, take your stances… Begin!"

And again, Shion pressured Takeru with fast attacks. Yet, this time… Takeru kept his feet firmly planted on the ground and limited himself to just parry her attacks. I saw him moving his lips, opening them a bit… as if he were counting aloud.

Once Shion had to take a step back, he went after her in a frontal swing. Sadly, Shion could deflect his attack without much effort. Even if he is a boy Shion is probably in better shape than him, he won't be able to overpower her. In a fluid motion, Shion sent another upwards slash at him and got him off balance once more. However, he didn't let go of his sword and tried to not fall back. Shion had to settle for a hit to his chest again. She once more put too much force on her swing, the boy once more ended up on the floor.

… He could tell when Shion would take a step back. If… If he were on equal terms of skill… I look at Maya, who simply remained staring at him. The glint in her eyes told me she was as satisfied as when we used to finish our day of work. She… What did she teach him?

"See?! I'm better than you! I'm better!" Shion, who wasn't satisfied yet, raised her sword again ready to do a follow up but I reacted quickly and reached her side, grabbing the blade.

"Shion, there is no need to continue. You won, that is all." I could see her eyes taking the shape of those of a wolf from within her headgear.

"… I won. He should know when to quit. He's nothing but a peasant, he should pay for even trying to duel with-"

"Shion!" Maya raised her voice, making her sister fall silent. "It is disheartening to see how little you seem to retain of my teachings about poise."

Shion's hands slowly, oh so slowly, started shaking. They fell down as I loosened my grasp on her blade, free from any hostile intentions. Maya went to the boy's side as he tried to stand up.

"Takeru, you did well. I do think this was more than enough to prove your point." She helped him up as she held his hand, Takeru was groaning again. "Are you unhurt, Takeru?"

"Yeah… I'm fine, Maya-nee."

"Good. This last time you did better than before. It is good to see you remembered my advice about waiting for the right moment to attack." She took the headgear off him, ruffling the boy's long hair.

"… Why do you praise him?" Shion said as she removed her headgear. "Sister, why do you praise this peasant? He didn't do well, all he did was flail his blade around! I was the one who-"

"Shion, you didn't restrain your strength in front of a clear novice. And I see no changes in your technique. That is all."

Shion lowered her gaze as her hands started to shake once more. Shion has been always pursuing the best result she could achieve. To be told such words after these bouts, by Maya no less, must be a shock to her pride. A most odd tincture made its way to my mouth, a taste of mint mixed with too much salt made me bit the inside of my lips as Shion was performing a great effort to not show her tears.

"Why do you scold me? I'm doing… my best…" She barely managed to squeeze out the words. Had I not been by her side, I would have missed them. Hanging her head, she tightly clutched her sword again.

… Could it be? Scolded… Wanting to be praised… When was the last time we praised Shion for something she did? We have been pushing them to be better, but when did we congratulate her efforts openly? Is she… the same as Mion? Do both of them look for our acceptance in their own way?

Then… if that's the case…

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**[Maya]**

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It is a shock, to see that Shion hasn't improved. Mana did tell me her temper was still giving her trouble, and I didn't expect her to treat Takeru well, but to show such aggressiveness? Mana is right, this will only make her resent our peasants. She'll end up as I used to be a month ago. I cannot praise her efforts, not when she has this attitude.

I inhale deeply, searching for a way to convey to her what Takeru taught me that night where I allowed my weakness to control me. Perhaps a talk in private before we leave would do her good, so that she can reflect on what she did.

"Shion, do not look so upset." Father said. "You fought as you usually do. Maya, I find it most odd. What could this boy gain from this? It is clear he isn't on their level."

"Father, I am Takeru's retainer. And so, I shall decide how I teach him. If you desire to speak of it, we could share a cup of tea later." I cannot allow Takeru to be put in his sights. He is very emotional, after all. And knowing him, he will probably speak up against Father if he were to get upset.

"… Yes, that is a good proposal. Should we be going? I doubt sparring with Mion will make a difference appear."

"I have to agree." Mana said as she caressed her hair. "Maya, I believe this was enough. Perhaps you could give Shion some advice regarding her endeavors? I believe she could use some time to speak with you now." Shion's head slightly arched up at her words, Mana gave her a pat in the back and then she took a few steps forward.

I inhale through my nose again and veer my gaze away from my sister's. She might misunderstand my words and I cannot explain to her why I am with Takeru. And until now my words weren't of use for her, I never managed to find why she fails to restrain her feelings. Not now, let her anger die down. Once she's calm again, then I'll approach her.

"Shion is still the same as she was, and I already have given her advice while she and Takeru fought. I have to speak with Father for the time being." Upon hearing my words, Shion's gaze again sank. Her shoulders also descended as slowly as a feather that had went on a ride with the winds of spring.

Sigh… Maybe I will have to speak with her before I leave. At the very least I need to bestow upon her what Takeru taught me. I cannot let her fall into the same hole I-

"Shion, you were amazing!"

I flinched at Takeru's voice. He had suddenly gotten closer to her and, after grabbing Shion's hands, he looked at her with a gaze that could stare right back at the sun.

"Huh? Amazing…" Shion remained still as Takeru shook her hands up and down with a smile on his face.

"Yeah, can you keep practicing with me when I come visit?" He asked her as earnestly as he usually does.

"… Why would I? You're just a peasant." She released herself from his grasp, folding her arms and looking away. Sigh… As much as I

wish to stop him, perhaps this will do her good. If I can let her learn by interacting with him, it will be easier than to explain what I realized that night I hit him.

"But you're really good. I wanna get better so fighting with you will help a lot. Come on, don't be mean!" Takeru again got closer, perhaps a tad bit too close, and Shion was once more at a loss of words at his forwardness.

I threw a glance at Mana, shaking my head as I saw her moving towards them. She pursed her lips and nodded. Father, however, had a hand in his chin, some of his displeasure vanishing from his face.

"… I don't want to. You're weak, and you're just a normal person." Shion again looked away from Takeru's eyes as she released herself from his grasp.

"I'll get better then!"

"… You won't get better than me. I don't know why Sister is training you, but you're weak."

"Well, I'll do my best. And Maya-nee is with me, so it'll be fine." Shion's brows arched downwards at the words.

"Why does she have to stay with you? Leave Sister alone, you're a waste of time!" She pushed him back with quite some force. However, when I was about to scold her again… Takeru puffed his cheeks but didn't seem to want to fight with her.

"I'm not a waste of time. It's not my fault that you're awesome with a sword." He folded his arms and looked away, pouting. It's… endearing, how honest he is. Instead of getting upset, he's praising her honestly.

"… Awesome? Are you making fun of me?" Shion, who didn't understand commoner terms, took it as an insult as her frown got

bigger.

"Shion, it means he thinks you're truly good. Takeru is praising you." Mana told her as she put a hand on Shion's shoulder. "He's only trying to be friendly with you."

"Yeah, that's true." He nodded at the words. "I wanna get better with a sword, so will you train with me?" He again got closer and stared at her with that shining gaze of his. Considering how he was around Yuuhi-sama I shouldn't be surprised.

"… Why? Why should I train with you? Why are you coming here?"

"Yohime-san told me it was okay." Did he just…

"Takeru!" I went to his side, pulling his ear. "How many times have I told you to be polite?"

"I used a -san this time, Maya-nee!"

"It's Yohime-*sama* for you, Takeru. You have to address her with the proper respect."

"But she didn't say anything when we talked."

"Stop being so contrarian." He puffed his cheeks at me, I cannot help but to sigh. "What am I going to do with you?" I let go of his ear, patting his head softly.

"Sister, why are you this kind to him? I am… I am your sister. Why are you with this boy? Why do you-"

"Shion, that matters not. You have your own mistakes to polish, as does Takeru. We shall be coming here every weekend to train. I hope you can start to act as you should when we do." Shion bit her lips as she hanged her head once more. I was about to say something else, but then Takeru pulled my sleeve.

"Maya-nee, why are you angry?"

"I am not."

"But you haven't praised her. She was awesome!" He narrowed his brows as he said that.

"But she was too aggressive." I know you are stubborn to a fault, but I can't let Shion keep going on like this. I will have to have a talk with her later.

"Yeah…" He rubbed his head as he narrowed his eyes. "But she still was awesome." He said, rising a fist to the air. "And why does she call you Sister? Your name is Maya."

"Takeru, that is the proper, formal way to refer to one's older sister." He squinted his eyes as he tilted his head.

"Why? Why can't Shion call you Maya-nee?"

To let Shion… Hmm… I suppose I could try to be closer to her and support her as I do with you. Perhaps some kindness will help her with her anger? Hmm… Would Father even allow me to? I do not wish to keep getting into arguments with him, considering how he sees you. And… she might begin to think less of me were I to suggest such a thing. Shion is very dedicated to her training after all.

"Well… That would be inappropriate. She should address me with respect." I tap my glasses again, Shion's eyes narrowed as I did. Once more, the ants march on my back at the sight of her face.

"But I call you Maya-nee all the time." Takeru didn't let go of the idea, however.

"That is true, however-"

"And why can't you praise her? She's your sister, right? She fought really, really well too!" Takeru again puffed his cheeks, my lips twisted slowly as I looked at him.

Giving you emotional support was my first hurdle to overcome… And I suppose you weren't only receiving said support this month. I do think Father will oppose this, quite strongly at that. Sigh… But Shion is my sister, and she… also needs me just like you do.

"… Fine, you are right." He smiled and then I went to Shion's side.

The little one slowly looked up at me, a foreign shiver running on my chest as I gazed at her. I slowly placed a hand atop Shion's head and caressed her hair. She flinched when I did, as I had never done this for her. Her eyes looked up at me, wide and surprised as they never were before while her mouth remained slightly open.

"You fought well Shion. You should still try to manage your temper, but it is clear you're still as sharp as you always were. You… must have been training with all your might to retain your edge with me gone."

"Yes… I have been doing my best, Sister." Returning my gaze, Shion's lips betrayed her mask and rebelled against her formal act, twisting their edges in hopes of drawing a smile. So she did need some kindness…

I gulp what clogged my mouth, though it was not physical what tormented my throat into constriction. You can say it, Maya. Even if Father is against it… there are things you have to teach her. I cannot fear their rejection, not when it's about my duties as both a retainer and a needs to be bestowed kindness without it being tied to her duties as a member of the Tsukuyomi family.

… Hm? Without it being tied to…

Who said those words to me? I squint my eyes, trying to recall. And then, as if it were so simple… I remembered. There was someone who used to give me such warmth when I was younger. Someone Shion never got to meet.

… Mother. Mother used to argue with Father about how harsh our training was. She used to comb my hair whenever I was resting from my bouts with Mana as we read some books. I… Why did I forget about it?

Shion… I never gave Shion anything of the sort. No one ever did. I inhale deeply to calm the raging salmons that were jumping at my heart from within, shredding themselves and my composure with every passing second.

Giving people strength with the power of love, huh? It seems your words held more weight than I gave them credit for, Takeru. In that case… There is only one path I should follow going forward.

"… I suppose you could call me Maya-nee, when we're within the walls of our house." I said, eyes closed as I tapped my glasses again while letting some air out softly.

"Huh? I can… Sister, do you mean it?" Her tone now incredulous, her gaze widening. I then crouched by Shion's side, still patting her head.

"Yes, I am your older sister after all. That makes me your guardian too, even if Father is with us. It is clear you have continued to excel while I was gone, Shion. I hope you can make an effort to calm that temper of yours, otherwise you're on the right path. Well done, my sister." Shion's eyes stared back at me unblinking, her lips folding inwards.

"I… Thank you, Si… M-Maya-nee?" Shion awaited my response, her legs slightly swaying and her lips tightly sealed. When I nodded at her words and ruffled her hair once more, Shion finally allowed herself to smile, even if it was as small as a spark. "I will keep doing my best. Will you train with me again, Si… Maya-nee?"

"Yes, I shall. I'll come on the weekends so please keep up the good work during the week."

"Eh? Why… Why can't you come back home? Why are you with that peasant?" Shion shot a glare at Takeru, who simply tilted his head again as he rose a brow at her.

"Shion, listen. Takeru might be a peasant but that doesn't make him any less important than anyone else. We train to protect and help our fellows, no matter their standing. Takeru needs me by his side for now. Can you help me train him, Shion?" I stopped petting her, stood up and tapped my glasses once more.

Shion looked down, bringing her hands together. Delaying an answer, she looked over at Takeru. Narrowing her eyes, her lips plucked a bit. She finally looked at me again, her brows still low.

"If you want me to, I'll help you. Maya-nee…" She grabbed one of my hands as she came a bit closer. "… Will you look over my tests before you leave?"

"I suppose I could. Could you keep Takeru company while I speak with Father?"

"… Yes, if you so want I will do it."

"You won't be harsh or rude to him?"

"No, I won't. I promise." Seeing she was being honest, going by how she held my gaze, I patted her head one last time before turning around.

"Takeru, let's go get you changed."

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*A few minutes later.*

*(Tea Room.)*

**[Mana]**

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Sitting by Maya's side with Kazora-sama in front of us both, each of us drank some tea that was just served. I looked at my cousin, who returned her usual blank, cold stare.

"Well then…" Kazora-sama spoke up. "Maya, can you explain yourself? What is the meaning of this? Why are you content with being the nanny of a peasant?" The moon had appeared, the wolves howled deep into the forest of his complexion.

"I am not a mere nanny, Father. I am Takeru's retainer. I suppose Yohime-sama has informed you of why I've been entrusted with this mission."

"Yes, she did allow me to discuss it with you." He lowered his cup, groaning for some moments.

"Excuse me, but I still don't know what's going on here." Maya finished drinking and looked at me.

"As it turns out Takeru's father is a member of Takahisa-sama's squadron." Yes, that was what I was told just as we arrived. "Due to his mother passing away, his father wished to quit his post in the Guard to be by his son's side."

I don't know how to feel about that. On one hand, I can understand his feelings. Being the one who looks after Mion and Shion, I can sympathize with his intentions of caring for his son. On the other, I feel somehow… betrayed. To leave us in such short notice, despite how hard this situation must be on him, is nothing short of a betrayal to the trust we placed on the man. He could have hired a caretaker to look after little Takeru. Wait… Maya is Takeru's retainer now… So, how did this happen? She then tapped her glasses before continuing.

"However, Takahisa-sama wished him to stay in his post, and so he requested someone be sent to his son to look after him. Yohime-sama simply chose me to take that role."

"You are the last person I would think of to perform such a task." I say as I caress my hair.

"Do you have a complain, Mana?" She narrowed her eyes at me as she usually did in our bouts.

"No, it's just… You never liked to be near the peasantry. What made you change your mind?"

"That is a good question indeed, Mana. Could you explain yourself, Maya?" Kazora-sama then picked up his cup and drank without letting go of Maya's gaze.

"Well, one could say…" She closed her eyes, taking a deep breath. "I learned a valuable lesson during my stay in Hiiragi. Father, Takeru taught me we should not be so harsh towards commoners. Nothing good will be gained through such actions. So I must ask you, why do you oppose him so strongly?"

"… Commoners and nobles should not mix. Maya, I have taught you that since an early age. The boy doesn't belong here."

"The same could be said for his father, yet he's one of our best pilots." I say, gaining Kazora-sama's frown on me. "When I asked around after my return, I was told many things about him. But regardless of the rumors about his manners, everyone agreed that Kageyuki Shirogane is one of our best men."

"… Even so, his son's situation is a different one. The boy should be left alone in his life, we should not grow too used to mingling with the peasants. Should we do so, we one day might falter when confronted with a problem that has no easy solution." Me and Maya frown at his words. "What could he gain from this? What good will it do to him to come here to be soundly bested time and again? What do Mion and Shion gain from this 'training'? Nothing, that's what this leaves to all of us."

"Father, I am sure you saw how Shion reacted to his praise." He grimaced at Maya's words. "Shion needed recognition. We never tried being kind to her, we only evaluated her based on her performance in school and in the trainings. If not for Takeru, I doubt I would ever have tried to bequeath her with kindness and simple praise. It is clear she needed us to be by her side, not only physically."

"If I may add, I believe Mion also needs the same. Seeing her reaction to Maya's talk with Shion, how she couldn't stop staring and twiddling her thumbs together while twisting her lips, I believe our faults have met an answer at last. Mion and Shion require us to be more than mere teachers to them, they need us as family as well."

He folded his arms, groaning. After a moment, stroking his beard and looking upwards he let out a long, heavy sigh.

"I am sure you know who we are. We cannot be flaccid in our teachings. We need you four to be as strong as you can as the guardians of the Koubuin House."

"And we also should be able to guide our lords in all matters that they might need. Shion cannot do so in her current condition and Mion also won't be able to do so if she doesn't gain some confidence." Maya nodded at my words, making her father squint his eyes even more.

"Mana, the one who has been watching over them, believes we should proceed in this way. Father, is an opportunity so much to ask of you?" Maya then silently returned her father's gaze.

"… If Yohime-sama allowed it, my opinion doesn't matter. However, you two will be responsible for anything that might happen. If Shion and Mion lower their performance, if the boy is unnecessarily hurt, you two will be made to bear the punishment. Even so, why must you stay with the boy Maya? Why can't his father hire a caretaker himself?" I also look at her, she moves her fringe out of her face as she waited a moment to answer.

"Well, Yohime-sama said she was entrusted by Takahisa-sama with the duty of choosing a caretaker. So if you have any complains, you could voice them to her, Father." The man again grimaced, grabbing his cup and drinking.

"That I shall do. That will be all. You can leave."

"You… do not wish to discuss anything with me, Father?"

"You seem to be in good health. That's all I need to know."

"Maya, shall we be going?" I said as I stood up. She nodded and after we bowed to Kazora-sama we left the room.

Walking towards the room where the kids were taken to, I sigh loudly after some steps.

"You seem unusually tense, Mana."

"Can you blame me? I have never seen you contradict your father. What happened to you, Maya?" She looks down, slowly relaxing her gaze.

"What do you speak of?"

"Please… What has made you change your mind in such a way?"

"I… Could you keep a secret?" I nod. "One day, Yohime-sama called the house." She stopped walking, closing her eyes. "I had believed she had kicked me out of the Guard due to her words."

"Huh? You, kicked out? Why did you even ponder such a thought?" She of all people getting kicked out? Preposterous, how could she ever reach such a conclusion?

"Well, you see… I didn't take the orders well at first."

"I see… Yes, considering how hard you trained I can see how hard you could take it." It is a surprise she even accepted the orders, to

be honest. "Then, how… What made you change?"

"That night… I cried." Maya's eyes wander away, her shoulders descend in synchrony with her chest. She… She cried? Maya? Crying? "Takeru saw me and tried to ask me why I was sad. I was most upset at the situation I was in. I couldn't control my emotions… and I hit him."

"Huh?! Maya you… You hit a children?" Seeing her bitter smile as she winced made me feel as if I had just swallowed a thousand needles. Maya… never allowed her emotions to surface in her complexion. Just… What vile parasite had nested itself on her heart?

"I did. He cried loudly his pain out, and yet in the end he apologized. He simply… didn't want to be alone. I cannot explain what it felt like, hearing him pleading me not to leave him in between his tears." I lick my lips over, inhaling slowly, as Maya chuckled for some reason. "Takeru taught me how foolish I was being. I looked down on him, I didn't try to understand his woes, and I leashed out to him to ease up my own suffering. Yet, he didn't scream at me, he didn't grew resentful. I'm sure you realized it on the way here but he's… perhaps too kind for his own good." Maya tapped her glasses and returned to her usual demeanor.

"So… What happened after that?"

"I promised to aid him earnestly, and since then he did many efforts to be better." We resumed walking towards the room. "He still gave me many troubles, mind you. However… I started to see good traits in him, despite his manners. Since then I started to see him and our neighbors differently with the passing of the days. And…" Closing her eyes, she again played with her hair. "As shameful as it is to admit, I do believe he wasn't the only one who received help during this month."

"What do you mean? Don't you tell me you enjoy his hugs, Maya." I was merely poking fun at her… Yet, she closed her eyes and nodded. "… Are you being serious?"

"I hadn't pondered it until moments ago, however… No one ever bestowed such kindness towards me. Not since… Mother died."

"… I see. Yes, since they passed away… our fathers have not been the same."

"At first I was truly upset when he kept hugging me out of the blue. However, for some reason, I stopped complaining at some point. It is shocking, to be honest. I hadn't made the connection but… To act like a family, to be by my sister's side made me remember Mother. I suppose Takeru simply noticed how sad I truly was, how fixated I was on my duty and tried to be kind with me."

"… He sounds like a good boy."

"He is, despite his manners."

"I suppose that means you wish to give that same kindness to Shion?"

"No, not only to Shion. As retainers, we also need to provide emotional support to our rulers. They won't be able to openly show their feelings, so it falls to us to accompany them in their privacy if they were to require guidance when their hearts are afflicted."

"It's good to see we finally agree on something, then." I finally relax and allow a smile to form.

"Indeed. Then, what do you plan to do regarding Shion?"

"That's what I want to ask. I do think having Takeru visiting them may do them good, but Father only gave me a month to prove to them that we can train them differently."

"I see…" Maya closed her eyes and rearranged her glasses as she thought and we took a turn. "Mana, what day is today?"

"Huh? Today? Isn't it March 18th? Why do you ask?"

"What happens in a week's time?" She asked as she looked into my eyes. One week from now… That would be the-

"Oh! Shion's birthday is next Saturday. Are you coming to visit her then too?"

"Yes, however I believe… Takeru might have an idea to help you." She joined her hands together again, stoic and composed unlike that small inkling of shine that was present in her voice now.

"So you think he can help us with the little ones?"

"Considering our talk with Yohime-sama before we went to train with you, I believe our sisters need a… friend. I'm sure that Takeru can make Mion realize how good she truly is and give Shion someone who she doesn't need to compete against. With him simply being himself and us watching over them, I'm of the opinion he can be that presence that they lack in their life. Someone who they don't need to be on their guard all the time."

"… It's truly nice to see how you've changed, Maya."

"What do you mean?" She now lowered her brows at me.

"Well, I never would have thought you would consider someone's feelings so throughly."

"I am more than capable of such a feat, however." She narrowed her eyes at me, I smiled at her.

"That seems to be the case."

"Why are you smiling in such a way?"

"I'm just… happy to not be alone in this anymore." I stop walking, looking upwards.

"Mana? What do you mean?"

"Well… Father hasn't been very… supportive of my ideas as of late. I'm working until night all the time, I haven't seen those two improve at all since you left… I'm glad to see I can count on you two helping me now."

"… Were you that preoccupied?"

"To be frank, yes, I am. Seeing Shion lost in anger from time to time, seeing Mion's gaze sinking deeper every day…"

Feeling the food clogging my stomach, unable to properly sit down to eat as work kept piling up. Constantly arguing with Father and Kazora-sama about my teaching methods. Seeing Meiya-sama trapped in the basement, hearing what is said of her by Father every time I made a report.

"At times it feels as if I were trying to reach the stars by climbing a mountain, only to realize that they where farther away than I thought as I reached the summit. Unable to aid Mion and Shion or have my words reach them, as if I was left on the shore and they sailed away to the horizon, Father's acceptance equally distant… I truly feared you would agree with them." I said letting some air out, feeling the trickle of cold water all over my back as it did during my training on that mountain.

"You… feared it?"

"Yes… If you agreed to them, Shion would follow your example. If she did so, nothing I could do would be enough to aid Mion with her self-esteem. It is truly a relief, to see you share my thoughts." I smile at her honestly, Maya's brow furrow slightly.

"I see… I never noticed you were under such pressure while I was here."

"No, while you were here I was managing fine. Who do you think is doing your share of work while you're gone?"

"Wait, you aren't getting any help?"

"We don't really have any hands to spare for the work you used to do. I do not know how you managed to file all those reports on time."

I frankly don't. Not only I can't read your handwriting but those odd signs and drawings you use to sort the reports are simply beyond my understanding. And that's not delving into what I had to do when your program stopped working all of a sudden. The code you wrote to automate the mails and computer related tasks you did is simply beyond my understanding.

"Well, you'd do well in learning how to automate the simpler tasks." Look at you, taking pride in having your code in such disarray.

"Sigh… Well, in any case it is good to hear you're on my side for this. Can you tell me what Takeru might suggest for Shion's birthday?"

"If he reacts the same as before… I believe he'll suggest us to bring a cake and presents for her." Maya said as she caressed her fringe.

"Cake? Oh, maybe I should bake one myself?"

"Hmm… That would make it more personal, I suppose. I do not recall if Shion liked such sweet food however."

"I am sure she will be pleased, and since a cake can be shared we could try to have her give some to Mion. Perhaps then they could use that to start becoming closer." Maya nods at my words. It is truly good to see we can now talk in this way. Finally, with a long sigh in the middle, the boulders that were bound to my shoulders eased up their hold on me.

"In any case, I am sure Takeru will insist on having cake on her birthday. I will leave it to you if you can do it, but if you don't have the time do contact me. I may not be as good a baker as you but I can manage."

"Hmm… Yes, receiving a cake from you would be the best present Shion could ask for now. I will let you take care of that then." Considering all I have to do I won't have the time.

However, I should prepare in advance for Mion's birthday. I am sure she will be happy, and if I can show her how much she means for me that will do wonders for her confidence. And if Shion can also start to be a bit more supportive towards her I'll be able to prove to Father that there are other pathways available to us in regards to their training.

Approaching the room where the children should be, an attendant came to our side and gave us a bow.

"Tsukuyomi-sama, we have been awaiting you."

"Thank you for your hard work. How are the children?"

"They seem to be fine. We brought some sushi for them to eat just moments ago."

"Sushi?" Maya's brow's twitched. "By any chance, did you bring natto rolls to them?"

"Yes, I believe some were brought to them."

"Maya, what is this about-"

"Who is watching over the children as of now?" Maya took a step forward, the attendant lowered his gaze at the sharp tone of her words.

"I was watching over them, but I was told you were arriving shortly and they were behaving well so-"

"You left Takeru. Alone in that room. With natto rolls near him?"

"Maya, what's the matter?"

Before I could react, she dashed to the door. And as we entered, we saw little Takeru sulking on a chair as he ate a natto roll. He looks so cute…

"Oh, Maya-nee! Where were you?" Noticing us, he came to our side.

"Takeru, how many of those did you eat?" Hm? Why is she so worried about that? Little Takeru's brows arched as he looked away.

"… Just a few of them."

"Shion, how many did he eat?" Maya asked her sister, she got closer as she had her arms folded.

"He ate most of them. Only two or three are left. I cannot understand how he could eat so much with the smell they have." Shion grimaced at Takeru, who puffed his cheeks at her.

He ate… most of them himself? Maya pulled his ear and he started complaining.

"Takeru, what did I told you about moderation?"

"They told me I could eat them if I wanted to!"

"Just because you can do something doesn't mean you should. Your stomach is going to hurt much later." Maya released him and glared at him. He looked away as he rubbed his ear.

"But they were tasty…" Aww… Just look at those eyes…

"Maya, I believe you could be a bit more lenient with him?"

"I am his retainer, Mana."

"Well, but you could try to be less abrasive in your scolding."

"If I do, he wouldn't mend his mistakes."

"Were I his retainer, I would approach him in a more patient, understanding way. I fail to see what good will pulling his ear do for little Takeru."

"… Thank you kindly for your suggestion. However, I will teach Takeru in the way I find most appropriate."

"Hey, aren't you going to eat?" Takeru pulls Maya's sleeve, breaking the clashing of our stares.

The children were taken to a small living room where guests usually wait before meetings, they had some tables, a few sofas and a bookshelf filled with varied offerings. Some food was still on one table, and we sat down and ate for a moment. I couldn't help to notice how the boy seemed unwilling to look at the girls for some reason. Mion and Shion had opted to sit in front of him, they were also avoiding looking at him.

"Takeru, what is the matter? It is rare for you to be so quiet." Maya said as she looked at him, he remained sulking however.

"… I lost all the times."

"Lost? At what?" I asked but soon got my answer as he pointed towards another table. A Shogi board was set up, some pieces already moved.

"I won all the matches. He is severely lacking in his Shogi skills." Shion said, arms folded and with an air of superiority as if she were merely gazing at an animal doing tricks to her whim.

"Even I could beat him without much trouble." Mion said before drinking some water.

"But I then bested you too." Shion quickly retorted.

"Shion, do not act in such a way." Maya directed a gaze at her, Shion tensed up and sat straight as she did. "You should always remain

humble regardless of your results. Now, why don't you try your luck against me?"

"Truly?" Shion quickly dropped her edge, happily moving to the table to spar against Maya.

I instead moved to sit near the still sulking boy. Looking at him, he looks so innocent. To think Maya hit him… Even if she felt left out, how could she harm such a cute boy? Look at him, who would ever harm such a sweetheart? It's the same with Meiya-sama, I cannot comprehend why people would scorn them.

"Say Takeru…" I say and he looks at me. "Have you ever played Shogi before?"

"Yes, a few times with Maya-nee."

"I see. Did you have fun as you played?"

"Yeah… But I lost." He slightly puffed his cheeks.

"Well, you can always try again. By the way, did you know that next Saturday is Shion's birthday?"

"Eh? Really?" His eyes immediately regained light as he rose, all displeasure cleared from his face as if a sudden wind had banished all clouds from the skies. "Are you having a party?"

"Party?"

"Yeah, a birthday party. Like with books, and music, and cake. What are you going to give her as a present?" So Maya was right.

"Hmm… That's going to be a secret."

"Huh? Why?" Hehehe… He really does look cute when he furrows his brows like that.

"Well, it's not going to be a surprise if she knew, right?"

"Ooh… Yes, you're right."

"Well, you will come visit next Saturday, won't you?"

"Yeah! Ah… I can come, right? The old people won't get mad?"

"No, it is alright. So, you'll be here for her birthday?"

"Yes, I will. Thanks for inviting me, Mana-nee." He then got closer from his seat and gave me a hug. Uuh… Patting his back and feeling his small hands on me pikes at the stones on me, sending them crashing away from my body. If only I could do the same for… Hm?

"Say Takeru, what do you say of playing some games with Mion while Maya is busy?"

"Are you sure? She didn't seem to have fun with me."

"Mion, would you like to play something now?"

"Eh? Play?" Mion was sitting some distance away from us, her hands joined by her lap. Again, looking down and expressionless as usual.

"Yes, why don't we play some Shogi? Or would you like to play something else?" I went to her side, trying to pat her head. However, my hands halted as I once more saw her tense expression as if she were frozen in place.

"No… I don't want to bother you, Sister. Please rest easy, I am fine."

"Why is she calling you that?" Takeru came to my side and peeked at Mion with his brows furrowed.

"… That is how I should call Sister. I am not as rude as you."

"I'm not rude, I'm friendly. So, you wanna play something else, Mion?" He also got closer, Mion's gaze trailed towards her own lap as her lips formed a line.

"I am fine. And please, do not call me by my name. You're not my family."

"Then can we be friends?"

"… Friends? What is that?"

"You know… Friends. People you have fun with." Takeru scratched his head as he tried to explain it to her with his clumsy words, to which Mion only furrowed her brows as she tilted her head.

"Mion, it won't do you any harm to spend some time with us, right?" She looks at me and, after her hands shuffle around themselves, she gave a nod.

"If you're not busy…"

"Then let's play something!" Takeru grabbed her hand and got her off the seat.

Mion's eyes widened yet she didn't release herself. Takeru said we should play something other than Shogi, however we do not have any toys or games to speak of here. On his suggestion, we instead played a guessing game with one of the books we had on the room where we were. I had grabbed a book about some of our traditional stories and he managed to guess many times before Mion when I asked them about our folktales.

"How can you not know what happens to Issun Boshi?"

"I haven't read the story in a long time." Mion answered in her polite voice, still as stiff as ice.

"I mean… What do you do to have fun, Mion?" Mion's gaze fell down at his question, my heart feeling a pressure tantamount to having a blade riveted on my throat. I delayed a breath as her eyelids descended and her shoulders tried to make themselves smaller.

"… Fun? I… I am busy studying for school and practicing my swordplay. I do not have time to slack off."

"Mion, relaxing for some moments isn't slacking off. I myself read some manga from time to time. I believe it would do you good to find a hobby you like."

"No… Sister, I am behind in my lessons. Father would be most upset at me."

"That is not true, Mion. Haven't you been doing your best efforts in school and in the dojo all this time?"

"I'm not good enough, Sister."

"Why? You're good in Shogi and you fight with Shion all the time, right? You must be really good then!" Takeru comments with a smile.

"Maybe to you, but I can't best Shion yet. I always lose in our practice at the dojo."

"But you're not giving up. Only one can win so it's not that bad to lose from time to time."

"Eh? Only one can win?" Mion pondered his words for a moment, seeing how her lips plucked at him… I could use this to get her out of her cage.

"Yes, only one can win. Losing doesn't make you bad." He said as he rose a fist again.

"Even so, I can never give her a good duel."

"Mion, think about what Takeru told you. If you were to best Shion once, would that mean she wasn't doing enough in her training?"

"Huh? I… Um…"

"Can you see it? Were she to lose, Shion would still have her good grades in school, like you do as well. Honing each other together does not mean only one has to win, doesn't it? If only one could triumph over the rest there would be no point in training all four of us to work together. We all are to cooperate so there isn't a single winner in the long term. Would you not agree?"

"I suppose…"

"I don't know why you're so down, you just gotta try again until you win!" Takeru told her, getting closer and grabbing her hands. "I mean, I lost super bad with I'm still going to try. You just gotta do your best until you win. But you can't overworry or get sad. That's why you should have fun once in a while."

"… Please release my hands. You don't know how hard it is, to fight with Shion." She looks away, her head hanging lower once more.

"I got hit in the head today. And I could barely do anything. You're better than me, right?" She nods slowly. "Can you actually hit her sometimes?"

"Yes, I can. But I always lose in the end."

"Then you just gotta hit her harder!" He released her and rose his tiny fists upwards.

"Huh? Harder?" Her eyes widened as she tilted her head at his simple advice.

"Yeah, if you can only hit her once then that hit has to count!" He furrowed his brows and puffed his cheeks. "If you can only hit her a few times, then you gotta win with those hits!"

"… If I can only hit a few times… then I have to win with those few hits…"

"Mion, his words do have some merit behind them." I pat her shoulder, caressing the back of her head as she looked at me. "You don't have to do the same that Shion does. You can fight how you find it most comfortable. Me and Maya don't use the same approach after all."

"Truly?"

"Yes, that is the case." I pat the top of her head like Maya did, Mion seems to be shaking a bit. "Why don't we practice together in my style, to see if you find it useful?"

"Would it be alright? I don't want to trouble you."

"You're no trouble, my sister. Would you like to train, just the two of us together?" Usually, she would have receded inside her shell. However, she now was tapping her fingers together, her lips twisting. She finally returned my gaze, the small flickering of a candle blistering behind the thick layer of ice that had covered her eyes as of late.

"Um… If you're not busy…"

"Of course I'm not. Do we have an agreement?"

"Yes… Yes, we do." She finally nodded. She agreed to do something new. Sigh…

"So, aside from your studies, how do you have fun?" Takeru asked again.

"Well, I read mangas." Seeing Mion was still unwilling to answer, I did so myself. "What do you do, Takeru?"

"I read folktales with a friend back home. There's also a book of poetry I got for my birthday that I haven't read in a long time. And that giant book of the monkeys and that weird island." He puffs his

cheeks as he said the last one. Mion put a finger to her lips, narrowing her brows.

"Monkeys? Oh, do you speak of the Malediction of Monkey Isle?"

"Yeah, that one! It's so long… I'm not even near half of it and I've been reading it for a long time too." He folds his arms as he pouts.

"Mion, do you know of that book?"

"Yes, we were once asked to read a foreign book that was translated into Japanese and that series of books was in the list of options. It was a large book so I didn't choose it, but it did seem interesting. Shirogane, what do you think of the book?"

"Ta-ke-ru, call me Takeru. That's my name."

"Um… It would be rude for me to call you by your name."

"But aren't we friends?"

"Well… Sister? What do you think?"

"It won't harm you, at the least." He looks at him, Takeru smiles at her and she looks down, tapping her fingers together. She finally nods at him. Uuh… They look so cute… I take a deep breath to calm myself down before speaking up. "So Takeru, what do you say of talking about it with us? Maybe you could bring those books here when you come visit and read them with Mion?"

"Oh! Yeah, I'll do that if Maya-nee lets me bring it. Then we can eat cake as we read it."

"… Cake? Sister, what is that?" Mion tilted her head as she folded her arms.

"Mion, you… don't know what that is?"

"No, I do not. What kind of food is it?"

"Oh, it's really sweet!" Takeru said, again getting a tad bit too close to Mion. "It has all this cream, and it's really soft, and it also can have strawberries and chocolate!"

"I see… Is it really that good?" She asked, curiously leaning forward.

"Yeah! It's super tasty!"

"Well, you'll get to try it next weekend. Should we read some books until Maya finishes her duel?" Takeru nodded in an instant, whereas Mion hesitated as her hands fumbled together.

"Um… Sister, would it be alright to have fun?"

"Of course it is. Shion is also relaxing now, right?" We all look at the table were the turquoise ones were.

It looks like they just began another match. Shion no longer has that roughness in her movement, that tint in her eyes as if she was always ready to fight. Now it looked as if she finally was calm enough to properly practice her calligraphy or do some origami.

"See? Shion is also taking a break. So you should do so too, Mion." She nodded as she looked at her cousin. "You are reading the book Takeru will bring next week with him, right?"

"Um… If he doesn't mind…"

"I don't, so let's read it together." He again gave her a handshake with a bright smile. "Next time I come I'll bring that large book and we'll read it together as we eat some cake. So don't be so down, Mion."

"Why do you insist on calling me by my name?"

"I mean… Aren't we friends?"

"… We could be, but… Why?"

"What do you mean, why? I just wanna be your friend. If you wanna read with me then you're my friend, Mion. So, what do you want to read now?"

He and Mion debated for a moment on what to read next. She was still being polite to him but she had dropped her tension. I watched their exchange and then we all read the book they chose together.

How thankful I am to you, Takeru. I am blessed for you to have come aid me right in this moment. I surely hope you can be a good friend to both Mion and Shion.

I do wonder if Mion will like the cake Maya brings, but at the least she might be able to enjoy reading with you. If Shion can stop being so aggressive with you, maybe you'll finally be able to smile again. And who knows? Maybe she'll be interested in that book and I can use that to make them get along from now on.

Regardless, he's really funny to be around. I can see why Maya likes you so much, he is not very polite but he is very attentive, in his own way. And I am glad Maya thinks like I do regarding our sisters. I can only hope Shion's birthday goes well, for both of them.

The only thing that is left piking at my heart is… If only I could give Meiya-sama a good friend like you, Takeru… I only she could have one person she could treat as her equal…

# Debris Junkyard

## Chapter 37: Debris Junky ard

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*November 27 th , 2001.*

**[Takeru]**

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Ugh… Chest hurts… Can't… breathe well… Where the hell am I?

Some sort of run down corridor, tilted to my left and with moonlight coming from the windows, except it's green for some reason is all I can distinguish amidst the fog.

Can't find an exit… What the hell is… happening here?

Struggling to keep walking, I realized something was looking at me at the distance.

In a flash, my feet froze up. Said something zoomed in, holding me by the wrists. Looking up at it, not recognizing what the hell it was, my feet sprung into action, kicking at the thing, pushing with all my might to release me.

The dark silhouette didn't budge, it stood still as if it were a statue. Some sort of dress was on it… and its eyes were… oddly round and big. Biting its lips, gazing into me with a look as hateful as Sumika's when she screamed bloody murder in her frenzy, its nails dug into my skin, peeling it off as if it were the foreskin of a roasted chicken.

"Gah! Let me go!"

No matter how hard I kick or struggle I can't break away. As if the thing were using charcoal instead of soap to clean my wrists, the pain doesn't end despite my efforts.

*" No, you are the one who has to let go."*

"… Huh?"

For some reason, I can't move again. As our eyes met, as the green moonlight grew stronger, as everything else around seemed to warp as if sucked into a twister, the… thing began to bite its lips far more strongly. It began to shake, fissures appearing on it, bits and pieces of the silhouette began to… fall off…

And the restrained but hostile expression… crumbled away to reveal a far, far more menacing glare, one that could kill in a mere glance. Those lightless eyes… that hawkish tint… where have I seen them before?

*" Release me."*

"What?… You are the one that's-"

*" I told you to release me!"*

One arm was raised, twisting into some eldritch, jagged shape, as the other kept me in place. Barely raising my free arm to protect me, the impact sent me flying away. Despite being hit on the face, what hurts the most is my chest. Feel as if I had taken a hundred slashes right at the heart, as if she had hurled the charcoal she was using to wash my hands right at my chest.

*" Cough … Cough…"*

Hurts… Everything hurts… Shivering and doing hiccups, trying to stand up and look around, my hands make contact with… something.

"What the hell is… going on…" Hunched over, as I blink I realize I'm on the… ground.

Dirt, grass… Standing up, looking around, I don't know where this is. Bare patches of dirt, humid and rugged, some grass here and

there… and a bunch of stone slabs. In rows, some creaking, others crumbling. Some had vases near them, with dying, drying flowers in them. Some had sunflowers, other had lilies, others were too dry to tell.

As I glanced around, within this thick fog and the same green moonlight, walking around, hearing literally nothing but my steps, the rows just have no end to them.

The silhouette wasn't around anymore, yet I couldn't shake the feeling that something was close by despite the silence.

This place looks like a graveyard, and yet I hear no crows, no other steps, no… nothing.

Licking my lips, I pick up my pace. Glancing back, I don't see the silhouette from before.

And yet, no matter how much I walk, there is no end to this place. The temperature seemed to be cooling down, I could see my breath as I rubbed my arm. *It feels as if someone had given me a hug after touching snow.*

"Heey! Is anyone here?!"

Gasping as a dog after running in summer, I keep changing directions, yet I find no one here.

No matter how much I scream, no one answers me back.

There is no one… no one left… lost in a graveyard…

Wait…

Looking at the graves around me as I slowed down to catch my breath… I know these names, don't I?

Sumika, Meiya, Kei, Chizuru, Tama, Marimo-chan… with the dates of the accidents back in my world, and those in last loop as well.

Again, the charcoal hit my chest as their voices began to echo around me, as those moments returned to me.

The wings of fire cover those two graves, a thunderbolt falls on another, the smaller one is crushed down, other begins to slowly freeze over while the last one explodes. And all the while, their voices kept echoing about.

Inhaling sharply, rubbing my forehead, I managed to drown out those voices once I ran away from those graves' side… But as I did, my ears picked up a noise rising in intensity around the place as the fog became thicker and a cold shiver ran up my back.

Somebody else… A voice… A cold, ruthless, and enraged voice.

*" Thereby, I declare you to be removed from the inner echelons of our fellowship."*

The ground began to shake, yet not as violently as my knees. The clouds began to swirl, cover the sky. The grass on the ground began to dry up, the ground cracked up, resembling a wasteland, the vases broke down, the flowers within crumbled to ashes.

Gasping for air, feeling something else coming closer, I broke into a sprint.

*" You shall be stripped of the honor of carrying my house's emblem on you henceforth."*

As I kept running away, the voice followed me. Glancing around, nothing was nearby, no silhouettes or anything, but the voice was still there. As if breathing down my neck, as if aiming for my nape. Not paying attention, a rock found my feet as I sprinted, sending me to the ground.

*" You shall forthwith regain your past station, along the obligations that with it come."*

Looking up, a grave was right in front of me.

It was cracked, the round arc on top broken in places, and it also was almost wholly covered in moss, as if nobody had come to take care of it in years.

No flowers were nearby, it didn't even have a vase or anything. The area around it was mossy as well, grass sprouting to its sides.

Losing my breath, clawing at the ground, I couldn't even blink to release myself from what read on the stone slab.

*Takeru Shirogane*

*December 16 th , 1982 - June 29 th , 1998*

*" Farewell, Ta… Shirogane."*

Then, the ground teared itself open. Roots shoot out at me, trying to drag me into the hole.

"Guh… Damn it, what the fuck is this?! I'm not dead!"

Trying to take the vines off me, my feet sink into the ground. My joints getting bent into stiffness, my neck beginning to be pulled backwards towards the hole, I dug the fingers of my only free hand into the dirt, trying to rise back.

As I did, it seemed as if the green moonlight began to shine in between the dark clouds above. In sync with that, another voice… one that I think I recognize began to speak from somewhere .

*" This is no time to be spawning rifts in our ranks. Come with me, and I shall aid you in your apology."*

For some reason, I can't help but to grit my teeth, frown at the tone of the voice.. all-knowing… superior… *Apologize for what? I did nothing wrong…*

*" You have fifteen minutes, I shall take my leave afterwards. Choose wisely, Takeru. This might be the only chance you have to correct your mistakes."*

That… condescending… cold… and prideful tone… *It pisses me off.*

"I didn't do anything wrong! I'm only… trying to save as many as I can…"

That's why I push forward… That's why I keep moving on… Because there's no joy in martyrdom… *There's no boon that could outweight all the lives that we've lost to this war…*

I can see them again… the last transmission… the reactor room… The bloodstained face. *I can hear their cries, of laughter when we met, of pain when we parted.*

*"* I've nothing to apologize for. I'll keep struggling until I reach my peaceful world! *You and your holier-than-thou act of superiority can go fuck themselves for all I care! Go and leave if you want, I'll cleave a path forward by myself if I have to!"*

Not a second after I said that, the clouds covered the moon again. And as it was obscured in its entirety, the ground began to close up, the vines pulled with far more strength than I was ready to endure.

My fingers getting caught in the closing edges of the ground, as if they got stuck in a closing cockpit, made them gave up and I fell down into the dark, cold underground. Everything in utter silence, the walls began to close in, more and more, until my limbs began to turn in angles that shouldn't be possible.

Ugh… S-Stop… C-Can't breathe… The vines keep pushing me down, yet I feel like I can finally begin to resist their hold, pushing and kicking in what little space I have left.

Let me go… I haven't… fixed anything yet… This can't… won't end like this… *I am not allowing these setbacks to get in the way*

*anymore… this accursed war… all these sacrifices…*

Something begins to push my back as the thrashing of the vines eases up, yet I still can't see anything, can't breathe well.

It hurts… It's so cold… *Feels so… empty… so lonely…*

*"… ru-san."*

Ugh… Gotta get out… Can't die… here… I haven't… accomplished anything yet… *Like hell I'll surrender like they did… I won't forget, I won't forgive…*

*"Takeru-san!"*

**THUD!**

"Guh… Huh?"

… What am I doing on the floor? Ugh… Head hurts… Chest too, can't breath well. My limbs feel numb, as if I were sleeping in an odd position. Ugh…

Taking some breaths, blinking a bit, it looks like I just fell from my bed. Why didn't I hear Kasumi waking me up?… What was I dreaming about?

Ugh… Shit, my head feels so heavy… Think there's a buzz in my ears zooming in too…

I feel a hand atop my hair, ruffling it slowly.

"Takeru-san, did you have another nightmare?"

"… Yeah." She softly pats my head for a while, I close my eyes as she does. "Thanks, Kasumi." Slowly getting up, feeling my ankles wobbling as if made of jelly, I sit on my bed. She looks super worried, eyes focused right into mine.

"Do you want me to suppress the memory?"

"No… It's… It's fine."

Inhaling deeply a few times in a row, rubbing my eyes and my nose, I finally manage to exhale a long, heavy sigh. A few tears running out as I did, I rose my arms to stretch and get rid of the stiffness in me.

"What was it this time? Are you truly alright?"

"Yeah, I'm… okay. Still, I… don't really recall what I'm dreaming about as of late. It's just… this suffocating feeling, this tension on my back." Though, it's the first time I fall off my bed because of a nightmare.

Yawning and then exhaling a sigh at the tail end of it, resting my arms on my legs, the more I try to remember the less I do. All that's left is… this empty feeling on my heart, like those days when I didn't had the willpower to get out of my bed back in my world after all the accidents.

Again, Kasumi pats my head. Giving me a smile, she takes a step closer and grabs one of my hands. As she does, very slowly, the tingly feeling comes back to the back of my head, and as it does, images of my life back in my world come back to me. The last games we played in the arcade, the times we met up after we got into college, the fun we had in school, and also… the other worlds where I could choose someone to be with.

Visiting art galleries with Chizuru, going to different restaurants with Kei, playing videogames with Meiya or having snowball fights against each other, helping to find homes for stray cats with Tama, and messing around with Sumika as we took our vacations from college, placing which sauce we would use for dinner as the prize of our usual squabbles.

… We really enjoyed ourselves back then… didn't we?

"… Thanks Kasumi, I'm alright for real now." This must be hard on her, to bring back these many images this early.

"I see. Your mind still feels tired. Should we postpone today's recovery session?"

"… Actually, there was something I wanted to see. So, if I'm still feeling fine by night, let's give it a go." She held my gaze for a sec, scanning me. Then, she gave a nod.

"Very well."

"Alright… Sigh, I'll get ready. You can go back now."

"Okay, have a nice day. Bye bye." Waving at me, I do the same as she goes her way.

And once she does, I let out a huge sigh out. Getting up and splashing my face with cold water, rinsing my mouth, and hesitating for a moment before getting on the shower, the heaviness on my shoulders refused to leave.

… Those days were truly blessed… Just spending time with my beloved, despite the arguments we had every now and then… Yeah, focus on what you can do… No idea what this nightmare was about, but hell if I let it bring me down. After all that happened, after how useless I was last loop to aid my squadmates, and after the accidents that befell my world…

"Yeah… I've got a mess to fix. I'll despair after I'm dead." Because I can work towards saving them, because the reset will fix my world.

Getting out, drying myself up, and putting on my uniform, that I should send to the laundry after this training, I leave my cell and go to pick up my breakfast. Better hurry or I'll miss the morning trainings.

Maybe I'll ask Sensei for permission bring some dumbbells with me to the office she gave me, I feel like I'm starting to lose muscle since I can't go to run or exercise at my leisure anymore.

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*(Same Day. A few minutes past Noon.)*

*(Sim Room.)*

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"Sei!" I dash forward and slash at the enemy. One less, two remaining.

"Shirogane-san, you're leaving my range!"

"Sorry, Tama. I'll pull back now, cover me." I back-boost towards her position. The next one should come right… Ah, there it is. Tama took down the stock Fubuki that was coming at me from behind a building in no time.

I hear Meiya charging to my left, shooting at the last one, then the message of BETA alert appears on my view and I quickly shoot at the silhouette of the Heavy Laser-Class. A message appears, informing us that we cleared the exercise.

"Good job, you three." The Instructor informs us, a smirk in her face as big as the horizon from atop the hill. "You've completed Level C-5, return to your starting point and we'll finish this session."

"Understood!"

And with that, the stock city vanishes from my view, the data link with the sim is ended, and I'm back at the cockpit. Unbolting myself out of the seat, I sigh for a sec as I comfortably lean back on it.

Thanks to my knowledge of the exercises, I could guide the girls towards victory without looking like I'm cruising through this thing,

and I can leave the rough spots to them, forcing them to improve. So far, the plan is going well.

Today we did some drills for the Feedback Protector during early morning after the lecture on how to properly use it, the same question of what we would do if we were stranded on it in the middle of the class, and then NotMarimo-chan had the girls have a go at Level D's final courses while she had me take on the FP course by myself.

Once that was done, she put us in two teams of three and we've been going at it since. To be honest we're making decent progress, better than last loop even, despite Tama still being reluctant to go into CQC or long dashes and Meiya's propensity to do the opposite to cover us, hesitating a lot when she was left without choice but to engage in long range. Both of them need that awareness, the first about the closer space, and the other about the surrounding area, to grow into the pilots they need to be. But, well, one step at a time.

I get out of my pod just as the other three were also going out.

"I told you to cover Yoroi!" Chizuru chased after Ayamine, who let out a heavy sigh, slowly turning towards her while taking a hand to her chin.

"The attacks were coming from our right, I was in a better position to strike both of them, so you should have covered my advance." Despite having her usual calm face, it was obvious she wasn't in a good mood. This is just like when we had to work together during my first loop.

"No, you should have sticked to the plan. Enemies won't stay put in the middle of battle, charging alone just because you thought it was a good idea will only bring us down!" She berated her while making circles in the air, stomping the back of one of her feet on the floor.

"We wouldn't have lost if you had covered her, you failed." Kei shrugs as she looks away and tries to go her way, only for Chizuru to

step in front of her.

"What was that?! You're the one that-"

"Chizuru-san, Kei-san, please stop fighting! I was the one that couldn't dodge both bombs, so I'm the one who caused us to lose."

"Yoroi, stay quiet. That wouldn't have happened if Ayamine hadn't gone rogue, placing herself and the mission in danger."

"Your addiction to rules and the 'proper way' to do things is gonna get us killed in real life."

"And your tendency to do whatever you want is gonna get many people killed. You're a soldier, you have to follow your leader's orders! How are we supposed to work together if you don't?"

"Not if those orders will get me killed pointlessly. I train to save lives, not to die to stroke your boner for defensive and coward tactics." Chizuru's eyes blaze up and she was almost about to strike Kei as the Instructor spoke up.

"Squad, line up!" We all quickly form a line by the side of the sim pods. She's staring at Chizuru and Kei smirking from ear to ear.

"We've all finished the drill, Instructor." Chizuru does the usual talk, but her hands are still shaking.

"Good job. Sakaki, Ayamine, Yoroi, while you barely passed it, it is amazing you completed Level C-5 in only your second day. Mitsurugi, Tamase, Shirogane, your teamwork was marvelous, you completely dominated the course." Her smirk eases up, nodding our way. "I said it yesterday but you're all breaking the records of all previous squads I trained, so keep it up." They all smile, even Kei and Chizuru. Finally seeing their training bear fruit is one very important step to forge them into the pilots we need them to be. "However… Shirogane, I have a few questions for you." Now what did I do?

"What is it?"

"What exactly were you doing?"

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about your moves. I've never seen someone move in such patterns, it's reckless to be honest. Could you explain to me what were you trying to achieve?"

Right, not only I am still relearning how to move with the old OS, but I also have been trying some of his movements these days. The sidesteps are really useful since I can't cancel now that I got the timings figured out. Oh well, let's explain to her all the concepts of Valgern-On.

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**One long explanation later…**

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"… This sounds terribly complicated. Where did you learn of this?"

"Nowhere, I just thought it was a good idea." Can't say a thing about the consoles now.

"Hmm… It does seem like you're onto something here. Do keep these new moves to a minimum, understood?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Then, since we still have some time, let's proceed towards Level C-4. This time you'll fight against seven AI controlled TSFs, so be careful. Same teams and pods as before, move along!"

"Roger!"

We get back into the sim pods, I take a look at the other three before entering myself. Kei and Chizuru were, as usual, not looking at each other or even talking. Sigh… Considering our talk yesterday, Kei

might just be on edge. Even more considering how this world is, but when I talked she was clearly shutting herself away. If things keep going like this, I'll have to rely on Tama and Meiya to clear the air between those two.

After properly bolting myself to the seat, I press the button and the visage comes to my sight. Another generic ruined city… Can't we get anything different? Like some giant dome, a battle on the shore, or a forest on the mountains? This isn't preparing us well to fight the BETA. Sigh…

"Shirogane, Tamase, report your status." Meiya's face appeared on my view, the data link to my team formed.

"05 Tamase, all green."

"06 Shirogane, all green."

"So, do any of you have a proposal for how we should operate for this mission?"

If I recall correctly, there's five of them in the middle of the city waiting to ambush us. When two of them came scouting near us, I remember that I started chasing after them and Tama had to save me from all the other ones during my first loop. Let's force Tama to take care of this one, to get her some more confidence in her belt.

"06, I'll go scouting near our position. 02, can you remain close by in case I spot the enemy?"

"Hmm… What about 05?"

"Tama can remain farther behind us since she's got the range to back us up, and if someone goes after her, you would still be close enough to cover her until I rejoin you." I believe it's a good excuse, today I want to make Tama get as much experience as I can.

"I have no objections. 05, what do you think?"

"I also agree with 06's plan."

"Alright. Then, 06, taking off."

After a long dash, I boost jump landing myself near a couple of tall buildings. Meiya was slowly coming towards my position. Taking some air in, trying to remember how this training went, shrugging off the heaviness that still lingered on my shoulders, after a look at the map my Fubuki slowly walks further into the city.

Checking my radar as I go, taking a turn to my left, I still see nothing. I do wonder if we're gonna fight against the AI that Sensei pitted against me in the Gekishin at some point. That was nuts, how they locked me down in a few minutes. It would be awesome if the rest could-

A beep in my radar snaps me out of dreamland, there they are. The signals of the enemy start moving towards me, spraying their ammo upon me as they appear on my sight. Since the delay is still on, my Fubuki could buckle and dodge easily, lazily returning a few volleys to make a convincing act to those watching the monitor.

"06, found two! Currently engaging them."

"02, roger that. I'll go cover you. Move towards these coordinates." A cross appears on my radar, an open park to the west of my position. I see, to allow Tama to snipe them. I knew I could count on you, Meiya.

I backboost while shooting at them, just so that they don't get too close. Doing some jumps and trying to do some cancel moves, I manage to avoid most shots while also doing some damage to their hands. As one got a bit too close, fire opened from my right. Meiya had joined and we retreated to the park while keeping the two of them from shooting at us.

The thing is, the park is near the center of the city, and if I'm not wrong the other five TSFs are probably somewhere near there,

waiting for us. Dashing towards the park through the half-broken streets while I keep a close eye on the radar and our surroundings, the other five TSFs appear as soon as we enter the open space. Taking two seconds, they start shooting at us.

"Damn, we got ambushed! 06, fall back!" Meiya starts retreating, but I take a forward dash and slash at one of our first chasers that got too close, knocking it out.

"No, we can take them! 05, can you snipe them from your position?"

"Eh?! I… I think." Her brows arched down, lips moved slowly in hesitation.

"Then go for it, we can hold out for a while. The enemies will get exposed as they try to get a clear shot at us."

"06, I am the leader of- Ugh!" She had to crouch and retreat behind a building as she was targeted by the TSFs.

"Let Tama try to nullify them, if we can break through their ambush they're done for." I boost jump and take cover behind a building to Meiya's three. Then, one of the ambushers gets taken down. Atta girl, Tama.

"06, let's focus our fire on the ones to our three. 05, aim at the ones to our nine." Quick as always, my dear Meiya.

"Roger!"

I shoot a 120mm at the one that was chasing us while Meiya distracts him, taking it down. Tama took down another one to our left. Then, Meiya boost jumped towards the two on our right, guns blazing. Sending a few volleys towards the broken buildings near the stock Fubukis, the resulting collapse caused their firing to get delayed long enough to allow her to get close safely, I then get back behind the building to reload.

Once she landed, the radar showed me Meiya dashed at both of them. Looking her way once more to support the charge, Meiya was in the middle of drawing her sword. She took down one with a downwards slash, and followed it with a dash and a wide slash aimed at the waist of the second one. The second Fubuki, however, back-dashed out of her range behind a building. Meiya tried to follow, but ended up smacking herself onto the building, and the TSF quickly aimed and shot at her at point blank before I could lock onto it. I finish it off from afar, as Tama also snipes the other one to our left.

The usual green message appears on my view, mission complete.

"Good job, squad. Return to your initial positions." We acknowledge our orders, the ruined city vanishes from view.

"Tama, good job with those shots." She appears in my view with a small cat-like smile.

"Oh, it was nothing. You and Mitsurugi-san endured their fire despite being so close."

"Nah, if it weren't for your marksmanship we would have lost this round. Don't go all modest on us, you can be proud of this result." She giggles as she smiles, scratching one of her ears.

However, Meiya hasn't chimed in and she's not in view either.

"Hey, Meiya. Good job covering me."

… No answer. She must be very upset.

After removing the bolts, I exit the pod. Tama was already outside nervously playing with the end of her hair. Meiya was giving me her back, so I can't tell what kind of face she's making.

"Hey Meiya, what's up? Are you upset?"

"I am not." She faces me, folding her arms and pursing her lips. Yeah, no. You're super upset.

"Thanks for covering me, and sorry for not being able to do the same for you at the end." I did hold back, to let her take all the glory. But that seems to have backfired.

"Do not apologize, I was the one who overestimated my own dexterity. If this had been a real fight, I would have died."

"D-Don't be so hard on yourself, Mitsurugi-san. I was able to land all of my shots because you two did a wonderful work holding out against so many enemies." Tama beams at her, but Meiya looks away as she sighs looking downwards, tilting her head to a side.

"Hey, you can always improve. We're making superb progress, so don't get all down. We all are making great progress so far, right?" I give her a pat on the shoulder, causing her to look up, recovering a bit of her usual shine.

"I… Thanks, Shirogane. Forgive me for being down, I just expected more of myself."

"… Does this has anything to do with the buff man that came on Sunday?"

"Buff man?" Tama tilted her head, narrowing her brows.

"Oh… Yes, it is related to that matter." Sobering up, she sighs as she caresses her air intakes. "I merely wish to complete the basic training as best as I can. A most harsh test is lying in wait for me, so I might have been too reckless today due to my own anxiety. Forgive me." She bows to us, shame flooding her face.

"No, Mitsurugi-san, you still did very well! Let's keep improving together, yes?" We're lucky to have such a sweetheart in the group.

"Thank you, Tamase. Even so… You never cease to amaze me, Shirogane." She folds her arms again as she stares at me, sparkly eyed.

"Yeah, you immediately took charge of the situation, you kept your pursuers at bay, you even managed to hold out in the park, we wouldn't have been able to clear this level without you, Shirogane-san."

"Tama, don't be like that. You could have done a good enough run without me." Because you did in all previous loops and you're better in this one. Sigh… Sure, I am pushing you forward, but these victories are all you.

"Nonsense. You keep surpassing all the expectations I place on you, I cannot believe we actually managed to hold them off together. Only you would try such a reckless course of action."

"Says the one who jumped ready to sword her way through a building to destroy her enemies." I smile at her, causing Tama to laugh. Meiya blushes, her lips shaking as she struggles to find a retort.

"That was… I merely was trying to do my share."

"Mitsurugi-san, I think you were trying to copy Shirogane-san's style. You still did very well, considering how weird his moves are." Tama giggles again, making Meiya's face go crimson.

"Tamase, I am not being influenced by him! He's just…" She closes her eyes and breathes deeply. "Just look at his performance, he's still keeping up with us despite the setbacks he's facing. Truly, you're still as amazing as you were during basic."

"Hey, I'm just doing my best. Stop putting me atop an altar." I really do not like how she idolizes me this time around.

"If you're there, it's because you yourself keep going further beyond than what we can expect. Your movements during this last exercise were also marvelous, I couldn't keep up with you as we retreated. Compared to that, you surely found my maneuvers most lacking." She sighs as she drops her shoulders.

"Don't start with that again. I'm doing my best to support you guys." Not lying, I am making an effort to let you make the most out of our trainings while I get used to the old OS again.

"That's why Mitsurugi-san is praising you so much. You're always driving us forward, making us do things we didn't think we could do. We're flying through Level C thanks to you." Smiling widely, she then scratched her head, unable to hold my gaze anymore. Uh… You're so sweet, Tama. "When you told me to snipe those TSFs I was kinda nervous, but I believed you'd pull through and knew I had to respond with my best effort. Thankfully I didn't fail this time, they were just little dots on the horizon… Haaauuu… I still can't believe I hit the mark." She starts shaking left to right as her eyes became whirlwinds.

"Don't worry Tama, you did great. And I'm glad to be helping out, so let's just keep doing our best." She stops shaking and gives me a nod as her eyes return to normal. "By the way, you really should try to fire a tad bit faster. The automated systems will correct a slight error anyways."

"Yeah, I know. I guess I'm just kind of used to have to zoom in clearly before pulling the trigger."

"About that, Meiya, you also should try to manage your barrages a bit better. Don't just aim at the enemy, try to use the terrain to your advantage."

"Well, I did not think it wise to further damage the city. Our mission was to defend it, after all." Arms folded, she plucked her lips just a tiny bit.

"Still, you ended up crashing. With no one around to get caught in the fight, more broken buildings are better than failing the mission or losing a comrade."

"I suppose… Forgive me, I was so throughly comcentrated on mine own performance that I misjudged my options." Damn, don't get so down, dear. Goes to show she's more devoted to her duty and role in this world.

"Come on, now. It's just advice, don't get this bummed."

"Bummed?"

"You know, dejected." Again, she sighs as she shakes her head.

"By the by, your jumps were very good all day long, Shirogane-san. On which page of the manual are the details for that?"

"Oh… It's actually not in the books." I scratch my head, looking up. "I, uh, am just putting to practice what my old squadmates told me about their trainings."

"Huh?! Really?" Tama seemed surprised, not as much as Meiya though. "Even the sniping?"

"Yeah, for real. I actually learned all I know about sniping from one very good squadmate I had back then."

"Oh, I see. Did you learn about the automated aim from that person, too?"

"Well, no, that was just me being a nerd about framerates and junk. But she was a great help in learning how to handle a gun, and her words of advice still help me a ton today." I really don't know what I'd had done without your tutoring, Tama. And despite all my loops, I'm sure you can be so much better than I am now.

"She must have been a great person."

"Yeah, she was. I still think she was better than me, I never could beat her in a sniping run. So, if I could get this good, you can too, Tama. Once you get your gears in order, I bet you'll surpass my sniping."

"C-Come on… That's not true." Scratching her ear, she looks down.

"Nah, you'll totally get there. Just keep it up, and remember the bits of advice I gave you and you'll be golden." Winking at her with a smile, she mutters a thanks as she can't meet my gaze. Uh, you're such a sweetheart.

"Ahem!" Meiya coughed loudly, startling me a bit. "Just as you said, so long as we continue to hone ourselves we shall reach our commission." Arms still folded, her brows were down and a bit tense.

"Right. Just don't make any reckless moves, that's my job." Both of them chuckle, Meiya loosening up her tension.

"Well, it's thanks to you that I have the confidence to do things like that. I know you're behind me giving me cover, therefore I believe myself able to perform those dangerous moves because I know you'll be there."

"Exactly! Since you're here we can rely on your quick decisions and moves to aid us, Shirogane-san."

"Well, glad to see you're comfortable with my style."

"It is not your style, but you yourself what gives us reassurance." Meiya confidently said as she strokes her hair. "Since I know how fast you are, I simply know you'll react in time." Her eyes sparkle at me as she gives me that classic confident smile she always used to have.

Why was she so down before? During this morning, while I was still kinda down, she did seem bothered too. Yesterday, she was rather nervous after the drills until me and Mikoto began to fool around, and

since I told her of what happened to the sword I've found her staring at me sometimes. Maybe she's still holding some suspicions towards me? I mean, me not having the blade confirms I'm not a fellow. I have such a hard time reading her face… Meiya usually is just frontal with her woes, so no idea why she isn't bringing up what she has on her mind.

But it's a good thing she doesn't seem to be affected by any more weird visions, since we can talk normally without her blushing or stuttering like after her first simulation. Same for the rest, they're all interacting normally with me now. Save for Kei, who is still eyeing me sideways from time to time.

"I mean, I'm not that good really. I still can improve a lot with enough time and training. There's a lot of pieces of advice from my old squadmates that I haven't put into practice, after all." Let's start building up the excuse for my soon to come jump in skill once I stop holding back, and for when I change back to the XM3.

"Of course, that's obvious." Arms folding again, a brow lowering, her eyes remained closed for a second. "But it is still a great relief to be able to fight by your side. It truly is a relief, especially after what happened." Meiya then looked down, sobering up again.

"Come on… I'm just glad to be here. Let's all just do our best together, yeah?" She stares at me for a sec, then nods along Tama.

"I only hope Sakaki-san and Ayamine-san don't keep fighting." You can say that again, Tama. Really, those two will be another problem.

"Regardless, I'll be relying on you for the remaining training courses, Shirogane. Let's clear all the records they have!" Meiya places her hands on her waist, looking upwards with a smirk. Tama does a little jump while raising a fist, smiling at us.

"Yeah, let's go for it." If they have a clear, hard goal to pursue they will become even better than before, maybe more than what I expected.

After a little while of waiting, the other pods open and Kei and Chizuru get out looking completely exhausted. Mikoto gets out sighing.

"Good job, squad. Let's review your results." The Instructor came towards us, bearing a severe expression. "First, Mitsurugi's team, you broke another record. You got the fastest clear time of this exercise. Well done, you're on the right track."

She smiles at us, I can see the girls' eyes light up proudly as a small smile appears on their faces. However, the Instructor's smile turns into a tight line as her eyes flare up, and a small shadow appears above them.

"On the other hand, Sakaki's team failed the exercise. Ayamine, I know you dislike taking a reactive approach, however, if you keep acting on your own without even telling your squadmates what you want to do, you'll keep bringing them down, even when your idea is the better one. Sakaki, you also should refrain from screaming at her all the time. Being the Squad Leader doesn't give you the right to always harass her, even when you're only keeping the order in the mission. Yoroi, you're the only one actually doing something for the team, but you also tend to get distracted and not follow Sakaki's orders as she asks you to. Start paying more attention to your surroundings and try to understand what Sakaki asks of you. We'll end today's morning session here. We'll follow up with more simulations in two hours. Be here at the ready by then, and don't forget to go do your laps before going for your lunch. Dismissed!"

"Salute!"

The Instructor nods and then leaves. Chizuru sighs audibly, rubbing her forehead.

"Sakaki, Ayamine, what gave you so much trouble?"

"Mitsurugi, the question here is how did you break the record." Chizuru crosses her arms as her expression gets mired by dark

clouds.

"It was all thanks to Tama." I pat the little girl's shoulder causing her to twitch.

"Eh?" Her eyes start widening.

"Miki-san, you're amazing! So, you were the star player?"

"Eh? No, nothing like that. I did play a key role, but I wasn't-"

"Nonsense. Tamase performed admirably in the last simulation." Meiya also went and patted Tama's shoulder, making the little one blush and look down.

"I see… With Tamase supporting you it's obvious you could fight more efficiently. Sadly, I couldn't do the same for my team." She sighs again as she takes her glasses off and rubs her eyes.

"We just got scattered, that's all!" Mikoto tried to cheer her up but only caused those eyes to flare up again, those brows to tense down into a V.

"No, that's not it at all. Ayamine didn't do as I asked her and did her own thing again, she ended up being taken out, and as we tried to get to her we got surrounded. All that chasing around was pointless."

"Only because your plan of sticking together and advance slowly would have gotten all of us surrounded anyways." Kei, why do you always have to antagonize her so much?

"You don't know that. My plan was the safer for all of us to gather info and then proceed with an offensive approach." She started doing circles on the air again as the patience was leaving her tone.

"There was nothing to gain from sitting around waiting for the enemy to bombard us. Given the urban layout, using a hit and run approach would have given us the same intel of their placement while taking care of some of them. My plan was better." Kei seemed to have

taken offense at Chizuru's tone. It's just been two days, for God's sake.

"And how did that turn out in the end? All you accomplished was to become cannon fodder." Chizuru shrugs as she looks slightly to her left.

"You just don't want to admit your plans are worse, that's why you don't support my ideas." Chizuru's eyes snap wide open, but before she opens her mouth I raise my voice as I take one step forward towards them.

"Alright, you two. That's enough. Unless you want the Instructor to be all over you with a lecture again, stop it." They click their tongues and look away "Discussing this without sending knives at each other isn't out of your reach. Both of you have the same goals, to save as many people as you can, right?" Chizuru nods, crossing her arms. Kei closes her eyes and remains in her poker face, unmoving. "I know your approaches don't mix, but no one can progress alone. There has to be a way in which you can find a superior alternative without either of you feeling screwed over."

"… Don't talk so high and mighty." Kei muttered under her breath, her brows coming down and melting the poker face.

"If I was wrong in anything, feel free to rebuke me, Ayamine."

Then, she shot me a glare, a hand on her chin as she took a single step forward.

"You have no business telling us what to do."

"I'm just trying to help you guys out. Things won't be fine if you keep butting heads like this. You didn't pass the CCSE for this, right?"

"Yeah, I didn't. I also didn't train to be lectured by an American that killed Japanese soldiers."

"K-Kei-san! They told us that-"

"Shut it." Frowning at Mikoto, she then returned her eyes towards mine. "You have no right to tell us what to do when you showed us how you clearly prefer to solve your missions. Why would I take advice from you?"

…

I know. She isn't my Kei.

The edge of my lips returned inwards. My gaze went downwards.

I know. This is another world, one vastly different to the one I've been to.

But it still hurts, to see her face like this.

I miss my cocky, teasing Kei, all the BS she threw at me, the one-liners I always walked right into. Sigh…

"Ayamine, we told you what had happened." Chizuru frowned at her, Kei looked away and left to the changing rooms.

"Sigh… I suppose Ayamine is still reluctant to see you as a squadmate." Meiya shook her head, sighing.

"… It's cool. She has the right reasons not to trust in me."

"T-That's not true, Shirogane-san!"

"Yeah, she's merely doing whatever she wants without a care for the team." Chizuru also shakes her head, sighing.

"I don't… think she's uncaring, but…" Mikoto looks down, a finger scratching her nose. "… I guess it'll take some time."

"It's alright, guys. Don't pressure Ayamine anymore. That'll only backfire as things stand." I know how she is, better to give her some

space.

She might have gone along the joke yesterday, but every time I begin to fight well or answer the hard questions right her eyes again get sharp and distrustful. I don't know that to do anymore about her.

"We did tell her you weren't at fault, Shirogane-kun. And, well, you wouldn't attack anyone so aggressively again, right?" Holding my gaze, her tone slowed down and sobered up.

"Of course not. Sure, I might be willing to make sacrifices to achieve my mission, but… I don't want to have a repeat of what happened during the CCSE." I fight to save people, to bring back peace. There will be times when shit will hit the fan, times where nothing will be enough… *However, in no way would I support such cutthroat approaches to be the norm.*

"Sorry, I didn't mean to-"

"It' cool Sakaki, for real. We should get going, though." They nod and we begin to make our way to the changing rooms.

This is one setback I was not expecting. Why does Kei refuse the orders like this? She wasn't that much of a prick in our past loops, she was clearly challenging Chizuru's authority and methods. I know she has a problem with authority due to her Dad causing casualties to the UN or something like that, but maybe things are worse for her this time around too? I wonder if I'll be able to bridge the gap between them this time…

Also, I wonder if we'll ever get along again…

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*Same day. A few minutes past 8 PM.*

*(Sim Room.)*

**[Meiya]**

"That will be all for today. Dismissed!" We salute 1st Lt. Takamura who returns the gesture before leaving.

Barely a soul remains of the sim room at this hour, since it is almost at the end of our usual curfew. The few that still remain here are waiting for their comrades to end their simulations, others are merely watching the runs as they drink something along their companions.

Having no more business here, we five march out towards the changing room to finish our day. Sakaki and Ayamine haven't directed a word to one another to mend their discussion, they even decided to be in different teams during this evening training.

Ayamine also did not apologize to Shirogane, no matter how we tried to approach the subject. While Tamase was sent with her and Sakaki during the afternoon, their cooperation did not improve in the slightest. While I normally would favor Ayamine in employing a more offensive plan, Shirogane's proposal for a reactive tactic during the afternoon proved itself as the superior alternative. His and Yoroi's marksmanship is truly a wonderment to observe, even if she tends to ignore our orders at times.

"Sigh… Today's session was intense." Yoroi cracked her knuckles as she moved her neck in circles.

"Hauuu… I really screwed up. Sorry." Tamase hanged her head low, eyes closed.

"Tamase, do not be so harsh on yourself. Takamura went too far today." I truly cannot believe she made us fight against thirteen enemies on our very first training, yet I suppose it was her way to ascertain our current skill level.

She especially pushed Tamase today, making half of them take sniping positions. If only Takeru were with us… No! I cannot allow myself to fall into that sinkhole, I myself have to step up when the

need calls. Becoming overdependent on him is a mistake I must not make, even if Takeru is more skilled than me.

Ugh, I'm calling him Takeru again. What is wrong with me? I shouldn't be referring to him in such a way, but for some reason I keep doing so. Today I was careful to not say it out loud, but it doesn't help that he's been so nice to us since we came back, despite all that he's going through.

It truly is a shame he couldn't keep his Minaru Kamui, I was convinced Tsukuyomi was wishing to induct him into the Guard. Why did she react so badly when I tried to approach him then? Could it be that they have revised their opinion on him after the CCSE?

"I agree with Mitsurugi. You did very well today Tamase." Tapping her glasses, she gives her a nod. Ayamine pats the little one's shoulders as she smiles, causing Tamase to blush and look down. "Still, I can't believe someone more pushing than the Instructor exists. Though I do wonder why she offered to lend a hand in the evening drills. Why would she bother with us?"

Yes, it is odd. She does drag Takeru with her during lunch time and after our afternoon training is over due to the punishment. I can only hope she's treating him well, considering she's also a member of the Guard I wouldn't put it past her to be cruel to him given his current situation.

"B-But because I couldn't take out the snipers we failed the course. If I was better…" Tamase's slow, small wailing stopped as Ayamine petted her head.

"Don't worry. We'll clear it next time." She smiled at her small trembling frame, making Tamase finally give us a smile.

Unlike when she's paired with Sakaki, Ayamine didn't disobey her orders. I suppose it all comes down to their differing views of how to proceed with a mission. I wonder if there is anything I could do to stop these petty discussions of them…

"We'll keep improving the more we train, so we have to make sure to make the most out of this." Sakaki's finger traces circles again. When did she develop this habit? "We have to be grateful 1st Lt. Takamura is going out of her way to train us, despite her reasons to do so. I saved some documents in the library's computers before coming to train, they have some tactical reviews and movements I thought were interesting, so give them a read when you have the time. We cannot let Shirogane-kun get the number one spot again."

"Chizuru-san, do you still resent Takeru?" Yoroi asked her, without breaking eye contact.

"Of course not. I simply don't want to have him shoulder everything again. I think all of us have taken a look at his control logs, right?" She looks around, we all give a nod. "Not only his piloting style is extremely complicated to understand, but his pacing and footing is incredibly good."

"I wonder why that is…" Ayamine put both hands behind her head, rolling her eyes.

"We already told you that-"

"Sakaki, do not retort." She furrows her brows, sighing. "Ayamine, you as well. What were you trying to accomplish with that comment?"

"Just telling the truth. Special-kun always comes out with minimal damage despite all those reckless charges he does. Don't you find it odd?" She looks directly into my eyes, remaining as collected as habitual.

"… I do notice his skill. However, as I told you before, he isn't hiding anything odd from us."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I… believe he didn't lie during our talk, so I again must ask of you to refrain from displaying such hostility towards him."

"… Fine, I'll try."

Sigh… Why must you hoist such doubts? We have told you many times he has no ill intent towards us.

"Ahem…" Tapping her glasses, she then gave us all a look. "So, I'm sure all of us want to get as closer to his level before we get commissioned. We don't know where we'll end up after that, so I believe we have to make the most out of this trainings, especially once we begin to pilot our Fubukis."

We all nod in agreement, even Ayamine, to her words. Soon after, we reach the changing room and go inside. For a moment, no words were said as we got out of our suits.

Sakaki is right, we don't know for how longer we will have him by our side. There is still much I wish to learn about him, I also want to have a proper duel with him. Grasping the reasoning behind his movements is something I cannot seem to do, so just copying them is pointless. Should I ask him for a duel in the simulator? I do wish to see how I hold up against him.

"Say guys, did you see them already?" Tamase spoke up as she finished getting out of her suit.

"See what?" Ayamine was getting in her fatigues, but froze as she looked at Tamase.

"Today I went for a walk to the hangar, and there I saw them as they finished painting them. There were ten Takemikazuchis painted in UN colors, with the insignia and all!" She smiled slightly, moving both hands in the air.

"Eh?! I didn't knew we had… Mitsurugi, do you know anything about this?" Sakaki was undoing her tied up hair, her eyes were widening

by the second.

"No, I have no idea why they are here. If you're implying I had a hand in this, allow me to clarify that in no way I have the power to do such a thing." My voice sounded drier and sharper than I expected. Sakaki looked away and gave me a small bow.

"F-Forgive me. I didn't mean to imply anything."

Sigh… In the end you're like the rest. It's not like I'm not used to being treated so formally, but I had believed we had formed some trust for you to not feel obligated to show this unnecessary respect.

"It is alright. I have not taken offense, it just baffles me is all. I am no less surprised by this than any of you."

Even more by the fact that Master, Mion and Shion were sent to deliver them. I know I still need to face Master, but there was no need to send this many Takemikazuchi to give them an excuse to come here, or for you to send your personal unit to me. Whatever would you do if danger goes your way?!

"So even you don't know? Wow, this must be some secret deal, right?!" Yoroi had finished changing and was staring upwards with stars in her eyes.

"How many times must I have to tell you that I am merely a civilian? I am no noble so-" However, Yoroi's ramblings covered my voice.

"The Type-00 is like our most powerful TSF, right? Do you think we're getting ready for some super mission?! Oooohh, I wanna see it fly!" She once more gets lost in her own world. She does enjoy talking about TSFs for some reason.

"Yes, it is our most powerful weapon. With its deployment during the Battle of Kyoto and Operation Lucifer it became clear it could stand toe to toe with America's and the European's 3rd Gen TSFs." Sakaki remarked as she tried to close her jacket.

"Exactly! Imagine if we could see a mock battle of them!" Yoroi started shivering, her eyes shining bright as a blistering shooting star.

"Yeah, it is a relief to have them here for sure." Tamase put on her boots, finishing changing.

"I do agree it's a relief. However, it is still concerning. If they are indeed painted in the UN's colors, that means they're recognized as UN's TSFs. I cannot fathom why the Empire would relinquish its most prized weapon to the UN in such manner."

"Same. It's weird." Ayamine nodded in agreement.

"Well, on one hand you're right." She rearranged her glasses after making her ponytails. "But so long as the pilots are Japanese I think it isn't so much of a problem. I don't think they just handed them out, the Empire must have received something in return."

"Yes, I suppose you're right." Sister wouldn't do something so naive. It is still worrying though. It is too soon to start deploying another domestic TSF, if the Takemikazuchi's weakness get exposed to the foreigners…

"Anyways! We can rest easy because we have Japan's best sword in the base to keep us safe!" Tamase brightly smiled at us, clearing the stagnant air that had started to form as me and Sakaki spoke.

"Yeah! I can't wait to see it fly! It's gonna be awesome!" I wonder how Yoroi can remain standing despite being shaking so much.

"Well, talking about flying… I think it's just a matter of time before we get to ride our TSFs for the first time now." All of us stand in attention at her words. "I know we have been progressing fine for now, but we must not get overconfident. I believe that in one or two days we will get our first real piloting test, so let's polish our skill as much as we can these last days. Let's aim at clearing Level C before we take our first ride!"

"Roger!"

"That's all I wanted to say. Let's enjoy what little free time we still have, today was a harsh day after all." She raises both arms upwards as I hear her shoulders crack.

We leave the changing room. Tamase and Ayamine went to the library to read up on something, Yoroi dashed towards the hangar to take a look at the Takemikazuchis, and Sakaki went back to her room. I suppose I'll go for a jog again. And so, I begin making my way to the track field.

… My first run, I can't wait until I finally get to actually pilot. If I defeat Master in our duel I'll finally be recognized as a member of the Tozama, this shall be the first real step to achieving my goal. Please be patient Sister, I won't disappoint you. However, I cannot believe you sent your own TSF to me. Am I so weak you felt the need to send a clear sign of my standing, to ward off possible enemies? Mion and Shion must have reported my failure during the CCSE, I shiver to think how upset you must have been at your sorry excuse of a sister. Does she even see me as her sister though? Sigh…

And yet, I cannot excel in my trainings, Takeru is still above me in everything. To think I barely am able to keep Sakaki and Ayamine from further bickering among themselves, to fail at conveying how much Takeru aided us during the CCSE. And… I'm also disgusted at myself, to have such a vision during my aptitude test. I did not think myself to be such a lascivious person, why did I think about Takeru doing… Ugh, no! Don't think about it anymore! I am a blade! These thoughts are in the way.

Except I can't stop my gaze to wander to his side. He's amazing, in more ways than one. Sister needs a stronger version of myself, I should be thankful to have Takeru by my side.

Sigh… I can't believe I refer to him as Takeru within myself. I do want us to be friends, but even so… Well, he does call me Meiya, so this is only fair for me.

Even so… I do not know how to feel now. I feared he could replace me, but after the CCSE I… started to see why he would make a good Royal Guard. Someone who isn't afraid of bloodying his hands for the right cause, someone so skilled and so resolute. He also remains most afflicted by the CCSE, and today again showed he doesn't take pride in the decision he had to make. Takeru didn't simply murder without thought, and yet, somehow, the fire within his eyes… that light that he chases after… hasn't left. I wonder what could it be, whatever motivates him to push forward.

Did Tsukuyomi took his blade because he killed those soldiers? She should know why, she should know it was my miss what caused that outcome now that the cousins are in the base.

He doesn't deserve this. Takeru should be getting praised instead, with how great he acted, how he's enduring the whispers behind his back, and how he's keeping up on the trainings despite how he has to live now. I'm so glad we can fight together. Having him by my side is truly a relief.

Takeru… by my side… No, don't think about it. Don't think about him in the suit, don't think about us in the sim pod. I want him as my fellow, the partner in my element. Nothing more.

"Sigh… Takeru, what did you do to me? Why do you spawn these feelings within me?" I hug my sides tightly. I refuse to lose myself to these feelings, I must not lose composure.

I do not wish to lose his aid, I doubt I could find a better sparring partner than him. I should be ashamed of myself, to look at him in such a salacious way. He's my comrade in arms, not someone I should desire. I'm the Shogun's blade first and foremost, I cannot let myself be led astray by such temptations. Even if I do admire him, it's a completely different thing to desire him in that way. I am not like that.

And furthermore…

I look at my arms, tight and rough. The clear shape of my muscles, the way I speak, how I fight and carry myself. A knot again makes its way to my stomach. I always knew I'm not that feminine. If I compare myself to Sister, or even to Tamase, I can tell I do not look like a lady. I doubt he finds me attractive.

Especially since it would seem his eyes are locked onto another. Now I'm convinced of it, the one who bested him soundly was that same woman he spoke of today. The cheer, the sheer elation in his voice, that same light on his eyes, they're the same of those in our first bout. And when he spoke of how she taught him, it was just as when he spoke of her during the CCSE.

Someone so dear to him, who taught him this much, only for Shirogane to have to mercy kill her. And then… that would imply the Minaru Kamui he had belonged to this woman, I am certain of it now.

Still, who was she? To hold his gaze captive in such way, to invigorate his voice with such passion… Adept with a sword, with a finesse in sniping, perhaps also a polished sense for tactics. And for her sword to have been given to him… He did mention the handguard tradition, now that I remember.

T-Then… Does he… know of the implications of such a-

"Meiya-sama? Are you alright?"

"Huh?! Oh, Tsukuyomi… 1st Lt., what did you need of me?" What foul timing. I can only hope she doesn't notice anything odd with me.

"Well, it seemed as if you were in pain. Is anything troubling you, perhaps?"

"Thanks for worrying, but I am fine. I'm on my way to do some jogging, so if you'd excuse me." I try to leave, but she steps in front of me.

"Ahem, we need to talk. Could you follow me to my room?"

"What is this about?"

"You'll know once we get there. Now, let us go." She turns to the hallway to my left, and I follow suit.

What does she want to talk with me to come out and face me so openly? Did I… Did I make a miss? Did Sister… No, Her Highness sent a punishment for me? Or am I being sent back to the mansion? Master did come here some days ago…

We reach her room on the far west of the barracks, where the usual trio salute me as they move aside. As we enter I see three figures dressed in red sitting around a small table, drinking some tea.

"Good evening, Meiya-sama." Master, Mion and Shion give me a bow, that I return before sitting along Tsukuyomi.

"Good evening to you all. What did you require of me?" Master lays his cup on the table and fixes his posture.

"Ahem… First, I wished to inform you that we will have our duel in two days. I just got confirmation from the XO of this base."

"Eh?! Two days? But I haven't piloted a TSF yet."

"That means you'll get your piloting debut before that. I believe you had plenty of simulator training already." Not changing his tone, he stares at me. If this is how it is, I'll cleave through you then. I can't lose any more time.

"Understood. If that is what's been decided, I shall face you with all I've got."

"Ahaha! Good answer, grasshopper!" Smiling as I know he does, then nodding a few times my way, he again drinks some tea. "Now then, into the less pleasant talks…"

His smile was as brief as steam, I've never seen Master's eyes lacking so much cheer. Looking at them, both Mion and Shion have

remained oddly silent and look far too solemn for them. Even Tsukuyomi seems to be rather tense. Master coughs, then sighs as it would seem he is hesitating. Looking at me, his eyes squinting, he leans forward.

"Meiya-sama, could you tell us what you know of Cadet Takeru Shirogane?"

# Kriegspiel

## Chapter 38: Kriegspiel

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*November 27th . 08:37 PM.*

*(Near Yuuko's Office.)*

**[Takeru]**

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I wonder what Sensei wants now, to call me at this hour. I wanted to go talk with Kasumi about seeing who my parents were in this world, but I guess it'll have to wait for a lil' while.

On one hand, I can tell her of the designs I sketched today. The HM ammo, the revamped M61 for the Type-00C I was supposed to get, the Blade Armor of the F-15, and the chainsaw sword. I'm still not sure if they are actually practical or if we have the resources for them, but I think at least it's worth considering these ideas. Especially the HM ammo, since we are going to get blindsided by the Laser-Class a lot in our future missions. I also haven't finished theory-crafting the clone of the Flash from Valgern-On, using some data about a prototype Chaff missile that was abandoned by America.

Honestly, mixing jamming and the chaff's cloud to give even more protection is a genius move. Whoever came up with the JAFF concept should have gotten a raise, since it's also really cheap to use. Sadly, since fighting the BETA became a priority, they pretty much abandoned the patent and sold it to the UN, who did nothing with it. Then, America developed the Raptor and had no more use for this type of chaff, so they literally forgot it existed. Better for me, now I found another tool to improve our stealth capabilities. I just

need Sensei to help me with the calculations of the jammer that reflects a signal off the chaff.

On the other, however… She might have noticed my movements and now wants an explanation. After all, she'll protect me 'so long as I help her'.

I reach the end of the hallway, and before I can knock on it, the door opens automatically. Weird, I always had to knock before Sensei unlocked it in this world.

"Good evening, Sen… Huh?"

"Oh, good evening Shirogane. Take a seat." Sensei gestures towards a sofa.

I sit, facing the other person in the room, a woman that looks just like Sensei but with long hair and a wide smile.

"Good evening. So you're the famous Shirogane…"

"Famous? Um, excuse me, who would you be?" She gives off the same aura as Sensei despite being smiling all the while. She was wearing a loosened UN formal uniform with a yellow bracelet on her left hand.

"Oh, where are my manners? I'm Mitsuko Kouzuki, Yuu-chan's older sister."

Yuu-chan? Older sister? Great, now there's two of them. Though, she seems awfully relaxed, like my world's Sensei.

"Mitsuko-nee, I told you to not refer to me in that way."

"Oh, don't be so cold with me! Anyways, I was expecting something more…" She looks back at me, a small smile on her face. "… mature, I guess? You're telling me this pipsqueak is that important guy for your project?" She waves at me, making a comical smile now. Did she just insult me?

"Yes, he is. Shirogane, this is one of my older sisters." Plural, so there's more of them somewhere. May God have mercy on my soul. "She's a member of the UN's High Command Council and the responsible for you not getting executed. Be sure to thank her." For Sensei to be so stiff and serious, her sister must be even worse than her.

"Ahem, thank very much for your support, Mitsuko-san. I suppose you wanted to have a talk with me, right?"

"Yes, indeed. Though, it's surprising you have the guts to call me by my name. Well, Yuu-chan must have influenced you in that regard." She grabs a cup that was on a table nearby, smiling at Sensei.

"Just so you know, he was like that from the beginning. I had nothing to do with his attitude. Anyways, let's start the talk." Sensei sits on her usual seat near the board, one of her brows lowering as she glanced at her sister. "Shirogane, let's start by telling you that HC no longer has anything against you. Mitsuko-nee coerced all members to drop the claims and suspicions off you. I also pulled some strings to make sure they didn't want you off the base."

"What did you do this time? Blackmail?" She gives me a devilish smile as she starts drinking coffee.

"Shirogane-kun, Yuu-chan has many people indebted to her. She used some of that support to convince some of the most hardheaded members to stop trying to get you out of the Empire." She entwines her fingers and leans back on her sofa.

I doubt people in the Shogunate would want to help her with this kind of thing. Especially considering that I killed people and had a Minaru Kamui.

"I know what you're thinking, but the Shogunate didn't raise any complains." Gazing at me, with a subdued smile, she rested a coiled hand on her chin. "I have a few allies in America, many people still support Alt. IV there. I merely asked them to make the UN's

American Branch ask about your situation, since you were trained there. Given the fact that you are being very useful to Takamura and that I am asking you to do some 'important paperwork' for me, HC went into panic when they asked for your standing in the base."

"Why? I mean, if America asked to get me back, I think they would immediately get me in a plane with a ribbon on my head." Mitsuko-san starts coughing, it seems she was in the middle of drinking and I caused her to laugh.

"My, what a peculiar description. Shirogane-kun, do you have a thing for cross-dressing?"

"What?! No!" Are they trying to make me lower my guard?

"Then, why do you think you'll be sent with a ribbon on your head?" Ugh, she's worse than Sensei. Her smile seems kinder, but in her eyes lurks a snake with a venom stronger than anything I've seen before.

"It's just how presents are given, right? You know, you cover them with that bright paper and then tie them with a ribbon?"

"Mitsuko-nee, stop teasing him. Shirogane, they didn't want you to go away once they realized you're making yourself a valuable asset to me. You invented the training terminals, and are making yourself useful to at least two important research projects in this base as far as they're concerned. Do you really think they would want to lose such a promising source of income?" Well, she's right. If the UN's Japanese Branch can get the profits of my inventions, then they wouldn't want me gone. So, our plan is going good?

"What Yuu-chan said is the summarized version of it." Twirling some of hair on a finger, she smiled my way."HC has received some interesting reports about your performance in these days. Not only you've been forced to endure a severe punishment, but were put in two important projects. Yet, not only your performance in your trainings hasn't dropped, but you're actually delivering decent results

in your work. Who would want to get rid of such a hardworking pawn?"

So the plan is working, glad to hear that. The UN saw how useful I can be and now they don't want me gone. One thing less to worry about.

"I see. That is a relief to hear. But I guess that's not all there is to this. I doubt a member of the Council would come meet me for such a simple matter. I assume you want a report on my 'important paperwork', right?" Both of them smile at the same time.

"See Mitsuko-nee? Told you he can be sharp when he wants to." What do you mean 'when I want to'? I'm always doing my best!

"Well, he's not wrong. Shirogane-kun, as you must have realized, I know of your involvement in the many developments that have been going on in this base since your arrival. And I also know you're on the Shogunate's sights." Sobering up, leaning forward, she sent a look my way along a devilish smile of her own brand. "I've been looking for something that might help to mend the relations with the Empire and having you developing tech that gets recognized as Imperial by the UN can be called nothing short of a godsend. However, that doesn't change the fact that I know nothing about you, and Yuu-chan refuses to speak of anything regarding who you are." Sensei tensed up as she heard that, as Mitsuko-san gave her a serious glance. Briefly looking at me, Sensei brought one hand to her chin as she fixed her eyes on her sister. "So, while I also have other things to talk about with both of you, I'll cut to the chase." Crossing her arms, she shot a direct look at Sensei. Dropping her smile and lowering her brows, Mitsuko-san then pointed a finger at me. "Yuuko… Is this boy the 00 Unit?"

…

Wait, what?

"Sensei, she for real?" I look at Sensei, rising one brow. She places one hand on her head and sighs audibly. So she's not sending me to the sharks.

"Of all the things I thought you would ask…"

"What is it with this reaction? Yuuko, I want an answer. The timing of his appearance and of you stopping to give reports coincides perfectly. It only stands to reason that a quantum computer is the one that is coming up with all of these inventions, including that OS you mentioned."

"Oh, so that's why you think that. Sorry to disappoint you, but I'm a normal person." Her eyes widen as a brow twitches, then looks at Sensei, who just shrugs, and then Mitsuko-san sharpens her gaze upon me.

"So you're a normal person? Not a cyborg? And you're also not with the CIA?" She drills her eyes onto mine as if they were spears, but since I'm already used to Sensei it's not being very effective. I mean, I'm not a spy and I have nothing to hide regarding America.

"Nope. I'm a Japanese dude with no ties to America whatsoever."

"… Then, who are you? Yuuko, while I am more than glad about all these developments you've given us in the last month, I want to know the truth."

"Mitsuko-nee, that's what you're misunderstanding. He is Takeru Shirogane, there is nothing false about that." She smiles at Mitsuko-san, making her relax into her seat again. It seems she's playing on my team, for now.

"So, you're telling me a mere boy like him is being useful to you?" I don't like how you're pointing that finger at me, nor the tone of your voice. Well… All they'll see in me is a mere boy, I guess.

"Yes, that's right. And if you don't believe me, we can show you some interesting things. Shirogane, did you finish any of the schematics you were doing?" So she's gonna use the weapons I was coming up with as bait?

"Yeah. I am having trouble with one in particular, and I was hoping you could help me with the math." That seems to have picked her curiosity, her smile relaxing into the honest one I know her for.

"Oh, don't worry. I'll have a look at it later, is everything in the same directory as where you saved the docs?" She goes to her desk and starts typing something in her computer.

"Yeah, on a different folder. It's named weapons, so it shouldn't be hard to find." Let's see what she does, if she won't sell me away.

"Alright, let's see… Mitsuko-nee, come and see for yourself. The result of Shirogane's paperwork." I don't think this is a good idea, but if Sensei thinks it is I'll have to trust in her, and deal with the worst if it comes down to that.

Mitsuko-san goes to the computer and I suppose she starts reading the reports and schemes I made today and yesterday. Her playfulness vanished from her complexion, that turned focused and alerted as a cat in front of a dog while she kept reading through the docs. Her eyes look like those of a hawk right now, making not a single noise or moving at all as she reads.

"Shirogane, by the by, what did you come up with? You haven't told me a thing about your research yet." Sensei plays with her bangs as she comes to my side. She's relaxed, but since she may be hiding something let's play it safe.

"A new ammo, another sword, a revamped machinegun for the Type-00C, some Blade Armor for the F-15 and I also found an interesting tool that will increase our stealth capabilities."

"Really? Well, color me surprised. So, what do think Mitsuko-nee?"

"Yuuko… What on earth is this?" Mitsuko-san looked at us with sharpened eyes and blades in her tone.

"Hmm? What is it? I thought you would be happy to have these nice new toys." Sensei smiles at her, but she returns a scowl with those hawkish eyes.

"That's not the issue here. Why was I not notified he had this kind of knowledge?! There's no way a mere recruit could come up with these diagrams! According to these schematics, he possess knowledge like that of an engineer. You're telling me this boy is both a soldier and a researcher?"

Oh, just that. I do have experience in college, and my interactions with the engineers have only made me grow more in that regard. But even if I thought the reports were kinda rough, she seems truly impressed by them.

"He does have a lot of knowledge and doesn't really let 'common sense' to bind his ideas. As for why I said nothing, nobody asked me about his aptitudes outside of the battlefield so I didn't mention it. Right, Shirogane?" Sigh… She's just being her usual self in the end.

"Yeah. I mean, I'm just coming up with random ideas and drawing them, using the experience I got from the training terminals' development here." Me and Sensei nod at each other's words. Seems like she didn't notice a thing yet.

"Sigh… I can see why you two get along so well. Even so, this is very surprising. It stands to reason we can't let you off this base, despite your dubious origins. Yuuko, I expect you to start reporting these developments to HC in the short term. Now, let's start addressing the important matter here." She goes back to her sofa. "Shirogane-kun, am I right to assume you do not wish to go against the Empire?"

"Yes, I want no trouble with them." Not lying here. I want no more setbacks.

"Then, what would you do if you were confronted by the Royal Guard?"

"I'll try to run away. I don't want to die, but I also don't want to put the UN in a rough spot because of whatever reason the Guard has to come after me." She smiles faintly as she grabs her cup again. After finishing her drink, she again speaks up.

"I suppose you're alright with all of your inventions becoming a patent of the UN, right?"

"Yes, of course."

"Hmm… Well, I'll do my part to highlight your involvement in these things. That should be enough to placate the most nationalistic people within the UN. It should also please quite a few in the IJA and the Guard, to have Japanese citizens working for the 'glory and honor of the Empire' in the UN. Now, let's touch the most important part. Yuu-chan told me the Guards that were sent here have been trying to approach you. If General Guren has come personally after you, it means the Shogun wants you gone." So they tried to 'approach me'? I look at Sensei, who sighs and faces me.

"They tried to go to your cell today after dinner hours was over. I don't know what they're planning to do, however you should remain composed if they approach you. I don't think the Shogun would be so foolish to act against us now that we have accepted the railgun and are preparing all of these new toys for them, but you never know."

"Roger. I'll stay on my guard, just in case."

"I also wouldn't like to lose such a promising pilot, so I'll pull some strings to keep the Guard off your back. I hope you keep supporting Yuu-chan from now on, Shirogane-kun." Mitsuko-san smiles at me as her eyes finally relax and show true kindness in them.

"Of course. But are you both sure this will be enough?"

"Shirogane, they don't want to get into a fight with us now of all times. I did some moves and signed some papers that must have pleased the Shogun a lot, so I'm sure the Guard will have to fold its hand or be open about their motives to approach you." Sensei can't speak comfortably while Mitsuko-san is here, so let's try to end this talk.

"Alright. Thank you both for your help, I'll keep doing my best to get you the results you expect of me." I bow to them. Sensei seems surprised while Mitsuko-san smiles warmly at me as she moves her hair out of her face.

"That is much appreciated. Though, now I have even more questions for both of you. Yuu-chan, who came up with the idea to add machineguns to the Takemikazuchi?"

"That was me, actually." she edges closer on her sofa, licking her lips.

"Oh? Why did you want to do that?"

"Well…"

Me and Sensei spent almost two hours informing Mitsuko-san about our developments in the base. About how 'an interesting idea' lead into the XM3, how my help in the consoles' development made Sensei think I had a knack for coming up with unorthodox but useful ideas, how she let me do some research to see if I could come up with more interesting concepts for our weapons, how I'm helping with the railgun and how the project is coming along. She also asked me about my training and my relations with my squad. After that Sensei dismissed me, and told me that since it was already late I should go to sleep.

But I wanted to have a recovery session today… Dammit… I returned to my cell, since the door to Sumika's room was locked.

Well, I'm glad I don't have to worry about the UN anymore. Seems like my efforts these days are starting to bear fruit. That being said, I should be a bit more careful, just in case. I wonder if he'll finally contact me tomorrow?

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**[Yuuko]**

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"Seems like you found yourself a nice pawn, Yuu-chan." She speaks as I went to refill my mug, just as Shirogane left the office.

"Mitsuko-nee, he's too important to be just a pawn. You also know of his piloting skills, do you not? Why didn't you ask him about that?"

"Oh, he seemed really tired. And I already got the data, that's the most important thing. So you weren't kidding when you said you'll give him the last Type-00C." She crosses her arms as she looks at me.

"Of course I wasn't. I told you he's very skilled, in and out of the battlefield. That's why I asked you to hold them back. The UN can make a lot of money if these inventions of his become a reality." I was expecting something crazy, but you again surpassed my expectations.

A portable HM bomb, in case the Laser-Class ambush us, to allow a small squad to perform a Laser Hunt. Several add-ons to make Blade Armor for the F-15, which will come in handy for the new F-15 we're developing. A redesigned M61 to fit in the Type-00C's hip block. A barbed sword that looks similar to the Blade Motor's designs. And these chaff missiles, which will improve our already great stealth capabilities. If all of this gets patented and mass produced, we'll get a nice amount of money and support from the UN and America. And that's without even starting to touch his Type-00C, who knows what kind of things he will do to his machine.

"Frankly, I'm a bit jealous you have such a dependable man in your team. So, how's the Yellow Dust coming along?"

"Sigh… No news. We still can't find the balance we want."

"Despite all the new test subjects you got after Niigata?"

"Yes. If we wanted to use it on people it would be a great success. But we still can't get it to harm the BETA, at all." I slump into my seat, sighing.

Not even with Motoko-nee's help we can figure out a way to harm them. And it's not like we can rely on them being hurt for it to work. If the BETA are harmed, as soon as the Dust makes contact with their blood, they'll start to melt too. But without harming them first, it's pointless to use it.

"Then let's leave it at that. I suppose you still don't know who was the one behind the pulling of the execution order." I shake my head, grabbing my cup to drink some more coffee. "Sigh… I also haven't found anything. Do you know why the Royal Guard is so interested in the boy?"

"That's what we want to know. You do know his records were erased. I did try to ask them about it, but they dodge the issue every time. It is a bother, to be honest." She nods as she strokes her chin.

"Then, can you tell me why are you making him pass as a dead person?" She twirls her hair as she looks to the ceiling. I have to make her believe he is the real one, until he gets enough memories to fool everyone.

"I'm not. He is Takeru Shirogane."

"Are you being serious, Yuuko?" She crosses her arms, staring at me, her chin lowering inwards.

"Yes. While I know you helped me with his cover, I can guarantee you that he is truly Takeru Shirogane."

"Sigh… Yet, you refuse to tell me where he came from. I suppose that bit of him slowly recovering his memories isn't a lie?"

"No, that is true. However, since we don't know why his data was erased we must keep him safe from the Guard. At least, until they're willing to talk this out with us."

"So, do you think they might believe he isn't who he claims to be?" I nod at her words as I take a sip of my coffee, leaning back on my chair. "Then, why not send him to the Capital to fix the misunderstandings?"

"… Because I doubt the Guard would accept a mistake. You know how our security forces do things, they'll never release someone who they brand. It would only bring them shame to their eyes."

"So you think they'll try to blame him, to hide the fact that the databases suffered an error? Well, I can see our stubborn Royal Guard acting in such a way, sadly." She leans back, smiling as she shakes her head.

"That's if they don't make it seem as if we are the bad ones. Don't worry, I have all the intentions of actually taking the XFJ Project under my care, so deliver those papers as soon as you can."

"You think you can actually restart the Second's development?" I smile at her, showing her some graphics I had prepared in advance.

"Oh please. We will get the money from this parts, and once the Empire stops being so paranoid towards the UN and I reveal the XM3, I can ask America for some help. We also have a nice test pilot in our ranks now, so that base is also covered. And if we also adopt the Type-00C as our High Performance TSF and get it to be exported, the Royal Guard will also be in our debt. I think Sweden would like to have the Type-00C to work along its JAS-39. I believe

we do have nice relations with them, and they would welcome the Takemikazuchi to be the High to the Gripen's Low."

"Then, should I start speaking with the Chilean and Argentinian branches to prepare a test run?"

"Please do. I know our relations with the EU are also strained, but if we manage to get them to cooperate the Type-00C will definitely get the seal of approval faster." While we could do some testings along the Guard in Hokkaido, now that the Soviets isolated themselves we can't sell them anything and can't rely on them to do any testing. And there's also little space to work with in the Empire as is. "While it isn't Siberia, see if you can get approval to do some testings in either Ushuaia or Punta Arenas Base."

"I'll see what I can do." She nods, straightening up her posture. "So, in exchange for this, keep me updated on Shirogane-kun's control logs. You did say that you'll have him fight Takamura in that F-15, right? Be sure to make him pilot his Type-00C if you get the chance." She stands up, buttoning up her suit.

"I don't need you to tell me that. Do look forward to it." Smiling at her, she chuckles back.

"I promise I'll try to get you some more support. I really would hate to lose such a useful pawn. Oh right, I almost forgot!" She began to groan a bit as she started rummaging through her purse.

"What is it? I swear, if this is another of your jokes-"

"Here. The UN's Undersecretary will be coming to visit the base on the 30th, it was decided on a rush so I couldn't tell you in advance." She hands me a folder with some papers. Is this one of the 'accidents' he mentioned? I'll have to ready the OTH Cannon just in case.

"I see. Nothing we can do now. Well, I'll call Pyatkh to escort you. Take care, Mitsuko-nee."

"Oh, how sweet of you to worry, Yuu-chan!" She jumps and hugs me tightly. Ugh, she knows I hate this kind of thing!

"I told you to not call me like that!"

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*Next Day. 11:03 AM.*

*( Classroom .)*

**[Takeru]**

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"And that's all. After getting into your suits, go towards the hangar. I have to prepare something beforehand. Dismissed!"

"Salute!"

The Instructor goes her way and we then start going towards the changing rooms.

"Honestly, I can't believe she just dropped this on us." Chizuru sighed heavily as we walked.

"We're taking our first, actual, serious piloting test. I-I'm not ready for this! Hauuu…"

"Chill, Tama. No point in overworrying. Let's just do our best like we have been doing in the simulator so far, right Meiya?"

"… Oh, yes. We just have to face this hurdle."

… She's been weird today. She hasn't looked at me in the eye and avoided making conversation after our runs in the sims. Is she not feeling well? Perhaps some bad memories leaked into her?

"Gotta step up. We're not failing this." Kei frowned as we reached the changing rooms. She looked ready to hop in her cockpit and tear anything in her way.

A small time it took us to get prepped up, and then we marched on towards the hangar.

"We're flying! Takeru, what do you think we'll do?" Mikoto was all smiles as usual, ignoring the tension in the other girls' complexion.

"I dunno, target practice?" That's what we did all the time for our first piloting session.

"I agree with Shirogane-kun, they must want to see if we can actually handle the shaking of a real TSF while attacking and moving at the same time. Squad, no matter what they throw at us, let's clear this test!"

Mikoto and Tama give a 'Yay', Kei just nods, I smile at them. But Meiya seemed out of it. Still walking along, but way too solemn and silent. Chizuru notices this too and approaches her.

"Mitsurugi? What is it?"

"Hm? Nothing, I am merely bracing for what is to come."

"Is that so?" Tapping her glasses, she also doesn't seem to buy into the excuse.

Making our way into the hangar, the Fubukis came into view. Tama began to take breaths, Mikoto got up to the rails to stare at them, while us remained a bit behind as we waited.

"Hey, you guys…" Mikoto looks back at us, tapping her cheek with a finger. "Why are there only five Fubukis lined up here?" Now that she mentions it… I didn't ask Sensei why there are only five of 'em here.

"Oh, I hadn't noticed." Chizuru looked over the hangar that was filled with TSFs. "Maybe there was no more space?"

"Shirogane, what do you think?" Meiya's eyes still seem normal and she sounds kinda worried. But still, something is wrong with her today.

"They either couldn't fit the last Fubuki here, or someone won't do the test in a Fubuki."

"Someone? You…" Meiya's eyes became sharp. She gazed at the purple Takemikazuchi and bit her lips. I got closer to her and spoke in a low tone.

"… Think they'll force you to use it?"

"I hope that's not the case." She is more bothered by it, but there's not much I can do.

"Squad! Line up!"

"Instructor, there seems to be one less Fubuki for us." Chizuru spoke as we formed the line.

"One less? What are you talking about? All five of them are here."

"Instructor… Then, who will ride a different machine?" Meiya asked, clearly tense as her hands were coiled into fists.

"Isn't it obvious? Shirogane won't get to do his training in a Fubuki, due to his punishment."

Huh, so that's how it is. Can't say I didn't expect it.

"Huh? Shirogane-san will? B-But isn't that unfair?" Tama stepped forward. I didn't think she'll defend me like this over something so small.

"It is what it is. Shirogane, you'll pilot that Gekishin that's on the far right side of the hangar. Now, all of you, get inside your units. You'll do your test all together as a squad. Move along!" Barking her order, NotMarimo-chan then went her way to the mobile command center, probably.

Well… Time to rumble, I guess.

"Takeru, will you be fine?"

"Don't worry, Mikoto. I'll pull through somehow."

"Squad, let's hurry. Shirogane-kun, you don't worry. We will do our part to aid you during the test in case something goes wrong."

"Thanks Sakaki. Well, let's go." We all nod at each other and go towards our TSFs.

As I get to the far right I see that this Gekishin is the one I used during the trial against that AI back in October, but it looks more spiky than before. It also has an antenna on its head and its Jump Units are the same as the ones that the Kagerou I used before had, with the pair of Variable Wings. I get into the cockpit and, after bolting myself, I start the Data Link. Let's see this… doesn't have the XM3 installed. Sigh…

After checking all is in working order and that the training weapons are all set, I send the signal.

"06, all green."

"Roger that. 01, all green as well. Everyone, how are you?" The rest replies, seems like there are no problems whatsoever. "Alright. Squad 207 is ready to go. Command Post, what are we to do?"

"Command Post to Squad 207. Get ready to deploy and wait for our signal."

The Instructor so ordered, and thus, I felt as my unit was being turned around. The small shaking as the system started to brace once the cables loosened off, my sight changing towards the opening gates of the hangar.

"Everyone, align on the rails and get ready to boost as soon as we give you the signal." NotMarimo-chan said. The five Fubukis and my Gekishin line up near the gate, that was open already.

A brief moment of wait extended itself, until the connection with the Instructor appeared again.

"Squad 207, take off! I repeat, take off!"

First Chizuru and Meiya, then Mikoto and Kei, and Tama along me last. All six of us are now flying towards the ruins, following the path that appears on our radar.

"Squad 207. Some marks will appear on your radar, get ready to perform the movements necessary to pass through the designated altitudes. Now, exercise start!"

This is like what we did in the sim, but without circles in the air and just a certain height to be at a certain point. We boost upwards at first, moving forward for some meters. Then we slowly move downwards, and continue to descend until we eventually reach the training grounds. Nothing wrong with this, for being their first take off.

"Well done. Now, spread in a line. Many targets will appear along the city, aim at them and shoot. However you'll have to do it as you boost through the city, so you cannot stop. There should be some mark to indicate the available placements, report back once you're all in position." After her orders were clear, we all got in position at the ready.

We all got one street assigned to cover. Once the signal was given, we boosted into the ruins, guns at the ready. This next part went by easily again. I had no trouble hitting my targets, even with the stiffness of the old OS.

"Squad 207, we've all finished this course." Chizuru notifies our progress, her face then appears in my view. Looks fine and dandy, no stiffness nor fear.

"Roger that. Now, for the last part of this training. You'll have to return to your original position without boosting. You have to remain grounded for this part. Many turrets are being activated all over the

city, they will shoot at you once they spot you. Return with as little damage as you can. That is all."

"01, copy that. Alright squad, let's go!"

"Roger!"

We dash into the city. I disable my comms and everything except the infrared. I check the radars and sensors, the Noisemaker is not activated. That's good. Now, let's do this in the same way I did it last time. By dashing like mad.

Again blazing through the city as the turrets shoot at where I was instead of where I currently am, the ruins come and go in my vision. Thanks to the sidesteps I learned from his memories this is a piece of cake. There are less turrets compared to when I did the test run against that AI so many nights ago, so I have plenty of time to spot and dodge their fire, or to change my direction to avoid them.

I reach the end of the ruins with some paint, but I'm not soaked in it. It took three minutes for Mikoto to reach the end, another two for Meiya, then Tama arrived shortly after that and behind her Kei and Chizuru were the last ones to arrive. All of them were covered badly in paint.

"Squad 207, you've completed your first run. Return to the hangar. Over and Out." NotMarimo-chan delivered the orders and we returned to the hangar. No words were said in the trip back.

As I descended from my TSF and went towards the group, the Instructor approached us alongside Takamura from a hallway.

"Salute!"

"At ease. Squad, you did very well for your first run, to clear it without anyone being knocked out. In the future we will start doing mock battles in your TSFs and the sims, so get ready for that. You can have the early afternoon free, we will return to train at 1800 hours in

the simulators. I have to compile the data from this run, and prepare some new training drills on the sims based on it. So look forward to that. Dismissed!" We salute her again, and both of them leave. Takamura didn't call for me, does that mean I also get my afternoon free?

"Takeru, those moves you did were awesome!"

"Huh?"

"You know, those zigzags you were doing. You dodged almost all of the paintballs!" Mikoto beams at me with sparks in her eyes.

"Well, it's what I usually do."

"Really? I've never seen you do those moves in the simulator. You're usually fast but…" Meiya commented with a slow, tense tone. She looks dejected, like when I started cruising through the daily runs.

"Yeah, I knew you were good but those moves were quite fast." Tama commented, but on a soft friendly tone. "Your dot in the radar kept blinking as you moved farther and farther away, it was something else for sure."

"You will have to tell me where you learned to do that." Chizuru readjusted her glasses as she looked at me as if I were some weird thing in a test tube.

"C'mon Sakaki, I told you all already, that's how it feels natural to me."

"Hmmmmmm…" Why must you look at me like that, Kei? Sigh…

"In any case, it's good that all of us made it out in one piece. From now on, we'll have to redouble our efforts in the mock battles. This is where the real training starts!" Chizuru says to motivate us, raising a fist to the ceiling.

The others give a 'Yes' and we start making our way towards the changing rooms. The other three started to talk about how it felt to pilot, how they aimed at the targets and other stuff.

However, Meiya and Kei didn't join in. And remained staring at me as we walked.

"Is there anything else you wanna ask?" I approach them, they don't change their aura at all.

"Special-kun, how good are you?"

"How good? I mean, I dunno. I still haven't finished my training."

"Please, Shirogane. That maneuvering… Why haven't you done that in our trainings so far?" Meiya again was looking at me clearly bothered. Like… the day she punched me.

"It's not like I can test everything I wanna do in our exercises, I am under a punishment. Oh, I have an idea. What if we ask the Instructor to let us spar against each other in today's session? That way you could learn to move like I do." And I could prevent you from getting all negative.

"Eh?! You want to… Wait, are you serious?!"

"You don't want to?" I thought Meiya would immediately agree to it.

"I'm in, so long as you're serious." Thanks Kei.

"I will, don't worry." So please drop the side glance. It hurts.

"Well, since you offered your help. So, you won't hold back?" What got into her today? Why are her eyes full of clouds again?

"Hey, you've been weird today. Did I upset you?"

"No, I am not upset."

"But you've been really cold with me today, during the training and before the test too." She caresses her hair as she looks away.

"I've been my normal self today. I'm just surprised at how good you are, is all."

"… Are you doubting me again?" She flinches back. Her eyes open wide, her irises are flooded by conflicting waves.

"Shirogane… I am not doubting you. I shan't deny that I became… a bit envious at your result. But I am not holding a grudge or anything. You have been helping us in our trainings, and I know you're always doing your best effort."

"Then, why can't you look at me in the eye?"

"I… I mean, I'm just minding my words. I do not wish to say anything unnecessary." She looks away, digging her gaze on the floor.

Kei remains staring, unblinking.

"Do you wanna say something too, Ayamine?" She nods.

"Special-kun, you're too good. You sure you weren't conscripted before?" Oh shit, here we go again.

I feel as if I had swallowed that first pizza I made so long ago, rough, dry and hard as shit. Why… Why do you look at me like that again? What did I do this time? Is this how it is in this world, then?

… No, get it together. I have to do whatever I can to stop them from becoming paranoid again.

"Well, I just did what I usually do. I could teach you how to do those moves if you want."

"Really now?"

"Yeah, it might take a while for me to properly explain them, but I'm sure I can tell you how to do it."

"You speak as if we could match you." Meiya said, this time with spears in every word.

I honestly can't believe it. I mean, Kei was never on good terms with me, but for Meiya to turn around overnight. Little by little, step by step, I thought I was beginning to fit in the team. Alas, my fragile dream of camaraderie was crushed again by some unseen threat.

Did the General speak with Meiya? Or are they just jealous of my piloting skills? Regardless, I can't allow them to get all negative on me. If talking to them won't work, I'll just keep my distance. The last thing I want is to go back to how things were before. I'll help them out if they want, that's all I can do.

I look away and continue to walk in silence, while the other three still debate over something.

Sigh… In the end, seems like that's all I can do. Force a draw, reach a compromise. There's no… way for us to be on good terms here?

"Um… Shirogane, forgive me. I am just baffled at your performance. I didn't mean to imply-"

"It's alright, for real. I can tell you're bothered, I don't know what I did to make you angry at me again, but I'm not so dense to not notice it." Without looking back at them, I rub my eyes. "I'll be serious against you during this afternoon's session, so don't worry about me looking down on you. I'll do what I can to not make you feel uncomfortable guys, so I'll be on my way. Later Ayamine, Mitsurugi." I wave at them as I pick up the pace.

"Shirogane, wait up!"

"Hey, what's going on?" Chizuru and the rest were glancing at us, we had reached the changing rooms.

"Nothing, we were just talking about the course." I wave her off, I don't need Chizuru to get involved in this too.

"Oh, I see. Let's get changed then, we can all talk at large after that."

The other three go into their changing room. Kei and Meiya didn't, they remained staring at me.

"Special-kun, you angry?" Kei looks at me with her usual poker face, but her eyes were wavering a bit.

"A tad bit. I thought we had left the doubts behind, that I was beginning to fit in, but it looks like I was mistaken. Don't worry, I won't hold back anymore. Let's keep the peace in the squad until we get commissioned, just ignore me from now on." Kei's lips shook for the briefest moment. "Well, I've gotta hurry up, I need to go to the XO for my orders since I can't have free time due to my punishment. Later."

"Wait, Shirogane." I glance at Meiya as I was ready to go into my changing room.

She looks to the ground, unable to meet my gaze. Her hands are tightened into fists. It's clear she's regretting what she said but, what got into her?

Did Tsukuyomi-san told her something? Or did the General order her to keep tabs on me? That's the most plausible reason for her change. And I don't want to be harsh to her, so I better mind my words.

"Forgive me. I didn't mean to… well, make you uncomfortable. I let my jealousy get the better of me again. I'll be looking forward to today's training, I hope you can show me how to do those zigzags you usually do." She recovers a faint smile and stares at me with her usual confident eyes.

But… if they approached her… it means you're on their side now. I know you'd take Yuuhi's side over me. So, if she ordered it, you

would become my enemy. I can't let you get negative… But I can't trust in you either. *I am a stranger here after all, I know full well that anyone who takes Yuuhi's side won't show me any sympathy.*

"I'll try to meet your expectations of me. Later, Mitsurugi."

She twitched at my words. Her eyes froze and a layer of shadow appeared over them. I went inside before she could reply.

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*(Same Day. 07:09 PM.)*

*(Hallway.)*

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"Finally done." Moving my neck in circles, I walk towards Sensei's office. How did Sensei sort out the JAFF calcs so quickly is beyond me, but almost all the prep is done.

Luckily, I ended up delivering folders for Takamura until I had to go training, so I'm not that tired either.

Today's training was fruitful too, I guess. I kinda went serious against them from time to time, and I managed to not let them off easily. I pushed Kei and Meiya to a standstill, and defeated the rest. I gave them some pointers about their jump timings just like I always did. That's all I can do for now. I can only hope Tama is ready for what's to come. According to Takamura, they should have finished another training session right about now, so hopefully that went well.

"If only I could think of how to approach Meiya…"

When we fought her moves were unfocused, her swings were less precise than usual. Against me it was obvious, but all of her matches were odd. She was kinda out of it and looked depressed to no end, kept staring at me when we both were out of the pods, but didn't try to talk and I didn't feel like forcing a conversation, last thing I want is to make her uncomfortable or more paranoid.

I want no more problems, and I don't drive a Mercedes Dense anymore so I know better than to poke my nose where I shouldn't. If she was approached by the Guard she'll end up getting all negative all over again, I better keep my distance and do my best to not upset her. I do not want to fight her, she and all the squad is too precious to me.

I'd still like to find a way to get along with her, but if she was told something it's gonna be hard. And if Yuuhi ever asks for my head… If that General brands me as a traitor… It'll be over.

Sensei did say that the UN will give me cover so long as I can keep making useful stuff, so I'll have to believe her. At least I'll be safe here for the moment, until we see how this memory business plays out.

Since she again called me to her office, maybe she's got an update or something. That, or she noticed my moved.

Reaching the office, I knock on her door and enter after she beckons me in.

"Good evening, Sensei."

"Hey Shirogane. Let's go." She gets up from her desk and comes towards the door.

"… Where are we going?"

"You just follow me." She smiles at me, chuckling a bit.

We go back to the elevator and ride it, and while at first I was a bit nervous, we ended up down on Hangar 90. Getting out, no one else was in the place at the time. Only our footsteps echoed about in the gigantic empty space.

"So, what are you going to show me today?" I follow her, looking around. Without the XG this place feels so hollow.

"We've been making a Kagerou variant that is similar to the one you used. Our best team has been making some adjustments to the frame of the F-15J to further enhance it. Here, take a look at it." She made a grand gesture with her hand towards our left.

In front of me was a Kagerou that looked very different than the usual. Now its shoulder pads were triangles, its chest also was definitely more sharp than the one I used in Niigata, and the antenna on its head was a bit bigger. The inverted triangle shape of its waist was the same though. Its hands were not mounted in yet, and the leg armor and knee tanks were also not present.

"So, what's new with this one?"

"You can consider this one a fusion of the Strike Eagle and the Active Eagle. Unlike the one you used, this one has the final and fool-proofed versions of the Jump Units, engine, radars, antenna and sensors we made. Like the Strike Eagle, it will be able to get rid of its knee blocks once they're depleted, we also changed its internal components to make it lighter and completely functional with OBL. Its hands and legs are being worked on now, to put in them the Blade Edge armor you came up with once its built. Its forearms will also have sensor pods similar to the ones on the Active in them, we'll mount the blades on them to allow you to use them as a striking close range weapon. That will free the knees since you won't need to hold daggers in them, giving you double the ammo from last time."

"That's awesome. So, does this thing have a name yet?" I'm honestly surprised we can do this kind of things so fast.

"No, I haven't come up with anything conclusive yet. Since we want it to be known as a Japanese design I was going to codename it F-15JS, the S stands for 'Shin'. Calling it Shin Kagerou would give a nice ring to it, don't you think? This will have the lightness of the Strike, the mobility of the Active, and our best stealth tech on it. With your data as the base for its configuration, it'll turn out to be a great machine." She declares proudly, puffing her chest as she makes varied gestures with her hand towards the yet incomplete TSF.

"Heh, glad to see we're making progress here. This is a surprise for sure, didn't expect we could make new models here."

"Good to see you're pleased." A hand on her chin, she smiled. "By the by, the Gekishin you piloted is something similar to this. While we finished the new parts, the unit you're training with is the proof-of-concept that we used to test the full power of the new parts. You can consider it the one and only Shin Gekishin, since we won't bother to try to make a new model at this point. While I disabled them for today's test, it also has stealth capabilities. If you want we can paint it in ARP, in case you ever need it." I give her a nod. So that's why it was so fast. It wasn't the same I used, it was its ultimate form. No wonder I could still dash like that despite lacking the XM3.

"If we can paint it, go for it. We don't know when we might need it. It did move very fast for a Gekishin." She smiles again as she turns around.

"Glad you're happy with it. With that said, let's go over there." She moves to the open space to our right, where… No, you gotta be kidding me.

"Sensei, are those the chaff missiles?"

"Yeah. We had some of them lying around, I honestly didn't knew they were here. Tomorrow we'll start to develop these babies. I checked the reports you made, and let me tell you that you came up with some nice ideas. The HM ammo is the easiest one to make, we are currently working on it on the upper floors, but we will need some time to double check the sword design you came up with before making a prototype. Honestly, I have no idea how you came up with the barbed sword concept, but it is interesting."

"What about the M61?"

"Well, for that we will have to go to the other side of the hangar." She picks up her pace humming a tone to herself. Someone sure is happy today, Sensei very rarely hums to herself like that.

On a corner of the hangar, a Type-00C was standing proud in its new UN colors with some cable connected to its head.

"So I suppose this is my unit, right?" So she did reserve it for me. Glad she followed through on this.

"Yes. I already opened it up and checked its specs and functions, and while I don't think we can match its internal engine or Jump Units, I believe I can improve its radar and sensors to give it stealth. Since its head is a simplified one, I can make an antenna for it to give it a horn like the other Type-00 have. I was thinking on mounting the M61 on that triangle on its waist, by the sensor's side and in front of the Jump Units. You could lock them with the barrel looking downwards when inactive and it would lock forward when activated, or you could try to manually control it when you're on the air. Since the M61 itself is rather small its weight shouldn't offset your agility too much and since it uses 20mm ammo we can fit a great number of it in a small space."

"Great. Since it also has its daggers in the hands, that would be like having four weapons on board, along the rest of its weaponized armor. I suppose you already installed the XM3 on it?"

"Yes, of course. It's ready for you to take a ride in it if you want." She smiles devilishly at me.

"Heh, I might go for it in due time. So, that's all?"

"No, I wanted to let you know I'm putting you in charge of the hangar."

…

"Sensei, when you say in charge, what do you mean?"

"That you'll be the one overseeing the development of both the F-15JS and of your Type-00C. You're in charge of these two, they're

your babies after all." She chuckles at me as she plays with her bangs.

"So, I'll be the one who'll be monitoring these two? Does that mean you're getting closer to finishing the 00 Unit?" She smiles widely at me. I mean, this does play nicely with my plans, but… I'm kinda tired, not gonna lie.

"Exactly. I finally met the equations I wanted to fix. So, now that we tested that the hardware and the software do what we want it to do we will go and re-spec the 00 Unit."

"What about the leaks? Did you manage to get anything out of the tests?"

"… No, not for now. However, thanks to the second theory, I found a way to halt the sharing of data. While nothing happened between the reactor and the parts we're testing, Yashiro failed to scan the parts despite the lack of hyper ceramic. So that's a success in my eyes."

"… What is hyper ceramic?"

"Oh, a material that makes it impossible for the ESPers to scan someone's mind in any way or form. So, if the Reactors also establish a psychic link with the unconscious 00 Unit during the times the ODL must be purified, all I had to do was find a way to block anyone from accessing her mind at a time like that. I believe you're familiar with the ribbon I was preparing?"

"Oh, yeah. So, you did something like what those… particles on the ribbon did to her conscious mind?"

"Precisely. It was really hard, though, and frankly, it may be a pain to deal with."

"… Why?"

"Because it'll cause her ODL to deplete even faster, since I'm putting even more burdens onto her brain. Think of it as a subconscious shield, how our brains block certain memories from surfacing at times, or even forge fake ones to avoid a certain trauma. I aimed to replicate that, and while it went well enough during the tests, I assume it'll make her performance drop until you can stabilize her into proper human behavior."

"Roger. Don't worry, I'll handle it well."

"As I expect. So, I assume the 00 Unit will be running in three to five days." Wow, that's earlier than I thought.

"So I'll take care of all these projects to free your schedule until you're back?"

"Yeah, as an overseer. Thanks to your data from Niigata we finished the new parts for the Kagerou, so they're ready to be mass produced. So we will focus now on making the Shin Kagerou a reality along the revamping of this Type-00C. Also, you're in charge of the weapons too. I'll be expecting good results, Chief Shirogane." She laughs devilishly again.

Sometimes I don't know how you can pull these reckless things. Is she onto me? Or she's merely trying to regain my trust? Regardless, this is quite the shock. To be the chief of this hangar…

"… You've gotta be fucking kidding me."

"No, I'm neither kidding nor fucking you." Then, she smiles as her tone descends into a whisper. "Though, if you're in the mood for the latter, you can swing by my room later."

"Sensei!" I can feel my face blaze up and my heart begin to lag and glitch. Why does she have to be like this?!

"Ahaha! Sorry, couldn't resist. You're too much fun to tease. In any case, you're the Chief of the hangar until further notice. Show the UN

that you can lead this projects to fruition." Locking her eyes onto mine, the sobered up gaze told me everything I needed to know. For now, our deal is on the rails.

"Understood. I will deliver, Sensei."

"Good. Now, let's get you changed."

"For what?"

"Hm? Didn't I tell you? You're going to have a battle with Takamura in your modified Kagerou." Don't stroke your head like that, you know you didn't tell me a thing about this.

"I heard nothing of this. I mean, do I have to play as the Viking again?"

"Yeah. I want to see how our inventions measure up. Don't worry, we repaired your TSF and replaced the parts with the final ones. It should be even better than last time. This will just be a mock battle, so don't be so tense." Easy for you to laugh like that, I'm up against a Type-00F with a Kagerou. After such a long day, too.

"I'll do what I can. Also, I can meet with Kasumi today right?"

"Yeah, of course. What? Are you in a hurry to get some memories of Her Purpleness?" Folding her arms, she gives me a side glance. What's up with her?

"No, it's not just that. You see, today I had a rather weird dream. I saw this world's Sumika with him in it." Sensei's brows arch up, looking intently at me.

"What did you see?"

"Just some kids fooling around. There was me, Sumika, one guy named Jouji, another named Masahiko and another girl named Chie. We were all just playing in a park with a ball or running around in the slums. It was like… I dunno, dreaming about people you haven't

seen in a long while." Like the few times I used to dream about my grandparents outta nowhere, or about some old friends that moved away when I was little.

"… Is that so? These memories might help to stabilize Kagami, so you should show them to her as soon as possible. Alright, let's take care of Takamura swiftly so that we can get on that." She waves her hand at me and starts walking towards the elevator.

"You say it as if it were an easy task…"

"Oh, come on! You can take on thousands of BETA but you're scared of a single woman? You didn't fall for her, didn't you?"

"Of course not! It's just that this is too much of a gap, facing a Takemikazuchi with a Kagerou. I feel like I'm going to be destroyed." The technological gap is too big. I'm not sure if I'll be able to win. And… She might be sending me to my death, now that I think about it.

"That might be true if we only look at the specs, but don't forget that you have the stealth protocol on your side, and you have much more experience than her. Your sheer agility will definitely play in your favor too, even if it can't match up with the Type-00F, your patters will definitely throw her off." She doesn't seem to be hiding anything, but I don't think I can read her that well. The door opens and we ride the elevator.

"About that… What if she realizes I'm the one who fought with her down the line?" That is a serious concern. I do have habits and tells that I can't hide, someone is bound to notice them and make the connection.

"Don't worry, I don't think she'll notice anything. As you proved to me, most pilots rely on their radar, sonar, and automated systems to get a feel of their opponent during Anti-TSF combat. They don't pat as much attention to their immediate surroundings. You, on the other hand, tend to rely more on your vision to move. They will be

constantly looking at their radar, altimeter, and data logs to read your position until they're close enough, while you'll be looking straight at them alongside the data in the projection. With the stealth the radar will display nothing, so they won't be able to recognize all of your patters precisely because they will have to rely on their sight for that, and at the speed you move even seeing you for more than a second will be hard in the cramped space of the training grounds. If they can't see you in their projections, their data longs come up empty, and they can't even track you, all you need to do is strike from behind and any opponent will fall."

"I know what you mean. But it still makes me nervous. Since she's a samurai she might be more used to not relying on the radars and focus more on her sights and hearing during close combat. But I guess we'll just have to see what happens."

Facing against a Takemikazuchi is crazy, but even if this is dangerous it will be a good test to see how I hold up. I may have to fight them in the future, so I'll take this chance to spar with a Royal Guard in preparation for any upcoming battles.

"That's better. Now let's go, I suspect Takamura is waiting already." The door opens and we step into the hallway. "Oh right. On the 30th, the UN's Undersecretary will come to visit the base. Is that one of the incidents we have to be careful about?"

"Yeah. An HSST filled with explosives will fall on the base, and we will have to use the OTH to strike it down. I did what I could to make Tama as good as I could, now it's all on her." Sensei smiles at me.

"You trust a lot in them. I certainly did not expect you to send Takamura to train them. Who would have said you could make her do your bidding like that?"

"I just asked her if she could do it." Really, can you stop with the teasing? It's not like I can boss Takamura around, she's just being considerate.

"Well, I already tuned the OTH today, so we did all we could to prepare. Don't worry, everything is under control."

"If you say so."

We reach the changing room and I go inside. I suppose it's time for another fight.

# True or False?

## Chapter 39: True or False?

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*November 28th. Near 10 PM.*

*(Shogun's Private Chamber. Imperial Palace.)*

**[Yuuhi]**

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The heavens have bequeathed good fortune to me, for today was light on meetings, and that I could delegate them to my trusted fellows. After all, they would have found me on a most ill mood. The mantle of the Shogun requires me to be a beacon of light and amicability, yet a forceful lightning wouldn't have bestowed me any favors in my duties. Such atmospheres most remain cordial, therefore I could not allow this toxic mire to permeate what words were required of me.

Sighing once we enter my chamber, yet there is still a tint of disquiet in my breathing. The opulence of my room, with such regal decorations and furniture, that are but a grim reminder of the shackles I wear when taking upon the mantle of the Shogun, at least have served me as a haven where I know I am at peace, where no one could intrude on my thoughts, or dare to eavesdrop on my words.

… However, albeit nothing has changed, my fingers cannot stop tracing my neck. As if crows were pecking upon me, as if some manner of rusted iron were oh so very slowly tracing from my nape and down, hewn into my very flesh, nothing I've done today has managed to assuage this foreboding feeling, and the resulting ire it has brought to my heart.

"Your Highness, if I may." Maya tells, returning me to the room, away from the sensation that drowns all else.

Extending my arms upwards while slowly closing my hands, eyes wandering the ceiling, Maya carefully removes the pieces of my formal attire, cradling them onto her arms as she does. My Chamberlain places her fingers on the edges of the golden crown atop my head, taking it off my hair with small, precise movements as habitually. Once she safeguards the ornament, she then rests my night attire on her palm, which descends upon a small table to deposit on it my clothing as a leaf would fall upon a pond.

However, while the habitual routine is something that gives me a respite from my incessant duties, a breath of calmness where I can detach myself from worries, the lethargic pace of it all only manages to distress me further, for I would be wishing to receive news on what is transpiring on Yokohama.

Once Maya has finished her duty, my hand reaches for her arm to stop her from proceeding as usual.

"I can get changed on my own. Maya, please do go request a report from Daizaburou-san and Mana henceforth."

Briefly closing her eyes while tapping her glasses, she swiftly bows down and leaves my formal attire on the Chamberlain's hands, who also proceeds to quickly place it in its place before leaving behind Maya, more do to my own mood than her desire to remain by my side.

Looking to the door to make sure I was left alone, alone in these magenta walls full of opulence, with a glistening wooden floor, I drag my feet through the small changing room and into my private bedroom, but do not stop, instead I keep walking past this unnecessarily large bed of mine and all of its cerulean sheets.

Moving my neck in circles, undoing my ponytail slowly as I move towards the window, gazing at what few stars I can see from beyond

the curtains, with every breath one small fraction of this disquiet leaves me. Without any haste, without removing my gaze from the window, I change into my night clothes, then sit on my bed as one hand swims through my hair, some strands caught in between my fingers.

And then, my hand begins to halt its advance as it approaches my neck. Massaging it, parrying the vexing raking with my the tip of fingers, once I sigh what was restrained within I manage to quell the feeling.

I know it is futile to repine about the matter, to continue to ruminate in such way, however, whatever has compelled such silence from both Mana and Daizaburou-san? It has been many days already since their arrival at Yokohama, and besides the preliminary words from Kouzuki, which have not been as pleasing as I once desired, they have yet to report anything. To think their mission would have been stymied, what manner of protection has that faker been bequeathed with?

Resting an ankle just beyond one of my knees as I crossed one leg over the other, feeling my brows beginning to wish to interject, I close my eyes and take in a deep breath as a hand moves to the base of my neck.

"Peace… All shall be dealt with in time. They cannot hide that faker for long."

However… How in the Heavens did that man gain possession of a Minaru Kamui? Mana was much preoccupied when she reported the matter… even going as far as asking me if I was certain of his death. That he knew of the nickname he had given the cousins, that he knew of his favorite food, his birthday, and that the man's expressions were the same as…

Releasing the sheets I was unaware to be clenching, that same foreboding sensation once more ascends yet again to my neck.

"Sigh… I cannot fault her for harboring doubts, however the reality of the matter is that… he's dead. No matter how much knowledge that faker may possess… Takeru died as the G-Bombs fell. In no way could he have survived from that event without me knowing of it. Such a flagrant trickster having deceived Mana…"

It is certainly impossible that anyone has acquired such knowledge. And yet, regardless of knowing of his birthday, of the possibility that the man guessed his favorite dish… How in the Heavens did he learn of the cousins' nickname? Moreover, how could the man ever have taken possession of the blade? I doubt Mana's eyes could be deceived with ease… It is dubious she and Daizaburou-san both had fallen to this deception. What if… if somehow…

No, it is impossible. I was in the vessel that was overseeing the operation, the UN officers that were in it alongside me confirmed there were no signals coming from the location of the blast or its surroundings. I saw the… horror of that black orb that took his life. Taking a moment to exhale, with long steps I return to the window, with a gentle swipe of a few fingers I move aside the curtains, and once more I begin to gaze at the stars.

Could it be that they are being manipulated somehow? Perhaps their thoughts could be being read by the young ESPer that resides in that base, and she then tells such intel to the spy who is passing as Takeru. However, what reasons could compel such manner of plotting? After all, I highly doubt they know who he was. Unless, however, the man's mission is to hinder my relations with the UN. However, I do not see Kouzuki allowing such a person to be on her base.

"Sigh… The more I ponder, the less I understand. However… that does not change the actions that have to be taken from this point forward."

While I cannot merely have the man executed after learning he knows of the importance the Minaru Kamui has and that he somehow gained possession of one beyond my knowledge, and I do

not desire to become the recipient of Kouzuki's animosity by forcing an execution of someone from her base, much less with the regretful turn of events that transpired during the cadets' test in the island, there should be a way in which we can apprehend the man while not compromising our relation to the UN.

Yoroi did say the Vice Commander is still an ally of ours, on his opinion, and that the chasers were not acting on her orders. However, he also harbors doubts regarding the unyielding refusal of the woman regarding sending the faker to the Capital, on the excuse of mending the missing data in the databases.

Yet again I am unable to dispel the growing frown that refuses to remain hidden, the mere thought of someone passing as him is bountiful enough to set my ire unfettered. As he would have said, I could almost see the blue fire in the reflection of my eyes shining stronger than the light coming from the lamps that illuminate my privacy.

I look back, he isn't there. And I know that, no matter how much I call his name, he will never come back. Feeling my lower lip folding inwards, placing a hand over my neck, the longing that this emptiness leaves in me, equal to that of a lonely seed in wait for spring as it endures the cold night gale of winter's gate, instead is almost engulfed by the anger of he who dares to trample over his name with this deception.

"Sigh… And yet, if I begin ruminating on this overlong, I shall wind up with a most severe headache."

Rubbing my head in a slow circular motion, my chin lowering in as I remember how he used to pat my head, how carefully and tenderly his hand would descend upon my hair whenever I was troubled and failed to halt my overinsistent trails of thought.

… I miss you, Takeru.

Sitting on my bed again, opening the drawer that was close by so slowly it made no sound at all, I take out the item it had within. Resting its lower tip on top of the drawer, placing some small amount of tension on the tip of my fingers, I spin the toy and lose myself in the colored patterns its surface makes, my mind wandering towards those so distant days that have been lost to me so many moons, so long ago.

When he gave me this toy, my very first present from a friend, when he would come visit with new souvenirs every weekend, when we would get to play together, when he didn't hesitate to hug me… The toy stops spinning, yet I continue swimming in those memories, a cheek slumping onto one of my palms.

When he would complain of me besting him in Shogi… When he still was clumsily learning to wield a blade… When you were still here…

"Yuuhi-sama?"

"Eh?! O-Oh, Tsuhi? Sigh… Why must you never announce your presence when you arrive?" My tone slightly adusted as she broke my reminiscence, I join my hands as I give her a good look.

She then proceeds to bow down almost lethargically, her short dark hair swaying as she does, yet her calm, almost frozen expression remains unchanged, those topaz-colored eyes of her meeting mine with the habitual poise a calm lake would possess. Her gray uniform almost standing out against the walls, her slim figure, almost as tall as I am, remains staring for a moment.

"My apologies. I did not meant to infringe on your privacy, I merely am used to walking silently as the shinobi I am." Speaking as slowly as always, in that usual composed and almost lethargic pace her words take, as if she had just been woken up from a long dream, as if she were still shaking off the husk of a dried cocoon from her wings, she then stood in attention.

"Tsuhi, you are no longer a shinobi. I believe I have made my wishes on the matter clear enough by this point."

"And, as I am sure you are well aware, I am merely following my family's code, and my leader's orders." Narrowing her eyes as she said those last words, I sigh while bracing for what I assume is to come next. "Which begs the question, why have you not notified me of Takeru's situation until today?"

"… Because there is nothing to notify you of, is all. The man is a faker, through and through." Her eyes not relenting, I stand up and take a few steps towards the window. "Now then, I do not recall giving you permission to enter my chamber unannounced." Remaining as composed as she was, she merely nodded to my words.

"Indeed. Maya-sama was called to attend a few matters regarding the patrols, and thus, she tasked me with the delivery of the report to your person, considering the gravity of it."

"Sigh… Fair enough." Tsuhi is one of the last I would have wished to learn of this ploy, however if Maya has decided to rely on her, I too so shall do.

"Well then, should I begin?" Giving me a small bow, a hand on a shoulder, she looked my way.

"By all means."

Turning to face her, she coughed before opening the small folder she had on her, and thus she begins to speak.

"Well, first and foremost, it would seem that the man in question has truly been placed under a most severe punishment." She then details the supposed routine of the man, and how they were unable to pay a visit his cell past dinner time or even approach him at all.

"So they were… impeded to approach the faker?"

"So it would seem. Due to his situation, the man cannot receive visits on his cell without first requesting the permission of the Vice Commander, along the motives for the visit."

So that is what has stymied their progress. If the man has been made to work during most of his time outside of the training course, then there will be few openings in which they could approach him.

"Has Daizaburou-san mentioned anything regarding their plans to unmask this faker?"

"As it were, Daizaburou-sama seems to be holding doubts regarding the identity of this person. During their meeting, it seems-"

"Pardon?"

"Ahem, I said, Daizaburou-sama is not convinced at the moment of-"

"Yes, I heard that well enough. How… How could it be that he is also casting doubts on my words? Whatever does this mean?" First Mana, now him… Just what is causing this?

"Well, according to his report, it would seem his first impression of the man was not what he expected." And yet, she remains composed, twirling a strand of hair as her eyes focus on the report she had. "He thus says, and I quote, 'the man possesses an expression truly reminiscent of our Takeru, with clear traces of the wrath that once took hold of him restrained under a layer of the relaxed nature we knew him to always display before the war'." She takes a moment to catch a breath, curling a strand of hair behind her ear. "And, with all due respect, I am of the opinion that, in light of what the report says, this person might in fact not be a faker at all, Yuuhi-sama."

"… Surely you are not proposing what I believe you are?"

"Well, what would you order if the man was, in fact, Takeru?"

…

"He's dead, Tsuhi. You were on that battlefield as well."

"True that might be, however, I was not allowed to inspect the nearby area of the G-Bomb's explosions. If you recall, we were hard pressed while cooperating with the squadrons from the A-01 STF to halt the American's advance into the Yokohama Hive. Therefore, I cannot deny the possibility that my leader could have survived somehow."

"And I am saying that is impossible."

…

"… Would you wish for me to continue with the report?" She gives a small, curt bow.

"By all means, please do." Closing my eyes and brushing my hair, I face the window.

"Then, it would appear the man has been made into the recipient of many ill rumors, while also receiving low grade synth food as his sole source of nutrition on these passing days. All points to the UN using him as a scapegoat for the… Ahem… misconduct of the chaser squadron."

"Is that so?"

"Indeed. Mana's subordinates have also reported that the man in question has been seen around 1st Lt. Takamura due to some arrangement of said punishment."

"What? Has he… been placed on the railgun project?"

"So I said, Yuuhi-sama." Unable to restrain a small groan, I fold my arms and look away from her furrowing brows. "However, the details of his involvement remain a mystery to our fellows. According to Daizaburou-sama, it would seem the man has been placed as an

aide, perhaps. However, since questioning 1st Lt. Takamura might arise suspicions, they have not approached her for the moment."

"… I see." Why would Kouzuki do such a thing? In any case, we also now possess Takamura's eyes to our disposal, if her account ever becomes necessary. "What else is of note? Has the man… showed any hostile signs towards his squadron?"

All matters considered, I shudder to think of what the true goal of the faker could be. Not only for Meiya, but for all the other members of her squad. I will not be able to face my fellows were harm to fall upon their daughters due to my tardy action.

"No, nothing of the sort. The man seems to be fitting in well, better than before the CCSE as far as the report from Mana's team says." Huh? How in the Heavens could that be? "Also, it would seem he has remained in top form during his training sessions, and it appears as if he were employing odd maneuvering at times."

"… Odd in which sense?"

"In Mana-sama's words, those same eccentric sidesteps my leader always preferred to do."

One of my hands began to shake ever so slightly, closing my eyes and taking a deep breath, sending that hand to again swim within my hair, the vile is subdued once more. So the faker happens to also share a piloting trait with Takeru, perhaps? In no way could this man know of his training, for Takeru was trained under my House's doctrine and for the spy to possess such knowledge would mean someone has betrayed me, yet no one who knew him would do such a thing. All of his fellows have remained loyal, even if our views differ from time to time. However, why are Mana and Daizaburou-san being deceived by this flagrant deception? I did not think Mana to be this emotional, to fall prey to this sinkhole of lies.

"Anything else of note?"

"There are still a few points of interest." She says, unfazed and completely calm at the situation, which yet again makes my lips pluck. "Mainly, it would seem the man is fond of Meiya-sama, and according to her is also prone to make odd jokes every now and then."

"Oh? So the faker is trying to get close to Meiya? Sigh… How did I not see it?" It is obvious, some American is plotting to gain intel on her background. Perhaps, another Regent is also doing the same for some reason. "Have they decided how to proceed from now on?"

"… No, as it is they are once again asking you if you are certain that-
"

"Yes, he's dead. Do tell them to device a plan to ensure the faker is exposed, detained, and brought to my presence, and soon."

"Yuuhi-sama, may I tell you of what Meiya-sama herself said about the man?"

"Hm? Meiya spoke of him?… I suppose, do tell me."

"Ahem… First, the man was insistent on referring to her by name since they met on the night of October 22nd." Huh? Oh, a foreigner it is then. Quite foolhardy, to reveal their trails this easily. "Second, she is certain the man employs the Mugen Kidou as we do."

"… Excuse me?"

"I said the man empl-"

"Yes, I heard well enough. Whatever does this mean?! The Mugen Kidou… to fool Meiya's eyes… What of Mana's observations?"

"In her opinion, the man does indeed fight in our style. Mion reported that, during their bout on the island, his stance and patters do resemble those of Takeru, albeit far less aggressive than she

recalls." She then looks my way, awaiting further questions. Yet, those I have couldn't be answered by her.

Did… one of our fellows betray us? I suppose, since Mana confirmed the Minaru Kamui was indeed a real one despite having a dulled edge, one of us has turned traitor. However, all of my trusted confidants still have their blades with them… And his fellows would never denounce their oath to their leader. In which case, from where did this damned faker get hold of the blade, and learn our style as well? Furthermore, how could both Mana and Mion be beguiled with such ease?

"Sigh… Just what trickery is this faker employing, I wonder?" It is so vexing… Inhaling slowly, easing the vice grip my hands were placing on my chest, the toxic trail of thought is stopped before its fueling force surfaced in me.

"Yuuhi-sama, what if they weren't fooled?"

…

"… I believe I was clear enough. Takeru is dead. Stop reiterating the matter." Why do you all doubt me so? Is this their ploy? To make my fellows reticent towards me? Why are they falling so easily to this deception?

"However, the man is also aware of the handguard tradition, it would seem."

"Huh? He… Wait, how do you mean?"

"That the man once mentioned to Meiya-sama that he knew of the meaning behind giving someone the handguard of a blade." She retorts, as composed as always.

"T-That's… No, the spy is knowledgeable on our customs, that's all there is to it."

"She also mentioned how his reactions to the talks of his missing memories seemed honest as well." She retorts, a gentle stroke of a finger on her chin.

"… I said he is dead. Meiya never met Takeru, so she can in no way ascertain whether she met a faker or not." Pushing the curtains aside with a hand, the scorching azure fires that the reflection of mine eyes returned brought me stillness, I had not noticed such an intense scowl had made nest on my face. "… If this is all, do prepare a notice to inform them I wish to hear clear progress on the next report. What has Kouzuki done so far?"

"Remained as stoic as she was. When inquiries were forwarded, she asked our reasons for delving in her special protegee's affairs. Without knowing if you'd favor a confrontation, Daizaburou-sama has remained in wait for now."

"Have them approach the man at some point, to ascertain for who he works. If Kouzuki continues in her refusal to send him to the Capital, I myself shall lead the talks." Little power might I have, yet I won't allow her to tarnish his name, even if she is the leader of the project. She must be aware of who the man truly is. "You may leave, Tsuhi. Thank you kindly for your devotion, as always."

"No, it is nothing. However, there is something I must ask."

"… I am not sending you to Yokohama." Looking back at her, she finally reacted. Lowering her brows and chin, what once could eternally lie found motive to stir back to life, to incite a most searing frown on her face.

"Why would you not? Were you still harboring doubts, I could easily tell if the man is or isn't-"

"Tsuhi, Takeru is dead. What is it with all of you?"

"That is my question, Yuuhi-sama." Still frowning, still adusted and inquisitive.

"Whatever are you talking about?"

"Why do you so vehemently refuse to consider he might be alive?"

"… Because he died. There is no way in which he-"

"Because it would mean you, again, abandoned Takeru, wouldn't it?"

… Clutching the curtains, feeling something within me tearing, something pounding into the back of my head, a myriad of insults and aggravations wished to be released. That same poisoning sensation spawned on my neck, and I did not fight it this time. Yet, licking over my lips, exhaling through my nose, such hampering thoughts were kept in check, for the moment.

"Take those words back this instant."

"Why should I? You did abandon him when Yokohama fell. And, if he had survived, you would have-"

"Takeru has been dead for two years. That is the truth."

"He could have survived, however. In which case, we must take action to bring him back home instead of leaving him in the clutches of the UN."

"He did not. And furthermore, I never abandoned him."

"Then, why were we together under the Chain squadron when we began investigating the affairs that lead to the fall of Mo-"

"Enough!" Rubbing my forehead, gulping as I tried to calm down my breathing, yet failing to restrain those days from returning. It made my ankles shiver as if tickled by feathers, made me again massage my neck to regain some measure of poise. "Sigh… I understand your worry as one of his fellows, however, if he indeed survived Lucifer then, how do you explain his disappearance?"

"I have been trying to tell you what the report says, yet you seem fixated on rejecting the news." Narrowing her eyes, giving me a side glance. "Meiya-sama said the man was sent to Alaska, that he woke up alone and without knowledge of his past. And that, because no one could find anyone related to him, he had to stay abroad."

"That is… nothing but a forged story. In no way could he have left the Empire behind our knowledge."

I was looking at all times, and they explicitly said no signals were left on the area. I was there… when the radar went blank… when that dark orb appeared… I am certain he is dead. Could it be you are also under some drug's hold, Tsuhi? Or, perhaps, are you part of whatever this plot is aiming to do?

"And on the off chance that such a thing happened?" However, she rarely shows such open signs of anger… No lies reflect off her eyes or tone, then, whatever compels this insistence?

"… It is impossible. That is all. Take your leave, now."

"Why do you refuse to consider the chance that he might have survived?" She takes a few steps closer, such a defiant tone bringing an odd sensation to my throat, as if some foul bug was climbing on it. Two fingers choke a strand of my hair as I look away, no longer able to restrain a frown.

"I already explained my reasoning. There is nothing else I require of you. As your Shogun, I order you to leave my chamber, 2nd Lt. Yasomaga."

"… Very well, so I shall do. There is one matter I would wish to remind you of, however."

"And that would be?" And yet again, she frowns my way.

"You may be the current Shogun, however that is not why I serve you, Yuuhi-sama. Please do remember why many of us remain on

your side."

Taking a step towards her, our eyes met. She remains composed, yet frowning.

"… Are you insinuating that you are not loyal to me, perchance?"

"I am loyal, because my leader so commanded. Because I still believe in his words, in his fiery fury to protect our people. That belief in your House's teachings is why many are still devoted to you. And if he happened to be alive, I expect you take the necessary steps to ensuring his return to our home, regardless of your own opinions. That is all." She then turns around, as if thinking she could merely leave after such words.

"Halt where you stand. Whatever do you mean? You expect me to… Are you… in league with this faker?"

"… So you truly refuse to admit the possibility that he is still alive."

"Why must you all-" Looking back at me, yet again with a calm expression, she sent a hand to her chin as she stared.

"No, the question here is, why do you refuse to consider that possibility, after both Mana-sama and Daizaburou-sama have both expressed their concerns?"

"… Sigh. Because he has died." Why… Why are all of you so fixated on this matter? What good will it do to us to hold onto such an obviously false hope?

"Isn't it because it would mean you abandoned him, when he was at the verge of death?" A brow twitching as I looked at her, she rose both hands in peace as I took a few steps towards her, as my teeth gritted, as the restrains of my ire were coming unbound.

"… I did no such thing, and he has perished."

"Then, why would you be hesitating, Yuuhi-sama?"

"Huh? I am not-" She takes a step forward, but remains silent. Staring at me, her face relaxing into her usual expression.

"Why did you retreat your petition for the execution, then?"

"… Because the man had a Minaru Kamui, and it had to be investigated how-"

"Order the man to be handed to the Royal Guard for the execution, inquire into the matter with the UN to see how much they know."

"That would still not answer-"

"Yuuhi-sama, when Mana-sama took possession of the blade, all that was left was to capture the man. Had you asked him to be sent to the Guard for the trial, using the deleted databases as a motive for the procedure, the man would already be in our custody. And yet… You hesitated."

"I… am merely minding my power. I do not wish to bring chaos to the scales of this nation. It… would set a most dire precedent. And furthermore, it would raise questions regarding why we were acting in such way. Do remember that his identity must remain concealed, despite his passing."

"… Is that so? However, isn't leaving the man near Meiya-sama far more dangerous?"

"Then, pray tell, whatever would you have done?"

"I already said so. Request his transfer to the Guard for his punishment, interrogate the man here. The UN was in no position to refuse your petition, considering that they wished to hide what transpired during the CCSE. And furthermore, if anyone had dared to look into the matter…" Her brows lower, a small smile forms on her. "We could have easily crushed their fangs."

"… I cannot allow the matter from drawing too much attention, that is all."

"Yet, you sent Daizaburou-sama, Mion, and Shion, while Mana-sama is also present in Yokohama. Could it be that you are struggling to accept the man might truly be Takeru?"

…

"Well, Yuuhi-sama?"

… If he were still alive… if he truly was agonizing back then… and I didn't send a search party… I gag on air, clenching my hands once more as my feet grew unsteady, thinking on what could have been of him. H-However…

I return to the window, to the skies. Betraying my own words, considering the possibility… Hugging my sides, it is not enough to assuage this shiver on me as his hands would have.

"… If, for some odd miracle, Takeru had survived, then I myself will handle this matter. We cannot allow attention be directed to his name. Furthermore, Mana, Mion, and Shion are in Yokohama as of now. If he truly is alive… t-then he is in good hands. However, as I have been saying, in no way that faker could be Takeru."

It is nothing but a faint wish, a pointless expectation. In no way Takeru could still live… but… but if… he was… if such a miracle had occurred…

"… Hehehehe."

Hm? Whatever has caused her to giggle so? How odd, Tsuhi rarely laughs, much less in my presence.

"Why would you be laughing in such a way, Tsuhi?"

"Ah, no, my apologies. I merely found it amusing, how you seem to believe them to be able to quell his anger."

"… I believe that there are few people better suited to pacify him other than-"

"Yuuhi-sama, you have certainly not forgotten those days, have you?" Noticing the slight increase in speed of her tone, the tinge of joy in it, my lips could do little but pluck as I frowned. "If you truly wish to have Takeru back home, then having the man meet with either you or Raiko-sama would be the most effective way to do it." And then, I bit my lips. And knowing what she is implying, every fiber in me came unbound in a synchronized shift towards anger.

"… I am the only one who could assuage his ire. In no way that woman could ever-

"Please, I was one of those who remained with him after Yokohama's fall. I very well know how Raiko-sama tended to his heart after you left it in tatters."

"How dare you… have the gall to utter such lies… I did no such-"

"Please, I am not looking to upset you." She again bowed down to me, now a small smile on her face. "However, please do not feign ignorance towards what you did. And given their relation, I believe remembering their closeness would ail his heart were he to remember those harsh days that followed the fall of Yokohama."

"First, the chances of him being alive are astronomically low. Second, if he were, the Tsukuyomis are fit for the task of looking after Takeru. And third, were he to suffer a shock from recovering lost memories, only I would-"

"Please, Your Highness." She turns around, without even listening to me. "You should know that I was Takeru's right hand on his flight, since I was the one who kept giving you reports on his condition. Which is why I am saying that she is a good choice to handle this situation, since it would be difficult to arrange a meeting between you and the man without drawing unwanted eyes onto us now that you withdrew the execution order. And I am certain of this because she

surely knew how our leader fared on those days better than you and me both… I dare say that she know every inch of him, in fact."

"Silence! How dare you-" Without even waiting, she bows down and goes to the door.

"I suppose this shall be all. Good night, Yuuhi-sama."

"Do you not be thinking yourself capable of merely taking your leave after uttering such-"

"Then, why was he drowning in tears after you left Hakuryo Base?" Back to the frown, she stared at me. Saying nothing, awaiting my reply.

…

I am not proud of what I did. I was… prey of stress and fear. Amidst the pressure of becoming the next Shogun, as if the white darkness of fog had covered me whole, no words he said could dissuade me, no explanations could make me accept a scenario where he wouldn't be by my side. His reiterated refusals, his insistence on remaining in Hiiragi…

Takeru's company was reassuring to me, one last link to who I was beyond my duties as a Head of the Koubuin House and as a Shogun. Whenever I looked back, he was always there. I knew it, even when we were little, that he would come during the weekends to share his fun and joy with me and the cousins. And then, there was a time where he always near, when his presence became a constant in my daily life.

A small treasure only I knew where to find, a hand I could always reach out to whenever I needed it. Someone who I could relax around, without any need of forceful formality framing my conduct into a mold. Someone who never once tried to take advantage of me, who never looked at me with neither false amicability to gain my favor nor forced manners hiding disdain at my position.

And yet, he wished to stay in Yokohama despite the risk, despite the fact that it was equal to signing a death sentence. And in my suffering upon his refusal, feeling betrayed by his very first harsh words towards me… I tried to impose my will upon him, only to be met with his very first reaction of anger. And in turn… I retaliated, uttering words I never should have spoken.

"… I admit I was foolish, nothing but regret do I harbor for my words on that day. However, it does not change the fact that only when being by me did Takeru restrain the wrathful id that had been sowed into his heart of hearts by the war. You, as one of his fellows, should know that well, Tsuhi."

"Please do not be upset, I am not intending to insult you. Simply put, I am certain that you are well aware that both of you cater to different sides of him, is all." And again, that small smile.

"Cease your prattling! Takeru never held her, no, anyone else in the same regard as me, even after our… dissidence on that day. Even if he no longer lives, do not forget you are speaking of a member of the Koubuin House. I shan't allow you to tarnish his memory with your vile lies."

"And do not forget you are speaking of my leader, the man who continued to protect your wishes for all of the '99. The man you are refusing to confirm if he yet lives. Furthermore, I seem to recall you had removed him from your house. Which is why he instead had a burgundy lotus on his-"

"Utter one more word and I'll have your head on a pike by morning." Short of receding, she yet again smiled.

"Hehehe… Do you still claim to be in the right mindset to face this conundrum, Yuuhi-sama?"

"… Whatever are you referring to?" Then, while never dulling her smile, placing a hand on her chest, she gave a short bow.

"Well, if the words of this humble servant are enough to bring forth such ire, whatever will you do in front of Kouzuki if and when you are required to have a talk with the woman? Whatever would you do should he require your embrace to regain his composure?"

"I… Uh, I would… Nothing the XO could say would compare to-"

"Takeru Shirogane is my special protegee, therefore he shall remain by my side." A frown ignited on me, only to cause her to giggle once more. "You two truly are so similar. It would seem he did whisper that same wrath into you, Yuuhi-sama."

"Utter no further balderdash. You have merely put me in a foul mood."

"You still should meditate on all possible outcomes, however. He is no longer here to express your ire for you, so I do understand the pressure you must feel by being forced to play the role of a docile and warm Shogun every single day of your life. And, as per his command, it is my duty to ensure you do not ever follow his footsteps." Taking a step back and bowing deeply to me, she remains in position. "Thus, please do take into account that Takeru might yet live, and what you will need to do to ensure his return."

"… Take your leave, and do not dare to mention those days ever again." Turning back to the window, I hear her first steps as she leaves my presence. Looking back after a moment, I heard the door and then the ensuing solitude of my chamber.

The gall… How dare she say such words… How dare she still insist on such… lies, on such provocations. Takeru only confided in that woman because he… he insisted on remaining behind. It is true I was undeservedly harsh towards him at the time, yet… yet she could never, in no way or form, replace what I was for him. She was nothing more than a confidant, nothing else.

I can only bring a hand to my forehead as I shake my head, all of my anger, or at least most of it, leaving me as if rows of candles all

drowned into ashes, sending my heart into a placid, dark, and regretful pondering.

"Sigh… How foolish of me, to become this adusted at her words. She is merely trying to spur me to act, to reignite my feelings for him so that I would try to confirm the man's identity." Ugh… Tsuhi always tends to act like this, and I always fall in her trap.

This time she went too far yet again. Maya should admonish her tomorrow, and well enough. As much as I appreciate Tsuhi's services, it would be the same as asking a bird to be pleased by living in a cage to have her act in any other way. After how the relation between our families crumbled, I should be grateful she still supports me despite the losses we suffered, even if I simply cannot stand the way in which she carries herself when she becomes upset.

"Still… Her words do carry some truth in them. I must not allow wrath to make nest within… And indeed, if I react towards her in this way, how will I face my daily endeavors or Kouzuki in due time?"

I sink into my bed, looking at the ceiling yet seeing something else entirely. Recalling all those distant days, when you visited, when we played together… What if… What if you're truly… alive…

However, how did he survive? That should be impossible, and it would make the man unable to truly be Takeru. And yet… And yet…

I curl to a side, hugging my forearms. Suddenly feeling cold, remembering his company yet no longer having it, I begin to rub my arms over and over.

"… I saw the readings… I saw the radar… He perished on that day. And that's… the truth."

Then, the tip of my nails begin to press themselves on my arms.

I have known this since many moons ago. They are all… merely being overwhelmed by emotion while facing someone who

resembles him much. That is all. It is only logical, I also would have been truly shocked to see a copycat of Takeru. And yet there is no way that such obvious blight would fool my eyes.

Descending to my elbows, small marking are left on my arms. Then my hands begin moving up, this time with more impulse on their pressure.

There's no way he survived… There's no way I abandoned him… I didn't… I didn't do such a thing… Takeru is dead… The sword… must be a well forged replica, he must have received footage of the Mugen Kidou…

By this point, my teeth were gritted as my arms reddened, as my hands raked them over and over as if they were a lush farm field. However, what spawns these tears comes from within.

To know his tastes… his gestures… and his piloting quirks… To… possess his face and display those same emotions…

"Sniff… What if… you truly were… still alive? But then… How were you taken from… Uh-Ugh… Hic… Who… took you away?"

… And, if it truly is you… I should send word to them posthaste so that they monitor him more closely from now on, to dispel this fog. Both to quell the hesitation they're displaying and my own disquiet. However, if he had survived… If it is truly you…

"… Then, I shall have you back home, regardless of the UN's consent."

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*Next Day . 10:12 AM*

*(Sim Room.)*

**[Takeru]**

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"Why didn't you follow the plan?!" Tapping her glasses, she fumes at Kei.

"Sure did, targets got shot down."

"Because you broke the formation. All of us were supposed to nullify one target each during this scenario." Making circles in the air again, she sighs.

"No point in following a flaky tactic." Her brows are twitching, she's trying hard to not snap.

"Oh, are you saying my plan was flawed somehow? Why didn't you say so when we debated how to approach the exercise then?"

"C-Come on, you two." Mikoto barely manages to wring out. "In the end, we passed the exercise, so let's keep-"

"Yoroi, you did not manage to perform at your best." Tapping her glasses, the frown does not fade away. "If this continues to happen, Ayamine's teammates will end up with far less points than they should. If you're seen as dead weight, your score will suffer the consequences."

"I wonder who is at fault…" And of course she'd retort like that.

"What? Are you implying I'm the one who made Yoroi under-perform just now? How selfish can you be…" Crossing her arms, her brows tense into a tight V.

Looking back, Tama was shivering a bit as she looked at them, then at the ground, then at me and Meiya, then at the Instructor, then at the ground again. Meiya sighed yet again, leaning on the rails, the onset of a frown also appearing in her face. And NotMarimo-chan doesn't have any intention to stop the fight, just as she did nothing when they dog piled on me.

Sigh… And the core issue behind this argument won't be solved with a few words, much less in this world.

"Maybe you should look in the mirror more often." Looking away, hand on her hip, her usual deadpan tone could set off a Jump Unit without much help now.

"Huh? Some of us aren't making the most out of the trainings because of your selfish maneuvers!"

"C-Chizuru-san, it's alright. I can make it up in the next run."

"Shouldn't have to. You did try to do the right thing." Kei says, giving her a nod.

"What are you even going on about? Ayamine, it was you who broke the formation and caused this to begin with. It's always the same in every single run we do." Shaking her head, she then rolls her eyes.

"If you had followed my lead, all of us could have scored well enough. You didn't, and forced Yoroi to do the same when she was about to follow up." She says, which makes Chizuru shoot a look at Mikoto.

"Um… You know, I did think that, maybe, it would be for the better to scatter at the clearing…" Holding her elbow, she looks to the ground, unable to hold Chizuru's gaze.

"Then, why didn't you say that before the exercise? We could have devised another plan." Tapping her glasses, fuming an eruption out of her lungs, she looks away too.

"Uh, well, it was because I thought the plan was fine."

"Huh? You just said you thought scattering would have been better."

"Yeah, but… well…"

"Well, which is it? What was your assessment of the exercise, then?" On normal circumstances, Chizuru's question would have been received as the curious, honest inquiry of a leader trying to learn. However…

"Ah, um, you know… I saw the enemy had a vantage point and, uh, thought that we should scatter…" Mikoto is terribad when it comes to putting her thoughts into words like that. She usually has problems doing that, so in such a tense situation it's obvious she'd just clamp up.

"And after that? How would you have proceeded?" Chizuru presses, Mikoto looks down.

"Uh, I… well…"

It's not just about her usual absentminded way of being. She, just like Kei and me when I had just begun, moves purely on instinct. For her, who is also dealing with the same issues of not finding her moment to talk, and so keeps avoiding getting involved in the thick of the debates while instead just popping in every now and then, finding the right words is going to be almost impossible under this mood.

If I had to guess, going by how she isn't even lifting her gaze from the ground, she'll choose to either shut up or ask for someone else's opinion. She still doesn't have the confidence to voice her own thoughts and to follow through on her own ideas.

"Can't win if you stick to the books, is what she's saying." Kei says, shrugging. Probably trying to shield Mikoto in her own way.

"Hmph." Chizuru crosses her arms, shooting Kei another glare. "Don't be ridiculous, we can't go into battle without a plan, and not communicating our opinions is only going to make things worse."

"I did. I told you to follow me, and that you were one breath too slow." Again, one of her brows twitch.

"And what part of that tells either me or her about how you wanted to proceed?" Kei just looks away, again remaining silent. Chizuru sighs yet again. "So Yoroi, in the end, what were your thoughts on how to move on after scattering?"

"… Well, uh, I didn't really… think it that far. Kei-san, what did you have in mind when you asked us to follow you?"

"Yoroi, I'm asking your opinion. Why did *you* think it was a good idea to break formation?"

"I… I've been telling you, I just thought it was… the right call in the moment."

Chizuru shakes her head, looking away as she closes her eyes. Mikoto's gaze sinks further in down to Kashgar as she scratches her neck, Kei remains as she was, brows down and posture stiff as hell.

And the ones keep rollin', and they don't stop comin'. Wish taking ten was an option right now, seems better than rolling this rigged dice.

Kei again says a one liner, Chizuru fumes about how they're both not making sense, Mikoto doesn't even try to talk anymore.

"Um…" Tama speaks up, looking back at us. "S-Shouldn't we do something?"

"Leave them be, Tamase." Tracing the rim of her fringe with a finger, Meiya's eyes narrow. "Halting the argument won't solve anything. It is they who must find a way to healthily communicate their issues with one another. We must have faith that they shan't allow this setback to hamper our collective efforts."

"Uh… Shirogane-san, what do you think?"

"Well, on one hand, Mitsurugi is right. They're not little kids anymore, and us stepping in and telling them what to do won't solve anything." Tama looks down, deflating like a blimp that sees that it's in the

range of the Lasers. "But, no way in hell we should just stand and watch."

"Huh? Then, what should we do?" Tama takes a step forward, regaining some color in her eyes.

"Shirogane, you should desist." Meiya says, arms folding. "Surely you know how they always have been like this. The probability of them reacting badly to your words is decidedly high."

"… And?" Looking away from her eyes, I scratch the back of my head.

"It would be most foolish to interject now of all times. We should give them some respite before we try to speak of the matter. As they are now, no words we could employ shall reach them."

"Cool, that's your opinion, Mitsurugi." One of her brows twitches. "But we're losing time, and since their problem is my problem too, I'm gonna take cards on the matter." Turning around, facing the Instructor, I can't take two steps before Meiya places herself in front of me.

"And what are you trying to accomplish by having the Instructor halt their discussion?"

"… Who said I'm going to stop their argument?"

"Huh? However, then, what are you planning to do? You should tell us what-"

"No, I don't think I will." Her lips pluck a bit, a finger begins to tap her forearm. "Because I know you're not gonna agree with me, Mitsurugi." One of her brows sinks down.

"Then, why follow through with this idea of yours?"

"Because they need a splash of cold water, and believe me when I tell you I know what I'm talking about."

"… Oh, is the water in your cell truly so cold, Shirogane-san?" Tama's tone got all creaky.

First, that's not what I was referring to. Second, don't give me those sad eyes, it's cheating. Third, thanks for worrying, sweetheart.

"It's just a manner of speech, Tama. Anyways, we can't just fold our hands and hope everything will just fix itself on its own. So, please move, Mitsurugi." Giving her a direct gaze, holding it for a second, she finally nods.

"If you're so determined, then do as you wish. However… What about our acco…" She looks down, then simply walks away.

"… What was Mitsurugi-san talking about?"

"It's nothing, Tama. Don't worry 'bout it." Smiling at her, I then turn to see that they're still going at it.

Mikoto trying to pacify them, Kei refusing to speak, and Chizuru still trying to get them to explain their thoughts in a way she can understand them.

If Kei hadn't given up on talking things through with her, all it would take is a 'You gotta be more flexible on the battlefield, because the targets will fight back in real life' from her to solve this mess. Though, if I go in and say it, Kei herself will get pissed off. She hates it when people either force her to do something or are telling her the same thing over and over again.

What makes this worse is that Chizuru is telling her she's making a miss when, in all fairness, the one making the biggest mistake is Chizuru herself. She's trying too hard to prove herself worthy, to make good plans, to make sure her outlined scenario fulfills an ideal outcome that she's missing the point of the training as she did in all past loops before the mock battles started. And since she's so dedicated to her tactics, people telling her 'do this or that' without an

explanation sets her off like nothing else. More so in this world, where she's more dedicated to the role of leader.

Just like when I bought stuff on impulse back in my world and she scolded me for not being responsible with my money. Luckily, she isn't admonishing Kei as badly as in my other loops, mainly not insisting on her being mistaken, but still, it will get to that point if nothing is done.

Kei needs to trust in Chizuru again, to drop whatever is making her retort in remarks and tell her, no layer of sarcasm involved, what she wants to do and why. Not being forced by anyone, Kei herself needs to be honest and speak her mind openly or this won't have any meaning. I think Chizuru is trying to be more patient, despite how pissed off she is, since she is still trying to talk things out with both of them, so maybe I could talk things out with her later… But Kei remains as the main issue, not only in her isolating stance but on her 'No Retreat' ideal.

… One needs to learn to let go of the script and trust in her gut, the other needs to begin to rely on her team and drop that almost suicidal way of fighting. So… They gotta face a situation… in which their original plan is busted and their wincon becomes survival. However, no way in hell the Instructor will let us advance in the exercises to the missions that would place them in such a scenario, so we gotta make do with what we have on hand… which are stock Fubukis that don't move unless it's to give chase if we retreat and also barely retaliate, if at all, or the slow moving targets that are barely an inconvenience.

So, there's only one thing that could get them out of this hole as of now… and I know this will come back to bite me in the ass later today, considering how long last night's fight took, but… I guess I don't lose anything by asking.

Looking away from the argument, I walk up to the Instructor, who rose a brow as I approached.

"… I'm not going to stop them, if that's what you're going to ask." Crossing her arms, she returns a narrowed gaze.

… Yes, I knew you wouldn't, NotMarimo-chan. No need to remind me.

"I have a suggestion to make if you'd allow me, Instructor."

"Hm? What is it?"

"Would you allow me to face off against both Sakaki and Ayamine in the simulator?"

"… And that would be beneficial to the squad because…"

I then tell her my idea, and what I needed her to help me with in the sim. Never letting go of my eyes, she groans a bit once I finish.

"… And, assuming I agree, do you truly think yourself able to fill the part?"

"Yes, Ma'am. For the squad to be commissioned, and for their own futures as well, they need to stop this bickering. But, as you can see…" I look back, they're still going at it. "… words alone won't do the trick. Could you allow this exception, Instructor?" Giving her a bow and remaining like that, she soon begins to chuckle. "Uh, Ma'am?"

"It would seem you're finally ready to take the training seriously, Shirogane." I don't like that smirk, but whatever hellish training she comes up with after this will be future me's problem. And those two… gotta step up, now. "Fine, I'll allow it." Then, she begins to walk towards the rest, taking her usual pose. "Squad! Line up!"

Meiya gave me a stare as I got to her side, seeming to want to say something but choosing not to at the last second. The rest also line up quickly, the shorter ones looking antsy as hell, the other two

pissed off but making an effort to restrain their mood, and failing miserably at it.

"Well, another exercise finished. No comment on this one." One of Chizuru's brow twitched, Mikoto's mouth barely opened to let out a small groan. "The next group will be Sakaki, Ayamine, Shirogane, in that order on the pods."

"Um, Instructor, what about-" Meiya's question was slashed in half by a silent stare from NotMarimo-chan.

"Come on, in the pods!"

Meiya still stared at me, arms folded and brows low. Both Tama and Mikoto gave us the antsy, worried gaze as we walked to the pods. Man, they look like I did whenever Yuuko-sensei dropped one of her crazy questions in her exams. Making a small smile, I give 'em a thumbs up. Mikoto seems taken aback, then Tama seems to tell her I had a plan or something which eases her tension, just a tiny bit.

… Meiya, however, remained with her arms tightly folded, tapping one of them with a finger, never letting me out of her sight. Sigh… I really tried to stay in good spirits around her today, but I know I should just mind my words. Though… for now, I have something else to focus on.

Looking away from the other three, I saw Chizuru and Kei sharing a sigh as they walked to the sims, getting in the pods.

Entering my sim and bolting myself to the seat as usual, the connection was started. However, unlike all the other times, a different message, colored in crimson, appeared in my view as the colors of the HUD shifted to a darker hue, as more and more windows and options appeared for a second as the sim changed its mode.

[LINK CONFIRMED - AGGRESSOR UNIT]

I think this is the very first time I play as an aggressor during my cadet course. I wonder if I can override their BGMs now? Sadly, I have no badass horse to use as a name for my unit… Oh, but one could say that I am a time diver, kinda. I'm even using an old model on the course to boot, despite the sim having me train with the config of a Fubuki. Thinking about it, my Shin Geki could be like what the Specter Type-R was for Gyriam Jaeger in the game.

Pfft! Hahaha, would be real cool if I actually was some sort of badass, S-Tier unit. Though, from the eyes of my squad, I might as well be one.

"Shirogane, can you hear me?" NotMarimo-chan's face zooms into the center of my view.

"… Loud and clear, Ma'am. All green on my end." I almost ended up lost in thought again there.

"Good. So, just to be clear, are you sure you want me to remove the automatic functions of the simulator?"

"Yes, I've been meaning to ask for permission, but didn't find the right moment."

"Sigh… Do remember that your final score will be reflected by all of your exercises. A poor performance will hurt your records. Also, manual controls can and will give you the full feedback of the unit, and that also applies to the shaking and vertigo. The images that will be projected when you perform high velocity maneuvers may either give you motion sickness or dizziness. And, of course, the aggressor configuration will also require your suit to enter the full load of the heightened feedback. Are you certain you wish also remove the auto-adjustments?"

"I am well aware of the conditions I'll be facing, Ma'am. And I have weighed my options, I believe I can handle it, more so if you allow me to use manual controls."

"Hm?" Arching a brow, she simply stares back in silence for a sec. "And, how exactly are you certain that you can handle this mission?"

"Well… There is some delay between the commands I input and the feedback, there's also the slight lag on the display. If my eyes didn't fail me, I have some frames of leeway to make some mistakes. And, not to boast or anything, but I am confident in my skill to face off against them by myself." Cue in Blaze Wars fading in aggressively.

… Not to joke again but, if I were a unit in a game, what would my BGM sound like? Oh, I know. I'll ask Kasumi to pick one for me from the songs in Oratory Tango next time we get to play.

The Instructor blinks a few times as she furrows her brows, leaving her mouth barely open.

"… Can you explain what do you mean regarding the frames?"

"Uh… Think of this as if it were a race where I can gain some seconds of advantage on the curves." She nods, making a short groan and placing a hand on her chin. "So long as I keep myself in check, so long as I listen to the car, I can exploit those seconds of advantage I get off the curves to extend my lead or break even."

"And this translates to TSF combat, in which way?"

"Sigh… There is some delay in the feedback we see, right? The inputs don't occur as fast as we press them, doesn't feel like it at least."

"Well, yes, that's true."

"So, since I more or less know which commands worsen or lessen the lag, and which are unaffected by it, I have an advantage over them, besides my own piloting skills. And so, by having no limits on the movements I can make, I have a wider set of options to choose from which will allow me to set the pace of my fighting as I go depending on how well I can take the unlocked feedback of the sim."

"I can see what you mean, however, what does this has to do with the manual controls? It isn't as if you were lacking options with the automatic support systems activated." She crosses her arms, raising a brow.

"Well, to be honest, the forced auto systems bother me a bit. My volleys are not arching as I want them to, they continue firing in a straight line, my auto-aim doesn't allow a target switch as fast as I'd like, and I can't move as I want to if the system prevents me from doing something it deems problematic." Really, I know easing people up in the learning curve is important, to grind the basics into our skulls and polish any unnecessary moves we might make otherwise, but this could use an overhaul.

Sure, I didn't get all hyper over Valgern-On in a single day, but the learning process was so much more smooth than our cadet course. Beginner mode alone covered what I'm asking of her with just a simple flick of an option. The XM3 can't get unveiled any faster. If only they had agreed to train with the consoles… Considering they're now in the open, I doubt we'd get to formally use them before we join the Valkyries.

"Hmm…" She smirks again, I don't like the gleam on her eyes. "One last question, do you think you'll be able to finish the day's trainings after this exercise?"

"Huh? Yeah, I mean, we don't have anything on the afternoon after all." What with Tama's dad coming over and…

… I just fucked up, didn't I?

"Shirogane, what do you mean by that?" Narrowed brows and eyes, the edge of a blade being released lingered on her words.

"Uh, you see… Sensei told me something serious was coming up and I wouldn't have to train on the afternoon… due to my punishment, that is."

"Sigh… Fair enough." Bullet: Dodged. "Fine, you can have your match on your rules. Show me if your ideas hold water, and if your ego translates to reality. However, if you fail to complete the exercise, I will not hesitate to give you a matching score. Are we clear? Good. So, you were wishing for their data link to be delayed?"

"Yes, if you could allow it. They need to see the importance of communicating on the go in a clear way, and halting the data link is the only way to force them to talk, for now."

"Alright, I'll play along this time. I am expecting a good show, Shirogane."

"Yes, Ma'am!" She cuts the connection, and I'm left waiting for the start of the run.

Sure, showing off will make Kei and Meiya more paranoid… but they need to get better, they can't waste their time with these arguments anymore. Also, if I'm being watched by the Guard, this might prove to them I don't fight like this world's me did at all, even if I try to use his sidesteps. But… their future is far more important than the risk of increasing my wanted level on the Royal Guard's black list yet again. And anyways, chances are they are still coming after my head, going by how Meiya again got all suspicious of me.

So… even if it's a bad call… Inhaling through my nose, filling my stomach with air as I lean back on the seat, I recite the poem Maya-sensei taught me within me as the rumbling of the sim begins to make itself known.

"… Time to flow into my enemies, with the might of an unending waterfall."

# A Mistake Worth Making

## Chapter 40: A Mistake Worth Making

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*November 29th. Around 10:30 AM.*

*(In a sim pod.)*

**[Kei]**

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Sigh… What have I done to deserve this shit? This is the third time in a row the Instructor puts me along the princess, and now with Special-kun too. Why isn't she saying anything? Why isn't she stepping in?

I'm not making a miss… If we followed her orders we would die in the field, and she just won't shut up about how we're mistaken. Easy to throw your comrades' lives away when you can just run away to Daddy's mansion.

The initial rumbling slows down as the scenery comes into view, yet another urban layout.

"01, all green. 04, 06, report your status."

"… 04, all green."

Still, I can't fail this training, and I don't wish to become a burden. But then, how on Earth do I make her understand? If I say anything, she gets all irritated. If the others do, she pressures them until they shut up. Some squad leader you are… We all are scoring good enough numbers, perhaps not when compared to the irregularity that is Special-kun but we're still doing remarkably well. Actually, she should be the one revising her stance. The military has to do all it can for its people, that also includes one's squadmates and

underlings. Yet, she still acts all high and mighty despite being the one with the worst numbers across the board. She's just like the idiots that blamed me after what Dad did, skull as thick as her eyebrows.

"06, report your status." She asks again.

And then… there's no answer.

"06, do you copy?" Some seconds pass, but he doesn't answer her calls.

"Should we call the Instructor?"

"Yes, just a second… Instructor, do you copy?"

…

Okay, now the Instructor is also missing? Maybe something came up? But then, her face zooms into view as usual.

"Were you calling, Sakaki?"

"Yes, Ma'am. We can't seem to reach 06's unit… And he is nowhere in sight."

"Don't worry, this is all part of the exercise." Smirking as always, she begins the briefing. "Now then, let's begin exercise C-2. You currently have a base behind you, guarded by some artillery and infantry units, that's in the middle of an evacuation." A blink in our radar shows us the location of the target we have to protect, located at the tail end of the map to our seven. We were somewhere close to the middle, near a highway. "A hostile TSF unit is closing in on your location, and you cannot allow them to reach the perimeter of the base. You are to stand your ground and subdue the aggressors. However, your data link's functionality shall be reduced, and your mapping won't be as fast as it should. Make sure you communicate

well between yourselves to clear this mission. As always, the goal is total annihilation of the hostiles."

"Roger." Still, this is weird. We didn't clear C-3, yet she's sending us to the next one… Well, this might be one last show of patience to force us to work together before punishments come out pouring.

"Understood. Instructor, what will 06's role be?"

"06 has been placed on a different location, and has to remain alone during his part of the mission. Said reason is why your data link is limited, so that neither he nor yourselves know where the others are. You have a few seconds before the mission starts to discuss strategies, that is all." And with a nod, she cuts the connection.

So she's sending him all on his own, to test his real abilities. This will be a nice way to see his true colors. While our sparring yesterday wasn't bad at all, and he did better than before, I still can't find a single weak point in his piloting. But… he didn't give us any advice as usual, and even kept some distance from Mitsurugi and me. Even asked us to ignore him… as I did when I got fed up with the princess.

No, I'm not wrong on this. He's too suspicious, too skilled to be a cadet. Closing my eyes for a moment, releasing some air as I hunch forward, I refocus on what's ahead. Can't involve myself with him, can't let my guard down.

"04, I think we should each take one side of the crossroad up ahead." The princess cuts into a corner of my vision, a small marking appears on my radar. "Most of the landscape to our twelve seems to be collapsed so any hostiles won't be able to get past it without jumping, and then we could snipe them. So, blocking the open highway seems like the most appropriate choice."

… For starters, it is. Until we see through the missing dots where Special-kun is on the mission, blocking that street is our best bet. However…

"I suggest that we stand behind the collapsed buildings further into the ruins, there is very little cover near the highway."

There's a clearing near our position, and big enough buildings and large lots full of rubble to each side of the highway both in front and behind us. Getting too close to that small clearing equals exposing ourselves unnecessarily, our rifles have plenty of range to deal with any hostiles rushing through it, and the extra space would give us ample time to react to any that jump through the toppled ruins.

"However, our data link will be hampered." She retorts, hand on her chin. "We might not be notified on some of them approaching through the ruins, and if we're focusing on the highway there's a possibility that we might miss some. I believe we should be closer, so that our radars locates their signals sooner."

"We can slowly approach the highway as we deal with the hostiles." Even in the case of a sudden rush with multiple enemies, we should have enough room to chase some if they happen to evade us somehow. Having more cover would be beneficial so that those enemies can't strike at us from a blank point.

"Acquiring intel on the enemy's position would be a priority in this situation, in my opinion. Also, neither of us can snipe as well as Tamase, so we should shorten the distance in case some sneak by us."

"We can chase them then." In this narrow space full of debris they won't be able to get near top speed, and if they jump they'll be sitting ducks in the air. No AI could match up Special-kun's deranged style, after all.

"What if the Instructor deems any hostile getting too close to the end of the map as an instant failure?"

"… Damn, didn't think of that."

She's got a point, all be damned. If the Instructor wants to, she can say we didn't cooperate well enough. She did say we couldn't let anyone reach 'the perimeter' of the base, so if we take too long during the chase we might fail this. And yes, neither of us got Tamase's sniping, and we don't know where Special-kun is, nor if he'll get close enough to lend a hand. And, if the hostiles go in the princess' direction, she ain't got the ability to hunt them down. She can't fly as precisely as I do, but also lacks the marksmanship of either Yoroi or Tamase to make up for that. And if there's a sudden rush of hostiles after she's forced to chase a stray enemy…

Sigh… For the sake of the training… For my own commission… At least we can't retreat on this exercise.

"Roger. I've no complains, let me take front point then."

"Huh?" Arching a brow, she taps her glasses. "Why would you take front point? Your long range is worse than mine."

"My CQC is better, I can rush the enemy while you cover me in case many come at us all at once."

"Don't be stupid, we have to operate close to each other. Especially in this mission, without our data link working well."

"What do we do if some slip by through the ruins?"

"We'll have enough time and space to give chase if we're near each other, since they'll have to jump through all those toppled buildings to do that."

… Not even considering the chance that they might strike at us from a blank point, huh. And no way in hell she'd be able to chase them down. I'll just listen to the radar and take out any enemies that try to break past us. No need to keep bashing my head against the wall.

"… Roger."

"Well, here's the positions I thought of." The radar shows two spots near the start of the clearing, quite some meters in between each of them, behind two of the few buildings that we could use as cover. "This gives us a good vantage point to attack the enemy while also letting us see far enough into the highway with our combined footage."

"Okay. Which side is mine?"

"You prefer the right one, so take it. Remember to use the comms to notify me of any changes you see."

Yes, I know you like being on top, princess. No need to remind me. Worst of this is, if she misses an enemy I'm too far away to try to snipe it from here. There's a goddamn building in the way and if I'm not careful I might end up taking the princess down if I try to get it on the small opening I'll have from there. And we also don't have a frontal view of the highway, so we might not see an incoming rush quickly enough.

Sigh… Don't have time to argue, just focus on doing what you can. As much as I dislike it, at least Special-kun is somewhere out there. For all I know, he might have been placed as a last line sweeper.

Before neither of us could say anything else, the green message appears on our view. The mission started, and wasting not a second I move forward, running through the rubble. Gotta conserve my fuel, in case a chase is required later.

The princess decided to jump instead, making it to our decided spot a few seconds before me. As I did, though, I saw the first few enemy signals pop up on my radar. Five enemies, two right behind each other on the right, the others lagging behind on the left.

Alright, I'll begin with a dash to gain momentum and suppress them with the 36mm, from there I can-

"Ayamine, take your position! The enemy is closing in already!"

"… I know." God damn it all.

Rifle out, fire angle locked. The enemy appears, heels on the pedals then I tap the trigger to send a short volley, and then do the same when the second one appears as I move back. Both of them neutralized, less than fifty 36mm used. Taking cover as they shot at me, the princess begins to attack then.

Shooting together at the rushing enemies while taking cover when necessary, we subdue the first wave. More than I thought would come, but we did have to go toe to toe against eight enemies at the end of Level D. Luckily, their response time is rather slow and we even have the aid of auto-aim for when we have to move back. Locking onto another target does take half a second, so just shooting is actually the better choice since the machine remembers the last angle I used to shoot at, added to the absolute lack of evasive maneuvers of the AI. Guess Special-kun was right about that, too. Maybe because he actually piloted a TSF before.

Bringing me back to the fight, more beeping comes in through the radar.

"What the…" Nine signals, all at once. Closer than the others were before when we noticed them. A rush so early in the mission? "01, hostiles located. Nine coming, first four coming on the left to your two through the ruins."

"Nine?! Dammit. Can you handle the highway?"

"Yeah."

Moving under cover, going to the left side of the building to get a good sight of the enemy, seeing the first two hostiles get shot down by the princess, I prep up a boost. As the hostiles rushed from the highway into my range, I again opened fire upon them, moving behind cover when necessary. As the radar updates, I see one is near me and getting closer. Readying a dagger on my free arm, crouching as I move out, a rush aimed at its cockpit drives the

dagger home. Lost the weapon but the enemy Fubuki was neutralized without me taking any damage. Sigh… All done here.

But once I saw the radar, there were five more signals coming our way.

"04, five more hostiles sighted. Prepare to engage again."

"Way ahead of you."

"Why, you… Here they come!" Don't need you to tell me.

Reverting to the 36mm, going back a few steps, more and more bullets are sent at the hostiles, that get shot down on the spot. Before the radar could tell us, another four come through the highway, trying to scatter as they dash away from us. Rushing out of cover, veering to the right, I try to spread my angle to not miss, but one of them had sent missiles my way, forcing me to move behind cover. And as I was re-aiming, the shock warning appears on my sight as my inputs cease to work. Damn… As soon as I got out of cover, one of them landed a hit on my feet, and I began to fall down onto a building, pretty much headbutting it face first. Just a scratch, no damage to the visor thankfully. Then, her face pops up in the left corner of my vision.

"I got hit. 04, can you still move?"

"No, they got me too. Let's chase them, no signals over the radar."

"Roger, let's hurry with this!" And for once, she isn't being a bother. It's gonna snow, dammit.

Diving my heels onto the pedals once the response comes back, the shaking increases as I suddenly shift to full march towards my fleeing target. Her dot on my radar was unmoving despite how she took off immediately once the shock time stopped, as I did. Looking at it, there's a three second lag in what's displayed.

Choosing to boost jump when I realized I wasn't gaining time on it, the distance between us finally begins to shorten.

Don't have time to waste, if too many come out now we won't be able to get them if they scatter. If this were a real mission, and she ends up surrounded… she would die, I would die, the base might get overrun. And I'm sure… this is nothing compared to what our armies had to do when that attack happened a few weeks ago.

"I won't let something like this bring me down…"

Boosting again while leaving my feet firmly planted on the pedals, the Fubuki finally enters my sight again. It's running instead of boosting… probably because it should conserve fuel to escape after attacking the base. Shaving the distance, the hostile stops in its track as it turns around, readying its rifle. Not giving it enough time to properly aim, switching to 120mm, then flickering the trigger once more with a vengeance, another volley comes out and the hostile is shot down.

Sigh… Thank the Emperor it didn't get near the cramped part of the ruins, or that it didn't have time to shoot. Worse, if it had boost jumped, I would have made us lose. Alright, let's return. Radar shows nothing, but I shouldn't count on it.

"04, stray neutralized. How's the situation?"

"01, I just shot down my target as well. Let's return to the highway."

I nod to the projection, shutting it off later.

Again activating a boost, jumping above the nearby buildings and rubble lots, I quickly return to our prior position. However, I don't return to the spot she chose. Circling to the place I had thought of before, crouching in between some broken down buildings in front of a small amount of rubble, I take aim at the highway.

The enemy's goal is clear, split us up. Wouldn't surprise me if another rush was coming our way, so we need space to not end up shooting at point-blank, we might get taken out otherwise. If another rush comes right after this, and I have to give chase again, I might not make it in time to suppress the enemy. Hell, the princess might not make it back before the next ones come here, her target ended up farther away than mine after all. Worse, they might stop using the highway altogether and force us to separate to then gang up on us. Better take these next ones from a safe distance and then get some breathing room to see where the next ones come from.

Prepping the 120mm, the radar beeps, just two signals.

"04, two hostiles sighted."

"01, roger that. I'm getting close and… Wait, why aren't you by the highway?"

"Risk of taking a hit at point-blank, can't take that if you're not here."

"That's… No, good call. I'm almost there."

Wow, she didn't begin to scream? Shit, a blizzard is on the horizon. Heh… Well, a Fubuki *is* coming towards me, actually.

Looking back forward as I grin, said hostile Fubuki comes through the highway, running with its guns blazing. Too bad you can't hit me from that far away by simply spraying your shots around. Not fast enough for me to miss, nothing like Special-kun or Yoroi, trigger pulled and down it goes. The other again tried to break through the ruins, to make a run for it, but I had enough time to lock onto it, move out to intercept and take it down in between the streets. Didn't even have to give chase, I knew this spot was the best pick.

"04, both targets down." Her face again appears in a corner of my vision, this time her brows were down and arched very, very hard.

"Good work. I'm right around the corner, how's the situation?"

"Both targets shot down. And… nothing on the radar." She is almost here, so I guess I'll just return on foot to my cover. Turning around, stepping on the pedals with just a bit of impulse, I jog my way to the buildings.

"Stay on your guard, we don't know when the enemy will appear." Sigh… I know.

"By the way, I noticed the radar takes three seconds to update when you left."

"Oh, really? Good work, 04." It's gonna rain icebergs, I tell you. "I can see the highway already, any updates?"

I look over the radar, that was blank three seconds ago, as I bring my unit to a halt.

But then, the image displayed a singular dot in the highway, almost to our end of it actually.

But… But the enemies so far didn't move that-

**Beep!**

For just a second, as I turned around, I saw the figure of the Fubuki as it flew right through the open space of the clearing. Locking my barrel onto it, my shot missed. Once its feet touched the ground it again jumped, wasting no time and in a fluid movement as if it were dancing a ballet, taking cover behind the buildings we were behind before while dodging all of my shots. Then, it sent a volley my way, tumbling my Fubuki down. Light damage to the outer armor of my left foot, dammit!

"01, a single enemy sighted! It's- Tch, damn." Forced to crouch and hide behind a cover to avoid its heat, the radar shows me the hostile again began to advance as I did.

Looking out from my position, I saw it flying about for a second before it landed behind some buildings, out of my sight.

"04, where's the enemy?!"

"Got past me, landed on a street to your Five. Giving chase now."

"Wait, leave it to- Woah!" Her face tightened, gritting her teeth.

So the runaway ran into her, huh. Good enough, we'll regroup after taking it down, so unless there's another rush we should be able to manage. No other signals on the radar… I could leave it to the princess… But if more of those come out, I can't hold five or so by myself if all of them boost jump in different directions.

"01, currently engaging. Can't seem to pin it down."

Sigh… If it wasn't because it caught me by surprise, I wouldn't have let it slip. One alone is not a threat to me. Shows how good she truly is. The radar changes, showing me their positions. She's… actually getting driven back? What the hell, squad leader. Much lip, little skill.

"04, I've located you. Coming in to your Three."

"Got it, I'll distract it to let you strike from behind then. Just hurry it up!"

Thank the Heavens she's cooperating, even if we're gonna swim in snow the next few weeks. As my Fubuki runs through the broken streets in between the buildings, I caught sight of the radar as it updated. The hostile is in a clearing, not letting the princess move out from her cover.

… But wait, why would a hostile AI do this? If their mission is to reach the base, it should have tried to run away as soon as she couldn't retaliate, like the others did until now. After all, all the enemies we've faced before don't stay to fight when the mission entails defending a perimeter.

Then… Why is this one acting differently?

Three seconds passed, the radar was updated as I was almost to the clearing in the ruins, taking a corner to reach their position and seeing the back of the enemy Fubuki. And wasting not a second, the hostile turned around. Pointing its rifle right at me, making me bite my lips as I yank the controls.

"Damn it!" Moving sharply to my left, the increased shaking tells me that shot just grazed me. "01, this is no ordinary hostile. It noticed me and attacked in less than a second."

"What? I thought it was just my imagination when he engaged me…"

So you saw it and said nothing? No, now's not the time. Where is that-

"The target is fleeing!" And again, doesn't seem like it's running either. Triggering the boosters, pushing the controls a tad bit too strongly, I begin to make consecutive jumps to get closer to it. "I'll take care of this one, you return to the highway."

"Don't be foolish, you can't take that one out by yourself."

Heh, tell your pride to get down from the pony. My reflexes aren't as bad as-

Looking forward once I landed, the warm end of a rifle was pointed at me on the corner of my sight.

"Guh!" Feeling my elbow hit my ribs, the edge of the seat sinking into the back of my knees, instinct takes over as I jolt the controllers to move back.

Dammit, again just barely managed to dodge it. And by jumping away from it, again. Doesn't matter, I'll take it out with the next shot. Like I always did with the other hostiles up until now. Getting out of

cover, my trigger finger ready to shoot, the first thing I see… is a sword coming down onto my head.

Barely pulling away to avoid it, the follow up forces me to backboost for the first time since I started my piloting training, all to barely escape the edge that creates a blizzard of concrete and a deafening sound burst as a building is shredded down, prey to the onslaught of the hostile.

And through the rubble, through the dust… the green light of the enemy Fubuki's visor was there, staring right back at me and getting closer.

"Damn… But I've got you at point-blank. Now you're gonna bite it." I shoot, confident that it will be enough to take it down at this distance.

But, somehow, it brought its blade to its body, covering my shoots with it. Moving forward once more, bringing its blade above its shoulder, again all I can do is backboost away as it eviscerates another building.

Damn… That trick won't work twice on me, though. I'll just shower you with a few 120mm, let's see you block this with a sword.

"04, pull back! Let's pincer it toge-"

"Shut it, I can take it down."

I won't retreat. If this were a real mission, if real lives were at stake… we should subdue such a threat immediately!

I open fire again, this time not lifting my finger. Don't care how many bullets it takes, this one's going down. We're wasting too much time as it is.

With this it should… should be… enough… Huh?

It didn't move left. It didn't move right. It didn't backboost or use its sword to block my shots.

It jumped forward, looking more like a short hop, avoiding my firing line altogether. And raising its blade, I saw it would also tear me down as it did to those buildings as soon as it landed. Biting my lips as my tongue sinks down, clawing at the controls, and not because of the intense shaking, backboosting is all I can do. Again.

Landing with a feet forward, using the momentum of the jump to do an upwards slash, my pressure on the pedals is not going to let me avoid this. As I gritted my teeth, the hostile suddenly froze over in its stride, letting me get around a corner to catch my breath.

"04, I told you to pull back! I barely managed to cover you!"

"… My bad."

I ran away. Again. But… But that reckless attack pattern…

"Damn, I'm getting pinned down again. Did you sustain any damage?"

"No…" The radar gets updated, the hostile is in the middle of a street. The princess is on a corner diagonally from my position.

"Let's coordinate an assault on this one, we can't leave the highway undefended for so long."

"… Wait, let me try something first."

"Huh? This isn't time for any selfish maneuvers!"

"I'm not going to move, just give me a second."

"Ayamine, now's not the time to-"

Tapping the button, I open the common channel. Which should be useless during sim training… unless you're fighting against someone else.

Those sharp moves, the way in which he always jumps forward to close the distance with his enemies… If this isn't him, then it's an AI loaded with this moves. And while he might have been placed on the other end of the map with the same mission as us, I don't see the Instructor sending someone on a solitary mission like that. If she wanted us alone to do another run as a punishment or a test, she wouldn't have called him.

"So, seems like you got a nice role to play in the mission, Special-kun."

"Huh? What are you saying?" She sighs, shaking her head. "Come on, 04. There's no way that's-"

"Ah, goddammit. You had to go and spoil the fun." That same complaining tone as when he had just gotten here, couldn't help but to purse my lips.

"Huh?! Shirogane-kun?!" Eyes wide, mouth as well, she seemed to not believe it.

"Oh, well. No point in hiding it. I was given the role of your enemy for this mission. Nice eyes, Ayamine."

"… So, what was up with those moves?" They were better than usual. He never… cornered me in such a way. I never… shivered by seeing the green glint of an opposing Fubuki as it chased me. To think I ran away instead of retaliating… "Seems like you've been hiding your best cards from us. Bad Special-kun."

"Ayamine, this isn't the time! We're in the middle of-"

"Nah, it's cool. She's right, though. Sigh… I am doing my best right now." He groans a bit, his voice sounds… exhausted, drained.

"Really? Because you're fighting two on one?" The princess asks.

"Or because he thought we wouldn't notice." She groans as I say it, but he speaks up before she can.

"Well, can't exactly take it easy against you two. But hey, most of my work here is done already, so might as well enjoy this early mock battle we have going on here." His voice again full of cheer, of the fake variety since he's clearly tired, Special-kun chuckles a bit afterwards.

As I wondered what the hell he meant by that, the radar let out a beep as it updated.

Revealing over ten signals coming from the highway, rushing towards the base.

---

*Some odd minutes afterwards.*

*(On a hallway near the sim room.)*

**[Mana]**

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Mumbling and whispers filled the simulation room, yet all eyes were unmistakably gazing at the same monitor. While the performance of both young women was acceptable, it paled in comparison to the dexterity and finesse in which the male of the group commanded its virtual machine. A few pilots were gambling on whose side would emerge victorious, eliciting a small cheering from certain sectors towards either the females or the lone male as they continued to spar.

… And yet, in no way could I possibly believe what my eyes see now. It would be no jape to say I am petrified on the spot, as if my arms had been molded into my stomach, aware of my inhaling through my nose despite how tightly my throat is closing up at what I am seeing.

It isn't the same, not in its intent at the least, yet the similarities… are too large to ignore. More conscious footing, sharper cornering and jumps, barely no wasted movement in any of its attacks, and… a most polished control of the jump units that would leave anyone thinking the man is truly deserving of the darker suit he endows for his training.

However… It is less rash, impulsive, and far more aware of its surroundings. Takeru-sama tended to abuse its machines much, gaining the animosity of all of our mechanics in doing so, as he preferred to remain as close to top speed as possible while somehow managing to not crash as he did so. He truly was addicted to the element-based line-piercing doctrine Amato devised. And yet, despite being alone in this fight, he only ever uses a complete boost at the last moment, or sometimes even at random just to throw off his squadmates' offensive. Halting the advance of both of them at the same time, in spite of some… remarkably odd movements on his end, there is no mistake left in my eyes.

This is person… is none other than our Takeru. Even if its adusted impulse has been diminished, that most eccentric movement pattern is his no doubt. Then… Then, he truly was… alive? How on the Heavens could anyone replicate to this level of detail his piloting, if this isn't him? It is hard to imagine, when his fellows in training or even his Instructors were left lacking of all words when in front of his ways.

Sigh… You always were such a reckless boy… Even now, fighting on your own while relying on sharp dodges as opposed to taking cover… You never enjoyed using the shield, after all. Biting softly the inner side of my lips, I repress a smile. Finally exhaling heavily, my back allows itself to lean onto the frame of the wall.

"… It truly is a wonder."

"Indeed it is." Kamiyo says, yet with hostility permeating her tone. "What a parade. The man is flaunting his position as a commissioned pilot openly, and the fools are cheering on him."

Looking back at her, one of her hands was coiled hard enough to crush a rock, if one had been within its grasp.

"It is nothing but a cavalcade of clowns, what did you expect?" Tomoe says, shrugging. "However, at the least we now know our suspicions were spot on."

"That is true." Ebisu nods, taking a step closer. "Mana-sama, should we report this to the Great General? It is obvious the man should be detained, all things considered."

"And since when you are the one who decides what we do? Remember that we cannot act at our leisure in this base, even less after being appointed by her as the eyes of these testings we've been taking part in." Narrowing my eyes, she makes a sudden bow.

"Apologies, Mana-sama. However, in light of what we're seeing, I believe a report would be welcomed. There is no need to leave such a dangerous element near Meiya-sama overlong."

"I do agree with her." Kamiyo nods, then also bowing down. Tomoe follows suit. "While it is true we have no choice but to bow down and allow the UN to treat us as their mooks, we should not let this matter rest in my opinion. The damn American was in possession of a katana, and now we know of his true skills. We, as the servants of the House of the Shogun, should act to apprehend this-"

"Any further repining shall be reported to Her Highness." Freezing up, the trio simply bows down again. "You should know we cannot act by force. We're not some barbaric buffoons, we are the Royal Guard. And as my underlings, I am expecting you to measure up to the honor befitting the title you possess."

"Apologies, Mana-sama!"

"Sigh… Not so loud." And again, they bow down. While I am pleased with them as my fellows, and that they always listen to my words, from time to time I can't help but to wish they were slightly less noisy

in their loyalty. "In any case, you do have a point. Enough woolgathering, a report is in order. Ebisu, remain here watching over Meiya-sama and do not, unless it is an emergency, approach the man. Have your communicator at the ready if anything that requiered my attention were to ocurr." Again narrowing my eyes, she stands upright and salutes me. "Then, let us go."

Taking one last look at the monitor, at Meiya-sama as her stare was transfixed onto it as well, I briskly walk away from the simulation room.

… So you're alive? Is it truly you? If so, then…

How were you taken from us? Who plotted such a thing? And… Does that vixen fox know of your true identity?

Otherwise, despite the discussions regarding the blade, despite Chief Yoroi's warnings, despite how detrimental to her relation with the Guard it is to not hand over the man and instead have to negotiate herself…

Why would she so stoutly deny us the chance to speak with you? Why erect such a wall over your person? For that woman to do such a thing…

Biting my lips, feeling my boots repine as their grip on the floor loosened once I picked up my pace, a frown expanded on my face despite my efforts.

… For this equals that she sees you as an important piece, which would mean…

She knows something about your identity, however small that knowledge may be. And if not, then she plans to make you into her pawn, to truly make you into her bodyguard.

… And I'd rather face damnation as we did during the '99 than see that come to pass.

"Mana-sama, please wait for us!" Kamiyo repines, her voice sounding out of breath.

"I believe you were the one who was wishing to make a report? Then, make haste. Time is of essence, after all." Descending the stairs without slowing down, the sounds of their hastened steps soon follow.

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*At the same time.*

*(Sim Pod.)*

**[Kei]**

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Volley to the left, he dances away from it. Retaliating with his own, an ember scratches my left arm. Orange numbers, two more hits and its dead. Pressing the tip of my tongue against the base of the inner side of my teeth, my heels sink into the pedals. Veering left, I spray him with more bullets. Special-kun dodges them, but I manage to hit one of the AI hostiles that was behind.

"04, move back!" She shouts, the radar updating as she moved forward.

That I do, and she sends a few 120mm and manages to neutralize another AI Fubuki. And not a second later, she has to run away as Special-kun almost introduced her to the sharp end of his sword.

I move forward and firing immediately, but he jumps away, into a building as if it were a trampoline, and if it weren't for the princess' covering fire I would have been the one introduced to his sword just now.

"Damn it all… Can't chase the hostiles…. Can't take him down…"

I thought he was commissioned, that he had experience, but this is just asinine. He isn't even using a shield! And he's just dodging our shots as if it were effortless…

He said… He once said that, since the auto-correction in the aim systems would remember the last angle the TSF fires at, taking a second to truly look at the target would make a difference in our results. Taking a single second to truly look at where you have to aim, that's the advice he gave us before things went south between us.

But… while that applies to stationary defense, if you're constantly on the move then not only you need to readjust your target, you practically have to align both the maneuver and the shots you fire. Such coordination while using a manual configuration… to make such precise and fine movements, to dodge our heat, and almost always hit the mark despite the constant shift in his position at the speed he moves…

"Forget being a commissioned soldier, you're a monster." Can't help but to complain as he again forces us to move away after another failed attempt at doing even some little damage to his unit.

Piloting a TSF is already complex as it is, but to instead take manual control of the machine to this extent? Was this… what you always were aiming at? My lips tremble as he again takes a sidestep to my left, the arms of his Fubuki moving slightly up as its torso shifts its weight back. My bullets, that were aimed at his upper body, move under its elbows as the arms raise, the edge of the blade now facing out and moving to the left. His Fubuki making the battle pose he always makes when sparring with Mitsurugi, the coming slash losing no momentum.

You're telling me… you're seeing through my moves with such ease? To dodge point-blank fire… and prep up a counter in the same move? Hands shaking, mouth wide open, stare is all I can do. I… He knew I would spray my shots, instead of aiming at his feet. He was

jumping like mad all this time… banking on this chance to take me out?

At the last second, it had to do a backboost.

"04, you have to pull back! I'm almost out of 120mm!" Her face appears in a corner of my vision, those thick brows arched.

Barely putting force on my pedals, I again… I again run away. As he gave us a breather, I looked at my radar and he wasn't moving.

A few hostiles broke through, but we can't move carelessly because he'll take us out if we try to rush. Once those AI get to the base, we will fail the exercise. He'll win this time, again.

Suddenly gritting my teeth, shifting my hold on the controls, I inhale sharply to fill my lungs. I'm going to take you out. Don't think you can ridicule us like this…

"04, how are you holding up?" Her face zooms in, tone also exhausted.

"… Arms in orange, fuel at half. No more 120mm, around 500 36mm left."

"… I'm not much better, to be honest." Closing her eyes, she sighs really heavily. Seeming to be biting the edge of her lips, she then shakes her head. "I… I propose that we should… retreat to a safer position while we deal with the rest of the hostiles."

…

"… You're planning to run away?"

"It's a… strategic retreat." Grimacing as she said it, she then sighed. "We need to neutralize those other Fubukis or we will fail this mission. And we can't stay near 06 or we risk being taken out. If either of us falls, this mission ends in failure."

"… Then, you go back."

"04, now's not the time. We both should-"

"You should go take care of the AI, don't think they'd give you trouble. I'll self-destruct my unit to off Special-kun from this mission."

"That's too risky. We should both take a vantage point to neutralize him after we regroup closer to the base." Furrowing her brows, her tone rose in complain.

"… We're wasting time. Go and run away already." Hitting the pedals, I boost towards Special-kun.

"Ayamine! Stop it, we should-" Ignoring her, the radar guides me to his position.

But, why isn't he moving? Heh, thinking to give us some advantage, hmm? Damn it, Special-kun.

Rushing through the broken streets, I make visual contact with him. Quickly sending a volley his way, the Fubuki crouches down as my bullets tickle its head.

Huh? He didn't… move or jump? Maybe his radar didn't update fast enough to notice me.

Boosting forward as I shoot short volleys, he again sends a few well timed shots my way. But he's slowing down, I can actually dodge his attacks now all by myself. I can do this!

We trade paint with the buildings' rooftops as we move while shooting at each other, painting the simulated streets with Fubuki footsteps, evading the other's heat.

"Haa… I'll be damned." He speaks over the common channel, still sounding tired. All those maneuvers had a cost, after all. "You're getting good."

"Look down on me and you'll pay."

"No one's looking down on you. Just… Sigh… Surprised to see you holding up so well on your own."… Why does he sound happy? Making fun of me? "So, what's the plan? Pincer me as you play decoy?"

"… I'm plenty enough to take care of you." Crouching and moving forward, I shoot at his feet, forcing him to glide away.

Entering a sudden boost to not miss the window where his rifle can't aim at me in the ground, I rush at him as I leave the boosters activated. Once the boosters go off, we'll both explode. With this, you'll be removed from the board!

Tackling him in full force as my arms grapple his arm joints to halt his attacks, the jump units begin to overheat. Holding my breath tight as the shaking intensifies, buckling my knees and hips down to not let go of the pedals, I let out a groan as my arm extends even more to push the controllers all the way forward, keeping my arms locked onto his arms with all I have.

However… Suddenly, for some reason, my machine ends up on top of his.

… He let a single foot slip as he bent backwards, and then activated a single jump unit. Spinning around, Special-kun took measures to bury me into a building as we both crashed. The increased shaking was too much, making me dizzy for a second, and my feet slipped from the pedals.

"Damn it all…" I couldn't self-destruct… My fuel… is getting low. I can do it one more time… but now I don't have the surprise factor anymore… Ugh… My head hurts a lot.

Yanking the controls and stomping on the pedals, I bring my Fubuki on its feet once more. He did too, and we stood close by, sizing up the other.

"You're one nimble bastard, Special-kun." I've got a newfound respect for you now. Quick thinking, sublime piloting, I wonder if there is something you don't have. If it weren't for his age and lame jokes… I'd say he's a vet.

"… What was the deal with that?" He asks, his voice making me shiver for a second. Dry, rough, somewhat upset. Heh, he's mad I almost took him out.

"Thought to self-destruct, since you're one tough obstacle."

"And why? Sakaki is still nearby, and the rest of the hostiles aren't down yet."

"I just said why. As things stand, you're the biggest hurdle to overcome. If this was a real mission, I doubt we could take you down without suffering casualties."

"… You still have your partner here, why would you choose self-destructing as the first option?"

"Because that's all a dead soldier can do."

If this was a real fight, I'd have a foot in the grave. All I can do is take you down with me to cut the losses of my forces. That's all I can do, I refuse to retreat and allow such a dangerous pilot close to my base.

"… Don't give me that bullshit."

"Huh? Did you…" Did he just call me plans bullshit? How dare he… Wait he's angry? I… I think this is a first.

"All a dead soldier can do my ass… Don't you give me that excuse."

"It's not an excuse." I ready my rifle again. "It's the most cost effective way to-"

In the blink of an eye, his Fubuki lunged at me. Looks like he was warming up his jump units. Barely able to dodge the slash, I can't

reposition as it quickly turns after me, shaving the pavement with the tip of his blade, as if sharpening it against the concrete and making sparks fly off, sending a rising slash at me.

That was… faster than before. And… he aimed at my cockpit this time. All the times before he was aiming at my arms or shoulders… What the hell is wrong with him?

"Don't give me that bullshit, Ayamine." Again coming after me, now with his rifle out as well, his voice sounds hoarse as if he were restraining a shout. "Your goal is to protect the base. Dying doesn't accomplish that."

"It takes you out of the equation, so it does plenty enough." Crouching to avoid a 120mm, he's forced to jump to avoid a hit to his feet.

"You're just giving up on the mission by choosing to die now!"

"No, because I'm doing all I can for my comrades and my base."

"And what about their lives?! Nothing guarantees they are safe."

"You'd be down, and that's enough to-"

"No, it isn't!" This time shouting in true anger, he jumped over the buildings separating us, starting a boost at the height of his jump.

Looking as if he were about to do air jousting, if I hadn't been on the move already I wouldn't have been able to avoid his attack. Couldn't even react to it, it was… simply too fast. Piercing through another building as I dodged, and quickly scattering the dust and crumbling concrete by swinging his blade around, it's as if I had been frozen in place after seeing the sheer speed and aggressiveness of his move. If that had connected… Finally, hands, shoulders, lips, even my knees shake for a moment.

How the hell did he do that? How did he came up with that move? He's a monster… To move with such precision even at top speed… To manage to not crash at that speed despite missing his target…

"Hear me well, Ayamine." I twitched at his tone, unlike anything I've ever heard from him. Sounding as if he were talking over clenched teeth, almost managing not to snap. His Fubuki turned around and pointed its blade at me. "Suicide is the last option. You choose that when abso-fucking-lutely you don't have another path available."

"… Not like I have much cards against a monster like you."

"Then, tell me. If the military has to do all it can for the people it protects, why are you abandoning them?"

"What did you say?! I'm… I'm not abandoning anyone! I'm removing the most dangerous target on the field." I fire another volley, he crouches and shaves the distance between us.

When I thought I was done for, he punched my cockpit instead of going for a slash. Damn, lost the grip on my rifle! Why didn't he knock me out?

"No, you're giving up. That's why you're choosing death instead of fighting until you've no other choice!"

"Shut up! This is all I can do now, I can't beat you in a one-on-one fight so this is the best course of action I have!" And I won't retreat. I'm not a traitor… I'm not like them… This is all I can do, don't talk so high and mighty as if you knew what it is to be in my shoes.

"… One person once told me that staying alive was the best thing a soldier could do."

"Huh?" His tone eased up all of a sudden, giving me time to stand up and locate the rifle I had lost.

"Once you're dead, you can't save anyone. It doesn't matter if others call you a coward or whatever, staying alive and fighting on is something that someone has to do. If you enter a fight thinking that you can only make yourself useful by self-destructing, you're about as good as a loose frag grenade."

"… Don't talk down to me. This is all I can do. I tried everything and nothing worked!"

"Then, why not try working with Sakaki instead of acting on your own?" Finally moving forward once I dashed towards my rifle, he kicks it away. Tackling his Fubuki, I sprint forward and recover my gun.

"I won't retreat, never. This is how I fight."

"… Don't fuck with me, you gotta know that stance is the same as asking to be killed."

"It's how I do things, deal with it."

"… So when things don't go your way, you place your pride above the rest and choose to just blow everything up?" Again talking through clenched teeth, his words froze me in place. "What about the people that placed their trust in you? What about your comrades? How do you think they'd feel when they see you exploding your everything away?!"

"I… I… What? I… I'm not doing that."

"Yes, you are! You always do! You just shut up and let your relation with the squad implode instead of taking the steps to talk your issues out with them! Shutting up and doing your thing without a care… You have to know you can't go on like this, dammit!"

… Huh? I… do what I want without a care? No, that's not it… But… When I can't take the loss, I shut in and do what I want? I… let everything explode?

His face flashed before my eyes, both when he was with me back home and the last time I saw him, during the execution. Traitor, American supporter, military scum, the names he was given were many. But all despised him for the same reason.

Dad killed the people that didn't agree with his ways at the last mission. That's why… we lost so many of our men, why the UN took so much damage. It is true many civilians managed to be evacuated due to how he refused to buckle from his position from what I heard… But… But… I'm doing the same? I'm the same as him?

My hands begin to shake, I hunch over.

No… I've been making an effort… to not be a traitor, to follow the rules as best as I'm able… But if I had retreated, we could have offed the other AI hostiles, and then it would have been a matter of keeping Special-kun quiet. But then…

My eyes and mouth open wide as the realization hits me.

I screwed up? I… If the mission fails, I… I got the princess and the base killed. Because I… placed my pride above them? Because I acted like he did? I… acted like Father did, all those years ago. But I… I always….

"Ah… No… You're wrong, I didn't…"

His Fubuki takes one step towards me.

"You did." He said, a bit calmer now. "And you shouldn't assume that's the only way forward."

"… What do you know? What the hell do you know?!"

"That to keep struggling isn't pointless. And believe it or not, I'm sure that at the very least me, Tama and Mikoto would welcome you being more honest with open arms. You're not fighting alone here."

"… The end goal of a surface pilot… is to enter a Hive. There's no retreat… in the battlefield against the BETA, there's no retreat."

"You know that's not true, the war would have been over if that was the only choice left for us."

"I… I'm not a traitor. I won't retreat." If I do… it's back to those days… What do you know? You can fly back to America any time you want, don't you?

"… So what if people call you names?" Again angry, his Fubuki took another step closer. "So what if the odds are against you? So what if you're not good enough? Who the hell decided that you have no choice but to lay your life down like that?!"

"T-That's the way it is with the war, there's no option left for- D-Dammit!" Yanking the controls, I barely dodge his slash.

"Wrong!" He sends another wide slash, leaving me with no choice to backboost away from his flurry. "When you give up, that's when you're truly out of options. Keep struggling on, until you find a better solution!" Wasting a second, I take out my sword and we begin to trade blows.

"And what about the ones that can't find a solution?! What about all the fallen to the war?!" Come on, mister American! I'm sure you know all about it!

"You honor their sacrifice by making the most out of your life, so that when death comes knocking you don't leave a mess behind."

"And what if you don't get the choice? Pretty sure the high-ups won't hesitate to use us as meat shields." The mission was to stand our ground, no matter what. While the Instructor hasn't chimed in so far… that wouldn't happen in the field, we would have been forced to remain in place.

"Don't shield yourself behind excuses! Plenty of people die without having a say in the matter every day, but we are different. We, as soldiers, are given the choice of how to die once we enter the battlefield. Be it prey to fear, to an accident, or to protect someone. But what you're doing is none of them, since you assume from the get go that dying is all you can do, all you're doing is looking for a place to die. Will you just choose to explode at the very first sign of danger, then?!"

"Don't mock me! Then, what can I do? What if I don't have a choice?!"

"So what if you don't?!" This time his shriek was… guttural, pained. The slash that came with it forced my hands to push the controls as hard as I could to not bend under the recoil and shaking. "There's a difference between a sacrifice and a suicide. And if you keep thinking that your only last resort is the red self-destruct button, then you'll only become the latter. If you don't struggle to find a way to victory, a way to bring you and your comrades alive from the battle, you're just a loose cannon." Sending a kick my way, my legs brought to red numbers, I barely manage to not fall back.

"… What's the point? If we die anyways… Might as well take some of 'em down with me. Why struggle if the result is the same?" It's just like when I tried to reach out to the squad. Those same eyes… the silence as people spoke behind my back… Why even bother?

"… Struggling in itself is meaningless, yeah." Calming down and sighing, he gives me a breather in his assault. "When faced with the situation you described, when you're just a meat shield," For a second, his voice sounded as disgusted as I've never heard someone be, "whether you die as a pig or bravely fighting to the end doesn't matter. But you know what? Even if the act is meaningless, we can give it a meaning of our own."

"… Huh?"

"Leaving the big picture out, fighting to live your life is a valid goal to have. And even when you think you've no choice but to die, maybe you should take a look around first. Maybe your presence inspired people to fight harder, maybe your comrades were closer to lend a hand than you thought if you had looked around instead of at the red button. And for all you know…" Then, his voice creaked as his swings became less fierce, allowing me to parry them without crippling my wrists. "… maybe someone could have needed your company when shit hit the fan at a latter point."

"T-That's… I don't really… think that's true, I don't really fit in anywhere." Tamase has her family and old friends… It's not like I'm that important…

"And guess what? If you keep shutting yourself in, you'll always be just a misfit lone wolf. You know that already, and I'm sure as hell that you're better than this!"

"S-Shut up! You don't know shit about me. Don't get all preachy on me… This is all I can do…"

"No, it isn't!" Sending another of those vindictive slashes, eviscerating another building to my right, his voice was filled to the brim with anger again as I backboosted away from him. "You don't have to do this because we're right besides you, you stupid idiot."

And then, instead of chasing after me, he jumped sky high while readying his sword for another of those air jousting maneuvers. And going by his usual speed… I won't be able to dodge this one, and I doubt I could take out my rifle quickly enough either… His visor looks down right at me, diving as a hawk.

"Open your fucking eyes already, Kei!"

**SWISH!**

**BOOM!**

I blink, still frozen in place. Everything is still working… And there's a huge cloud of dust to my right.

"Ayamine, why didn't you try to dodge?!" Sakaki's face enters in sight right in the middle of my vision, brows narrowed and tone way too high.

"Ah… I… What did you do?"

Finally looking around, I spot Special-kun some meters behind me, lying on the ground. His Fubuki seems to fumble around as it tries to regain footing.

"Why aren't you shooting at him?!" She complains, making me focus back again. Seeing that he was on and about again, I backboosted behind cover since I hadn't even taken my rifle out.

"I… Just shocked. What happened? What about the AIs?"

"Only managed to cripple them. I took down two and damaged the legs of the ones left to make it here."

"… Why did you come back?" Just to mock me? To hold the line as the plan said?

"I'm not abandoning you. I'm not turning tail and leaving you behind just because the plan is crumbling." Frowning, her Fubuki lands behind a building to my five.

"… I see. So, uh, how did you stop him?" Pretty sure he was going to skewer me right there.

"Using what you told me of the refresh time of the radar, I managed to catch 06 by surprise by going into a full boost after the refresh, but… What on Earth was that move?"

"That's what I want to know."

"Well… I shot and managed to hit his shoulder, which caused him to miss you and crash land further in." Then, she taps her glasses as she plucks her lips. "Anyways, Shirogane-kun! I'm going to have to ask you to stop lecturing Ayamine while we're in the middle of a fight."

"Shut up, Chizuru!" He retorts, still pissed. "This is your fault for not being more open with her! Kei wouldn't feel so left out if you had tried to be more civil."

Is he… defending me? Why? Why would he? I… I only give him shit, never talked much with him to begin with, even tried to harm him during our bouts at times before the CCSE.

She frowns in the small window that's in my sight, tapping her glasses.

"I have been trying. Not once did I shout at her as I used to do during this mission, and I made a conscious effort to be supportive despite her refusal to follow the plan."

"That's not enough! You have to be open and clear with her, you know Kei's skull is as thick as your eyebrows."

"Wha… I'm not that unreasonable, that's pure slander."

"My eyebrows aren't that thick! And I have been clear today."

"You're both wrong! Kei, you never listen to anything anyone ever says. And Chizuru, you never openly praise her nor directly ask her what she thinks first. You're both at fault!" His voice raising, he then sighs.

"Not my fault she never takes our words in consideration." After all, she only came back to deal with you. She used me as bait, all to take you out. The princess only wants the praise.

"I have been trying, Ayamine!" And of course she snaps. "You were the one who moved on your own, allowing Shirogane-kun to exit the highway and leaving me alone before."

"You're both right and wrong." He says, right before I could retort. "Yes Chizuru, Kei rarely listens but that's because you never tried to ask her opinion before without snapping at her. And Kei, Chizuru doesn't try to hear you out because you always get angry before her and begin to make sarcastic remarks which then makes her snap at you. Sigh… You two really are so thick-headed."

"Pure slander." She always snaps before I do, and always insist on me being mistaken… She's got it coming to her, to be honest.

"My head isn't that thick… And neither are my eyebrows. I always try to be honest, yet she dismisses my words and answers in insults."

"Because a certain someone doesn't know how to get down from the pony."

"What?! You're the one who never talks and continues to act on her own." Frowning again, she once more begins to shout. "And I do recognize your talent, but you never return the trust I place in you."

"Heh, you never did that. You just delegate what doesn't get you praise."

"What was that? Why don't you say that again?!"

**BOOM!**

A shell hits a nearby building, silencing our argument.

"See?! You're both at fault. You two can't keep throwing your biases and expectations on the other, because you know what's gonna happen? You're gonna die in the field if you keep this up." Another shell hits the building, it begins to crumble away. "And I assure you,

the Instructor won't let this petty issue between you go unchecked for long."

"… I am following her plans, yet she never listens."

"I do listen! You are the one who never talks to me!"

"So, are you two gonna let this go on?" Again sounding hoarse, more bullets hit another nearby structure. "If you gotta talk things out, do it on your free time. Beat each other out if you must, say to the other all the shit you've been holding in, but for now, you've got a problem on your hands. Can you defeat me by working together for once, you thick-headed dragons?! Or will you let the base be destroyed by the hostiles?!"

The radar didn't refresh in time, but both of us had begin to move away as he shouted. Barely avoiding his shots, we flee in the direction of the base by moving out towards the section filled with tall buildings. Wasting not a second, he begins to chase after us.

"… Let's do peace for now." She says, sighing as her Fubuki runs in front of mine.

"… Fine. So, what's the plan?"

"The hostiles shouldn't be near the base, but we don't have much time. I may have crippled their legs, but they should still be able to jump. We should try to perform a flat-scissor maneuver to pincer 06 when he comes closer again, even if only to cripple him to give us some time."

"How many hostiles are left?"

"Five, and they're not exactly close by. And my fuel is getting low, so if I'm grounded I can't reach all of them with all the rubble."

Sigh… So that's what it comes to. Neither can hold Special-kun down alone, and if we don't spread out to finish off the hostiles

before they leave the cramped part of the ruins, we lose this. The Instructor is hearing our talks, so… chances are she's gonna punish us regardless of how this mission turns out. But if we screw it up… So then, if halting him is what we gotta do first…

"… About that, I noticed something about his style." Doubt she'd want to go along the idea but… If I just shut up and do what I want… I'd be the same as him.

"Hm? What is it?"

"He can't stand up fast enough after the inputs cease. When you shot at him, his Fubuki didn't get up as fast as it should have."

It was as… Well, to be honest, it's as if he wasn't used to regaining his footing after falling. Not just today either, he always does that little fumble after he falls. For how good he is in everything else, it feels as if he didn't pay mind to the cease of inputs when he moves. That's the only amateurish point in his skillset.

"Really? Hmm… Then, I've got an idea." I nod, seeing in the refreshed radar that he was closer, far closer than I thought. Just a few buildings behind us to our seven… He could do that air jousting thing any minute now. "When we pincer him, I'll try to rush in after him at full speed first, so that when the freeze happens you can finish him off."

"… I'm faster, I could do it better."

"Yes, I know." Her brows narrow. "But you're probably almost out of ammo, aren't you?"

"… Sigh. Yes. But you can't get shot down, I'm also low on fuel."

"I am aware. But on the off chance that this fails and we can't freeze him, your CQC is our best bet to bring 06 down."

… So she's still leaving the kill to me, huh. I guess… she was a bit nicer this time around, just a little bit. Sigh… No, focus. I can't be an asshole right now.

"Got it. Just be one breath faster than usual if you wanna do it right."

"Sigh… What do you even-"

"Take a short breath and see." I take a second to do that, to inhale through my nose and then exhale it as if I were running. "Move that little bit faster when you dash."

"Okay, got it. Ah! He's nearby, stay alert!"

Looking at the radar, he's in the second innermost circle already. We don't know if his radar is updated with ours or not but if he didn't see her assault, then it is safe to assume it is rigged too.

"Let's scatter fast, to make him come after us and put some distance." She says, I nod.

We both separate and go into a moderate boost, taking different roads. The dot in the radar shows he's coming straight through a road to her five.

"One street front, one right." She says, informing me.

"One front, one left." I reply.

For a few seconds, we tell the other the streets we cross as we reposition to begin the pincer maneuver. The updated radar shows he's to my eight and her five, right before a crossroad without rubble. If he gets any closer, he might go into a jump and off one of us after we lose the cover of the buildings.

"One front, one right. Scissors?" I ask.

"One front, one right. Scissors in next two streets."

"Roger." Gritting my teeth, I double check my weapons. Less than a hundred 36mm, one knife, and a damaged blade. Still… better than nothing.

Letting out a some air, tightening and loosening my hold on the controls for a while as I leaned back, nothing I think of can quell the quiver of my knees.

What if he does that mad maneuver again? What if I fuck this up? Should I just trust in her and follow her lead? To begin the pincer on foot makes sense since we gotta conserve fuel and keep as much distance before we engage, but still.

The second streets comes up, I turn right and put my rifle in position on my right, and ready my pylon finger to take out the sword once I exhaust the bullets. You never know, I should do a boost dash just in case. And as I did, planting my feet slowly onto the pedals to dash through the street as we had planned in a moderate speed…

The radar updated, and he wasn't on the street as we thought.

His dot was in the middle of the lot the leader had to her right as she traversed the street we decided to use.

And I looked up in a flash, only to see the Fubuki in the same pose I saw twice some minutes ago.

But… she has nowhere to run to in the street surrounded by tall skyscrapers, even if she somehow dodges him.

"01, above you!" Heels trying to pierce the pedals, I force a sudden boost jump once I'm almost to the crossroad, locking my rifle onto him.

"Huh?!" Her Fubuki looks up as it runs in the middle of the street, but he's already descending.

Pressing the trigger and leaving it hard on while in the air, I shot where I thought he would descend to, since he should be aiming at the leader.

But he didn't dive down to the street, and my shots missed. Instead, he decelerated before crashing onto the roof of a skyscraper and then used it to change direction towards me.

"I knew you were gonna jump the gun!" He screams over the common channel as his Fubuki approaches, in the same posture of the last two times.

Again… I screwed up. I'm falling on air, I just used the boosters so I can't trigger them again without risking a failure or an overload, and I'm out of ammo. If I had sticked to plan… I… failed…

"04, stay quiet!"

Huh? Then, on the corner of my vision, I saw her taking aim at me, the signal of being locked on by a friendly beeping in. As Special-kun was almost to me, a rain of bullets showered on him, making one of his arms explode and sending him recoiling to crash onto a building to my left.

Landing hard, still a bit shaken by what happened in the last few seconds, my arms move on their own as I run to take a turn on the street. If this window of time expires, we're done for! Taking out my blade, stomping my way to him, his Fubuki was barely standing up amidst the rubble. No… It looks like it's swaying?

"Ugh… Damn it…" His groans come through the common channel, sounding hurt. Coughing a bit, his Fubuki isn't even trying to stand up as I approach him.

No! He's faking it! As soon as I let my guard down, he'll shoot me without hesitation! And so, raising my blade, I dash towards him, since I'm sure he'll retaliate.

"Take this!" Triggering the boosters, I rush at him.

And so, I slice his Fubuki in half, the sudden burst of speed enough to send the upper torso flying through the street as the legs explode.

"Argh! *Cough! Cough!* Goddammit… There was no need… to rough me up like that…" Coughing and hacking drowning his complains, I'm left staring at the one-handed torso of the Fubuki, its signal marked as down.

Huh… He was this exhausted? No, this isn't exhaustion, this sounds downright hurt. Maybe those air jousting moves give him motion sickness? I mean, with how fast they are…

"Good work, 04! Are you in one piece?… Huh?" Her smile on my sight turns into a wide gesture as her brows rise. "What did you even do to his Fubuki?"

"… I rushed him thinking he was going to… Wait, I really did it?" I look back, the signal is still marked as down.

Did I just… beat Special-kun? Huh… He really is down, is he. No… It would fit better to say 'we' beat him. Despite me fucking it up and playing into his bait… I only delivered the last hit. No, that's not right either. He was dizzy and down after her shot, she could have dealt with him even if he had shot me down. Maybe he would have surrendered on his own. All I did… was bring her down in this fight…

"While you did went a bit overboard, you truly saved us back there." She smiles, nodding at me as her Fubuki begins to walk away.

"What are you talking about? If I hadn't jumped out, his bait would have failed, and in the end he was dizzy enough for you to take him out without issues. Sorry."

"Uh, you do realize he might have actually attacked me if you hadn't moved out as you did?"

"… Huh?"

"Yeah, if he saw you weren't nearby, then he would have proceeded to dice at me. And your radar refreshed before mine, for some reason. I didn't see his dot until you shot at him." So our radars receive intel at different intervals? So that's why the Instructor told us to communicate at all times. I… didn't even think of the possibility. "And furthermore, if you hadn't moved out, 06 wouldn't have given me an opening to aim at him with such precision. Because I knew where he was going to be, and because he was in midair with no buildings to bounce off, I could land a hit, and by depleting half of my remaining 36mm. So, uh, if it weren't for you, he'd have taken me out. Which means, you made the right call back then." Again raising a finger and doing circles, she nods again. "Good work, 04. We won this fight thanks to you."

"… No, um, if you hadn't landed a hit… I wouldn't have been able to take him down… Let's just say both of us won this one."

"Alright, I can agree to that." She chuckles, I do too after a while. "So, let's go finish those remaining hostiles. We've no time to lose! You take the right side of the highway, I cover the left one. You do have enough fuel to jump, right?"

"Got enough to fly, let's not take chances." I smirk, stepping on the pedals softly to heat up the boosters.

"Heh, fine by me." She smirks back at me, I can see her own boosters ready to go. "Alright, let's take-"

**Beep!**

A green message appears on my view as the response fades from my controls.

"Exercise failed. Cadets, you may disembark." The Instructor's voice reached me, but I blinked a few times before what she said sank.

"Huh?! I-Instructor, Ma'am, did we run out of time?" The leader asks, her brows tensing much in my vision. Then, the Instructors' face zooms into the center of my view, eyes narrowed as she was in the middle of sighing while rubbing her forehead with a single finger.

"No, that was not the case. A hostile breached the base after the other four were destroyed by the little units stationed nearby, leaving them without ammo to stop it. Thus, you failed the exercise. Come out, the morning runs are finished."

"Ma'am, does this mean 06 won?" I ask, unable to not pluck my lips.

"No, both teams lost. He didn't stay alive, and you didn't protect the base. That is all. Disembark at once." And with that, she cut her connection.

"… Goddammit. This sucks." It's so anticlimactic, too. Just as I was getting ready to blast those suckers, just when the leader *finally* admitted how I helped out…

"Well, at least we defeated Shirogane-kun." She says with a small smile, her face now coming to the center of my vision.

"True that. So, uh…"

"Yeah?"

"… Sorry, for, well, everything. Can we… have a talk later?"

"… Sure, I guess we do need one. And me too, sorry for everything."

"It's cool… Guess you weren't as thick as I thought, huh."

"Listen here, I'm not thick-headed. And by the way, my eyebrows aren't that thick either."

"… They are, though."

"Wh- No, they're… D-Do you think they really are?"

"Well, just a little bit."

"Uh…" Plucking her lips, those brows furrow more and more. "Shirogane-kun, don't think I'll let your comment slide, either. I still want an explanation from you."

But then, he doesn't answer.

"Shirogane-kun? Are you there?"

"Ugh… Yeah."

"Hey, you alright?" He does sound hurt… Maybe I really went overboard?

"… I think I'm gonna puke yesterday's breakfast any second now."

"Sorry, shouldn't have attacked so hard."

"Yeah, a lil' late for regrets now, ain't it. Funny, how you two sync up only to beat me up." He groans, coughing again.

"Well, it serves you right for calling us thick-headed." She folds her arms, brows still tense.

"Cadets! Why are you not disembarking? Get out from the sims, this instant!" Frowning much, she barks at us.

"Roger." Me and the leader say, Special-kun groans.

"And Shirogane, if you puke now you'll have to clean it yourself, you hear me?!"

"… Yes, Ma'am. Loud and clear." Sounds like he just barely whispered that out.

"Well, come on. Get out, now." She then once more cuts the connection, Special-kun also closing off his channel.

"… Just what did you do to him, Ayamine? To send his torso flying like that…" Narrowing her eyes, she raises one brow at me.

"Look, if you had been the target of those air jousting moves, you would have done the same." I still can't wrap my head around how the hell does he manage to move so precisely while maintaining top speed. You're truly a monster, Special-kun.

"Sigh… Well, let's get down before the Instructor comes in again." I nod to that, cutting the connection.

And after a sigh, I begin to slowly unbolt myself from the seat. Still… We did just take him out. I think that's a first, to win against him when he's on his best. I should be happy about it. But I'm not.

Not only he sounded super beat down, but all he said… He was just trying to make deliver a point across, and if he didn't give a damn about me… He wouldn't have snapped as he did, if he was just angry he would have shot me down when he had a chance. And he had plenty of those. Defending me when the leader appeared, trying to make us see the other's point of view, just the fact that he cared enough to reach out despite how awful I have been with him is surprising. And plenty of proof to show me he's… not a bad guy at all.

"Sigh… I guess I really was being an asshole, huh."

Just saying sorry won't cut it… But I won't forget this. Regardless of whether I manage to make peace with the leader, someday I'll pay this favor back. Even if you compared me to her eyebrows, when I am in no way that thick-headed.

"But from now on, I'll try to answer to the trust you placed in me, Shirogane. And to show you… how grateful I am, for how you made me realize I was acting like him."

Inhaling sharply and opening the sim, regaining my usual composure, I step outside and walk over to the rest.

# Key Words of the Masquerade

## Chapter 41: Key Words of the Masquerade

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*November 29 th . Near 1 PM.*

*(Sim Room.)*

**[Takeru]**

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Slowly getting out of the sim pod while holding my head, I can barely walk in a straight line without wobbling. God damn it all, they messed me up. At this rate, I'm puking for real. Pulling off three Gliding Charges was too much for me… And after yesterday's fight to make matters worse… Though, I'm surprised they survived all three of them, since it's practically my ace move in Anti-TSF combat. In all fairness, I didn't use it from a blank point, so they had time to dodge.

Still… I'm drained… And the day just started… Haaauuu…

"Shirogane-kun, are you alright?" Tapping her glasses, she comes closer.

"… Do I look alright?"

"Well… No. Did those maneuvers give you motion sickness?"

"It's more like… I'm just plain exhausted."

Sigh… The Aggressor config really lifted the limiter on the sims, it now truly worked as if it were a real TSF cockpit. And while the shaking wasn't equal to one, the detail in the projection was near frame perfect. And my suit probably fed the system the data to give me the most accurate feedback possible, and with that the thing felt

almost like the real deal. Never thought I'd say this, but I need a break from piloting… Thank God Tama's dad is coming tomorrow.

"Hey, you really fine?" Kei comes over, hand on her chin as she stares.

"Yeah, I'll manage somehow… Phew… Though, didn't think you both would elude me in the end." I wearily smile while chuckling.

"You didn't made it easy." Kei narrows her eyes, bringing her head closer. "Those air jousting moves were on another level. What the hell was up with that?" To have her openly curse, it means she's really upset and curious. But… it also means she's at least willing to do peace, for now.

"It's just… my ace in the hole, if I can call it that. Think of it as the best move I can think of."

"Huh… Did you, uh, learn it abroad as well?" Eyes almost running away, her voice didn't have that same toxic tint it always used to have here. I'm glad… the bet worked, even if just a bit.

"Nah, that's an original from yours truly." Can't tell 'em I learned it from a videogame, after all. "So, is everything cool between you two?"

They share a look, Chizuru nods as she shrugs, Kei then does too while looking away. Thank God it worked out.

"While I don't agree with all the points of your lecturing… I admit I should have been more open." Tapping her glasses, she sighs.

"I, well, didn't see I was, uh… acting that bad. Sorry." She then gives both of us a small, but firm, bow. Wow… To have her apologize and all…

True, I did kinda snap at Kei when she said the same as… back then, but I didn't think she'd take it to heart. Kei rarely, if ever,

listened to a thing I said.

"Don't worry 'bout it, it's cool. Just… try to take one step at a time to get better at communicating. Just that, solve your stuff between each other however you like." Both of them nod, no shadows in their eyes nor delay in the gesture.

"Thanks, Special-kun. I, uh… appreciate it. You know, despite me being an asshole to you all this time." Still unable to lift her gaze from the ground, falling pencil would drown her voice right now.

"Sigh… It's cool, I also didn't try to solve things before the CCSE. Let's just leave that behind and focus on what's ahead, okay?" She nods again, now recovering her smile.

"Yeah, though… Why did you use our names back then?"

"Huh? Oh… You know, bad habit. Got pissed off and… Sorry, it just came out like that." I still tend to get emotional during my preachy speeches from time to time… Looks like both of them didn't take it as badly as the first times I called them like that here, so maybe… we can begin to mend the bridge from now on.

"Hmm… Is that so." She looks away, seeming bored despite the small ember in her tone. I dunno if she's mad or what, getting mixed signals right now. "Well, whatever. Just… Thanks again, really."

"It's cool, just… Sorry if I said something hurtful, I tend to get carried away when I do speeches like that."

"No, it… it was spot on. You were harsh but… you spoke the truth." Closing her eyes and sighing, she then folds her arms as she returns my gaze. "So, uh… Everything's cool?"

"Yeah." Nodding at her, the tension finally leaves and her shoulders ease up.

"By the way, Shirogane-kun…" Chizuru takes a step closer, narrowing her eyes. "… Do you mean what you said before?"

"Huh? About what?"

"… About my eyebrows being… too thick."

"He's right, though." Not a second after she said it, Chizuru shot her a glare. Kei hid behind me, probably returning the evil eye.

"Just so we're clear, my eyebrows are not that thick!" Again making circles in the air, she directed her verbal gun at me now. "So, I expect you to be more tactful from now on. You should choose your words more carefully."

"… I mean, I don't see what's the problem, honestly. I think they look cute on you." Sure, the Chop-kun doll you gave me had way too thick eyebrows, but they do look good on you. Frankly, it's nothing to be ashamed of. It's how you are, what's the problem?

"Wh-Wh-What… W-Wha…" Her stammering brought me back to Earth, one could say she was in the middle of an overheat worse than Sumika's ones.

Wait, why is she… Oh, goddammit… Did I actually tell her she looked cute? I am a walking danger when I'm tired.

"Special-kun, you silver tongued bastard, you broke the leader."

"Okay, that was not my intention. I was just being honest." She smirks at me, chuckling at Chizuru's embarrassment.

"Now this is a rare sight…"

"S-Shut up! I won't forget this teasing!" Again raising a finger at us, she turned around and walked away.

"Nice one, Special-kun." Then, she gives me a thumbs up.

"Sigh… Whatever, let's just go to the rest."

Walking over the sims, I soon find a crowd cheering on us as we walk over to the Instructor, who looks rather pissed. She looks back, silencing the people, before coming towards us.

"Squad! Line up!" We do just that, the other three giving us a good stare. Chizuru refuses to look at us. "Despite the failure of this last exercise, you did manage to cooperate to a greater degree than ever before. Sakaki, Ayamine, I expect you two to begin to work together as well as you did just now from now. As someone said, beat each other up if that's what it takes to keep getting this performance off. You may have lost a great deal of time, but your final strike was well coordinated for an on-the-fly attempt. I am looking forward to the next sessions."

"Thank you, Ma'am." They both answer in unison.

"Now then, Shirogane…" Crossing her arms, narrowing her eyes, NotMarimo-chan stares in silence for a sec. "You didn't puke in the sim, did you?"

"No, Ma'am. Yesterday's breakfast is still within me."

"What is this about, Instructor?" Tama asks, receiving a smirk with a chuckle from NotMarimo-chan.

"Oh, the hotshot here seemed to fly too recklessly as you saw, and said to be feeling dizzy and nauseous." The other three give me a worried gaze, the Instructor just smiles. "In any case, you did put on a good show. Perhaps a bit better than I was expecting."

Someone from the crowd of pilots and MPs whistles, others begins to laugh. NotMarimo-chan's brows twitch as do her lips, crossing her arms real tight.

"… But I believe I told you to keep those reckless moves to a minimum, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did Ma'am. Is there something wrong with how I piloted just now?"

"Besides the fact that you probably broke the joints of the figurative machine you operated? What on Earth were you thinking when you made those charges? You could get killed by doing those maneuvers in real life, crashing isn't something to take lightly, Cadet Shirogane. Not only the loss of a pilot, but losing a machine that, let me remind you, costs upwards of a million dollars would be a great detriment to the war effort, especially if you attempt such a move on a crucial mission. For all the talk about how you thought someone was acting in a suicidal way, you yourself seem to have a death wish of your own, Cadet Shirogane."

Ouch, using the rank and all. Though, I do understand her concerns. A miss in timing equals certain death when using the Gliding Charge, and if I'm hit during it, well… I just saw what happens then. And this is still rather tame compared to how she interrogated me when I used it during my first loops to tumble down the rock to save the old lady from the lava.

"I do comprehend your words, Instructor. However, I believe the move you have an issue with is as valid as any other. While it is true that it comes with great risks, it also yields great results when used properly. Furthermore, such line-piercing maneuvers might save someone's life down the line once we get commissioned, if I'm given time to perfect the move."

"… Perfect it? You say it could get better?" Raising a brow, her tone filled with doubt, she and the other five, and probably some of the others from the crowd too, stared in shock and whatever comes after that too.

"Yes, what I did was a simple charge. While the timing at the height of the jump is hard to pull off, with enough practice and accumulated data it could be feasible to say I could perform it without risk of crashing." Because I did that during my first loops, and without the XM3. "However, there is a way in which the base maneuver could be

improved, but it's something even more reckless and difficult to achieve. And frankly, I don't have the confidence to attempt the full maneuver at this point." Her eyes simply squint as her mouth remains half-open.

"Huh?!" Chizuru looks at me, completely tilted. "You say it… gets even worse than that?!"

"Better, actually. It wouldn't be an improvement otherwise."

"… Special-kun, you're a monster."

"No, I'm just Takeru." And I doubt I could pull off the Skull Kaizer's Sky Rend without the XM3.

"… Shirogane, does this have anything to do with… your special missions?" The Instructor asks, a hand on her chin, her tone calming down and edging up.

"Eh… Well… I choose to remain silent." She nods, taking that as I thought she would. "In any case, while I will keep it to a minimum due to how taxing it is on me, I ask you to give me permission to attempt my aerial charges when I deem them necessary." Giving her a bow, I can hear her groan. Some more people from the crowd whistle, her groans intensify.

"Sigh… Fine, I grant you permission to do it, but keep it to an absolute minimum." I return myself upright, standing in attention as I salute and thank her. She shakes her head, sighing again. "… In any case, you did play your role as good as you were able. Perhaps you should have seized the chance to dispose of Ayamine when you had it, but otherwise you fought admirably on your own despite your defeat at their teamwork. While I'd like you to hold back on those moves, you're free to attempt them in moderation. You fought better than I expected, and for that I'll let you off the hook today."

"Thank you, Ma'am." Sigh… Bullet: Dodged.

"Now then, there's a small announcement to make." The other five stand tense in attention, seeming to be bolted in place. "Tomorrow, an important retinue will be visiting the base. Therefore, all trainings from now on, as well as mock battles, shall be postponed until the start of December. This means that this marks the end of today's training sessions, since you're also free of lectures on the late afternoon."

"Huh?! However, Instructor, how could this be?" Meiya's voice rose up in complain, a bit more bothered than I thought she would be. "We didn't hear anything about this until today!"

"Sigh… And that's because even I didn't heard anything until today as well." Folding her arms real tight, her brows tense downwards. "Sadly, there's nothing to be done. Since it's the Undersecretary himself the one coming tomorrow, all trainings from noon onwards are cancelled. Not just for you, but for the commissioned officers as well" Which explains why there's so many of them lurking around here, instead of patrolling or doing stuff. "I will be busy helping with the preparations on B3F, so you also won't be able to use the pods at a later hour. Use this time to relax, as soon as December starts we're advancing into the mock battles."

"Roger!"

"Shirogane, I received word from Takamura that her mission will not require your assistance during these two days, so you are allowed to enjoy your free time according to the Professor's orders. That's all. Dismissed!"

"Salute!"

She returns the gesture, and as she turns around she reminds the people nearby to not bother us. A few still send me and the girls thumbs up and smirks, others just whisper as they look at us, and there's the obvious disdainful gazes of those who still hate my guts. However, after NotMarimo-chan's warning they all begin to scatter, seeming pleased with the show we put some moments ago.

"Cadets, do not dally in getting changed." She says, giving us six one hard stare. We nod, the girls tensing up as they do. "And Shirogane, if you truly are feeling unwell, don't hesitate to go to the infirmary."

"Don't worry, Instructor. I'm merely a bit tired."

"If you say so… Well then, until tomorrow." She then goes her way out of the sim room along the stream of bored officers.

Sigh… Thankfully she allowed me to keep practicing my Gliding Charges. And really, it's just a really fast dive, I'm amazed no one thought about it before. The people of this world lack imagination. It's not like I'm doing a Rocker Sunshine or a Bright Finger.

"… I cannot believe they cancelled our training without a single warning." Meiya was clearly angry at this turn of events, going by her sharpened eyes and dry tone. She was groaning to herself as she folded her arms, looking at the pods with tightly closed lips.

"We can't do anything about it. Squad, let's use this time to review our lessons and get as ready as we can for the mock battles. We advanced much for only a morning practice, so let's keep up the good work." Chizuru smiled at us confidently.

"Roger!" The girls all gave an energetic reply, even Kei for once.

"… Roger." Energy depleting… Need food… I think I did save some of my breakfast for after the simulations. Drowning a yawn, I blink as I move my brows up and down, running a hand over my face

"Shirogane-kun, are you really okay? Maybe you really should go to the infirmary?" Tapping her glasses, she looked at me in the eye.

"… Don't worry, I'll be fine."

"Takeru, are you sure you're fine? Maybe you should go rest?"

"Thanks Mikoto, but I can't just go to sleep, as much as I want to. It'll mess up my internal clock. Luckily, I can just laze about today."

I'm sure Sensei did this out of consideration, after yesterday's battle I was completely spent. And what little stamina I regained has been spent already. It's hilarious, actually. In the game, the Gliding Charge does deplete the energy gauge entirely, and right now my gauge is completely busted after doing them. Siiigh… A nap is tempting right about now, though.

"But man, that fight was super!" Changing her mood in a flash, she smiles widely at us. "Chizuru-san and Kei-san worked so well together at the end there, and your moves were superb!"

"Yes, just looking made me dizzy, to be honest." Tama scratches her head, giggling. "But it was amazing, how nimbly you moved at such high speeds."

"It's all in the practice, really." You have no idea how many times I crashed myself by attempting the Gliding Charge during my first loop. And the Instructor is right, it damages the joints real bad. Even if Chizuru hadn't hit me, my joints would have ended up on red.

"You truly looked like a monster." Kei gives me a side glance, still smiling.

"But Kei-san, you ended up tearing his TSF in half!" Mikoto giggles at her while she plucks her lips.

"By the way, were you talking about something back there?" Tama asks, tilting her head. I look down, since it's not my place to speak if they don't want to. "Since you stood quiet for a long while, and you even shot at a building a few times… Is everything okay?" Her tone growing a bit worried as she switches glances between Kei and Chizuru, her hands play with her hair.

"Well… It's nothing, really." Chizuru says, holding one of her elbows.

"… Cute eyebrows." Oh God, she just had to-

"S-Shut up!" An immediate, abrasive retort. Didn't expect any less.

Tama and Mikoto tilt their heads as they stare at them, Kei smirking as she chuckles and Chizuru pretty much spewing steam from her ears.

"Anyways, it is a relief to get a breather for sure." Again making circles in the air, she takes a step away from Kei. "Shirogane-kun, could you come with me later? I have something to give you." What could Chizuru have for me? Another Chop-kun doll?

"Sakaki-san, what are you going to give him?" Tama was eyeing Chizuru with stinky eyes. Mikoto followed suit. It's always funny to see them like that.

"W-Why are you looking at me like that? I just prepared some notes for him, since he can't go to the library like we do."

"Thanks, Sakaki. I'll read them throughly when I get the chance."

"Yes, you do that. It would be a problem if we couldn't coordinate our movements during the mock battles, especially if you start doing those charges." She started making circles in the air again. I can only wonder what memories she saw. I mean, do they see the things clearly, or do they just inherit the feelings?

"Chizuru-san, why are you even giving him that? He's the best one of the squad." Mikoto smiled at me as she smacked my back. And surprisingly, Kei nodded with a small smile in her face to the words.

"Yoroi, I did this for him because he can't access the library. It's for the good of the squad. Right, Mitsurugi?"

"… I suppose." Meiya just looked away, going towards the changing room. Her voice barely audible, shoulders down and with a slow pace she exited the sim room.

She hasn't looked at me since I exited the pod, so I guess… she's getting paranoid again. To remain so silent despite how we fought just now… Sigh…

"Well, anyways, we can't really stand around so let's get going." Chizuru takes the lead as she stretches her arms forward.

We all go towards the changing rooms, Tama and Mikoto asking about the fight and us answering what we could, or wanted to, tell them. Things seemed pretty tense in the hallways, everybody was hurriedly running somewhere. Considering what is coming up, it doesn't surprise me.

"Hey, is the Undersecretary someone really important? What does an Undersecretary do anyways?" Mikoto asked the group, receiving puzzled looks as an answer.

"Of course he's important, it's the man that connects many of the UN's High Command Council and our Parliament with the UN's International HQ. Basically, it's the right hand of the HC in many affairs." Chizuru obviously knows her political stuff, I never found out what exactly Tama's Dad actually does though.

"Oh! Then he's a super important person. I wonder what he's like." Smiling gleefully, Mikoto has not an ounce of care in her. As usual, basically.

"Yeah, it makes you wonder. What kind of person the… the Undersecretary… H-Hauuu…" Tama froze in place, eyes became two big white dots.

"Miki-san? Are you alright?" Mikoto waved her hand in front of her, but she remained still.

"Tamase? What's wrong?" Chizuru looked back worriedly at the frozen shape of Tama.

"In Shirogane's words, she's tilted." Apparently Meiya had noticed we were coming and waited for us. She looked at Tama, circled around her for a bit, poking her. "It seems she's out of commission."

"Hey Tama. Do you know who the Undersecretary is?" Color returns to her eyes, and very slowly she starts shaking.

"She knows. Spill the beans." Kei grabs her from behind and starts to give her head pats very aggressively. Death by forced pampering, a new form of torture has been born.

"Awawawa…"

"Could it be… Tamase, is the Undersecretary your father?" Chizuru, you hit the jackpot so hard it's now a crackpot.

"Haaauuu…" She somewhat nods under the pressure of Kei's menacing head pats. Kei seemed to be enjoying herself though.

"Ayamine, stop it. Tamase, you don't have to be nervous. You've been doing a fine job in your training, I'm sure he'll be proud of you." Chizuru, my dear, that is not the problem here. It's…

Wait one second, last time I got beaten up, right? I can't believe I'm happy the HSST is gonna fall, if only because I'll avoid that horrible fate.

"That's not the problem. You see…"

…

"Your father believes you're the Squad Leader?!" Chizuru's eyes turned white as the shock left her mouth hanging wide open.

"I just told him of how I was improving after the CCSE in the last letter, and he somehow turned that into me being the Leader. I'm sorry." Tama starts bowing repeatedly at all of us.

"Don't worry Tama. This isn't your fault. Did he misunderstood anything else from your letters?" She got tilted again. Oh God…

"Miki-san, what else did he got wrong?" Tama starts violently shaking in place as her eyes spin in a counter clockwise way.

"I can't tell you! It's too embarrassing! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

"Please stop apologizing, you did nothing wrong." Meiya told her in a slow, tender tone while placing a hand on Tama's shoulder. "Whatever shall we do about this? Sakaki, should we just be honest with the man?" I don't think that will work. I mean, considering how he usually acted in the past loops…

"Hmm… We don't really have a choice, do we? It's not like we can fake our ranks, that's a violation to the UN's code." She raises both arms in defeat.

Should I suggest the same plan as I always did? It would be sad to see the man dejected, and in the end he always saw through our little stand-up act… But will people let us do it in this harsher world?

"Special-kun, any ideas?" Kei stared at me with half closed eyes.

"No, not really."

"Hmm… Seem like you were wanting to say something, though." Her stare intensifies upon me, making the others stare at me too. Uuuh… I think this isn't a good idea this time around.

"Shirogane, do you have an idea to help Tamase?"

"Well Mitsurugi, you see…"

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**One explanation later…**

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"… and that's the gist of it."

"Shirogane-kun, do you really think you can convince the Instructor to allow Tamase to be the Squad Leader tomorrow?" I can't blame you for being skeptical, considering NotMarimo-chan's usual mood here.

"Sakaki, if there is one person who can convince her it's him. I shall accompany him to request this of her. It truly would be a shame if their reunion took a sour note for this misunderstanding." I didn't think Meiya would volunteer to help me.

"Sniff… Thank you. Really, I'm sorry for the trouble." Tama starts bowing at us again.

"Tamase, do not apologize. Sakaki, I assume you have no qualms with this if the Instructor gives her approval?"

"Of course. Honestly, I don't want to break his illusion, and it isn't unheard of for squads to change their leaders after they start piloting. Now is the most believable time to do something like this, since Tamase is more fit to be in the backrow we can just say that the position was given to someone who could be in the middle more naturally if we ever get asked about it." I'm so glad this Chizuru is more understanding. She is taking into account Tama's feelings and their effect in her performance, even if it means doing something 'wrong'. She also did seem to try to be more civil with Kei, despite their usual bickering.

"Don't worry. You'll do a better job than her." Kei smiled at Tama as she patted her head again. Why did I have to jinx it? I can already-

"Ayamine, what do you mean by that?" Here thar be dragons yet again.

"By what?"

"You just insulted me again."

"Nope, you're wrong."

"Why do you always talk through your teeth? Was all you said about trying to talk more openly with the squad just empty air?"

"No, that was for real." Chizuru's brows twitch, I can't help but to snicker at them now.

"Then, what did you mean?"

"Damn, you really are as thick-headed your eyebrows." And then, Kei dashes behind me as Chizuru was diving at her.

She again grabs my shoulders and uses me as a human shield. I may be able to pilot the XG, kill thousands of BETA, and travel through space-time, but releasing myself from Kei's grabs will forever remain as an impossible feat for me. And I'm also too hungry and tired to even try.

"Don't hide behind Shirogane-kun! Come out and speak up!"

"You said you'd stop shouting and being abrasive, squad leader."

"Wha… You have some nerve… And my eyebrows aren't that thick."

"… Hey Ayamine, what about the part where you said you'd rely more on your squadmates and stuff?" I sigh, feeling her grip on my shoulder tighten.

"… I'm relying on you to keep me safe from the her." Goddammit, Kei.

"Shirogane-kun is right, you shouldn't keep acting like this, Ayamine. After all, he made very fair points about your conduct back there." Moving the finger in circles again, she smirked.

"More like he did the leading for you."

"What was that!?"

"Sakaki, please calm down!" Thanks Meiya, keep the chill coming. "We should go change, we still have to talk with the Instructor."

"… You're right. I shouldn't let my temper-"

"Cute eyebrows." Goddammit Kei! Oh great, Chizuru's eyes resemble those of the Legendary Super Shayan now.

"Girls, let's calm down. We can't go bothering the Instructor now of all times, right? A lecture wouldn't be enough to placate her wrath this time. Wouldn't you agree, Mitsurugi?" I wink at her, asking for support. She looks away but nods at my words.

"Just like Shirogane said, we can't go making more trouble. Please do keep your poise, do not forget our shared goal."

"Yeah, come on." Mikoto says, but looking to the ground. "Pointing fingers won't do us any good, right?"

"Sigh… I know. I did promise to try harder from my position. So don't go hurling one-liners like that, we still need to have a talk after all." Chizuru looks away and starts walking, Kei releases me and joins the rest as we go our way.

Tama and Mikoto sigh as we keep walking towards the changing room, Meiya shakes her head as well. Wait a sec, did Kei do that to change the atmosphere? I mean, Tama looks way more calm now. She can be surprisingly kind when she wants to.

Once we got to the changing rooms, I change in a flash while also grabbing my little paper bag with what I saved of my breakfast. Thank God there's bathrooms right by the side of these rooms. Going to splash some water on my face, drink some to parch up my throat, and then part ways with yesterday's breakfast, I leave the heaviness behind as I get out, rubbing my forehead. And as I did, I kinda saw someone moving away fast into a hallway. Did I imagine that?

"Oh, you're already out." Meiya and the rest then came out in their fatigues. "Do you wish to go speak with the Instructor now or after eating lunch?"

"I rather have a short rest, if you don't mind."

"Very well, so shall we do." Nodding and folding her arms, she again looks away. Sigh… "So Sakaki, shall we be off to the PX?"

"Hmm… We still need to go run our laps, but considering that the trainings are cancelled we can just go to eat lunch today." Tama and Mikoto breath a sigh at her words.

"I'll be in the track field, go there when you're done." I wave at them and go towards the hallway to my right.

"Wait Shirogane-kun. Can't you come to the PX with us? Your punishment was lifted for the day, after all."

"No, just one punishment was lifted. I still can't go to the barracks or the PX. And… considering what people say about me, it's better I don't join you guys." Looking back, all of them were looking down, even Kei now. "So I'll rest there until Mitsurugi is ready to go talk with the Instructor. Later." Mikoto seemed like she wanted to say something, but didn't. Kei furrowed her brows, her hands diving into her pockets as she looked down.

And so, I went my way to the track field.

Some people giving me smiles, others commenting on the fight as I passed them, and still quite a few narrow and hateful gazes coming along dirty whispers, my feet dragged themselves to my destination. Breathing slowly, enjoying the coming sunshine as if I were a sunflower, as well as the chilly breeze that came in from the few windows that were open, at least I could ease up my tension as I made my way there.

Luckily, due to the prep needed for the incoming visit, there's no one around here. Finally, I can relax without hearing any whispers or being alert in case any bastard tries to trip me again.

"Sigh… Man, it's been such a long time since I could come out for a breather."

The sun feels so nice… I stand in the sunlight, enjoying the wind as it blows through the track field. Opening the food pack, I lean on a wall as I eat the little I left for this time.

Damn, I truly didn't think they'd push me to such lengths. Though, I really should try to relearn how to stand up quickly again. It's such a bother, but it's for the best if I gotta keep using the old OS for a while longer.

Though, to be completely honest, if I hadn't been exhausted after yesterday's fight I wouldn't have missed my charges. Takamura was a monster to deal with. Well, I can't really say anything since I sworded my way through three buildings trying to get you off guard. While I ended up losing, when she used her hands to damage my arms, it was because I had forgotten the Takemikazuchi's hands are also weaponized. We did duke it out for half an hour, so I'm happy with the result even if I lost.

My maneuvering did catch her off her groove at times and I actually knocked her sword away, but the difference in our mechs was too big, and since she isn't exactly a pushover I couldn't overpower her with my speed. Not even with an Albright I could take her down. I thought that coming at her from behind at top speed would do the trick, but nope. She sidestepped at the last second and started chasing me, firing at the buildings to my sides to close my escape roads.

But the fact that I could stand up to a Type-00 in a Kagerou, even if it had the XM3 and its upgrades, is proof enough that we are on the right track. That said, that battle tired me out more than I thought and I couldn't do anything else yesterday.

Still, at least I saw a funny dream of this world's me playing around with Sumika today. Who would have said she also was afraid of Binocchio's book in this world? And of course, she punched him into the stratosphere when he joked about it. It's good to see they were still that close here, too.

Sigh… Still, real tired right now. Looking up, I close my eyes as the wind blows.

In less than a day, we get the first real test here. Will we make it? Or will I fail once more? I can only believe in Tama, she has done many incredible things through all of my loops.

Anyways… Thankfully, I can enjoy some alone time in pea-

"Excuse me, Cadet."

And my rest is ruined. I just can't catch a break, can I?

"… What is it?" Mion and Shion were coming towards me, with the same lightless hawkish eyes they had during the CCSE. Great, dying today it seems.

Both of them were wearing the red dress of the Guard, taking slow but firm steps, enough to lift a small cloud of dust, never taking their eyes off me. Are they coming to harm me? Or are they here to test the waters? Faster than I expected, but I did show off quite a bit just now. The emerald and turquoise eyes meet my gaze as they lock onto me. Mion took one final step forward and spoke up.

"Good day, Cadet Shirogane. Do you happen to be free right now?"

"Yes, pretty much." I wonder if Sensei noticed this. Maybe she 'liberated' this zone, so that they could approach me? "Nice weather, right?" They both nod.

"I was under the impression that you were under a strict routine." Twirling her hair, never taking her eyes off.

"Something came up and I'm free for the afternoon, is all. So, do you need something?"

"Well, it seems like you're progressing in your training just fine." Shion smiled at me widely, showing me her teeth.

"One could say that, yes."

"From what we heard, you performed… quite well in your last session." She smirks evilly, as she did in the memory I saw.

"Well, I did my best just now, to be honest. Though, I ended up going overboard, to be honest."

"Did you happen to crash, perchance?"

"Oh, no. It's just that my head hurt a bit after moving too fast too frequently. I almost puked yesterday's breakfast all over the sim pod."

"… Huh." Both of them narrow their eyes, confusion and disgust mixed together.

"Sorry for the vulgar expression, but I got really dizzy after today's training due to doing some of my best moves."

"… Well, it would have been a shame if you were to be unable to pilot, considering you bested me during the CCSE." Mion also smiled, with a small hint of darkness in her eyes.

"I suppose. So, what did you need of me?" Giving them a side glance, their brows seem to lower just a tiny bit.

"Is something the matter?" Mion asks, forcing a small smile.

"Well, I just don't know why you Guards would approach me. Doubt you'd come just to make idle chitchat." Looking around for a bit, I don't see anyone else from their group, but I do now they're stealthy.

They… might just be trying to make me trip, or to attack me if no one is around.

"Well, that is true." Shion took a step forward, pointing one finger to the sky. I think her little self did the same in that memory I saw. "Are you truly free as of now?"

"Yeah? I just said so."

"Hmm… So, you came here to relax, then?"

"… It's kinda obvious, to be honest. So, uh, did you need something or what?"

"Could we ask you some questions? I am reaaally curious about you, actually." Shion says, again raising a finger.

"… Fine, I guess."

"Who're you working for?" Her eyes changed again to those lightless, oppressing, hawkish eyes she had during the CCSE.

"The UN?"

"Playing dumb? Well, do you like natto rolls?" She changed to a shining smile for some reason.

"Yeah, I do." I'm one of those weird people who don't mind eating natto rolls, and that made Mom and Dad always give me those when we went to eat sushi while they ate all the other ones. Damn pricks, just remembering that is making me mad. "But why are you asking me this?"

"You do, huh? Then, do you know what steamed doubin is?" She ignored my question…

"Yeah, my favorite dish actually. But could you stop talking about food?" She sharpens her eyes at me again, Mion does the same as she speaks up.

"Why? Are these questions bothering you, by any chance?"

"I've lost my lunch due to my punishment. You know, for what I did to those soldiers? So talking about food right know is like torture for me." I show them the small pack of rations I have on me.

"So you were indeed punished for saving Meiya-sama, huh." She twirls the low end of her ponytail as her eyes narrow a bit.

"For harming the soldiers. Nobody believed me when I said I did it to help my squadmates." I can't really tell why, but I'm feeling really calm now. Maybe because I saw their child versions? I mean, I'm not here to harm Yuuhi so there's no reason for us to fight actually. But, still, being cautious is never bad.

"Is that so?" Making a small smile, Mion tilted her head. "Well, you seem to be truly skilled with a blade. Can you tell us where you learned that?" She kept faintly smiling as she played with her hair, Shion on the other hand was silently staring at me with a poker face.

I can only drag the conversation and hope either Sensei or Kasumi notice this. As for the rest of the base… Yeah, they would leave me to my misery. Maybe waiting for Meiya is… But what if she's cooperating with them? Hauu…

"… I learned from someone that was on Yukon Base."

"Hmm… Say, considering your words at me when we fought, I suppose you don't know who we are, right?" Her eyes slowly were turning into those same eyes she had during our fight. Time to fish up some answers.

"Aren't you relatives of the 1st Lieutenants? I think you said that your sister was the one here, so you're 1st Lt. Mana Tsukuyomi's sister, while Shion would be 1st Lt. Maya Tsukuyomi's, right?"

"Ooh! He got it right!" Shion bursted suddenly, smiling again at me. "So Shirogane, the question here is, did you know about us

beforehand?" She said wiggling a finger at me. So that wasn't wrong.

"No? Aside from your relation with 1st Lt. Tsukuyomi, I've no idea who you are. I'm the one who wants to know why you called me by my name when we fought." Gotta play my part here, to make the 'I have amnesia' thing to be credible. And I'm not even lying, I've no idea who they are.

"Huh… So that's how is it…" Shion brought one hand to her chin as her eyes started to lose light again.

"I mean, we never met before right? Why would I know you? Do you happen to know who I was before I left the Empire?" C'mon, gimme a hint or something.

"… What do you mean by that?" More and more, their eyes lost friendliness and regressed into those hostile pair of gazes that met me in the CCSE under the rain.

"I mean… I don't really remember much from my life in Japan. I woke up in a hospital in Alaska without many memories, and since no one could find any relatives I have no idea who I used to be. Hell, I don't even know if my parents are alive." That is not a lie, we do not have any idea who the hell he was. Wait a sec…

Dad and Mom… Who were they here?

… Why do I… feel heavy again all of a sudden?

"… So you lost your memories? Is that true?" Mion asked, sounding as convinced as my Mom when I told her I actually passed my history tests once in a blue moon.

"Yes, I honestly don't know. Though, I've been dreaming about my childhood for a while. I think I used to live around here, when there was still a town."

"… Eh?" Both of them opened their eyes wide, taken aback for some reason.

"Yeah, I think I lived around this place when I was little. Kinda remember what my house looked like, sort of."

Suddenly, Shion sprung forward and grabbed my shoulders.

"What else do you know? Who did you live with?!"

"I-I dunno, I can't really remember. H-Hey, it hurts! Let me go!" I try to shrug her off, to no avail. Her fingers dig into my shoulders, determined to not let go.

I don't know if I was actually living with Maya-san or if she was just looking after me, so I better shut up about that. But seeing her reaction… They're scouting me, and with ill intentions at it. *Of course, they're on Yuuhi's side after all.*

"Shion, let him go!"

"Shut up! Takeru, do you remember visiting the capital?"

"No, I don't. And why are you calling me by my name?" Shion's eyes were fierce, but the glow in them had changed. Wait… the Capital? Is that where we were during that memory I saw?

"Shion, we can't arise suspicions. Let him go." Mion pulled gently on her shoulder and, very slowly at that, Shion released me.

"So… Can I get an explanation for what you just did and why you're asking me these questions? Did you knew me before I left the Empire?" Shion looked to the ground while Mion returned my gaze.

"… Shirogane, do you remember anyone from your childhood?" Did they take the bait? Mion seems serious, so let's assume it did work.

But… Considering Sumika's existence was erased as a collateral effect of the G-Bombs' explosions, they shouldn't remember her at

all even if they met her at some point. I better shut up about her, I can't involve Sumika in my troubles with the Guard.

"Hmm… Two boys named Jouji and Masahiko and a girl named Chie." Let's keep quiet about that memory I saw of their little selves, since it would imply that I do remember them.

"… Could you describe them?" I suppose she's testing me, to see whether I really know or if I'm just a spy repeating a speech.

"Well, I only saw them in a dream but…" I describe the children's attitudes, appearance and usual clothing. Their eyes started wavering as I talked, so the bait is working.

"So that's what you recall… Well, we might have been suspicious of you due to you coming from America and your profile lacking data, however, if you're a Japanese citizen, then we have no more reasons to question you. Forgive the inconvenience we've caused you." Mion gave me a small bow and prepared to leave, but then Shion took a step forward.

"Mion, I still have some questions for him. Don't decide by yourself when we end this."

"Shion, I believe we have already spent enough time here."

"I mean, when did this become an interrogation?" Shion shot a glare at me, slightly bothered.

"Shut up, Takeru." She's not giving me an inch, and she's calling me by my name again. "Mion, you're not in charge here, so I'll ask him some more questions. That's alright with you, Takeru?" She smiles at me wickedly. I do not like that smile.

"Uuuh… Why do always have to be like this?" Mion pursed her lips at her cousin, who just chuckled back at her.

"I guess I can answer some more questions if you want. I don't want trouble with the Guard, so if I can clear whatever suspicions you have I'll gladly answer your questions. But you still haven't told me what you know, did you know me or not?" If I can get some answers right now things will go more smoothly. Win-Win.

"I dunno. We may or may not have met." She giggles as she sees my expression to her answer. "Now then, do you remember having any siblings?"

"No, I think I was an only child." That part is true for me, but I don't know if it's the same in this world. Shion looks down, a small shadow covering her eyes. Right, he might have been like family for them.

"… I see. Then, do you remember having any military experience before joining the UN?"

"Not that I can tell. I did catch on quickly in my trainings, but I don't think I had any experience before." And since I don't know what kind of training he had I can't make up bullshit this time.

"Hmm… Can you show me your stance?" She stroked her chin slowly as she got closer.

"My stance?"

"Yes, when you get ready to attack with your sword. Show me your pose." She moved her hair out of her face and returned a fierce glare. I slowly take my Mugen stance, I see their lips tremble a bit.

"Is this good enough?"

"Yes, thanks. Do you happen to know the name of the style you employ?"

"No, not really." Can't tell them that, since it's something I learned in my world. "So, you don't have other suspicions about me?"

"If I may, why have you not gone to the Capital to rectify the matter of your missing data?" Mion asked, again making a small smile.

"Because I already presented the data I had, and if there is an error, is on the Empire's side. They're the ones who should upload the new data or fix their own mistake." Plus, that's on Sensei's shoulders as my legal tutor. You go and try to convince her to let me go near the Capital, I'll go take down Kashgar and every other hive in the meantime.

"However, you could try to delve into the archives, to see if any ties to you could be found. Perhaps, some members of your family may yet live."

…

Feeling my back completely cold all of a sudden, as if I had gone out to take out the trash in shorts and a shirt while it was snowing, as if I were curling under a simple blanket to drive out the cold air, as the shower in the cell feels on top of my head and on my back every morning, I sighed while looking down. For some reason… it feels just like when I wake up as of late… *so empty and far away from everything …*

"… Family, huh."

"Ahem… Is there anything wrong?" Shion asked, again raising a finger.

"… No, nothing." Looking up, scratching my head, can't help but to frown a bit. "It's just that… thinking about my family or my parents just… brings my mood real down." I pop into my mouth the last piece of the dough, looking at the clouds.

"… Huh, is that so."

"So, anything else?" Meeting their gaze again, for some reason, I didn't find that hawkish tint in them anymore, nor the readiness in

their posture.

"Well, I have one last question for you." Shion smiles again as she brings one finger up. Mion tenses up, slightly moving her brows in confusion.

"What is it?" She smiles wickedly at me, curving her brows a bit as she takes a single step closer.

"… Have you ever been kissed?"

… What kind of question is that? That's a personal-

"S-S-SHION!" Mion's outburst caught me by surprise, I'm sure her shout could be heard from within the base. Her face was reddening badly.

"Oh, what is it, cousin of mine? I did not aim the question at you." She smiles as she plays with her hair. One could practically hear the screeching gears on Mion's head as she opens and closes her mouth.

"You can't go asking that kind of personal questions! It is unproper for a Royal Guard to-"

"So Takeru, have you ever been kissed?" She ignored Mion's rambling and gazed at me again, joyfully smiling from ear to ear.

"… I don't know?" I mean, I have been kissed in my other lives, but in this one I… well, I've been alone so no action whatsoever yet.

"Was that a question or an answer?"

"I haven't kissed as far as I know, but there is much I don't remember, so… I dunno."

Shion then smiles at Mion, who returns a small frown her way. What is it with these two? Did this world's me kiss one of them? But wasn't he… I mean, Yuuhi seemed really attached to him. Does this mean I

fooled them? I can only wonder what they'll do next. There is the General to worry about too.

"What are you two doing?!" Oh, seems like I forgot about someone. Death flag, here you come.

Both Pickles twitch, their expressions clouding over as the roaring stomps of Tsukuyomi-san approach us. To say she's royally pissed would be an understatement.

"Ah, uh, Sister, you see…" Mion slowly, as a snail, turned around and bowed down. "We saw the cadet was free for the moment, and thought that perhaps we could have a talk with-"

"You both should know better." Dry ice would be a supernova compared to her tone right about now. "The situation of the cadet is a delicate one, and you may only bring him further setbacks, for others to see him being questioned by the Guard. Furthermore, the UN has requested us to not involve ourselves in their affairs unless necessary."

"We weren't questioning him in the slightest, Mana-sama." Shion, losing all energy and turning meek, said while also bowing down.

"Then, Cadet Shirogane, do you believe these two to have been interrogating you?"

"… To be honest, yeah." Both Pickles flinched, giving me a frown. Tsukuyomi-san's eyes narrowed upon their figures.

"Is that so. You two, take your leave right this instant."

"However, Sister, we-"

"Did I happen to mumble, perchance?" She then placed a hand on her chin, staring right at them.

Who would worry about global warming when you have Tsukuyomi-san here? Though… Seems like she also wants to have a talk with

me. The Pickles look back and give me a small bow before going their way, real slow at that. Tsukuyomi-san keeps staring at them, to make sure they do return inside the base. Once they're out of sight, she runs a hand over her hairs she lets a sigh as huge as a Fort out of her lips.

Taking a few steps back, never losing sight of her, I wait for a moment, yet she doesn't speak up.

"Uh… Do you need something from me, 1st Lieutenant?"

"Why, are you inconvenienced by my presence?" And there it is, the coup's glare. And again, for some reason, my stomach feels upset and heavy all of a sudden.

"Well… You just said people may misunderstand having a Guard asking me questions."

"Worry not, it seems no one can see us from behind this wall." She then walks past me, leaning on the wall to my right. As she remained staring at me, I sighed the acid on the back of my mouth and also got back on the wall. "Well then, it would seem you have been placed under a most unjust punishment, cadet."

"It is what it is. I do deserve it. Killing should never go unpunished."

"… I see. Now, may I ask if you were told anything regarding the situation of your blade?"

"That the Empire dropped the claims to have my head since I didn't knew its meaning and had no bad intentions. So… Is it back where it belongs?" She looks at me, eyes ever so slightly narrowed, then she nods. "That is a relief…"

"Huh, so you are relieved it is back to its rightful owner?"

"How could I not? The blade was too important to leave it in the wrong hands."

"… True enough. By the by… Why did it have a ribbon on its handle?"

"Huh? Oh… That was just… something to remember someone I liked much, someone dear to me."

Holding her gaze is harder than I thought. Yes, she is as imposing as I remember her but… *It is saddening to see such a rift between us, compared to how close we used to be.* Sure, that might only apply to when I married Meiya, but she did live with me and teach me many important things back home. And even in the other worlds, she was someone I knew would cover my back, even if we didn't see eye to eye during the coup. Her loyalty might have been somewhere else than mine, but she was someone I could say I looked up to. And despite how I harmed her, she still called me back during the incident on the school… Back when I was leaning on this same wall, unable to do jack shit, she still found it in her to lend me her ear.

Sigh… Different world, I know. *The one I remember her as is no more, this ruthless Royal Guard is all that remains.* I should know better by now, but damn, it still hurts to think about… all those I lost, *all those good times we'll never share again.*

"… Is that so?" Brushing her hair, she looks at up at nowhere. "Then, allow me to cut to the chase. Who was the one who bestowed the sword onto you?"

"… Someone in Yukon."

"I would be liking to receive a name, cadet."

"It was someone dear to me, so I won't say it." Not like I can tell her Maya-san was the one, or that the blade belongs to Meiya. "I was the one who brought it here, and so, I will face the consequences myself."

"… Even if that places you on a court?" Taking a step closer, her gaze cut into mine. Holding it, I nodded. "Are you… certain of this?

By merely giving us the name of who was the supposed owner of the blade, you could clear all guilt from your person."

"I am the last owner of that sword, and I brought it here. If you want to place blames on someone, the culprit is right in front of you."

"… While I praise your resolve, there is no need to shoulder this burden. You should be well aware of the blade's importance."

"So what you're saying is, I'm still on your black list?" Again feeling acid coming up my throat, a small twinge of pain appearing right below my ears as our gazes met, can't help but to cross my arms real tight.

"Ahem… It is a sensitive matter. It would be foolish to not warn you, seeing that you are willing to talk. I must insist that you give me the name of-"

"I refuse." Her brows twitch. "I thank you for your consideration 1st Lt., but this is my own problem. I should have listened to Cadet Mitsurugi's advice and go to speak with you earlier, to avoid this from being mixed with my current dilemmas. However, it is my own responsibility, and as such, I won't blame someone for my own miss. I brought the blade, unaware of its meaning, and did not consult with the authorities about it. That is all there is to this."

And if they press, I don't have an answer. I can't read her expression, so I don't know what they thought of the blade. Going by her earlier answer, she already sent the blade to Yuuhi probably, so… Going by how she mentioned a court, chances are I am still on their sights. Yuuhi is still… coming after my -san remains gazing at me, for a long while, saying nothing.

"… So, did you tell of the blade to anyone in the UN?"

"No, I kept it with me on the closet and never took it out of my room. No one, save Mitsurugi and the XO, know about it."

"I see…"

…

"So, uh, anything else?"

"Yes, I wanted to confirm something. When did you arrive to this base?"

"Huh? Why do you want to know that?"

"… Answer the question." Taking a step forward, she locks her gaze with mine again.

"Can't you just check the databases?"

"… So, you arrived on the 23rd then?"

"The day before, if it makes any difference." No point in hiding that, Sensei should have the cover prepped up already.

"I see…" Again running a hand over her hair, she stares at me.

"Anything else?"

"No, that was all. Do forgive my relatives' behavior."

"It's cool, for real. So… See you later, I guess." She remains staring, a poker expression in her face. Very slowly, her brows lower and lips pluck.

"Wouldn't you think that, perhaps, goodbye would be a better way to end a conversation?"

"I mean, we are going to see each other later at some point, what with you being around the base, so it isn't a goodbye. So, see you later. Here's hoping this mess can end well, somehow." Sighing the acids out, I give her a small smile.

I know, it's stupid to hope for it.… But I really would like this all to end on a good note, if only to not bring more problems to Alt. IV or be forced to restart the loop.

And, again, she stared at me silently. Still saying nothing, she gives a nod and then leaves the wall as she runs a hand over her hair.

"I suppose. Well then…" And thus, she leaves with hurried steps.

…

So, which one was it? I thought she would have been more fierce towards me, what with they having the blade and all, but she did mention a court. The Pickles' also were rather hostile at times, but ended up chilling down a ton by the end. Doesn't change the fact I've no way to explain from where I got the blade… Sigh… What could I do if they keep pressing? Sensei did say they wanted to approach me, and my answers were not pleasant ones for sure… I wouldn't trust much in someone like me if I were in their shoes…

As I was lost in thought, I saw Meiya coming closer.

"Oh, hey Mitsurugi. Should we go see the Instructor?"

"Yes, but before that…" She crosses her arms and stares at me with narrowed eyes. "I believe I saw 1st Lt. Tsukuyomi coming from the track field just a moment ago. Did she happen to come talk with you?" Sigh… Again with that doubtful gaze, huh.

"Yeah, you know, about the sword."

"Oh." Eyes sparked up, arms loosened quite a bit. "And, what came of it?"

"Eh, nothing much." I leave the wall, going to her side. "She still seems to hold some doubts towards me, as do her relatives."

"Huh? Did Mion and Shion also came to question you?" Widening eyes, curved brows, shocked for real.

I wonder if… you're on their side. The reason why I was here was because I had to wait for you, maybe I would have gone to my office to be in peace instead if nothing had happened with Tama. No… Tsukuyomi-san was royally pissed at the Pickles, so I guess they just seized their chance just now. I mean, I did fly like crazy. They sure got super suspicious after seeing that.

"… Yeah, a while ago. They asked me some stuff about the CCSE and junk. Shion kept asking about my childhood, for some reason."

"Your childhood? Do you remember anything from it?" Meiya's eyes gained a peculiar tint, as if concerned, when she got a bit closer.

"I've been having dreams about it, but they're just small little things really."

"That's not true! If you're remembering your past that would mean… Well, you would not be treated as a foreigner any longer. And aren't you glad to recover some of your memories?"

For some reason, you look happy about it. It does look like she knows something. So, she's… working for the General now. Huh… So that's how it is now, then.

"… Yeah, but they're just small tidbits. Well, let's waste no more time. I'm sorry for dragging you into this." I give her a small bow, I don't want her getting more negative with me after all. But she seems to be bothered by it as she fidgets in place.

"Do not mention it. I volunteered myself for this, now let's be on our way." I nod and we begin to walk.

Going back into the base, we make our way towards B3F, where the Instructor said she'll be. The hallways were still bustling with activity. I can only hope things go well tomorrow. There's also the matter of what the Guard will do now. Don't have an excuse for the blade and now they're asking for me to go to the Capital to 'fix the databases'. We still don't even know why his data was wiped clean… What if

Yuuhi wasn't on good terms with him anymore? Then… What could I do…

"Shirogane?"

I could fight with my voice distorted. But if they ask Sensei to hand me over… We're gonna have to pull some nice heist to deceive them and keep me hidden to ensure they never find out, assuming she wants to keep me here once I tune Sumika. All it takes is Meiya or someone else on the Valkyries to see my face or hear my voice once, and that's it. I trust that the Captain would keep it a secret, but if something goes wrong in the battlefield…

"Shirogane!"

"Eh?! Oh…" Arms folded real tight, lips pursed, and brows narrowed. And, as always, that purple fire coming out pouring in her eyes. "Sorry, I was lost in thought. What is it?" Meiya avoids my gaze for a while as her hands play with her tags.

"You see… I was wishing to apologize for my behavior yesterday and earlier today. I… well, shouldn't have treated you in such manner after all you did for me. Could you please forgive me, Shirogane?"

Her voice seemed clear, her eyes had no clouds over them. She is being honest, but is this some ploy to make me lower my guard? Regardless, I can't go making things worse.

"It's cool, Mitsurugi. But why did you get upset? Did I said something that I shouldn't have?"

"No, it's just… Do not worry about it, twas nothing but a show of weakness on my part. Also, could you stop calling me Mitsurugi? I thought we had agreed that you could call me Meiya." She purses her lips as she stares at me.

I know that when she looks squarely at me while moving her lips like that she's being honest, and a lil' bit bothered too, so this isn't part of a ploy or anything. But… I can't understand her. Yesterday she got all suspicious, now she wants me to call her Meiya again. Is this some sort of 'Cold-Warm' play she's doing on her own to make me lower my guard? Sigh… Whatever.

"Well, since you got upset at me again, I thought it would be best to put some space between us. I don't want to make the squad uncomfortable again, there's enough with Ayamine. Is it really alright for me to call you Meiya?" She looks away as a blush appears on her face for the briefest instant, then she faces me again while brandishing a serious expression.

"Yes, you can keep calling me Meiya, but on one condition."

"… What condition?" Is she going to ask me to tell her all I remembered from my past? Or to go talk with Tsukuyomi and the General or something like that?

"You may continue to call me by my name…" She looks away, her voice fading into a whisper. "… if you allow me to also call you by yours."

"You want to call me Takeru?" She twitches slightly in surprise, then starts fumbling one of her hands in the air.

"No, I don't. I am merely stating that it would be fair for me to call you Takeru since you call me Meiya. So, if you wish to keep calling me-"

"Fine, sure."

"Huh? Fine? You mean… I can call you Takeru?"

"Why are you so surprised? You know I don't really care a lot about etiquette, so if you're comfortable calling me Takeru you can do it, I don't mind." And it seems like you're just being you this time. I

missed this cute side of her, and I know she can't lie when she gets all bashful.

"Really? Then… T-Takeru?" The blush on her face grows larger as she comes closer, looking at me with bated breath as if she were waiting for my approval.

Meiya, stop being so cute. When she gets like this my heart melts, since she reminds me of my world's Meiya a lot. *Uh… Don't use that sweet gaze… Must suppress… the urge to hug…*

"Yes, that's me. Now stop getting all embarrassed." I smile at her to hide my own embarrassment, causing her to slightly pout at me.

"I am not embarrassed, not in the slightest." Folding her arms, another bothered gaze came my way. It's so nice… to have this back. "So… Takeru, let's hurry to the Instructor's room."

"Yeah, I know."

We resume our walk, but now Meiya was bearing a small smile. I don't get it, did the Guard talk with her or not? Or did she just got envious of my skill and that was it?

Well, anyways, it is good to see we finally made up. Maybe with this she'll finally stop giving me cold looks and stuff. Though… I wonder how long it'll last, what with the Guard coming after me. Looking at her, at that small, honest smile, the same one my Meiya had during our last talk…

"… It would be nice if it lasted."

"Huh? Did you say something?"

"Nah, don't mind me. Just lost in thought again."

"Huh… Is that so? Then, might I ask your opinion on our morning practice as we walk? As well as about that maneuver you employed during your sparring."

"Sure, don't see why not." Smiling at her, she returns the gesture.

Not as sweet as the one in my world, but still, charming as only she could be. *You truly look most beautiful when you smile. As beautiful as you also are fearsome, whenever that fire spawns on your eyes. Here's hoping we can… regain at least a sliver of the bond we used to share before, however little it may last .*

# Evoking Bonds

A/N: I've been forgetting to add a memo about the changes of this rewrite. Sorry for the delay.

There's only some very minor changes before Ch. 24, like Takeru speaking of Majora's Mask with Kasumi. The first "big" change is in Ch.18 in Takeru's reaction to his fight against the chasers, and his talk with Meiya on Ch.20 being a bit different.

From Ch. 24 onwards, there are tiny scenes added to this middle arc. At the end of Ch. 25 there's a scene from D&R I never got to post, then a small addition of Mana taking Takeru's Minaru Kamui, the earlier chaps of D&R are added to clear things up, and there's some more PoVs from Kei and the squad detailing their first days after the CCSE. Small new things, don't change the plot.

What does change it a little is the opening segments of Ch. 24, 37, and 39, since they show things I didn't get to tackle in D&R. Those are all the 'sparky important things' added that are new and warrant attention for the plot going forward.

I know asking the readers to yet again go through these large old sections is hard, to not say impossible, so you can simply wait until we're back to the Shirogane chapters, if the wait is worth it to you.

As always, thanks for reading. Stay safe.

Zuoriel

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**Chapter 42: Evoking Bonds**

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*November 29 th . Around 3 PM.*

*(On a hallway.)*

**[Takeru]**

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"And then the Instructor basically said that she will order Tama to be the leader for the day, on the grounds that I have to be part of all evening trainings from now on." Chizuru nods to my words, tapping her glasses.

We got lucky NotMarimo-chan was willing to hear us out, honestly. Using myself as bait was kind of a risky gamble, but I'm really glad she agreed in the end despite her usual sharp tongue. Even if this means more training and less resting for me.

"I'm sorry Shirogane-san, because of me…"

"Don't worry Tama, this was my idea to begin with." Smiling her way, what stiffness was in her evaporated away.

"So, I suppose Tamase will have to guide the Undersecretary during his visit to our side of the base, right?" Chizuru seemed relieved things went our way.

"Exactly." Meiya said while nodding. "Tamase is only required to play the role for a brief moment, it shouldn't pose too much of a problem. Also, Takeru suggested that we make an armband to… Hm? What's the matter? Why are you looking at me like that?" The rest stared at her, obviously shocked.

"… Meiya-san, how did you call Takeru just now?" Mikoto, ain't those evil eyes a tad bit too much?

"How? I called him Takeru, did I happen to stutter?" She looks at me for confirmation. So you can't even tell they're surprised?

"Mitsurugi-san, why are you calling Shirogane-san by his name?"

"Why, you ask? Well, he's always calling me Meiya so we agreed that I could call him by his name as well." She had to go and say it

so happily, folding her arms and rising her chin upwards.

"Huh, so that's how it is. So Shirogane-kun, you allowed Mitsurugi to call you like that." Raising a brow, tapping her glasses, and narrowing her eyes at me, she kept staring. We're only missing the snake hair for bingo.

"Keep it in your pants, leader." Kei, please don't taunt her.

"Ayamine, now's not the time for your quips." Thank God she ignored her.

"Neither it is for you to try to establish dominance." Tilted into stillness, save Meiya who cocked her head, the others couldn't simply form words for a sec, frozen in place.

"W-What do you mean by that? Can you stop with your double meaning phrases for today?!" Chizuru berated her as she hasn't done in a long while.

"Come on, you two. Don't start-" However, here thar be dragons.

"Are you really that thirsty?" Kei gives her a side glance.

"What are you implying?"

"Here, have some water." Eyes closed, she hands Chizuru a bottle. Where did she even get that from?

"I don't need it!" Stepping in between them, looking at each one once, I fold my arms.

"Please, you two. We've gotta talk about how to deal with Tama's dad. Remember, let's all try a bit harder to communicate better. And, by the by, why do each of you have a swollen cheek?" They both look away, pursing their lips. Please tell me you didn't just blow everything up between each other.

"One for one." Kei said, tapping her cheek with a finger.

"We said what we had to, and tried to get past some… troubling views we had." Tapping her glasses, she looks at the rest of us. "So, to leave everything truly behind us, we just gave the other one last slap for all the baggage we had between us so far."

"That's… a bit more extreme than I thought you'd be willing to do."

"Yeah, Chizuru-san that's a bit too much, in my opinion." Tama nods as Mikoto scratches her head.

"… It wasn't my idea."

"But sure you did retaliate." Kei shrugs, smirking her way. The comment makes Chizuru frown, choosing to say nothing as she fumes in groans.

"In any case, we've dealt with our prior issues as good as we could." Tapping her glasses, she tries to chill down. "But I doubt we'd be able to simply get along perfectly from now, so… well, let's just do what we can. So please stop with the one liners, Ayamine."

"… I'll try." Looking away while plucking her lips, this only makes Chizuru groan more.

"Sigh… You do you, but don't go overboard. We've got something important coming up right now, okay?" They both nod, Chizuru sighing and Kei shrugging.

"Yes, Takeru is right." Meiya nods, arms folded as well. "We should discuss what are we to do tomorrow if the Undersecretary inquires about our trainings. Please keep your arguing to a minimum for today."

"… Takeru, huh?" Kei smiles at her, making Meiya purses her lips at the teasing.

"Well, anyways! Takeru, in what do you think Tama's dad is going to come? Maybe we could get to see a destroyer?!" I've never been

more grateful for Mikoto's random outbursts than I am now.

"Yeah, that's probably what they'll use, right?" Let's try to get back on topic.

"Yeah, Papa did mention the re-entry destroyer sometimes." Tama followed up on the conversation, a smile back where it belongs.

"Then, it stands to reason why we are unable to proceed to the mock battles. In any case, let's discuss what we'll do tomorrow." Chizuru got in charge of the conversation, and we started to discuss our ideas as we walked to nowhere in particular.

Hopefully, this will turn out okay. We may have a better OS and the warning to make sure the OTH is ready, and now I know the Valkyries are at the ready if Tama can't do it, but still… I hope she can step up to the challenge.

After we agreed to simply be honest about her sniping results and how she's always on the lookout so that we don't fight as the motives for her being the leader, we then helped Tama practice giving us some orders, but she got super tense and started shivering midway through it.

Since we needed some privacy, Chizuru suggested that we went to the library to debate on what to do, and study while we were at it. The punishment only forbids me from going to the PX or the barracks, so I'm all clear on that front. Despite the whispers and nasty looks, that is. Sitting in a far away table, to not be in sight of any sudden visitors in case they had a bone to pick with me, we also picked up some books and stuff to have Tama know the procedures and junk just in case.

After debating on how to act around Tama's dad, despite her refusal to tell us what she put in the letters, our leader decided to have us do a reread of the lessons as well as the plans for the coming mock battles. Which are the same plans and formations we always used, but with me as a Gun Interceptor. Now they wanna use Meiya and

Kei as our vanguard, me, Mikoto and Chizuru as our midfield, and Tama alone in the backrow. Seems like they value my vision and pacing more this time around.

"With you covering their backs, Ayamine's random charges won't diminish our chances to clear the battles, and you also could team up with Mitsurugi should she find herself alone at some point." Again making circles in the air, she explains while looking at all three of us in the eye.

"Come on, now. Don't be so harsh with Ayamine, all of us got things to polish."

"Indeed, Sakaki. We triumph and fail as a unit, singling her out shan't yield positive results." Meiya nods, arms folded.

"Sigh… I'm not." Tapping her glasses, she leans back on her chair. "I'm just telling you my priorities. I can barely keep up with Ayamine's stride, but you two can do it effortlessly. All I ask is that you remember to not stray too far if you decide to advance beyond the plan's goals." We two nod, Kei was looking at the ceiling. "Ayamine, what is your opinion?"

"I agree with the plans. Also, as long as you remember to move one breath faster I think you'll be fine." She gives her a thumbs up, finally willing to talk without sarcasm anywhere.

"I will try to put your advice to work, but I don't know how fast I'll manage to get used to that pace, so for now let's play it safe. By the way, Shirogane-kun, could you tell us how you did that aerial move?"

"Hm? Sure. The key point is in freeing the boosters for when you reach the peak height of a double jump, so that you can reposition them to perform a full boost dive. Then-"

The lesson then turned into me lecturing them on my crazy acrobatics, and how they are effectively pulled off, and how a quick

random acceleration is what allows me to not crash every time I do my stunts.

It's not that I'm always at top speed, I just increase my speed to get the most impulse before hitting my target. But since I then let go of the pedals, the coming deceleration and unlocking of the jump units' positions lets me change their orientation to soften the eventual landing. Sure, the timings are really tight, but it isn't impossible to do. I mean, I can do it. That's proof enough.

"… So by knowing your craft's capabilities to such minute detail, you effectively change the psychology of the battle from your point of view." Meiya remarked, nodding with a hand on her chin. "Which is why you prefer manual controls, since they allow you to coordinate your maneuvers to the smallest detail. So it was all in minimizing the time you're in the air, while simultaneously reducing the windows where you're vulnerable to be tumbled."

"Uh… Yeah, that."

And again, she overthinks this. To be honest, while the move does have its merits, I merely use it because I'm used to it as my finisher after playing with the Kaizer too much. It's much more effective as a surprise attack or as a counter to the waves of Tanks we face, if I get enough space to prepare the jump without any of them getting onto me.

"… But the damage to the TSF is too grand." Mikoto says, reading the control logs she, somehow, had printed already. "I'm not saying it's a bad idea, but… well, doing so many of them is risky."

"It's okay, I know it's more of a gamble. It's an ace in the hole for a reason, it's not the consistent attack that I rely on most of the time, after all." Smiling at her, she also returns one at me.

"But it sure is amazing…" Tama says as she looks over the logs. "You three made some very precise moves at the end there."

"Yeah, the leader sniped Monster-kun really well."

"… Oi, who're you calling Monster-kun?"

"You, of course. I still can't understand how did you came up with the move." Eyes still narrowed, she reminds me of my world's Mikoto after he faced the Elef.

"Sigh… It really was a lucky shot, though." Tapping her glasses, she leans back on her seat. "But I believe all of us should at least try to perform those… double boost jumps he does."

"Just that? What about the cancels or triple jumps?"

"I… don't think I can take those." Scratching a cheek, she looks down.

"I wanna know how you spun your Fubuki when I grappled you." Kei asks, leaning closer.

"As for me, I would welcome a lesson regarding the 'cancels' you spoke of before." This time Meiya said, eyes a bit narrowed for some reason.

"What about you, Tama, Mikoto?"

"Huh? Ah, well… I think I also want to learn the cancels and the double jumps at least, if you have the time of course." Again playing with her tags, Tama gave me the lonely kitty eyes. Uuh… That's cheating. I nod at her and she beams back.

"Hmm… For starters, I also want the same as Miki-san. Once we pilot more, I'll see what I want to polish." Smiling as she kept reading the control logs, Mikoto nodded my way.

"Roger… So, well, do we have the manual around here?"

"I'll go pick it up." Kei stands up, going to the shelves.

"Bring the one about repairs, too." She nods, giving a thumbs up. Sigh… How good it is to have mended this bridge…

"Ahem…" Looking back at the table, a certain pair of eyes were spewing purple fire. "Then, should we begin with a preliminary opening, Takeru?"

"Fine, fine. Let's talk with a timer in mind, to explain the random accel to reach a double boost jump quickly. Mikoto, you have the pages of when I exited the highway ready?"

"Uh… Going by the time mark… Oh! Yeah, here they are." First giving them a look herself, gaining Chizuru's and Meiya's groaning, she then laid the pages in the center of the table.

"Alright, let's compare them to both my other moves, Sakaki's and Ayamine's jumps, and the other page with the state of our virtual machines to show the impact it has on the joints." Kei comes back, leaving the books on the table, and after clearing my throat, I then begin the explanation.

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**Around an hour and half later…**

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"… I don't get it." Kei says, slumped face first on the table.

"I'm telling you, you just gotta use one booster to begin the spin after gyrating with a single feet to ensure you remain in position. Just lightly start the jump unit and then let go, you gotta do it in one breath."

"Impossible. My wrists are gonna die."

"… I'd have to agree." Mikoto nods, sounding deflated. "I can understand the jumps, but how can you be so sure to do a cancel? If you miss the prediction, you're getting shot down."

"You just gotta move faster."

"That doesn't make any sense." She groans a bit, plucking her lips.

"Yeah, and remember that time you didn't beat me?"

"Wh- T-That's because your movements are too erratic to follow most of the time!"

"And why do you think that is?"

"Eh? Well… Because you'd get shot down otherwise?"

"Exactly. Both you and Tama give me less than a second to avoid a hit. At least I can see where you are, which makes maneuvering easier, but Tama? Yeah, I can't dodge what I can't see. Got no choice but to do random turns and accel if I want a shot at dodging her."

"C-Come on… I'm not that good…" Again playing with her tags, her gaze sinks in embarrassment.

"That's not true, you're really better than you think." Mikoto nods alongside me.

"Monster-kun speaks the truth." She says, still resting a cheek on the table.

Seeing mine and Kei's smile, Tama blushes a bit as she looks down, muttering a thanks. As sweet and humble as always.

"Sigh… It's complicated enough to just get hold of the jump timings, but to also try to predict the firing lines of the enemy?" Chizuru sighs, a hand on her forehead.

"Well, it is proof that Takeru's results are not only fruit of innate talent." Meiya says as she keeps reading the control logs alongside the maneuver manual. "He has clearly polished his knowledge much to deliver these results. And if we also pour in a similar workload, our

own efforts shall certainly improve even if we cannot replicate his own quirks."

"I agree." Tapping her glasses, she leans an elbow onto the table and a hand on her chin. "Still, this merits more reading. I still can't fully grasp the image of the movements in my head."

"Yeah… Um, maybe we could leave this practice to the sims?" Mikoto taps the books and the notes they had taken, looking at the rest furtively.

"I'm on board that idea." Kei lifts a thumbs up, as well as her face off the table.

"Yes, it would be most dangerous for us to try these concepts without mastering them first." Meiya nods, as does Tama. "Takeru, could we perhaps continue these lessons during the evening trainings from now on?"

"I mean, I don't see why not. Whether it is with Takamura or the Instructor, I agree that it's better to leave this practice for the extra trainings." Wouldn't want them scoring lower numbers due to failing to do the cancels or jumps with the old OS, after all.

"Well, now that that's settled… Should we end this for today?" Chizuru looks at us, we all give a nod, except Kei who yawns. "Alright, let's put everything in place then."

Grabbing the books and papers, we began to tidy things up, the others debating what they understood of my words as I went to the shelves.

"… Hey." Kei elbowed me, a book in her hand, as the others kept talking.

"What's up?"

"Nice of you to help Tamase with her dad."

"Just doing my share, is all. Tama was always nice to me, it's only normal I'd return the favor."

"Yeah, that's right.… Sorry."

"Huh?" Placing a book in its place, I look to her. Looking down, playing with her tags, her lips moving as if unsure of what to say.

"Sorry, for being an asshole all this time."

"Hey, we already went over this. It's cool, really."

"Still… I should have known better after the CCSE… So, uh-"

"Don't say it, it's okay. I did something horrible, and it was obvious you'd be reluctant to trust in me. Let's just… try to get along from now on, okay?" Smiling at her, she nods.

"So… You really… aren't that violent, right?"

…

"… Do I… look like that in your eyes?"

"Well, when you charged at me, I was frozen. You sounded like a monster for a second as you screamed at me then, charging so fast I couldn't even react." Finally looking at me, a minuscule shaking of her lips, she gulped as she stared. "You truly… aren't a conscripted soldier?"

"Sigh… No, I'm not."

"Then, about… what you said back then… about someone needing me after I was dead…" Holding my gaze, making me feel acid down my throat again, she takes a step closer. "Who was that about?"

"… About someone I lost… to an unfortunate accident before I had to come here. Someone that, just like you, didn't want to retreat, no matter what." Exhaling as I look up, softly biting my lips, a hand goes

to the back of my head as I think of those fights. "I'm no one to tell you what to do with your life, and you are right in a way. Sometimes, the red button is the only option left. Just… I'd like to believe we can work towards a better result in our fights. I know that it's impossible to have zero casualties in a mission, but… that doesn't mean I don't want to try to get them as close to zero as I can." And even if it's for the best, I don't want to use others as meat shields. Just as Sumika planned during Ouka, to have us be the sole strike force to protect all the UN vets that were going to be sent alongside us, I want to be the spearhead, the spiked pavise that'll protect the rest from those unending, unyielding hordes of BETA.

"I… see…" Her gaze dropping, a hand going to the back of her head, she stole gazes at me now, oddly hesitating in her words. "Um, then… The CCSE… was just an accident, right?"

"No, it was a mistake I chose to make. But… if you're asking if I'd do that in the future, then… No, I'm not that violent, and I don't want to be. If left with no other choice… I'll probably do something like that, but only if it is to save a life, either mine or someone else's. I know it's hard to believe me with how I pilot… but I'm not willingly doing something like that again unless I'm absolutely out of options."

Looking straight into my eyes, she then grimaces as she lowers her gaze.

"Sorry, didn't mean to accuse you or anything."

"It's okay. I… get why you'd want to confirm if you can trust someone like me."

"So…" Scratching her head, still looking down, she, very slowly, raises a hand. "Could we… start over?"

Sighing as I smile, I give her a firm handshake. She stalls a reaction, opening her eyes wide. Seems like she didn't expect me to agree so quickly.

"Really? Everything's cool?"

"Yeah, for real. I'm not telling you to let what I did go, but we can begin to work together if you think I'm worth your trust. And yeah, that means I do trust in you, Ayamine."

"… So you think I can fit in the team?"

"We're already part of it, if I fit in of course you would too. Let's do our best to get commissioned, and then we'll kick the BETA's ass back to the other end of the galaxy. Good enough for you?" Smirking at her, she finally tightens her hand around mine as she returns the smile.

"Yeah, good enough."

It's so good to see we could finally reach a truce, Kei. Here's hoping we can keep getting along from now on. Finishing our business in the library, the girls decided to go to the PX for dinner. So I said my goodbyes for the day, going to get my own dinner. At this point, even the paper bag looks tasty to me.

Going down to Hangar 90 as I ate, there I checked up on the orders I had left during morning. The design of the sword seemed to be defined already, now it was time to do the math to see if it worked. The actual production would take a lot of time, so I might not see it in action this year. The M61 was ready to be mounted, but we need some more time to double check the internals of the Takemikazuchi, we do not want to break it just to do things fast.

The rest of the weapons are coming along nicely. I also gave an explanation to the mechanics and engineers about how I saw the Blade Armor for the Shin Kagerou, with fins similar to the ones on the Super Tomcat. It would have them on its forearms, feet, legs and shoulders. That will protect it from all the Tanks and it's not that hard to do, unlike mounting a machinegun on its waist like we're trying to do for my Type-00C.

Also, I'm glad I finally got an answer on the mail. Though it'll have to wait until after tomorrow, it's good to know he was willing to hear me out. Well, let's time my steps. I do need to make sure I'm not being played here.

And since that's over and done with, I ride the elevator towards Sensei's office. Exiting and going up to the door, the usual knocking is followed by the usual ding of the thing being unlocked, and so in I go.

"Good evening, Sensei." Facing me, eyebags marked hard, she stopped typing on her PC as I approached.

"Good evening, Shirogane. Is anything wrong?" Her tone slower than usual, colder too, her eyelids lowered a tiny bit while looking at me.

"Not wrong per se, just thought I'd drop by to see how was everything."

"Under control. The Valkyries and the MPs have been briefed on the patrols required, the OTH Cannon is ready to be used at a moment's notice, and anyone who was looking the least bit suspicious has been observed by Yashiro."

"I see… Good to know. So, by the way, the Guard approached me today."

Then, she looked into my eyes, saying nothing. A hand on her chin, a stone-cold mask.

"… What did you tell them?"

"Nothing much. Just answered with bits I remembered during the sessions. I'm not sure if they bought it, but they pressed for three things. To see who gave me the blade, to know when I arrived here, and if I was planning to go to the Capital to fix the databases. They left me alone after that, without any real hostile signs."

"… Is that so."

…

"… You did know they approached me this time?"

"Yes, I was informed. Don't worry, your cover is air tight. And I am sure you've no plans to go to the Capital, so if you think they at least believed some of your words, there's nothing else to do. Now it's time to see how they react to what you told them."

"Well, you're right. So, I know you're busy but, can I see Kasumi today?"

"Hm? Yes, why would you not?" Narrowing her eyes a bit, she leans forward.

"I mean, you may need her for something or the other, it's not like I can waltz in to see her whenever I want."

"… Fair enough. She should be free for the moment, if she's done with what I asked of her. If she's in the cylinder room, then you're free to go there. Remember to wear the headband if you perform a memory recovery." Sighing a bit, she then looked back at the screen of her laptop.

"… Is everything really okay, Sensei?"

"Hm? Yes, why do you ask?"

"Besides the fact that you're being awfully cold? Is it something I can't help with?"

After again holding my gaze in silence for a sec, she begins to spin slowly. Leaning back onto her seat, looking up, she folds her arms.

"… I'm merely taking care of many issues all at once. The 00 Unit, the papers to present for the coming operation in Sadogashima, the formal request to host a trial for the XM3 and ask for the XG line, as

well making sure the ones responsible for the drop of the HSST are nowhere near this base."

"The ones… Do you think it's those terrorists you told me about before?"

"You don't need to know that, for now." Wow, back to the dry ice tone, huh. "So, I'm not in the mood for long talks today. If you dealt with the Guards well enough, then that's that. Tomorrow is a very important day, so do try to rest well. I'm busy now, so if that's all be on your way."

"… Roger. Later."

Didn't even get to sit down, huh. Whatever… This is on me for coming here in high spirits after how good things went today. I forgot… who I came to talk with, of course she'd just leave me in the dark again. If it's something serious enough to make her look like that…

Sigh… No point in delving too much on this, it's on her if she doesn't want to talk it out. After all… She's neither the Yuuko I worked side by side last loop nor the one I supported after everything was over in my first loops. This time… our goals differ, in a way. But this is just further proof, now that she's tired she dropped the mask.

Exiting her office, I try to enter the creepy hallway and the door slides open as usual. Making it to the cylinder room, I see Kasumi near it as usual. She turns around, moving her bunny ears when she seems me.

"Hey, Kasumi. How's it going?"

"Good evening, Takeru-san. Everything is fine."

"I see… So, check this out! I finally managed to make Kei and Chizuru try to get along."

"Really? But they seemed too stubborn…"

"Haha, yeah, they are. Luckily I could get my point across, even if I got a bit emotional back there. How about you? Is work going well?" I get closer, petting her head. She moves her bunny ears as I do, nodding.

"Yes, today I started since early morning, but we made good progress. But I can't tell you about it."

"I know, I know. It's top secret, after all. Just knowing you're holding up fine is enough." Seeing her faint like when we did the transfers is not something I'd like to repeat, after all.

"So, did you want to do another recovery session?"

"Only if you're feeling fine. We can play games if you're too tired." Narrowing her brows a bit, she looks right into my eyes.

"I can do it." Clear like a summer sky, her gaze seems honest, and her voice sounds as usual so she isn't lying.

"Alright. Thanks as always, Kasumi." Again patting her head, this time ruffling her hair a bit, I smile back at her.

"… It's nothing, I'm always ready to help you. So, um, what did you want to see? Something of the Guard?"

"No, today… I wanna see something of his family. Something of when we lived here. I dunno, how did he and Sumika met, where or who are my parents in this world… Just that it has to be short since tomorrow's schedule is packed already."

"I know… Then, let's start." Grabbing my sleeve real tight, she dragged me closer to the cylinder. "Could you try to think about Sumika-san this time? We can try the rest tomorrow, if you'd like." Hesitating like a cat seeing water, her grasps on my arm eased up as I sat down besides her.

"Of course. After all, it's thanks to you I can even see these memories. Just don't exhaust yourself, okay?"

"Yes, I won't. Leave it to me." Then, she went to pick up the weird-looking headband, and once I put it on she hugged my back, resting her head on it.

I closed my eyes, feeling the tingly sensation once more. Again thinking about boats and floating on water, I let the feeling cover me whole as a distant light slowly made its way into the center of my view.

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*November 28th, 1988. 0 7:34 AM.*

*(Hiiragi District. Sumika's House.)*

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Light poured through the window, a cool breeze accompanying it. The soft sounds of early morning on the street, the chirping of a frying pan as an egg dove into the oil, and the humming of a woman decorated the kitchen of the Kagami household.

Haruna Kagami was preparing breakfast while listening to the news, stealing glances at the house next door. She couldn't help to wonder what kind of people were her new neighbors. It was truly odd that someone would buy a house in this precise moment, with all prices on the rise. " *Hopefully, they're nice people and we can get along,"* she thought to herself.

"Sumika, breakfast is ready!"

Her call went unanswered, to which the woman let out a sigh. Climbing the stairs she went to her daughter's room, where she found Sumika reading a book by her bed.

"Sumika, come on. Breakfast is ready. You have to go to school." Haruna said as she ruffled her daughter's hair.

The little girl gave a nod and left the book atop her bed.

Haruna couldn't help to keep gazing at the small frame of Sumika as they went back to the dining room and as they ate.

It has been four months already since they were notified of her husband's death during an accident during maintenance, as a leak in a jump unit caused an explosion when he and his team were servicing said TSF.

Ever since then, Sumika's smile grew duller and duller until one day she stopped smiling. According to the people she talked with at school, it started when one of her teachers openly badmouthed Sumika's father. Since some of the kids have been treating her harshly, calling her names and being mean to her, Sumika stopped talking with the kids in her class, choosing to remain silent most of the time.

Some people in the neighborhood called her father a failure, a disappointment to the Empire. Kids can be really cruel when they want to, and after hearing some adults insult the Kagami family, they did what kids usually do: imitate the adults, since that's what they want to be. Some teachers scolded them, others encouraged them.

The schism that had been planted in Japan was to blame. You're either loyal to the Empire or you're with the foreigners. Those who cannot meet the expectations of the Empire, those who are not useful to society, become disappointments, failures, mistakes, and are scorned by a growing part of society, that thinks that failing to meet the expectations of the Shogun equals treason, since you're wasting the trust His Highness placed on you.

While small at first, due to the increased tension between the Shogun loyalists and the American supporters, this radicalized nationalist ideas have been popping up more and more on the media and in the general population's attitude as of late.

Obviously, all of that was above little Sumika's understanding. All she saw was people being mean to her and her Dad's memory. And the more sad she got, the more the other kids wanted to bully her. Only a few stood up for her, but she was alone in her classes. So, she simply stopped talking. She didn't react when the others were mean, she didn't talk with the teachers. She was too scared to do so, because the bullying would worsen whenever she spoke up.

Once Sumika finished eating she went to get her bag, and after her Mom fixed herself they were ready to leave towards school. However, as they got out to the street, they saw a slender woman coming out of the house next door. With chestnut hair done on a single hairbun and dressed in a modest orange and white dress, the woman had a child dressed in the same uniform of Sumika's school with a rather small bag on his back. They were also going to school, and when they looked at Sumika and her mom as they approached them, the woman gave them court bow.

"Good afternoon. I believe you're my neighbor? I am Miho Shirogane. I just moved to the house next door. It's a pleasure." The woman introduced herself very politely. Haruna, however, was surprised by how pale she looked.

"Likewise. I'm Haruna Kagami, the pleasure is mine." She smiled at her new neighbor, returning the bow. "This is my daughter, Sumika. Come on, dear, introduce yourself." Sumika looks at them, not coming out from behind her, and tells them her name softly.

"My, how cute. Hello, Sumika-chan. I'm Miho Shirogane, and this is my son. Takeru, why don't you-"

The boy stepped towards the new people and with a big smile greeted them before his mother even finished speaking.

"I'm Takeru, who are you?"

Miho heaved a sigh, no longer surprised at her son's lack of manners. Haruna, however, thought it might be a stroke of luck to

have another kid nearby. She held the hope that maybe the Shiroganes weren't going to judge them because of her husband's fate, and that the little boy could maybe be a friend to her daughter.

"I'm Haruna Kagami, Takeru-chan. Say, can you be friends with Sumika and play together from time to time?" The boy gave her a nod with a wide smile, and then circled towards Sumika.

"I'm Takeru, let's be friends Sumika!" He then promptly grabbed her hand and shakes it vigorously. Sumika seemed to be at a loss towards the boy, who clearly didn't care at all about her personal space.

"S-Sorry about Takeru, he really doesn't understand manners." Miho said, giving Haruna a small bow with an apologetic expression. "Takeru, come here. You're being rude."

"Why? She told me to be friendly." The boy pouted at his mother, causing her to sigh again.

"It's fine, really. It would be nice if they could get along." Haruna answered, pleased with Takeru's open friendliness. Sumika was still looking at him as he returned to his mother's side, as one hair of hers stood in attention.

"Forgive him if he ever bothers you. He just doesn't know to give others space." Miho said as she petted the little boy's head.

On the way to the school the mothers chatted along. Haruna told Miho of the layout of the district, as well as the people she should watch out for. She was surprised by her new neighbor's politeness and the general warmness of her speech. Since Haruna had gotten used to not speak much with her neighbors, she thought it was really nice to have someone like that to talk to.

However, to Haruna's surprise, Takeru kept making talk with Sumika about the smallest things. The sweets she likes, the manga she reads. She found the way he talked to be really funny, and had to

cover her mouth on many occasions when he argued with his mother about how he was treating Sumika. Her daughter wasn't bothered by him, though, unlike how was around most people she met back then. The boy's earnest friendliness seemed to have piqued her curiosity, even if she feared he would be mean to her once they were in school.

"So, how old is Takeru-chan?" Haruna then asked.

"Hmm? He's turning six in a few days." Miho said with a small smile as she gazed at the boy that kept talking to Sumika with a bright expression on his face.

"So he's the same age as Sumika. So they may be going to the same grade."

" *This is such a stroke of luck!"* she thought. If he ended up on Sumika's class maybe they really could be friends, that's what Haruna was hoping for.

"I see. It would be nice if they could become friends." Miho said what she had just was thought of, wishing for her son to find good company in Hiiragi.

"Yes, I hope they do." So Haruna agreed to her words.

They reached the school and the little ones went their way. Miho had to remind Takeru to not be rude, to which the boy puffed his cheeks and protested again. Haruna simply petted Sumika, telling her to try to enjoy her day.

"Sigh… I hope he behaves as he should." Miho clasped her hands as she looked at them as they entered the building.

"Is he usually so relaxed?" Haruna asked, causing the chestnut haired woman to sigh.

"All the time! I can't get him to be polite no matter how much I try. He's so stubborn."

Both mothers turned around and started going back their way, and Miho chose to speak up.

"Um… Thanks for accompanying me, Kagami-san."

"No, it was a pleasure. It's been a while since I got to talk at large with a neighbor. Lately everybody has been really tense." Miho groaned in agreement.

"The news have been filled with bad omens lately. With how the IJA is falling behind in some tech program to how bad the situation looks on Asia. It's really worrying."

" *Going by her face, she must have a close relative on duty. Maybe her husband?",* thought Haruna. She chose to change the subject, to avoid being asked about her opinion on the whole militar situation.

"Anyways, it's really nice, this neighborhood. It might not have as many stores as the northern part of the city, but it's still really nice. And since there's the base close we're safe from any kind of thugs. By the way, did you want to ask anything in particular?" Haruna tilted her head, and Miho gave her a small nod as she scratched the back of her head.

"Yes, actually I was hoping you could point me towards a grocery store nearby. F-Forgive me for troubling you, I'm sure you must be busy." However, Haruna smiled brightly and replied amicably.

"Shirogane-san, what do you say of going together? I also have to buy some things, so if you don't mind waiting for a bit, I could tag along with you."

"I would really appreciate that, Kagami-san. But please don't go out of your way, it's alright. Just tell me where the store is, I don't wish to trouble you."

"No, no, it's fine really! Since we're neighbors, let's try to get along. You know, trust in your fellows and all that."

Haruna hoped she wouldn't be like the rest, but she chose her last words as a test, to see how she reacted. However, Miho smiled warmly, happy to have already found someone friendly in the neighborhood, and thus made a mental note to repay the favor.

"Thank you. I really appreciate your kindness."

Both mothers didn't knew it, but with this seemingly innocent exchange they had set their children's doom in motion.

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*Same Day. Some time after that.*

*(School.)*

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The bell rang and the kids joyfully relaxed on their seats. Lunch break had just started, which meant food and games, and running away from math while they were at it.

Some girls glared at Sumika, so she chose to remain sitting instead of going out of the classroom. As always. She didn't look up from her seat as she took out her lunch. Everybody would just go and play without her, and if she tried to be friendly she would only be the receiver of more pranks anyways. No matter what she did, though, they would just be mean again when it was time to go back home.

"Hey, are you okay?" A boy was standing in front of Sumika's desk. The boy she met just a few hours ago, Takeru Shirogane looked at her rather worriedly.

"… Yes." Startled by the boy's stare, she couldn't really think of an answer.

Was he already coming to be mean with her? She did saw him talk with most of the other boys, she feared he already thought like the rest.

"Can I eat lunch with you?" The boy asked. Sumika gave a timid nod and he returned a smile.

Bringing a desk closer, he sat in front of her as he took out his lunch. Takeru started talking to her, asking about the last class. He was apparently bad at math, and so was Sumika. However, she felt no malice from him, he wasn't trying to mock her. It reminded her of the school life of just a few months ago, when everyone was friendly to her. However, a question appeared on her heart as the boy smiled at her.

"… Why?" She managed to squeeze out her worry.

"Eh? Why what?" Takeru replied, brows furrowing.

"Why are you being nice?"

It wasn't the first time it happened. Someone would talk to her and be nice, only to later pull a prank on her and laugh along the rest. Why was this new boy being nice to her, when the rest of the class had wanted to talk to him too? It perplexed her, it didn't made sense to her eyes.

"Aren't we friends?" Takeru's honest answer startled Sumika again. It had been quite some time since someone called her 'friend'.

"Really? You're not lying?" She looked at him unblinking, but he smiled widely at her as he nodded.

"Yes, let's be friends. Or… you don't want to?"

Takeru was now uneasy. He was told many times he was 'rude' and some adults didn't like him for some reason. He didn't understand why people got mad at him when he was only trying to be nice. The

other kids on his last school were also really mean to him, they said the samurais were bad and since his Dad worked for them, they treated him badly. Which meant he ended up being scolded for punching them, since they were insulting his Dad and the samurais.

"… No, um… Then, we're friends?" Sumika asked with bated breath.

Takeru nodded again, and began to ask her questions about her hobbies again, happy to have found a friend already. For the first time in a long time, she was enjoying her lunch break and he had another kid his age to talk to.

The rest of the classes went by quickly for Sumika and slowly for Takeru. History was something neither of them was good at, but Sumika was so really happy to have been called friend again that she didn't mind paying attention even if she didn't understand the meaning behind the names on her book, while Takeru was again complaining to himself about how useless it was to remember so many dates, making the class seem longer to him.

Some kids tried to make fun of Sumika when school was over, but Takeru scared them away to their and Sumika's surprise. He got scolded for punching two of them, but, very firmly and loudly, he retorted saying he was right to defend a friend.

This caused the teachers to again start arguing, some saying that it was wrong to allow bullying on the school, others defending the act, saying they were just drawing a line between them and 'the failure'. Both mothers took their children quickly and with a fast apology they made their way to their homes, not wanting to be part of the political debate between the teachers.

"You shouldn't punch others, but thanks for defending Sumika, Takeru-chan." Haruna petted the boy's head in thankfulness.

"Takeru, I've told you many times you don't have to get angry so quickly." Miho admonished him, causing him to yet again pout at her.

"But they were bad. Dad told me I have to stop people that are being bad." He rebuked, puffing his cheeks.

"Even so, no punching. Or I won't let you watch TV at night." The color drained from the boy's face, making Haruna laugh at his reaction.

"Um…" Sumika spoke up faintly, drawing the other's attention. "Thanks. Can we… Can we be friends?"

"But I already told you we're friends?" Takeru again tilted his head in confusion, not understanding why Sumika kept asking the same thing over and over.

Yet his honest answer startled the girl once more, who could do nothing more than stare at him as one of her hairs tensed up in surprise. She didn't understand as well. Why was he so nice with her? Why did he defend her? Sumika kept wondering about that as she gazed at him.

"Aren't you glad, Sumika?" Haruna stroked her daughter's hair softly as she smiled.

Sumika still hadn't smiled and remained with her poker face, but she was happy nonetheless. She hoped Takeru wasn't lying, she hoped that he was really her friend. He kept asking her questions about what shows she watched or what books she reads on their way home.

She diligently did her homework as usual before dinner, unlike Takeru who was slumped on the table refusing to open his history book again for the remainder of the day, much to his mother's displeasure.

Much to Sumika's surprise, his room was right by her window, so he also reached out to her before going to sleep, asking her about what she ate on dinner and telling her of the TV manga he watched before going to bed. Sumika again summoned some valor to open her lips

and ask him another question that was bugging her, despite how her tiny hands were shaking, and not because of the cold of the night.

"… Aren't you scared?" She asked timidly in the middle of one of his explanations.

"Scared? Of what?" He replied dumbfounded.

"Of the others in school. If you're my friend, they'll be mean to you too." Sumika was happy to be called a friend again, but she didn't want Takeru to be treated like she was.

It made her sad to think he would also be made fun of like she was, that he would also end up alone, that he might hate her for it. In the end, all the kids on her class that were once her 'friends' stopped talking to her when the others started to being mean with her. However, Takeru tensed his brows, raised one fist and spoke loudly with little flares on his eyes.

"They're the bad ones! I'm not scared of bad people. The blue samurais don't fear them, so I don't too." The boy puffed his chest proudly. Sumika didn't understand what he meant, but was surprised to see him be so brave. "So you don't be scared, we just tell the teachers when they're being bad with us. Or we punch them."

"But your mom told you to not do that." She countered as her eyes drew a downwards arc, worried about him being scolded for helping her.

"Guh… Fine, no punching." *'I'll just kick them then!'*, he thought to himself as he smiled. "But anyways! I'll lend you some of my mangas later." He said, hoping to have someone to talk about his favorite books.

"R-Really?"

"Yes! I'll share them with you if you want. Or we can read them together on Sunday."

The two little ones kept talking for a while, until Miho came to check up on Takeru. The boy then said his good nights and closed his curtains after waving at her one last time with yet another of those wide smiles. Sumika remained by the window, her nose barely above the lower frame, thinking about him. Before going to sleep, she looked up at the night sky, wishing this day wasn't a dream, hoping Takeru wouldn't end up being mean to her.

Since then, the two became nigh inseparable. Takeru would drive away the girls that bullied Sumika, and she would help him with his homework. He would always have a joke to make her laugh, and she would always cover him when he played a prank on the boys that bothered them. Both would read books together and share sweets and toys, to the point that sometimes the mothers and the two little ones ate dinner together in one of the houses. And they'll always spend some time talking by their windows before going to sleep.

Since then, Sumika slowly began to smile again everyday. Since then, both kids made more friends from the other classes, and so were no longer bullied anymore. Since then, Takeru always had someone to talk to when he felt alone or scared. Even if he had the tendency to show her scary things and she would end up sometimes punching his tummy too hard, they still were each other's best friend.

…

… Until one day, Takeru left Sumika's everyday life.

He would only come home during the weekends, full of bruises and scars. Despite his exhaustion, souvenirs for her were always on his bag, a wide smile always rose up when they met again, and he still spent his little free time with her during those days.

But he was no longer there in school or by the window. The rest of the gang were still friendly with him, they all gathered at a park to play during Sunday. But it wasn't the same. And because of that…

… Sumika couldn't help to slowly start resenting the girl Takeru always talked about when he came back. Unaware of when this started, the desire that 'Yuuhi' somehow disappeared had been sowed into her heart. She didn't realize it at the time, but she had fallen in love with him and was terribly jealous of this 'Yuuhi' who, in her eyes, had taken Takeru from her side.

So, despite the shaking of her hands, of how empty her stomach was at the time, she confronted Takeru about it once. He then told her he couldn't come back, he had to train much to follow his dream. Sumika's left speechless, she didn't want him to give up on his dream of being a samurai, but she also wished to have him by her side everyday again. However, unexpectedly to her, Takeru hugged her and made a promise. That he would always come back. That this was his home. That he wouldn't forget about her.

She was elated to hear that, all the awful feelings washed away as he tightened the hug and smiled at her as he always had done. Because it meant that his home was by her side. That he was studying away, but that he would come back. Even if it reminded her of her father's promise when he left to the army, she believed they would be able to be together one day. Even if it hurt seeing him leave every Sunday night.

She really thought her feelings would someday be reciprocated by him, and that then he would once more remain close to her, never to leave again.

… Sumika could never have thought that her affection towards him would end up fueling the blazes of what would eventually be Takeru's downfall after Yokohama fell.

She could never, not in any possible way, have thought that her pure affection would become one of the reasons, if not the core one, why the man once known as Takeru Shirogane became what many people in the Empire would refer to as a heretic samurai, why he ended up becoming something even Yuuhi was at one point terrified of.

Sumika could never have guessed that his happy memories of her would turn intowhat pushed Takeru to become the leader of the Special Investigations Brigade of the Intelligence Division of the Royal Guard, codename Swordbreakers, as he then embarked in a quest for revenge… and redemption.

# Resolve

## Chapter 43: Resolve

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*November 30th. 12:42 AM.*

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***[Takeru]***

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"So you're sure I won't get yelled at or anything?" I ask NotMarimo-chan, who narrows her eyes at me.

"Shirogane, this is not a regular situation. You can remain in the PX with your squad until the Undersecretary arrives. Sakaki, come with me."

Then, both of them leave the PX. Chizuru seemed really upset about this, going by how her brows were arched and how heavy her steps were.

"Hopefully Sakaki can deal with this task without losing her composure." Meiya watched as the two disappeared into the hallway.

"I know Chizuru-san is the leader, but why are they making her guide the politicians if Miki-san is the squad leader for today?"

"I think it's because of her standing, right?" Meiya nods at my words as she comes back into the PX.

"That it is exactly. Well, nothing we can do about that. Tamase, you're the leader now, what should we do?"

"Huh?!" Tama twitched, a sweat bead appeared on her forehead. The armband Meiya made moved slightly as she started shivering.

"Supreme Leader Tamase-sama, your orders if you may." Kei, you're just making her more uncomfortable.

"Huh? I… err… E-Everyone, remain in standby and… a-and… Haauuuwhawha…"

"Miki-san, you can do it! It's not so hard." Mikoto beamed at Tama, who sighed deeply and calmed down a bit.

"This is harder than I thought." Maybe if we had trained them with the Game Guy and the Stallion using CryRing Saga she would have gotten more used to the idea of leading.

"Fret not, it will be over before you know it. Have faith in yourself." Meiya smiled at her warmly, easing Tama's nervousness.

"Yeah… Just don't sweat it." Nodding at her, she smiles a bit.

"Hey guys… Think that's the ride?" Kei called us as she looked outside, where a figure on the sky was closing into the base.

"Oh! So that's a re-entry destroyer! I never got to see one up close." Mikoto was staring at it starry eyed. Was she so into this kind of thing last time around?

"Papa is… Papa is… Awhawhawha."

"Tamase, do not lose your composure. It is unproper to act in such a way, surely you've been taught how important poise is, right?" Meiya looked like an older sister now. Tama straightened her posture and stopped shivering.

"Yes, but I'm not… I mean…"

"So guys, shouldn't we go to the barracks?" They nod and we all look at Tama.

"Right. Tamase, your orders."

"Errr… Everyone, let's go back to the barracks."

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**A few minutes later…**

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"Let me tell you, they didn't stop talking about all of these stupid regulations that are literally useless in this day and age!" Fuming as she drew circles in the air, she then shook her head.

"It is most troubling to have such politicians on the UN, if they are the chosen ones to represent our nation in front of the international community." A hand on her air-vents, she nodded hard.

Meiya and Chizuru were talking about the guys she had to guide just a while ago, with Kei surprisingly nodding in agreement to them.

"I wonder if Miki-san will be alright."

"We gotta believe in her Mikoto. And Kasumi is with her, so she'll be fine."

"Hmm… You trust in Yashiro a lot, don't you?" Putting her hands on her waist she leans forward, staring suspiciously at me.

"Hey, cut it out. Kasumi's a friend, you know."

"Really now?" Mikoto stop being a jerk. "So, feeling fine today?"

"Yeah… Still a bit tired, though."

"What's up? Didn't get much sleep?"

"Well… Kinda."

Seeing how little me and Sumika met up was really nice, Kasumi was overjoyed at the memory. We were lucky to be underground, because the stars would have gotten so jelly of the bunny's shining

smile. That went well enough, even if I didn't stay to see how Sumika reacted to the memory since I was busted.

Of course, seeing Mom that pale wasn't nice but… Since I couldn't get that out of my head, as well as why Dad was nowhere in the house… What I saw today in my dreams… wasn't pleasant at all… Why was Mom in a hospital? I don't remember her ever having health problems back in my world, or at least they never mentioned anything. Sigh…

"Hey, you sure you're okay, Takeru?"

"Yeah, I'm alright. Thanks for asking Mikoto, but I'm just a little tired, is all." She doesn't buy my excuse, looking at me top to bottom.

"Well, you should rest more, in my opinion. You have eyebags growing under your eyes, and even your tone is showing signs of tiredness. I think it would be for the best that you slept in earlier today."

"Yeah… I'd be good if I could do that. Thanks for the advice." She scratches her ear, a small grin on her.

"Hey, they're coming! Squad, line up!" Chizuru spotted them at the end of the hallway and we all formed up, awaiting them.

The Instructor, Tama's Dad, Kasumi and Tama, who was clearly tense and moving like a puppet with one string, arrived at the barracks.

"T-These are the barracks, sir. To the left are the women's rooms and to the r-right are the men's rooms." Tama looked like a robot during a short circuit.

"Oh! These barracks do look nicer than the ones on the rest of the bases I've visited. Papa is so happy for you, Tama!" He's still the same doting father here, huh? It's nice to see that hasn't changed, for her to still have that good relation with him.

Wait a sec, is he gonna do that same joke about me and Tama being together?… This will not end well. I mean, in this world they shouldn't have feelings for me, so maybe everything will be alright. Considering how this world is, if everything goes the same as before things could end up bad for us, what with the Instructor almost turning into a Super Shayan on a daily basis and the stronger views people have here.

"S-Squad, salute!" Wow, Tama did it on her own this time. We all salute, the Instructor smiling at us.

"We've been waiting for your arrival, sir!"

"These are the members of Squad 207. Allow me to tell you that they've been excelling in their training, even if they are almost more trouble than they're worth." Ouch. Marimo-chan, forgive all the cruel things I did to you. You have no idea how much I miss you right now.

"Oho… So this is Tama's squad? Oh, you're the one from before… Chizuru Sakaki-kun, right?" She then takes one step forward and bows.

"Yes, sir."

"You must be exhausted after having to endure my fellows' ramblings, they can be very obnoxious, I know." He sighs in sympathy, nodding once.

"No, sir. It was an enriching experience." You were badmouthing them just a second ago though. I see Kei holding her pockets. So she wanted to comment on that.

"I heard you are Tama's second in command, am I right?" Oh, who told him that? The Instructor is grinning, so that's how it is.

"Yes. I have relied on her sound advice many times. I cannot count the amount of favors I owe her." I would like her good will to be repaid, but alas…

"Yes, I've heard about your attitude from Tama. You're just like your Father. Stubborn, inflexible, prone to screaming, and worst of all prideful and rude. Do try to not give Tama any more problems, will you?" Wow, she's holding it pretty good. Despite her trembling eyes, she's maintaining her posture.

"Y-Yes, sir. I'll do my best." She takes a step back and rejoins the line. As she does she shoots a glare at Tama, who starts quivering. Kasumi pets her head a bit, trying to calm her down.

"Now, you would be…"

"I'm Mikoto Yoroi, sir." Please try not to cry…

"Oh, yes. You're the happy one. The one who's always smiling and making everybody laugh with her eccentric quips." Phew, so this time she wrote nice things about- "And the one who's surprisingly flatter than Tama." Dammit Tama!

"Y-You know how much… Waaahhh!" Off she goes, leaving a trail of tears in her wake.

Tama keeps shivering while Kasumi keeps petting her. The Instructor is holding her mouth, so even she's finding this hilarious. How odd, she rarely ever shows us anything other than anger.

"Hm? What a strange fellow." One of his brows raises, his tone a bit confused. "Now, you would be…"

"Kei Ayamine."

"Oh, yes. You're the strong one of Tama's squad, right?"

"You're Tama too." Kei, no! "Nice mustache, by the way." Dammit! Why must this always go so poorly?

"Hey! Do not talk back to the Undersecretary!" Tama suddenly snapped and yelled at Kei. Oh God, she's twitching.

"Forgive me, Squad Leader." She's narrowing her eyes at Tama, who flinches back.

Tama, you're so dead. Kasumi nods at me, that means Kei is gonna have her revenge on her, huh.

"Well, I've heard you're quite a mystery and that you usually do your own thing. Do try to not get in Tama's way. You don't want to be like Sakaki-kun, right?" Double kill! I don't know who was more offended by that.

"… Yes, sir." Brows furrowed real tight, she stomps back into the line.

"Then, who's next? Oh, you must be…"

"I am Meiya Mitsurugi, sir." She steps up, saluting him.

"Hmm… Yes, I can see it. Hmm…"

"Do you not have anything to say about me, sir?"

"No, you see, I'd like my head to remain above my shoulders."

"I see?" She tilted her head, clearly not understanding his words.

Like, what did Tama even write about Meiya? I understand the guy not wanting to make jokes about a potential relative of the Shogun… But still, what the hell did she write?

"But well, seeing you here is a relief. Now I know why Tama could keep her hair like this." He nodded as a grin appeared on his face.

"Pa… I mean, Undersecretary that has nothing to do with her."

"Hey, Sakaki… What are they talking about?"

"Hm? You know, of why Mitsurugi and Tamase get to keep those ridicu…" Stopping short, she taps her glasses. "I mean, long haircuts without nobody saying anything." Am I missing something here?

"Sir, in this base we are allowed to maintain our personal appearance as we please, so long as it doesn't go against the dress code of the UN." The Instructor explains to him. I didn't knew we had a dress code here, since we get handed our uniforms after all.

"Oh, I see. Shame it's not the same in my office… Sniff… I do miss my old mustache from time to time." A single tear runs down his cheek. Wait… His old… You're telling me he had that same flamboyant mustache in this world?!

"Papa, don't be sad. Someday you'll be able to have it like that again." Tama beamed at her father, he smiled widely.

"Oh! Tama, my dear! You've no idea how happy I am that you can keep your do! Forgive Papa for making you go through so many hardships."

"No, Papa it's not your fault!" I feel like I'm missing something important here.

"Why is he so sad about that? What happened to him?" I look at the rest, who just make complex expressions at me.

"Don't ask me, we try to not pry into each other's business, remember?" Chizuru shrugged me off.

"He took an arrow to the mustache." Kei, are you being serious?

"Hm? What was that?" Crap, he heard us… "So you've told them about your bow skills, Tama? You must trust in them a lot." He smiles warmly at her, who starts fidgeting.

"Wait… Bow?"

"Oh right, you didn't know." Chizuru smiles, again tracing circles in the air. "Tamase is really good with a bow. We always used to poke fun at her, about how she should use a bow instead of a gun when

we had just started basic." So this world's Tama was also good with a bow?

"Tamase is really good. But maybe Tama Elder hit himself in the face and lost his mustache like that." Kei smiles as she strokes her chin.

"Hey! Ayamine-san, no disrespect to the Undersecretary!" The kitty hisses, Kei narrows a gaze back at her and she recoils down to normal. Oh Tama, you cute little thing…

"Oh! You look so graceful when you give orders, my Tama. Papa wants to see you give some more orders, go ahead!" And he immediately invigorates the flame back up, huh.

"Hey you! If you've nothing better to do, go scrub the latrines!"

Why do you always point at Kasumi?! And why do you always obey without protesting?! Kasumi looks at me and smiles, then leaves towards the baths. Sigh… What the actual fuck? I was kinda worried things would spiral out of control in this world, but this is still as chaotic as always and everybody is cool with it. What the hell, seriously.

"You look so mature. Papa is kinda sad, my cute little daughter is becoming a woman…"

"Papa, don't say that. It's embarrassing!" The Instructor smiles at her, same for Kei and Chizuru. However, Meiya was looking away.

"And you're the last one… Takeru Shirogane, am I right?" Let's do this! The HSST is coming at us right now probably, so I just gotta endure it.

"Yes, sir!" I step forward. His gaze observes me all over, this is actually a bit embarrassing.

"I've heard many great things from you. You're strong, smart, driven, and kind above all else. Tama has mentioned how many good deeds

you've done for the squad, and how you've helped them to improve in the short time you've spent with them."

"No, sir. I've just been doing my best efforts to not fall behind."

"And modest, to boot! You wouldn't happen to also know how to shoot a bow, would you?"

"Huh? I mean… No, I do not." I almost said yes. I do know how, but I don't know if this world's me also knew how to. So shut up, myself.

"Well, you can't be perfect after all. However, I heard you gave Old Man Mooroka a run for his money during an interrogation, not many people can do that. Your grit is most remarkable!"

"Thank you, sir."

"Hmm… Yes, you'll do just fine. Please Shirogane-kun, keep supporting Tama and standing by her side from now on, as you have been doing so far." Ah, yes. Here we go. "Let's practice for awhile, try calling me Papa!" A wide smile, welcoming and without any hidden spike or anything.

Now that I think about it, his attitude towards me is the complete opposite to that of my world's version of him. What the hell, yet again.

**TUG**

"Shirogane-kun, could you explain what he means?" Chizuru, please do not get so upset.

"I mean, shouldn't we ask Tama about-"

**AGGRESSIVE TUG!**

"Takeru, I have something to ask of you. Worry not, it shan't take long."

Meiya and Chizuru look even more pissed off than how they usually were in my past loops. Meiya's eyes were blazing purple again while Chizuru's glistened red as her hair rose up, snakes coming out of her twintails. Why?! I could maybe understand Chizuru, but you were getting all paranoid a few days ago! Why is the fire pouring out like when you sent me to that damned mountain?!

"Awhawhawha…" And now she's completely tilted, too.

"C'mon, guys. Don't go overreacting. I'm sure Tama has an explanation for this." My shoulders try to, very subtly, edge away, the crushing claws keep me firmly in place.

"Hm? I got the impression there was something between you two from Tama's letters, am I wrong?" Yes! Yes, you are!

"Undersecretary." Oh? What is Kei planning to do? "You misunderstood. There is nothing between them." Meiya's and Chizuru's grasp on my shoulders eased a bit. "And it's because they're so close, that there is literally nothing between them." God-fucking-dammit Kei! Don't smile at me like that! What about getting along and all that jazz?!

"Oho… So they have already gone that far…" He closes his eyes and caresses his mustache.

"Takeru, could you please explain what this means?" Meiya, dear, my bones don't bend that way. Her eyes, full of purple flames, resembled those of a dragon.

I really do not like it when she gets jealous. I still wonder why she's being so obvious about it, what data leaked into her?

"Tamase, why didn't you give us the happy news?" Chizuru went and addressed Tama in a small and slow whisper. Tama then seemed to suddenly become interested on the floor, doing a pendulum arc back and forth as she remained groaning.

"Sakaki-kun, don't make trouble for the Squad Leader." Kei poked the wolf, gaining a glare and a bark from Chizuru.

"Ayamine, I am just asking for confirmation on what the Undersecretary is saying."

"… Really now?"

"What are you implying now?"

"You're just jelly because you can't get Special-kun's special milk." Kei said in a mocking tone as she moved her closed hand up and down, closer and closer to her lips with each swing, which made Tama and Chizuru turn into tomatoes. The Instructor couldn't hold it in and I heard a noise escape her lips.

But… But… Dammit, that's embarrassing. On one hand, I'm happy she's willing to joke around like this. On the other, I really wouldn't like her to start making this kind of jokes often. It's hard enough to remain cool after they started being nice, being reminded of our intimacy is only gonna make me miss 'em more. And who knows how they'll react to that in the first place. Imagine Kei suddenly having dreams of us together after all we did to finally start over.

"Takeru, what is Ayamine talking about?" Meiya was the only one who didn't get it. You sweet cinnamon roll…

"Don't ask. It's better for you to not know." Especially considering the memory business, and how dear your duty is to you here. But then, she pouted as she heard my answer, her hands deeply rooted into her forearms.

"Why is that? If you have access to a special type of milk, I would very much like to try it. I've heard that milk is usually processed to have many different nutrients, so if it isn't much trouble, could you spare a cup of your milk for me?"

…

She can't… I heard that wrong, right? There is no way that she asked me that with a straight face.

"Pfft… Ahahahahah!" The Instructor couldn't hold it in anymore and started laughing.

"Hmm? Why is she laughing in such manner?" Meiya tilted her head, looking at the Instructor.

"Mitsurugi, you… Do you know what you just said?" Chizuru's face was completely red. Even Kei was blushing a bit.

"Ayamine, this is your fault." I send a scowl at her, and she ignores me as she closes her eyes and stretches a hand forward.

"Unexpected collateral damage. It was fun to hear, though."

"You can't just say things like that! Look what Mitsurugi said because of your joke!" Chizuru was stomping the tip of her foot in the ground. Kei shrugs, which makes her even more angry.

"Um… Can any of you tell me what is the problem? Takeru, is there any reason why you cannot give me some of this milk of yours?" Shut up, dammit! I should be worried about the HSST, not you! Ugh, I can tell my face is completely red by now.

What am I gonna do if Tsukuyomi-san is keeping tabs on you and heard this?! I'm dead! Screw the memory business, I'm dead! They'll assume I want to corrupt Meiya, and if she sees any other of our intimate moments, that might as well be true. If that happens, then Yuuhi is so gonna come for my head and cream me like a… No! Not like that, brain! God-fucking-dammit, myself! *In no feasible way would Yuuhi and I ever do anything of the sort! What the hell am I thinking, defiling her like this?!* Where the hell did that come from, anyways? Damned teenage hormones, making me imagine Her Highness in that way.

Meiya groans at my silence, a finger tapping her arm. Placing a hand over my eyes, I sigh and shake my head, unable to hold her gaze anymore, feeling a shiver on the back and down, as the Instructor keeps laughing.

"Awhawha, someone stop Mitsurugi-san!" Already on it, Tama.

"M-Meiya, I forbid you from ever bringing this up ever again."

"Eh? But… But why can't you-"

"Wahahahaha! Tama, your squad can really put up a nice act, can't they? Ahahaha!" His loud laughter, along the Instructor's, left us baffled. Is he doing this to spare us the embarrassment?

"Oh… Yes, sir. It was merely an act to show you how good we get along." Nice reaction Tama. Oh, Mikoto's back.

"Hey guys… Hm? What happened?" She stared with a finger on her lips at the blushing faces of the rest and the laughing adults on the side.

"Don't ask Mikoto. Just don't."

"Thank God Yoroi didn't heard that." Me and Chizuru share a sigh.

"Hm? Hey, what happened? Meiya-san, why is everybody acting so strange?"

"I do not know. Takeru refuses to tell me why he can't share with me some-"

"Mitsurugi, when quiet you're prettier." Kei put one finger over Meiya's mouth, saving the day.

"Well, let us continue with the tour then!" And as Tama's Dad prepared to move…

---

Thank you HSST, for saving me from this awkward moment. May Tsukuyomi-san have missed this little argument. Otherwise, they'll come for my he… life without a doubt.

"This alarm…" The girls look in shock at the red sirens.

"Undersecretary, DEFCON 2 has just been declared. It seems a destroyer lost control and is going to fall near us. Please accompany me to the underground command room." The Instructor apparently received her orders from a communicator.

"I see. What will be of the Cadets?"

"I do not know. For the time being, they should-"

"Surface Pilot Cadet Squad 207th. Assemble immediately in Briefing Room N°2. I repeat-"

"They're calling us to the briefing room?!" Chizuru's yell was mired by fear. The rest also looked petrified on the spot, as if they also had forgetten how to breathe.

"What is the meaning of this?! Ugh, Yuuko!" The Instructor sighed as she strokex the top of her head, drawing hard circles. "Squad! Head to the briefing room on the double!"

"Roger!"

"Take care, Tama." Tama's Dad took one last look at her before leaving.

"Y-Yeah… I'm off."

---

**Some moments later.**

---

Sensei's explanation went by just as I remember it, with the Undersecretary chiming in midway, until she revealed the OTH

Cannon.

"This is one of this base's greatest weapons, the OTH Cannon. It's already assembled, ready to fire. We'll take it down with this."

"Professor, the OTH Cannon isn't an anti-air weapon! It doesn't-" As before, the Instructor's complains are drowned by Sensei's chuckling.

"Oh yes, it can do it. This is our best bet, after all. And we did improve our base's equipment not so long ago." She sent a brief glance at me, a smirk in her face.

Right, the new radars and sensors will help Tama with more accurate data on her Fubuki, even when the Fubuki itself cannot be upgraded. We now could also indirectly help Tama's aim by upgrading her TSF's auto-aiming data with that of the training units we have been developing here.

I mean, I did say that the auto-lock wasn't good enough, and Sensei did want me to prove her how good going manual was, but I didn't expect her to try to improve the response time of the automatic aim systems too. Is that why I didn't miss most of my attacks during Niigata? Just how good are those new sensors? I'll have to read the docs throughly when I get the chance.

Sensei explains to the rest how the OTH works, it sounds exactly the same as what I remember. Except something about how she improved the shell's CPU to make it more accurate. Did she use something from Alt. IV, just like she did for the XM3? Maybe she was running against the clock to get that done, and it's why she's so tired.

"Professor! What are you saying?! Tamase is still a mere Cadet!" Glad to see the Instructor doesn't just go along with this mad plan, even if it is our best bet.

They start going back and forth again. Tama is clearly shaking now, holding her shoulders tightly. Eventually, the Instructor submits to

Sensei's plan and faces us. With an expression far more grim and pale than I ever thought I'd see in her.

"The fate of this base… is in your hands now, Tamase." The rest hold their breaths, Tama seems to have stopped breathing as she stood frozen in place.

"No… I can't… I'm not… I'm…"

"If the Professor has chosen you above all the pilots in this base, it means you're our best bet to avoid this crisis." She tried to pat Tama's shoulder, but then she moved backwards. Still quivering, she retreated away from us and the Instructor.

"I can't… I can't protect you. I'll fail…"

"Tama, please calm down. Listen to Papa, you can do it. You've been training for this, haven't you?" He tried to get near her, but she kept moving away towards the door.

"Tamase, keep wasting your time and the whole base is going to disappear. Your father right there will die too. Do you want that to happen?" Sensei, as usual, had no intention to sugar coat the situation we're in.

"I can't do it!" Tama sprints away, not even stopping at her Father's hand.

He looks at the door, grimacing at Tama's reaction. The rest are all clearly staring hatefully at Sensei. Sighing, I rub my eyes. It might be for the best to not have Sensei halt this accident, but… it's not pleasant to go through this either.

"… Professor, I do think you're going too far." The Instructor sent a scornful gaze at Sensei, who returned one full of stalagmites.

"Marimo, that only matters if we survive."

"Professor… Why can't we evacuate? Or have someone else shoot it down?" Mikoto stepped up, despite her shaking hands.

"Even if we evacuated, the secondary wave would scorch us to death, and it's not like we have the time to get many people under B10F in less than fifteen minutes. As for why it has to be Tamase, it's because she has the best numbers. She is the number one sniper not only from this base but from the whole Far East Defense Line, I am not exaggerating. But I will only wait five minutes for her, I do have other pilots. However, do let me tell you that this will reflect negatively in your resumes, to run away from duty like this. Now, go and see if you can find her and bring her to Hangar 16. I'll be waiting."

"Everyone, let's go!" I scream as I leave the briefing room.

Before I left, Sensei gave me a faint smile. Everything is under control, huh? Regardless, it has to be Tama. Otherwise, her self-esteem will plummet if she runs away now. Not only for the Kashgar mission but for her own growth as well, she has to surpass that fear.

All of us take a different area, I rush towards Tama's room in the barracks.

"Tama, are you there?" With the sirens booming around, I enter the dark room.

"… What should I do?" I turn the lights on and she her shivering on her chair.

And on the desk, there were the sauntpaulias. Our flowers, the ones that brought us together. Memories of our times, both in my world and in the other loops come back to me. As well as her ends. When she was devoured by the Tanks, when the Superior turned her into a Soldier-Class, when a light post squashed her beyond recognition. Tama…

"Hey. How're you feeling?" I slowly approach her, she's still crying.

"… I'm scared. I can't do this."

"Nice flowers, by the way. It's a wonder they grew so much in a place like this." She looked up with her reddened and teary eyes.

"… Papa gave me the seeds when I enlisted here. They're called sauntpaulias, it took a lot of time for them to bloom. Actually, they got sick not so long ago. They almost withered."

"That's a relief."

"I don't know about that." Huh? Her voice sounded broken, is she not happy that they didn't die?

"Why do you say that? Didn't you take care of them a lot?"

"… They remind me of my Mom. And that makes me sad sometimes."

Her mother? Now that I think about it… I never met her Mom, and they never talked about her when I got into a relationship with her. I don't really remember that much from our relationship back in my world, so I have no idea what kind of woman she was.

"But… You didn't like your Mom?" She rises her head, frowning as I never saw her do, and I unconsciously take a step back.

"Of course I did! She was… I adored her. She was always tending to the flowers in the gardens, back when all of this war was so far away." She again hugs her sides as her gaze sinks lower and lower.

"Then, don't you want to protect that memory?"

"… I can't do it." She slumps into her seat again.

"Tama, I think you can do it. I've seen your progress, I think you have what it takes to rise up to the occasion." I try to speak softly and crouch near her seat. Our eyes meet and the distorted light within her gaze makes my heart tear up inside.

"… Why? Why do you believe that? You could do it instead of me, you're so much better."

"I'm not as good as you. The TSFs have proved that, I'm decent but you're a natural. Have some faith in yourself, Tama."

"I can't do it! I just took my first piloting run, I get… really anxious all the time. If it weren't for the auto-lock, I'm sure I would miss all of my shots. I can't even think, I just shoot! My hands get all sweaty, I can feel this pounding in my head… If you all weren't by my side… Someone like me can't protect anyone."

"Nobody can protect its own life alone, though."

"Huh?" She looks at me again, I wipe the tears of her eyes before continuing.

"Someone once told me that, in my old squad. I don't think it's a bad thing to feel fear, we all get really scared from time to time. Hell, when I started I was such a failure, if my whole squad hadn't got together to get me in form I wouldn't be here today. It's not a sin to rely on others, Tama. Because I'm sure the rest feel the same, they're also anxious and nervous. And because you're behind them, they can rush forward without fear." She shakes her head as she hugs her sides tighter.

"That's wrong. No one could feel safe with me…"

"The flowers do, though. And anyways, we can't run or hide. We gotta face this head on, and I believe you're our best bet, so at the very least I feel safe with you." I smile at her as I get closer, she looks at me, tears falling from her cheeks.

"That's not… I can't…"

"Tama, even if you don't, the Professor can get someone else to do it. But there is a reason she chose you above everyone on the base, think about it. If whoever takes the shot fails, wouldn't you regret it?

It's a great responsibility, to defend the whole base. But isn't that what you've been training for? Even if it's fighting the BETA, shooting down an HSST, or defending a base, didn't you train because you wanted to protect something?" I reach out for her head, to try to calm her down. However, she knocks my hand away quite strongly, making me fall backwards.

"SHUT UP!"

"Eh? T-Tama?" Her shout caught me off guard, her eyes were sharp, she was angry as I haven't seen her ever be. I remained still on the ground as a monster spawned itself within Tama's eyes.

"What do you know about me?! What do you know about war?! You were living in America, what do you know of this war?! Don't talk to me like that when you haven't lost anyone close to… Ah…" She stops shouting and starts to cry again as she turns away from me. What did… happen to her?

"Tama, you mentioned your mother a while ago. Does that have anything to do with this?" I slowly get up, minding my distance.

"… Please leave."

"Is that what you truly want?" She nods slowly. "Well… Take it easy then. I'll go shoot that thing down. Or fail miserably at it."

"… Eh?"

I turn back and try to leave but I feel a tug on my back.

"… Why? Why would you do it? It's impossible… W-We're just Cadets, we can't…"

"Tama, there is always a way to make things happen, just that sometimes we can't see it right away."

"But why? Why would you… still try to do something so… so…" She chokes on her sobs, unable to finish.

"You know… I lost everything I had before coming here."

"Huh? You lost… everything?"

How many loops? How many times? How many lives? I don't even know anymore.

"… My base was attacked by the BETA, everyone on my squad died. I was the sole survivor, so I decided that I would fight to bring some peace to the world they left behind." Though it's actually worse than that, since I have my world's blood on my hands now too along all the fuck ups during my loops in the Betaverse. Both from the time I ran away and from this time.

"Your base… Your squad… But then, why did you come here? Why didn't you stay in America?"

"Because this is the place where I can help the most. Someone I respect a lot told me that those who wish to bring forth a change in this world must not look away from their responsibilities and must not waver when they have to bloody their own hands. I don't want to lose everything again, I wouldn't be able to live with myself if that happened. I don't know what you went through, and I won't lie to you. I don't understand you, everything won't be alright, and all of us will be dead in around ten minutes if we do nothing. So, if you think about it, doing something and failing equals the same as doing nothing, right?" I turn around and smile at her, her eyes oscillate around the room.

"What are you trying to say?"

"Is is really the same, though? Even if you failed, do you think we would hate you? We wouldn't have the time, I assure you. But, even if we will disappear, even if this is where we die, I want to live. So, even if I fail, at the least I'll know that I tried and I won't die with the weight of the 'what if' in my heart. I'll take it all in and break through my fears, because I have something worth protecting here."

"… You're strong. I'm not. I couldn't possibly…" She shivers as she wipes the tears off her face.

"Nah, I'd say I'm an idiot who doesn't understand the situation. And even then, I still believe you would be better for this." Looking up at me, shivering a bit, her lips tremble. "Tama, I believe in you. If these are our last minutes alive, would you rather be here, alone in the darkness? Or do you want to protect this base, or at least your father?"

"I… I can't. I'll just…" Her breathing gets rugged.

There's no point in pushing her more. I don't know what's different this time, but she can't do it.

"Alright. Forgive me for being so pushy. I gotta get to the hangar. Bye Tama." I move towards the door and get back to the hallway.

"… Wait."

Tama had her eyes closed with both hands grabbing the ribbon of her uniform, slowly walking out of her room.

"Shirogane-san, do you truly think… I can save Papa? Do you really believe in me?"

"Yeah, I do. And even if it isn't you who takes the shot, if we fail it's all the same. But do you want to be the one to protect him? Do you want to stop that HSST?"

"… Yes. S-So… even if I fail… You all won't hate me?" Tears again fall from her face, what the hell happened to her in this world?

"At the very least, I won't." She takes a deep breath, she's still doubting.

… The Nucleus did seem to be causing some weird stuff in them lately, right? Making Meiya be jealous, even making Chizuru get so bothered by my comment about her eyebrows. Let's see if I can

make that work on my favor. I get close to her and crouch in front, diving my gaze into her eyes.

"Say Miki. Why do you want to fight?" She twitches at my question.

"… Eh? Why? I… I wanted to…"

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to. But let me tell you why I fight. I want to someday recover my peace."

"Peace?" She makes a conflicted expression as she tries to drive back the tears that just don't stop coming out of her eyes.

"Yeah. I'd like to live long enough to see a world with some semblance of peace back. That's why I would go and try to shoot that thing down, that's why I came here instead of staying in America. Now, I don't know why you fight, but let me ask you something. Would you like to see those flowers blossoming somewhere under the sun?" I try to recall those two years we spent together on that other world. Where we planted the sauntpaulias on the base and got them to bloom.

"I… I don't know… I'm just…"

"Take the HSST out of the picture. Even if just for a little while. Would you like to have your own garden?"

"… Yes. I… do want to. But now…" She's no longer shaking. Please Miki… I grab one of her hands, running a finger on her palm.

"So you do want to have a garden. You can't have that if the HSST falls now." She shakes her head, now looking down but not pulling away. "And we've just begun to get along in the squad. It would be a damn shame if it ended now."

"Yeah… But… I'm scared…"

"All of us are. If that thing hits, then… all we've done will be for nothing. And we're putting the safety of this place on your shoulders.

But I'm sure you can go out there and take that son of a bitch down if you put your mind to it." She stares at me, distorted by the tears those eyes of her are having a storm inside of them right now.

"… Do you really think I can do it?"

"Yes, I believe in you. And if you're too scared, you can just shout your fear away!"

"Shout?"

"I normally joke around when I'm nervous, but shouting works too. I frankly just keep pushing on, to someday live peacefully again. I'll despair after I'm dead."

"Despair after you're dead?"

"Yeah. Today's too nice to let my gloom freeze me, even if I can't help but to be scared from time to time." I stand up, not breaking eye contact nor letting her hand go, this time entwining my fingers with hers. "Miki, would you like to have a garden again?"

"… Yes."

"And you want to protect your Dad?" She nods. "Then, you know what you should do if that's the case. Go up there, and strike that damn thing into the sea. For the base, yeah, but for your own dreams too." Letting her hand go, I then pat her head for a second. "We're all going to be there with you, no matter what. That's what comrades are for, after all."

She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. Then opening her eyes, she takes a single, but hard, step forward.

"L-Let's go. I… I'll do it. I will… I will protect Papa! And all of you! I won't… I won't let anyone die! And someday… I'll show him a new garden, like the one we had before." She wipes her tears and shouts loudly.

Despite her shaking frame, her eyes burned with a passion that I've rarely seen in her. Did my little bet work? Regardless, it's good to see her out of that swamp.

"Alright then, we better hurry up. We gotta get to the hangar before the Professor picks someone else."

"Ah! Yes, let's hurry!"

"Well, come here." Getting closer, I then lift her off the ground, carrying her on my arms.

"Huh? A-Ah, wait! Shirogane-san!"

"We're short on time, so I'm gonna rush to the hangar. Hold on tight, Miki." I smirk at her as she trembles, wrapping her arms around my neck as I start to sprint.

"Awawa! Y-You're going too fast!"

"Don't worry, you just hold on. And… Thanks Miki, for being so brave for us." Looking into her eyes and smiling, the hold on my neck tightens as she nods, lips quivering as if it were snowing.

"No… Thank you, for believing in me."

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**A few minutes after that…**

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After taking her to the hangar, the Instructor took me to the rooftop where we all gathered again, just like during the first loop. The sun almost halfway under the horizon, the afterglow already setting in, the cold breeze rustling over and moving the reddening clouds, not a word was being spoken. When they saw me and the Instructor come in, the four of them quickly got closer.

"So you made it just in time, Takeru." Meiya smiles at me as she passes me my transceiver. "Is Tamase alright?"

"Yeah, I think she'll be fine. She was really shaken, I tell you, but she agreed on her own. Don't worry, Tama's got this." Smirking at them, all of them also do the same.

"Good boy." Kei, I'm happy that you're happy, but don't pet me like that.

"Sigh… I really hope she's not forcing herself…" Tapping her glasses, she looks at the Fubuki that just appeared on the railway.

"Yeah, it is really unfair to place this on Miki-san's shoulders… To give her that experimental cannon and all…"

All of us then stood by the fence, looking at the weapon and its wielder as we waited. Of course, the rest are tense as hell and super surprised to see the OTH. All I can do is hope… she can push through whatever the hell this world did to her.

"Cadet Tamase, are you ready?" Sensei's voice rings on my ears, the others stiffen up as well.

"Ready anytime!" Tama's firm voice replied.

Sensei gave her the explanation and finishes it with an 'Impress your father, Squad Leader Tamase.", nothing goes unnoticed in this base, huh? So far so good, we still have enough time to fire three shots.

"Loading first shell. Aligning shot. Checking target's trajectory… All green." Tama's voice showed no hint of hesitation. No trace of what had made enough tears to fill up a hive leave her eyes.

"Firing in ten, nine…" Pyatkh announced the countdown, and as if in sync everybody seemed to have forgotten how to breathe. "… Three, two, one…"

**BOOM!**

And there goes the first shot. Tama loads the second shell.

"Impact in ten, nine… two, one… Target Intact!" She notifies us, clearly tense. No changes to that, huh?

"Two more shots…" Mikoto holds both hands together in a prayer-like pose tightly.

"She can do it." Kei was also tense as she gazed at the sky.

"Actualizing data… Aligning shot…" C'mon Tama, you can do it! After the countdown the second shot is fired, roaring into the reddening skies.

"Impact in ten, nine, eight… two, one… Target Intact! 115 seconds before impact!"

And it also missed. Just like during the first loop.

"Tamase…" The Instructor took off her transceiver and bit her lips. Even if she is super harsh with us, she still seems to at least care.

"You look extremely calm, Takeru."

"Hm? Of course I am, Meiya. Because Tama's gonna take that thing down." She smirks as she heard my answer.

"You have complete faith in her, huh?"

"Don't we all?" The rest finally sigh and recover a small smile.

"Everyone… I will not miss, I was just getting used to this cannon. Next shot… will hit."

"Go for it, Tama!"

"Yes!"

We all look at the sky as Pyatkh announces the countdown for the last shot. Tama takes one last breath and shoots, the rumbling shaking the air one last time.

**BOOM!**

And as the deafening sound left our ears, as the rest held their hands hard enough to make mountains out of their knuckles… The good news arrived.

"The target has been hit! I repeat, the target has been hit!" Pyatkh said, eliciting a shout from Mikoto and sighs from the rest.

"Great job, Tamase." The Instructor says, back to her usual tone.

"N-No, I could do this because everybody was here…

"Nah, this was all you, Tama. You saved our backs, girl!" She begins to stutter a reply, a sweetheart through and through.

"Yeah, that! You were awesome, Miki-san!" A few tears came out of her eyes, the others finally chuckled at her reaction.

"We're back to DEFCON 4. All units, stand by until further orders are given." Sensei ordered, finally releasing us from this event.

The cockpit of the Fubuki down below opened once it knelt, Tama waved at us from there. We returned it, Mikoto shouting again, until the Instructor took us, and dragged Mikoto, back into the base.

Sigh… We avoided this incident, and Tama managed to do it on her own. Finally… A good roll on the dice.

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*Same Day. 06:43 PM.*

*(Launch Pad.)*

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"This inspection was much more lively than I expected thanks to all of you. As a father, I have not enough words to thank you. Tama, you must cherish these friends you've made no matter what may come."

"Yes, I will."

"And I hope you don't give Squad Leader Sakaki more trouble from now on."

"Eh?!" The rest look surprised. Of course he knew.

"And also… I hope you can find here a path you can walk confidently. Cadet Mitsurugi, please look after her. I'm sorry to impose on you like this, despite my standing." Huh? What's this about? The rest look surprised too, except Meiya.

"It is no trouble. She is a valuable friend, of course I'll look after her." Tama's Dad smiles from ear to ear.

"I see. Tama, take care. And all of you too, good luck in your training."

"Salute!" We all salute him as he boards his ride and it takes off. Tama's hand was shaking a bit, her eyes never leaving his back as he moved to board the HSST.

It must be hard, to just say goodbye like this. But in a way, that is also a blessing. Because someday there will be no more goodbyes to say. Just like how my Tama is gone forever, someday even this fragile gaze of understanding between them will crumble. Someday… her only family will be gone, forever.

To stall that moment for as long as I can, and to do the same for the rest of the squad… That is why I'm here. To lead them to a better life after the war… and try to give them something to work forward afterwards. Sigh…

At least this went well enough. And if I again prevent Alt. V, he won't die either. Even if she's not with me… she'd still have her family and her own dreams.

"Shirogane-kun, what's wrong?"

"Huh?"

"You look so serious, are you alright?" Chizuru looked at me worriedly. I suppose that I was being too quiet.

"I mean… I was just thinking about how nice it is that they can still say their goodbyes, even if they can just salute each other."

"… I see." Chizuru, who lost her mother, must know what I'm talking about here.

"Miki-san, you were amazing! What you took down was even smaller than that!" Mikoto hugged Tama tightly. A lil' bit too… Hey stop! You're choking her!

"Mikoto, for the love of God, control yourself!"

"Well, sorry! I can't be as calm as you! She literally saved the base from being hit by something even smaller than that shuttle!" She waves her arms around as I pull her away from Tama.

"Awawa… Awhawhawha…" Tama starts swaying left and right with swirly eyes.

"Great, now she's nervous again."

"Tamase, you performed admirably. You truly are the Far East's best sniper!" Meiya smiles at her, rubbing her back trying to calm Tama down.

"Mitsurugi, that's wrong." For Kei to contradict Meiya…

"Hm? How is it wrong?"

"She's our sniper. That's what counts. Good job, Tamase." She again starts petting Tama's head.

"Haaauuu… You're gonna make me cry again."

"Tamase, you saved all of us. Be more proud of yourself!" Chizuru patted her shoulders making her finally smile again.

"Thank you. I was actually… really nervous. I could do it… because you were all there, believing in me, giving me courage. I won't hold you back anymore, I'll do my best from now on. So…"

"Tamase, you're always doing your best. Don't cry and look up proudly! You've proved your worth today." The Instructor smiles at her, and after seeing that Tama regained her composure, she turned around and returned to the base, not without giving us a warning. "I think you probably know, but keep the matter of the OTH a secret. As well as all about this little mission." We nod, saluting her.

After returning the gesture, she leaves with a smirk on her face. Then, Mikoto starts hugging Tama again.

"Miki-san, you definitely were awesome today! We're gonna have to improve to catch up to you!"

"No, that's not true!" She was again blushing as Mikoto laughed.

"Yoroi is right. We all have to make our best efforts in the mock battles that will come. We can't hold back Tamase after all." Chizuru winks at her, making Tama look downwards as a blush stronger than the sunset made its way to her face.

"Thank you everybody. Really." She looks at us with shining eyes. Her complexion is the complete opposite of the one she had when she shouted at me, now making the first stars a bit jelly of her smile.

"No. Thank you for protecting us, Tama." She again smiles as she makes a little fist pump.

"But really, your dad is as cheerful as you!" Mikoto comments as we return into the base.

"Yeah, Papa is always trying to smile through all the hard stuff."

"I didn't knew he was someone so important. Forgive all those times I talked down to you, Tamase." Chizuru gives her a small bow, making Tama nervous again. Talking about her Dad…

"By the way, why did he ask you to look out for her, Meiya?" She opens her eyes wide and looks away in a hurry.

"Eh? I'm… I think I shouldn't say." She caressed her ponytail as she looked away.

"It's alright, Mitsurugi-san. I'll tell them myself." Tama stops in her tracks and steps towards the rest of us. She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath, then she timidly looks up at us. "I am… well… The thing is… My family… is part of the Tozama. We are… or rather were direct servants of the Shogun, when she still was only the head of the Koubuin House."

# Underlying Shadows

## Chapter 44 : Underlying Shadows

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*November 30th. 07: 4 4 PM.*

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**[Takeru]**

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The base had gone back to normal, some more soldiers doing patrols outside as the sole difference. While some whispers filled the busy hallways, no one really knew what had happened in detail. And as the afterglow faded into dusk, the gazes of many curious onlookers rested on our shoulders since they had heard Sensei's call for us during the alarm.

Luckily enough, we were given the rest of the day free while the other soldiers had to remain on standby, and due to Sensei's permission I also was allowed to join in the PX, as an extraordinary exception due to the events that transpired.

We were all sitting on our usual table, us six being the only ones on the PX save for the kitchen staff that was prepping up the dinner for the soon-to-come horde of famished soldiers. Kyozuka-san brought dinner for the girls, giving them a smile and making chitchat about their trainings. Sadly, I had to make due with what I had in the paper bag, because obviously all I got from her was a scowl as if she were smelling rotten food. Sigh…

Tama coughed after we ate for a while, hesitating on taking her eyes off her plate. She said that she wanted to explain her situation to us, and is why we made sure to come here now that no one else is in the PX. Resting her chopsticks on the rim of her tray, she finally looks up.

"Um… So, about me and my family. You all know how the ranks work, right? Well, the Tamase family was always one linked to archery. We had our own dojo and all back in Osaka. We were of Tozama rank, and every generation we had to undergo a trial to keep our status. I, well, never had the chance to take part in that test."

We all waited for her to gather her thoughts, and after a short while she spoke up again.

"My family was close to the Koubuin House, due to our same values about how one should fight and maintain the lineage's honor. Even when guns became the norm, archery was preserved as a symbol of our traditions and as such my family was one of the few that was directly assigned under the command of the Koubuin family, despite being of Tozama rank, and it's why we eventually were given a dojo in the first place. I heard that was because my grandfather reached the highest honor rank in archery in the whole Empire."

The rest's eyes pop up like a full balloon, in whatever comes after shocked. I remember her dad was in the second of those ranks back in my world, so maybe that's also the same here.

"So due to that honor, we were placed under their orders. I suppose we were kinda like an anomaly, I think?" She tilts her head, looking at Meiya for confirmation.

"Well, that is not inaccurate." She says, nodding. "While it isn't common, it also is not odd for either Tozamas or inductees to be appointed under the direct command of a Regent." More gazes of surprise go to Tama, who loses her sight in her plate's depths despite it being mostly empty.

"Is that so? Meiya-san, is that something weird in the hierarchy?" Mikoto tilts her head, scratching a cheek.

"No, not in the slightest. However, I was referring to the placement of the individual who represents a House. While all those who belong to a fellowship are under the command of one of the Regents, there are

those who are appointed to serve under the Head's direct orders, either in the Main House or wherever they are handpicked to work in. Or at the very least, that's how it used to be before the invasion." Deflating much, she sighs. "Such an honor is a rare one, only given to trustworthy fellows. Few are the Tozamas, and even less the inductees, that are given this treatment by a Regent. Therefore, it isn't odd at all, it is merely an uncommon practice since few are those who are bestowed said privilege."

"So what it means is that Tama's family was seen as very important fellows by the Koubuins, to the point of taking orders directly from the leader?" Meiya nods to my words, Tama also does as she looks down while scratching her head.

"Yes, it used to be like that, I think." Still unable to smile as usual, Tama keeps looking down. "When I was little, there were times when I accompanied my parents to pay a visit to the Koubuin Main House. But, for some reason, we were looked at very badly by some of the other servants. Papa was never a warrior, he always preferred to settle things with words, so I could hear some people calling him a coward behind our backs." Tama's voice creaked as she remembered that, her gaze trailed off the table, her figure clearly distraught with the memory she had recalled.

"… Such improper behavior. Tamase, you shouldn't feel ashamed of your origins. Be it by the sword or the pen, I am convinced your Father certainly worked much for our nation." Meiya firmly stared at Tama, who finally gave us a small smile and nodded.

"Well, things weren't so good with the last Head of the Koubuin House, since he wanted to be part of the vanguard in the war against the BETA, from what I heard from Papa. So when he tried to negotiate peacefully, it seems they argued about it. When…" Closing her eyes, taking a deep breath, turbulence comes to her breathing. "… the capital was attacked by terrorists on the 97, we had just gone to visit them and…"

Tama paused for a while, breathing deep through her nose as she closed her eyes. Squinting my eyes, felt as if I had been shot in the gut to see her wringing her hands so tightly.

"… W-Well, Papa got into an argument with the Head, and he ended up taking me back home in a hurry."

She shot out in a hurry, eyes tightly closed. She's obviously keeping stuff in, but to have her this hurt… Just what the hell happened to her then? No, wait…

Their parents used to always go together to the Koubuin House… And there was a terrorist attack… She said only her dad took her back home… And she said… that the flowers… reminded her of…

…

Oh God…

The rest also grimaced, unable to lift a word, sharing the silence as we waited for her to continue or call it quits.

"… I learned later that he resigned his title and decided to go work for the UN and the Parliament." Catching back her regular breathing, she finally looked up.

"Huh? But why would he… I mean…" Chizuru hugged herself with one hand as she looked at Tama.

"After that… Most of our fellows started calling us traitors, saying that we should be exiled… Since then, I… Well, many of my friends started shunning me out, and the ones who remained close were also secluded during school." Looking at the girls in the eye, her tone still deflated, the cracks beginning to widen. "That's why I don't like seeing you fight, why I always try to have us all get along. I'm used to being ignored by now, and I know I'm not that smart either, that's why I always do my best and try to stay positive. Because that's… that's all I'm good for."

Kei got closer and, hiding how tightly she was biting her lips a second ago, pet her head, causing Tama to look up. Her quivering eyes soon relax as she sees us smiling at her.

"That ain't true. You're a great squadmate." To say she flinched or twitched at Kei's word would be like comparing a hill with Mt. Fuji, tightening her lips as she tried, pointlessly at that, to prevent a few runaway tears to come out.

"Tamase, you're no burden." Chizuru spoke softly, looking tenderly at her. "And nobody here thinks you're a traitor, your Father is still working for the good of the Empire, just as we're doing now." I mean, she may relate to it after what she went through, since she's still trying to do her part while being on the UN, and while her Father is the Prime Minister.

"Really? You don't think I'm… dead weight? That I'm in the way?" Her downcast eyes looked at us, ready to recoil off a wall. All of us smiled at her again, making a sliver of tears appear.

"Miki-san, you're really good for so many more things you don't even notice! I mean, outside of your gun skills, you're always the one who notices when we forget something in the changing room or when we're moving wrong in the sim." Mikoto joined her hands and did little jumps in her seat, which made Tama laugh a bit.

"Yoroi speaks the truth." Meiya nodded to Mikoto, then to Tama. "Your attention to those little details is a most remarkable trait. And your positivity has always been an invaluable asset, you're the one who always keeps the peace between Sakaki and Ayamine, after all."

"Yup, without you these two would be at each other's throat all the time." Kei and Chizuru both narrow their eyes at me in perfect synchrony.

"That's not true…" Tama looked down again. And as if in sync…

"Pure slander."

"I wouldn't go causing us problems so often. While it's true that Tamase helps in keeping Ayamine in check, I am not so childish to-"

"Sassaki."

"What was that?! I'm just trying to-"

"See? So quick to anger." Kei smirks at her, Tama and Mikoto again stare at them worriedly, Meiya sighs. So harshly thoughtful as always.

"Grr… Why, you…"

"Please do not start again." Chizuru chills down at Meiya's words. "Tamase, none of us see you as a burden. You're our precious comrade, so please do not be so distraught."

"Good girl, you're really brave." Kei started petting her again, but more softly this time.

"I am glad you think me trustworthy enough to tell me of this, and as the rest, I apologize for the times where I talked down to you." Tapping her glasses, she then also gives Tama a bow. "Let's keep doing our best together from now on, Tamase." Both nod at each other, this time throwing Tama's stiffness far beyond the horizon.

"Man, I… I didn't knew you went through so much on your own. You should be more proud of yourself, Tama. It takes a lot of guts to turn your back and do what you think is right in a situation like that." I smile at her, but she drops her gaze again.

"I didn't really have a choice. I mean, not matter what I did everyone kept treating me like an outsider and pushing me away." Meiya and Chizuru's eyes tense up, they can't meet Tama's gaze.

Holding part of their uniforms roughly, moving their closed lips around. Considering how they acted towards me and how Tama tried

to defend me from time to time… Maybe they said something hurtful to her?

"But you're with us now." Mikoto beamed again as she dove into her eyes. "So, uh, I have a completely new image of you now, Miki-san. Not just because of the shot with the cannon, but… I agree with Takeru, you were really brave. Sorry, for those times I ignored you."

"N-No, don't apologize, please!" As sweet as usual, despite everything.

"I would have to agree. You should not feel shame, Tamase. Your daily displays are proof enough of the type of person you are, and I am grateful to have a squadmate such as you with me." Meiya folded her arms, smiling brightly at Tama. Coming from her, after what Tama told us, has to hit differently.

"No, I'm just doing my best… I will try to not disappoint you." As if she were being scolded, she looked down as she grabbed her ribbon and slowly pulled it from side to side.

"You never did, Tama." She twitches as she hears me, again looking up. I give her a thumbs up, as does Kei, and she nods back, this time clearly quivering.

"Thank you… Really… I'll do my best to not drag you down anymore." She quivered a little, but she rubbed her eyes and then returned a bright gaze to us. "Well, that's the reason why I joined the UN, and why I always tried so hard to keep the peace. I didn't feel welcome where I was, that trying to reclaim my title would be the same as leaving Papa alone, and anyways most people there hated me. So I decided that I would try to help him, even if I couldn't do much. I'm sure he was just trying to see whether I was telling the truth on my letters with his cheerful act today. I'm sorry, he didn't mean any of the bad things he said about you all." And again, she gives us a deep bow.

"Don't worry, Miki-san. It's nothing, he even saw through our facade." Placing a hand on her shoulder, Mikoto smiled back at Tama.

"And after what you told us, I can understand why he'd choose to go along our play." Drawing circles on the air, she sighs. "It's okay, water under the bridge." Tama sighs, smiling a bit. "But I have to ask, if he was just testing if you truly were pleased in the squad, what did you actually write in the letters?"

"Eh?" Oh God, she's tilted again. "Awawa… S-Sorry, I can't tell you!"

"But… Just what did you even-"

"Sakaki-kun, don't make trouble for the Squad Leader." Smirking much, Kei chuckles as Chizuru groans at her.

"I agree, let us simply leave this behind." Meiya nods, Tama sighs. "However, I cannot deny I am curious as to why he said nothing about my person."

"He was afraid you'd cut him in half, Meiya."

"Wh- I-I would do no such thing!" Purple fire? Check. Folded arms? Check. Slight pout? Check. We've got bingo.

"Haha, but Meiya-san does look really scary from time to time." Mikoto giggles, Meiya's glare intensifies on me.

"That is not true."

"Awawa… Sorry, but I really can't tell you. It's too embarrassing…"

"Got it. No more questions." Kei again pats her head, the rest of us nod at her, and Tama finally sighs, coming back to her usual smile.

"Well, in any case, we are more than happy to have you onboard, Tamase." Tapping her glasses, crossing her arms, she gives Tama another nod. "Let's do our best effort to earn our commission, all together from now on."

"Yes, let's! Thank you all, for hearing me out."

"What are you saying, Miki-san? That's what comrades are for, we rely on each other when things get tough. And you saved the base, we should be thanking you."

"Saving the base… Awawawa…."

"And here we go again." Can't help but to chuckle at her usual nervousness.

"I always knew you were great." Kei gives her a nod with a thumbs up, she mumbles a thank as she fidgets.

"Indeed. I relish the challenge of facing such a fierce opponent from now on." Meiya's wide smile melted away Tama's stiffness as she also returned to her usual happy look. "It is an honor to be able to spar against someone as skilled as you, Tamase." And now she made Tama blush.

"And it isn't as if we didn't have a weirdo in the team. At least someone can shoot down Takeru now."

"Watch it, Mikoto. I won't cover you next time we fight." I fake a pout and look away. Everybody starts to laugh, except Kei who simply smiled faintly.

"Well, it will truly be a challenge to face you from now on." Chizuru says, before giving Tama another bow. "And I promise to make an effort as a leader, to not pressure you as I did before the CCSE, or as I've been doing with my fights with Ayamine."

"No, don't apologize. I didn't… I'm not holding that against you, Sakaki-san. So let's leave that behind, and start looking forward as a team, yes?" She truly is what brings this squad together when things go south. Her cheerful and honest smile melts the ice that had made its way into the other three's eyes, leaving nothing but a warm light within.

"That's right. In the end, Kei-san protected us from the soldiers, and you two helped Takeru finish the CCSE. And you've been trying to change your attitude, I can see you three are trying your best to mend that stuff. So no more bringing that up!" Mikoto points a finger at them and they let out a little chuckle, as me and Tama also do.

It's truly a blessing… to have mended the bridge. It truly is nice… just to sit with you, laughing at the most little things. Sighing away, feeling as if I had unloaded a backpack full of jagged rocks piking at me, I took in the view of these passing seconds, of all of us just laughing in the PX.

"Well, if we can leave that behind us, then let's do so. So don't be afraid of speaking up when you feel you have to." Tama gives a nod to Chizuru, leaving the traces of shadow behind.

"Thank you, everybody. Let's do our best in the mock battles, and let's get commissioned as fast as possible. As a team." Tama said with small flames in her eyes. Shame she doesn't know the 'FWOOOH!' here, she could use a battle cry to pump herself up.

"Yeah!" Mikoto raised her hand and, after a second of hesitation on Tama's side, both did a high five. Kei smiled at them, while the other two drank some water.

"Well guys, I can't really stay here, so I'm going back to my cell. Good night." I stand and wave at them, taking the paper bag to my pockets.

"Ah! Shirogane-san!"

"Hm? What's up, Tama?" Her eyes swayed away and without looking at me she again tugged at her ribbon.

"F-Forgive me for hitting and screaming at you. You were just trying to cheer me up and I… I…"

"It's cool, I was kinda pushy back there. I'm the one that should apologize." Tama looks at me and gives me a smile. Glad to see she didn't got all negative with how I pushed her. I mean, with all the shit she's gone through I'm lucky she doesn't hate my guts. You're too sweet to be true, Tama.

"Takeru, what did you do?" Meiya looked at me, scanning my face real slow.

"Nothing much, I was just being my usual obnoxious self." I shrug but Tama jumps in, protesting against my words.

"That's not true. He was just trying to get me out of myself. I ended up screaming at him when he only was trying to give me courage." She looks down as some clouds dull the sunshine of her eyes.

"Don't be so down. You ended up rising up on your own, that's what matters. You saved us today Tama, there's nothing to forgive. So stop being so mopey and give us a smile!"

"Huh, so Shirogane-kun can be kind when he wants to." Chizuru gestured towards me, as if she had seen some surreal thing happen in front of her.

"Hey!"

"The end is near." Kei, you're lucky you're so endearing.

"It is a relief to hear you can be considerate and tactful, Takeru." Meiya regains her smile, burying the premature signs of doubts.

"You're making it sound as if you thought I was some kind of brute." I give her a side glace, she then folds her arms and nods.

"Well, you always were a great hurdle to overcome. And I myself saw firsthand your resolve, so I know how determined you are. It is merely surprising to see that you could also aid Tamase back then, considering the pressure she must have felt. To see you are capable

of such tactfulness is a welcome surprise." Giving me a small smile, I can't help but to narrow my eyes at her.

"Yes, that's true. He was truly formidable yesterday morning, and didn't mince words with us when he snapped." Again, she traces circles in the air.

"Monster-kun ripped us a new ear, such a savage." Kei then gives me a side glance, smirking. I know you want to cheer Tama up, but don't use me as fodder, dammit.

"Awawa… Don't say that! Shirogane-san has always been helping us out. And back then he didn't get angry, and he remained calm, a-and… and he kept encouraging me. Don't say bad things about him, please. Not even as a joke." Tama's soft and polite, but firm, tone made the other three drop their teasing smiles.

"Yeah, Takeru has always been giving us advice, hasn't he?" Mikoto nods, drinking some water. "Talking about the training and what's to come, how are we gonna fight in our mock battles? I mean, now we have two aces to look out for."

"How? The Instructor is the one that will decide that." Chizuru replied as she started to eat.

"But what if she puts us against both Takeru and Miki-san?" She asks, Tama scratches her head, not used to the praise, and the others got tilted hard.

"… We're dead, plain and simple." Kei answers, a solemn tone as passed her thumb across her neck.

"C-Come on, I'm not that good…" Poking at her plate, she blushes again.

"I for one hope for a chance to spar against you, Takeru. And if it also places me against Tamase, I couldn't possibly ask for better

challenge." Meiya says with glee. Look at you, you think you can beat me. How cute.

"Someone wants to keep losing, it seems." I return a tease and she purses her lips at me.

"I will not lose! I'll make you kiss the ground this time." More of those determined, blazing purple embers appeared in those eyes of hers, the fire that I'm got used to seeing here. But now, they're no longer hateful. None of their eyes are.

"We'll see. I gotta go, later guys." Waving at them, they return it as I leave.

Finally… Finally, we're back as it always should have been. It took a lot… but now we're back to being a cohesive team, in the making at least.

It's nice to see that Tama got out of that gloom mood she was in, despite all the shit she had to go through. Makes me feel like shit for never trying to have a serious talk with her about family when we were together… But I can start by being more supportive from now on.

And it's also nice to see that we've left behind those tense days. Hopefully we can keep the peace for a little while longer. Now… for that to happen… I gotta keep Yuuhi at bay…

"Cadet Shirogane."

"Oh?" 2nd Lt. Pyatkh called out, we shared a salute as I stopped. "Good evening. What is it, 2nd Lieutenant?"

"The XO is calling for you, to the usual office."

"Understood, I've received my orders." Again saluting each other, I then turn and keep going to the stairs, but now directing myself to the elevator.

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*Same Day. An hour or so ago .*

*(Yuuko's Office.)*

**[Yuuko]**

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"Then, you have been making certain progress?" The Undersecretary asked, reading the bare bones report I cooked up for him.

"Indeed. So tell the Security Council Alt. IV is progressing at fine speed."

"Is the petition for a mission to Sadogashima so soon… well…" Choosing to instead drink some more coffee, I spin on my chair as I chuckle.

"Yes, it's very much serious. I also would like to have a talk with the UN's HC and our patrons of the Empire soon about my… developments in the recent months. Could you perhaps arrange the meeting?"

"Of course, I'm sure it won't take long, what with how curious they are growing about what's brewing here. However… There is one matter I must inquire about." Resting his cup on the table, tracing his mustache with a finger, his eyes took aim at mine. "Do you have any intel regarding the matter of the aggressors sent to the CCSE?"

"No, I haven't been able to find much from here." Not anything I'd like to share with the UN, in any case. "Were the soldiers released as per the agreement?"

"Sigh… Sadly, yes. Everything will be kept under wraps in the end. However, many are wondering why you'd… agree to pay for the treatment of the soldiers."

"Besides the fact that the UN needs the matter from remaining secret? After all, the HC was the one who insisted on sending the aggressors. I don't recall having much veto power regarding who was sent…" He twitches, suddenly chuckling.

"No, I know that well. However, well, they don't buy you're oblivious to what transpired. I mean, I am going to keep quiet about it, and yet you were completely prepared for this little accident."

"Well, what can I say? Things are surely going to become more interesting in the short term for us." Grinning much as I spin, he again chuckles.

"Haha, as expected of someone like you. Ah, well, I'll try to keep them at bay, however…" Again furrowing his brows, he leaned forward, covering his mouth. "Do you believe there are sleeper agents of that faction in this base?"

"No, at all. I merely received a… tip, let's call it, from a trustworthy source. That's why I was well prepared for this. And in any case, I am sure you also were aware of what could happen during this visit."

"Well…" Going back, he straightens his suit. "What can I say? The rumors have been brewing, and as impartial as I have to be, I am a father as well. Let's just say I decided to take a bet when seeing the hasty manner in which this visit was requested."

"I see… I suppose you were pleased with it?" Leaning on one of my palms, he again chuckles.

"More than pleased." Standing up, this time his eyes without any of the hesitation of our prior meetings, he offers me handshake. "Even if some will be displeased at the news, I shall arrange the meetings. Best of luck Professor, and keep up your guard."

"I will, be assured. Is there anything you think is dire enough to tell me in advance?"

"Well… I'm sure you must have heard of that radical group…" Such a grimace, far more biased than it should be. "Hopefully you manage to deliver results before the tensions escalate further."

"… That I will do. I'll be looking forward to the meeting." Smirking back at him, ending our handshake, he gives me one last bow before leaving, Pyatkh already waiting outside the room to guide him to his ride.

And once the door is locked, I crash onto my seat. Sigh… I guess that warning is what Shirogane told me about, the third accident that has to be prevented no matter what. Still, I'm glad this went well enough. Not only I gained data on the OTH, the Undersecretary is also now clearly on my side as well. Those lobbying bastards will have to swallow their buckets of cash, soon they'll be jobless.

Beginning to spin slowly, resting my head on the seat, my eyelids begin to close as I look up.

Sigh… Everything is under control… Another accident prevented… The meetings are going to also go well with… these developments. The request for a mission to Sadogashima… should be a good enough sign.

My elbows lodging themselves on my sides, the armrest welcoming my arms dock in, the spinning and spinning continues. With eyes closed I sigh, simply enjoying the motion.

The cadets will also probably join the Valkyries… The 00 Unit's new protocol is progressing… just fine… The XM3 is ready for mass production… And the memories of…

Drowning a yawn, rubbing my eyes, resting my chin on my shoulder, I continue spinning for a moment. Until my last trail of thought made my eyes shoot wide open.

"Wait, I didn't read… the last report… Ah… Ah… *Yaaaawn*…"

All the tension in me comes crumbling all at once, a few tears on my eyes as I stretch my back, hearing something crack. My legs feeling numb, a jolt comes through my ankles as I moved them.

"Ugh… When was… the last time I slept, again? *Yawn*… Dammit. Hmm?" I look at my watch, for some reason it seems half an hour passed already.

Did I… almost pass out? Urgh… I can't… I have to…

Thundering away from my seat, leaning on my desk until my legs rebooted, I then go up to the coffee machine and pour more into my cup, to the brim. Two fingers run a loop on my forehead, yet no matter how slowly I try to drink, a sudden hoarseness is left imprinted on my throat.

I cough a bit, rubbing it, and yet nothing can seem to ease this heaviness. Another yawn tears my mouth wide open against my wishes, my head lowers and lowers.

"No… It's too early to go to sleep. There's some… Ahem… Quite some matters left unattended." Breathing into the smell of the coffee, pinching the bridge of my nose, whatever was clogging me is sent back in for now.

Sitting again, opening my mail, it would seem the orders I sent are already taken care of. The Valkyries reported that no one suspicious was nearby, nothing happened during the visits besides from the HSST, the customary bureaucratic mails from the retinue are also flooding my inbox, and since nothing has come to my attention I suppose everything is as always.

Sigh… Good enough. Now, Motoko-nee seemed to have done some more tests today… And she believes the hardware is as ready as it'll ever be. I suppose it's time for the final trial run… Inhaling sharply as the image of my prior failures comes back up, I send word to her to ready the prototypes for a final test tomorrow.

I'll delegate to the CO the arrangement of the patrols and whatnot, and the other officials can handle the bureaucrats and their mutual sharing of empty pleasantries. I should also send word to Radhabinod regarding the mission for Sadogashima, so that he can review it and offer his hindsight. I wonder if I should speak with Shirogane about it… In time, I don't want to craft a perfect plan only to garner any unwanted attention.

Speaking of… Now that everything else is over and done with… What hour is it now? Around 7:40? He should have come already to my presence, what on Earth is he doing? No… What if he came while I was asleep?

Checking the cameras on my laptop's screen, he isn't with Yashiro. Actually, she also isn't in the cylinder's room or in our work aisle, and he isn't there either. Where is Shirogane now? Clicking to switch the view, a brow began to arch as I couldn't find him, my clicks began to lose delay between each of them.

Not in the hallway or anywhere in this floor, not in the elevator, neither on his cell or on the way to it… Where the hell are you?! He couldn't have- Oh, he's in the PX. I suppose… I could let him eat in peace, I did give my agreement just for today. But it's been an hour since the Undersecretary left. I explicitly said that the cadets were free for the rest of the day… Sigh…

By the way, I also didn't see Yashiro anywhere. Where is she? Hmm… On a blind spot of a camera? No, perhaps she already went to sleep. I'll check up on her later, to make sure she's fine.

"Nothing to be done, then. Let's read up on the last report of the memory business." I do wonder where she is, but I suppose she also is close by. I'd have been notified if anything had happened to her.

Now, the report should be… This one should be it. So, what do we have here? Opening the file, drinking slowly while taking my time to scour the intel provided, what figments of tiredness where in me faded away.

…

Saw the subject when she was little… This world's him seemed to get along just fine with her… Decent progress, I suppose. Now, let's bring up the data of the headband here…

"… How interesting. So the delay in the surfacing is lessening with each session…" So Yashiro is having an easier time with the process, and he is no longer feeling as burdened by the toll of an ESPer… This lines up perfectly with my plans.

Alright, enough is enough. Let's call him here.

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**A few minutes afterwards…**

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"Yeah, everything went as well as before." He nods, drinking some coffee. "All okay on your end?"

"Of course. I arranged some meetings to gain authorization for the XM3's test as well as all the tech we're making, but for now we should remain on our guard. Until I see the sign on the papers I won't believe HC is completely on Alt. IV's side."

"Well, I'm sure that at the least we may be able to keep the Empire on our side once we roll out the Kagerou's new parts and the Shin too. Once it's made know we gave the Empire a stealth system, I'm sure many important people will stop seeing you with the evil eyes." He says, not a hint of doubt in his voice or in his shiny eyes.

Of course that they'll be happy. But I still gave them the toned down versions of the radars and sensors. I'm keeping the real deal for my use exclusively, no way in hell I'll hand the Empire this work of art.

"So, how was Tamase? Did she have a breakdown or something?" He smiles at me as he chuckles.

"She almost had one, truth be told. But honestly, I'm glad she could do it on her own. I think she will improve a lot from now on." Seeing him honestly relieved is all the proof I needed. Glad my little bet worked out.

Marimo was really worried about both of them, and was why she came up to me after your 'proposition' to have Tamase be the squad leader for a day. Now that she also suffered it herself, she sympathizes with the Undersecretary's plight. To be scorned and treated as a traitor just for joining the UN, even if you're still devoted to your nation. And since she wanted to let them have a happy reunion, I gave the OK for them to fool around a bit. Considering Tamase's display and the effect this will have on her performance going forward, it was a small price to pay. And it's not like I care about formalities anyways.

… After all, who knows if they'll get the chance to see each other again? I do plan to send her to Sadogashima, with her already remarkable sniping abilities, so… it truly was a small compromise compared to the effect this will have on her skills.

"Well, it is good to hear that. And about Tamase's background, don't worry about it. I knew beforehand she and her Father used to be nobles, I thought you knew as well."

"Sigh… This world gets weirder every day. For them to be a Tozama family that served the Koubuin's… Do you think Tama's Dad knew about me?" He crosses his arms as he leans back into the sofa.

"I mean, he didn't seem to recognize you so I don't think so. It's doubtful that each servant of the Shogun knows about every other servant in the House. Remember that they were the lowest rank of nobles, and going by that memory, this world's you was quite close to the Shogun growing up. I don't think Tamase or her father ever got to meet the Shogun when she was little." Otherwise, he'd have asked about you during our talk.

"I see. Well, there's something I've been meaning to ask for while, actually." Resting his cup on his lap, he looks up away from me.

"Hm? What is it?"

"Do you think you could probe for intel on the archives again?"

"… I believe I did tell you that probing more about him won't do us good. Are you not confident on your recovery sessions going well?" I lean forward, drilling my gaze into him. And again, he looks away.

… What does this mean? Perhaps, he is actually still burdened by the constant projection? He did go overboard yesterday morning during his training, after the fight with Takamura no less… However, even if he is tired, he should simply push through this for the good of the project.

And yet, just like the ones in my reflection, those eyebags growing under his eyes won't make this any easier on him… Maybe I should allow him to rest… to avoid the Guard from thinking I'm actually preventing them to meet with him, or gain their animosity once they're deceived. It's also for the good of the project, of course. Shirogane is required in good health once we start up the 00 Unit.

"If you're feeling exhausted, I can authorize you to rest tomorrow."

"Huh? No, I'm not that tired, though."

"Then, why do you want me to look into his data again?"

"No, it's not that… Well…" And again, he looks down, avoiding my eyes, clamping up. Coming up empty and shutting down on me, as my trials have done oh so many times.

"… Shirogane, what is the matter?"

"Sigh…" Finally looking at me, he scratches his head. "Do you think you can look into my parents' data without making much noise?"

…

"… Your parents? Not this world's you?"

"Yeah. I know you must have your reasons to not want to look into that, but-"

"Wait, you remember their names?"

"I always did." Furrowing his brows, he tilts his head.

"… And why didn't you tell me about that?"

"Well… You had already searched throughly on all data about this world's me, and since you didn't ask me to tell you I assumed you couldn't do it for some reason. I mean, you wouldn't let that pass you up."

Just… Sigh… All this time I thought he didn't know, that it was something unique to this world's him… And he was just keeping quiet all this time… when we could have used that intel in the negotiations with the General…

"W-Why are you glaring at me like that?" Narrowing his eyes at me, he then, yet again, looks away.

"Sigh… Doesn't matter. So, why did you want me to inquire into this again? There's no mention of your parents in the reports that… Shirogane?" He grimaced harshly, letting me see for just a second his clenched teeth. Why… would he…

"I saw them in a dream this morning, in a hospital. Couldn't hear very well what was going on, but I don't ever recall my Mom having health problems. I'd like to know what was of them. So, can you look into their profiles?"

…

Leaving aside the fact that he kept quiet about this dream for a whole day… Why is he asking me this? He should know I can handle something as meager as that. Sure, I can't probe into the Guard's archive for the moment to avoid arising suspicions, but the standard databases are not out of my reach.

Leaning further back onto my seat, crossing my arms, I look up,

The real question is, why did he grimace? Why did he hesitate? He should know my reach, and how useful this data is for our plan… And yet, it doesn't align with our prior talks when he was, for some reason I still cannot grasp, putting some space between us. Is he merely saddened then?

"Sensei?"

"Hm? Oh, yes… It's not an issue, you should know that."

"Then, why were you doubting just now?" I don't know, why are you doubting me now?

"It's nothing, I was just pondering something."

"You sure it's okay?"

…

Okay, now what? Why are you giving me that worried gaze? Again casting doubts on me, perhaps?

"… Why do you ask?"

"Well, you look real tired. If you're too busy, it can wait." Again scratching his head, he sighs. No delay on his words, and no intent to escape from my eyes this time.

"… I don't recall saying I was busy, furthermore, this is intel that we would need for you to play your role to deceive the Shogun,

Shirogane. Something as simple as this shouldn't pose any trouble to me."

"What about those eyebags, though?"

"Nothing you should concern yourself with." A small frown formed on him, and when I thought he was about to continue pushing he simply sighed and shook his head.

"Okay, if you say so… Just make sure to get enough sleep, Sensei."

"… In any case, your parents' names are…" He then tells me their names, with the proper kanji and everything. "Hmm… Easy enough. I'll have it done by tomorrow."

"Cool. So, in the meantime, can I go do another recovery session? I'd like to see something about them today."

"… Might I ask why? You can leave this on my hands, if you're that curious about their lives in this world. I believe you should focus on regaining memories that could be used to convince the Shogun of your identity." Pursing his lips, he holds my gaze without receding.

"Well, that's true… But still, I'd like to try that out today."

… And he then remains quiet, going for another sip. Refusing to tell me why, dismissing my offer without missing a heartbeat. Why is he still… No, in any case, whatever he sees Yashiro will tell me about it. And to continue to pressure him won't do me any good. While I could order him to focus on something else, if he wants to see this so badly… I suppose I can allow it, just this once. After all, I do get more data from the sessions, and that will help in the final stretch to tune the ESP protocol for the 00 Unit. A small reward for allowing me to deal with today's accident without issues, nothing more.

"Alright, I'll allow it. But just for today, I expect you to again focus on Her Purpleness from tomorrow on."

"Roger. Well, I'll be going to Kasumi."

"… Wait, Shirogane. Do you know where is Yashiro?" He freezes as he gets up, furrowing his brows at me.

"What do you mean? Isn't she in Sumika's room?"

"No, I sent her along Marimo to greet the Undersecretary but she never came back."

"Wait, so where is she then?" It seems like he doesn't know, but wasn't she with them when the alarm rang?

"That's what I want to know. You don't know where she is?"

"How could I… Ah." He opens his eyes wide as if he had closed a window without saving the doc he was working on.

---

**One trip to the bathrooms later…**

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"Seriously, why do you always agree to that?" Shirogane questioned Yashiro as she ate her dinner. He looked really conflicted for some reason.

"She looked like she wanted to impress her Dad. So I helped." She smiles, causing him to sigh. Hehe, when you're with Yashiro you do make very amusing faces.

"Shirogane, did Yashiro do this before?"

"All the time." He raises both hands to the air while rolling his eyes before sitting on his sofa. "I haven't seen her refuse that order even once." Hehehe… So you go back to normal when around her, huh.

"Well, let's get back on track. Shirogane, while she eats, let me inform you that I have a mission for you this Sunday."

"A mission?" He straightens up, his eyes become focused on me.

"I want you to start training Yashiro to pilot."

"Wait, what? You want Kasumi to pilot?" He seemed surprised, he took a look at her and she gave a smile.

"So I said. She does have a personal TSF that only she can use to its full capabilities, and I know no better pilot to teach her than you. Not like she'll listen to anyone else." She then nods. Shirogane scratches his head, closing his eyes tightly.

"That's another difference to the list. So, why can't we have her ride a Type-00 or a modified Kagerou?"

"Because that TSF has many special sensors that were made especially for it. Even if we can't use it for its original purpose, I belive that it would prove useful during a Hive infiltration or during a crowded fight."

I did remember we had it when he asked me to put sensors on the swords. Even if its specs are outdated, it's nothing we can't improve with our current developments. Furthermore, if he is enduring the toll of an ESPer now, he just might be able to allow her to reach her top performance in the future if they work well together.

"And why can't we make new versions of those things for the Kagerou? Or for the Shin?" Pointing a finger up, he raises a brow.

… Wait, he's right. I do have new tech now, thanks to him. Asking for the license wouldn't be a problem with my current standing… Actually, it would work to my favor, to engage that company in my 'development's as well. They might even begin to fully support me if they get a nice slice of the cake…

And we need a test pilot for the Shin, and Yashiro's previous numbers are actually decent… It would require some modifications to the Shin's frame…

But I could definitely do this, it isn't out of my reach. And by doing this, by having more parts requiring my architecture and programs… Looking forward, this would ensure the UN will need to stay on my good side for the years to come… Without talking of the opportunities to gain further influence on-

"Sensei, you hearing?" And he apparently got fed up with me keeping quiet and raised his voice. You just can't sit still for a minute, huh.

"Yes, yes. I admit you proposed a good idea, and it isn't out of our reach. But we would have to modify the Shin Kagerou for it to work properly, and we don't yet know if it would work smoothly. For the time being, Yashiro will keep using the Mindseeker until we confirm whether we can replicate the ESP sensors."

"The Mindseeker?"

"It's my machine." Yashiro looks downwards as her eyes tremble a bit. "I was supposed to pilot it with… one of my sisters. But since Alt. III was scrapped, we never got deployed."

"Okay, hold up. Kasumi has sisters?"

"You didn't knew that? I thought I had informed you about Alt. III in the other worlds, going by your explanation." He groans as he takes another sip of his coffee.

"I knew Kasumi was involved in Alt. III due to being an ESPer, but I didn't knew she had sisters. I suppose she's talking about the other ESPers, right?" He looks at her and she nods, staring at him. Not a single change in her complexion, which means Shirogane doesn't think of them as witches or anything. It is a relief to have someone that Yashiro can open up to.

"Yes, I was told that ESPers were going to be piloting together, if Alt. III hadn't been cancelled."

"Huh. So, this Mindseeker can be piloted by two people at the same time?" He seems really interested in that, the minute furrowing of his brows as whenever he gets fired up.

"Yes, it's a variant of the F-14. I acquired one when Alt. IV started, when Yashiro was assigned under me. We're keeping it under wraps on Hangar 78, on B22F. If you accept, I'll transfer it to Hangar 90 under your care, Chief." I smile at him, causing him to blush. It's so fun to see him get all bashful.

"Stop calling me Chief. Well, if Kasumi is alright with it I'll do it. I mean, she's been exhausted these days, with the memory thing and all. You sure you can handle it?" Looking at her, a tint of concern grafted on his tone.

You really overworry about just everything. That's because she's also helping me with some programming for the 00 Unit. And yet, despite you being tired as well, you worry about her first, huh.

"I can do it." She moves her bunny ears up and down a few times, locking her eyes with him. He then gives a nod.

"Alright. Then I'll train you. But who is she going to pilot with? You did say the Mindseeker was a two-pilot TSF."

"You, of course."

"Huh? Oh, so I'll tag along with her to show her my movements on action. I get it."

"You'll be under the Viking callsign again. You're Viking 1 and she's Viking 2. I'll have you spar against the Valkyries this time. I already installed the XM3 onto the Mindseeker, so don't worry about it."

"Pfft…" He holds his mouth as he laughs. Yashiro pouts at him, then she starts lightly chopping his shoulder.

"Shirogane, what's the problem?"

"S-Sorry, I just imagined Kasumi wearing a viking helmet and waving an axe around. I couldn't contain myself, sorry about that." He chuckles a bit as Yashiro keeps chopping his shoulder. Can't help but to chuckle at this.

"Sigh… You're awfully relaxed, as always. Well, in any case, I'll have to see if Yashiro can eventually pilot by herself. If she does, I'll start making a second Shin Kagerou for her. You two can go to do another memory recovery now, just don't exhaust yourselves."

"Yeah, I know. Tomorrow I do start with the mock battles. By the by, I left a report on how things are going on the usual folder." I nod at him with a smile, now that he finally seems to be willing to send me reports on a daily basis.

"I'll do my best." She moves her bunny ears again, then she stands up and takes her empty plate to a shelve, wiping it clean herself. She's so diligent, as usual.

"Good. Now then, off you go."

"Yes, yes. But you do look real tired though, so don't stay up too late, Sensei. Everything should be fine for a while." Smiling again, he nods at me.

"… Shut up. Didn't you want to go do that recovery session really badly?"

"Sigh… Just take care of yourself, okay?" Mmgh… What's with him all of a sudden? "Well, let's go Kasumi. Good night, Sensei." Waving as he had always done before, he leaves the office with Yashiro right behind him.

So when you're around her you smile, but when she isn't you freeze over… Well, in any case, it's good that Yashiro has a partner again.

Standing up, drowning another yawn as I left my cup on its usual shelve, I then sent word to the crew on Hangar 78, to send the

machine to Hangar 90 for the final touches on its maintenance for the mock battle, and so that they made sure the limiter of the ESP sensors was still working well. I do think they can handle it… and Yashiro wouldn't lose more than a day on the bed… but I can't risk his safety. In case the Guards try to inquire about the matter, and to ensure he can be ready for when the 00 Unit is started.

"Sigh… Yes, it's just to make sure the pawn reaches to other end… To get myself another Queen." Sitting back, spinning for a moment, my sight grew blurry as I couldn't help but to squint my eyes.

It's not like I enjoy seeing Yashiro turning into that silent puppet, but I was curious the first times. The sheer power of the Mindseeker when she activated a psychic link was unmatched, I can't even begin to understand what could be achieved if she could go into Prafka if we had another ESPer on the base.

However, no pilot could withstand the pressure of the psychic link. And no one could become a stable trigger for her either. I believe Shirogane might be able to endure the strain from the link, even if he isn't an ESPer. Of course, it would have been better if we could have gotten Yashiro's sister with her too. Even so, she'll be a good addition to our forces if she can copy Shirogane's style, and on the off chance that he can withstand the effects of the psychic link we could have an unstoppable duo.

But that's only if Shirogane can successfully link with Yashiro, and honestly I don't want to risk any damage to their psyche to test that out.

Though it's surprising I forgot about the Mindseeker. I can't keep everything in my head all the time, but I suppose… letting Shirogane oversee Yashiro's training, and the possible second prototype of the Shin Kagerou, is the right choice.

I lean back on my seat, crossing my arms, spinning a bit more slowly.

Now, I'll get to test those Type-00C the Valkyries have been training with this week and Yashiro's abilities… It's a shame the Shin isn't ready yet, but we'll get there eventually… And they'll be gathering more data about the Nucleus too…

Closing my eyes, inhaling until my lungs are full, one leg crosses over the other.

I just gotta look into his parents' profiles later… Yeah, that's easy as pie…

Hmm… How long has it been since I ate pie, again?

"… W-Wait, I can't… *Yaaawn…"*

Again, my eyes watered, my head began to fall down as if I had a brick tied on it. Swaying a bit, yet again my mouth disobeyed and teared itself open to yawn, a shiver running through my sides.

*"* D-Dammit… I should write down a memo to look into his parents' data… for tomorrow… *Yaaawn…* "

… I also need to put an alarm so that I don't oversleep, prep up the machinery so that Yashiro can ease up in case the recovery session is taxing on her, organize Motoko-nee's reports to read up on them before the tests… make another memo for the speech I need for the meetings as well as to look into the footage I asked to be prepared… and I'll also have to free my schedule to have time to read the CO's comments about the Sadogashima plan I should be sending him… I also need to stay on the lookout for what the Guards do from now on…

… Yaaaawn.

# Weary Homecoming

## Chapter 45: Weary Homecoming

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*June 15th, 1989. Close to 6:30 PM.*

*(Osaka Castle Grounds. Imperial Royal Guard Detachment Offices.)*

**[Kageyuki]**

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No sounds other than my scribbling reached my ears, taking a moment to stare at the suffocating narrow space of my cubicle I then rub my eyes. Alright, one last push and I'm done.

"… And no disturbances occurred for the duration of the patrols on the east wing…" Slowly, with simple and precise movements, I take care not to mess up my writing. I swear, if I have to redo this whole report again because of another mistake, I'm gonna headdesk.

Yet another requirement of the Guard, to deliver our reports in pristine and proper written letters. No, it doesn't cut it to just write a standard report. No, you gotta do it in Keigo. Three years and I still can't do this shit.

Fresh paint would dry faster in summer before I actually finish this. Feeling my arm cramping up, slowing down even more to make sure I don't screw this up, the tickling of the distant clock only serves to unnerve me even more.

…

Sighing hard once I finish, quickly putting the pen in place so that no small stains end up on the paper, a hand goes to my air as I lean back on my seat while I move the one I was writing with in circles,

hearing my wrist complain a bit as I do. With this, my shift should be over. And that means, once tomorrow comes, I can go back home.

… I wonder how is Takeru doing now. According to Takahisa-sama, he has been left in charge of Col. Kazora's daughter. He said Takeru seemed happy to be with her when he visited the House on the weekends… Even if he refused to tell me why that happens. At least he gave me a week-long leave permit this time.

"Well, let's get this over and done with."

Placing my report in a proper envelope, making sure my small cubicle was tidy before taking my leave, I then ant march to the desk in the far corner of the office, giving the report to the Tozama that was sitting there.

No words are exchanged, not even a gaze towards me. I'd have more interesting conversations with a wall anyways. Turning around after a customary salute, filling my lungs with air, yet again I ant march towards the mess hall.

Head held high as if kept in place by suspension cables, steps coordinated and firm, all to hide my tiredness from leaking over the rim. Just like when I helped out at Dad's restaurant, when I was a waiter to earn my allowance, keeping my gaze fixed at an invisible point is all I can do to steady my pulse and pace, to avoid a reaction from coming to my face, to not spill the order I was given. To keep my cool no matter what others say.

" *By goodness, it isn't even 1900 hours and he's taking his leave already."*

" *Whatever did you expect of a baseborn? The rumors of his performance must be complete rubbish."*

Deep breaths… One step after the other… And yet, despite having boots on, it feels as if I were again walking barefooted on the wilderness. Just that there's no nice cabin to go back to, no friends

to relax around. All that's here is the ever present cold pressure of the hounds.

" *I am of the opinion the man must be doping himself to achieve such results."*

" *How ludicrous, to think he'd control a Zuikaku better than our fellows."*

The heels of my boots began to cry as I sped up, my teeth sank into an edge of my lips like a hot knife through butter, and my eyes once more inspected the shiny floor and how well kept it was.

" *Do you think he might be the… swain of a Shinpan or a Fudai?"*

" *Pah! If that is true, they surely lack taste."*

" *I find the claim most insulting. In no way a fellow would pay heed to a brute such as him."*

More and more of those usual comments, more and more of the 'fellowship' shining for its absence. Sigh… Who cares about my efforts? Who cares about how hard I try? All they have is envy for those who wear the black dye. Not like the other inductees are any different, also giving me side glances due to 'how better treatment' I get than 'em.

Sigh… This shit blows, and it's only gotten worse since the battles against the Kagerou.

Finally exiting the office area, rid of the whispers, I sigh and shake my head. Easing up my stride, making it to the mess hall, I order my usual. The most modest food they had. Considering that we can order whatever we want from the Castle's kitchen, I could technically ask for something more… elaborate, if I had to describe the difference between the humble dinner I always have and the rest.

But I already learned what would happen if I chose to do that.

Sitting alone in a corner, the buzzing of the news on the TV as a background noise above the calm chatter, at least I can eat in peace. Monotonous and exhausting, but it's nothing I can't handle. Whatever they might say, the one winning the mock battles was our squad. For these three years I tried to reach out and be civil but I learned that keeping quiet is the best option I have.

Shame Koetsu works somewhere else… If only I was placed on his team back then… Sigh… It was the first time ever in which doing my best backfired on me. If I had been working with him, I would have been able to be more present… when she needed me there…

"Ahem… 2nd Lieutenant, sir?" Looking up, I saw one of the young fresh members of my squadron getting closer, tray in hand.

"Oh, Amato-san. What is it?"

His crimson dress as shiny as usual, he sat in front of me, placing his tray filled with the best food in the place slowly besides him. Taking a moment to try to comb his thistle hair backwards, only to yet again fail to tame that odd spike that for some reason shoots out from above his forehead as if it were an actual horn, his thick brows arching when that happened as I couldn't help but to chuckle, Amato then coughed, his gray eyes falling towards me.

"2nd Lt. Shirogane, you wouldn't be already ending your shift, would you?"

"… Uh, yes, that was my intention. Is there anything wrong?" Almost finishing my meal, I slow down as he again seems intent on not letting me turn in early.

"Well, it would set a most foul example as the leader of our flight, in my opinion." Nodding to himself before eating a spoon-fill, the young man remained staring at me in quite the obvious disapproval.

"Sigh… Our shift for the day is over, Amato-san. There is nothing left to report, our patrols are done, and we've already checked on our

maintenance."

"While I concede you speak the truth, it is for the good of the squadron that we remain attentive to the duties entrusted to us." Firm as always, what a surprise.

"In that case, what would you rather have us doing at this hour?"

"Readying the reports for tomorrow's duties, for one. I believe the others would certainly agree with me in that preparing the papers beforehand would be in our best interests."

"Well, while that is true, I am going to take a one-week leave. I think you all don't really need me looming over your necks like that."

"I… suppose…" Closing his eyes a bit too tight, he continues to eat. On my end, I finish my meal and take a moment to drink, knowing he's probably not done yet. "However, even if you shall not be present for the following week, I am of the opinion that you should be showing some measure of interest in the activities we shall be partaking in during your absence, 2nd Lieutenant."

"I was informed already, and besides the habitual patrols, there's nothing as intensive as the mock battles we had just a few weeks ago. I'm confident that all of you can manage just fine. There's nothing to worry about." Not like me not being here will make a grand difference, all of you newbies are already decent enough pilots.

Continuing to eat in silence, those thick brows of him arch even more. Taking a second to rest his chopsticks and bring a hand to his chin, he looks at me with clear bother within.

"Sir, I would suggest you to try to maintain your poise when you speak. It does you no good to employ such informality during your duties, in my opinion."

"Come on, now. There's no need to be so stiff while we eat." Let me relax for a moment, dammit.

"Still, I am of the opinion that it is this attitude what spawns all those whispers that have followed our flight regardless of our performance." Not giving an inch, he slowly eats some more.

"Sigh… That's just how I am, Amato-san. There's nothing to be done." One of his brows twitches.

"However… Surely you do not find it pleasant, to be the recipient of such ill comments?"

"… And what is the core matter that creates those whispers?" Tapping my uniform, I simply look away into the ceiling.

He remains quiet, not even touching his food for a moment. It didn't last long, though.

"Even so… You could certainly make an effort to counter these misconceptions our fellows have of you."

"For example?"

"Well, you could begin to arrive on time to the trainings for one."

Guh… Waking up early is something that, to this day, I cannot do. My internal clock says seven in the morning, and no amount of training or tender hugs has changed that. Sigh… But I don't get the luxury of being stubborn anymore. I need this job, and Takeru needs me as well.

"… I suppose you are right in that. Though, I don't know how fast I'll be able to wake up earlier than I do now."

"I believe that the effort would be welcomed. Certainly that isn't out of your reach, 2nd Lieutenant." Smiling faintly, he resumes eating. Sometimes I don't know if he's just blunt or a well-intentioned douche.

"I guess it isn't, really."

And he does have a point. If I want to leave as much behind as I want, and someday be able to live with Takeru again, I gotta to redouble my efforts. And every little detail matters, so that no actual complains can be thrown at me.

Sure, the image others have of me will never change and that's a roadblock I'll never be able to overcome, but that's no excuse to let that ruin everything else I've done until now. I already failed Miho by not providing more and not being by her, I can't fail to protect Takeru.

"Furthermore, if I may, what sort of business requires you to take an entire week of leave, sir?" Again looking at me, a brow rose in curiosity.

"Hm? Oh, I just… want to go visit my boy. It's been… awhile, and I'm sure he'll be happy to have an entire week with me now."

"Oh, I wasn't aware… So you have a son?"

"Yeah, he's six and a half now. And no, I can't wait until my month of vacation." Shooting down his retort, he groans a bit. Again sending a hand to his hair, and again failing to flatten the spiky horn, his brows arch down more and more.

"Well… I suppose I can understand why you'd be in a hurry then. However, can you truly not delay the visit until your vacation?"

"No, I simply can't. He needs me there, now."

"Uh, is… Would he happen to be sick?"

"No, it's not that. It's… Sigh… It's complicated."

"My apologies, sir. I did not meant to pry."

"It's fine, really." Waving a hand in the air, I force a smile. "Anyways, my house needs me present over there, and this is what I have to do

as a parent. So, you all simply keep up the good work as you've been doing so far."

"Eh? You… believe we've been faring well so far, sir?" Staring right at me, seems I caught him off guard for some reason.

"Yeah? I mean, you three are already good enough despite just joining in a month or so ago. Sure, you can get better, but your starting base is decent. You also deal with the office work in stride, and in your case I know I can leave knowing someone will handle any issues that arise nicely."

He might be a bit blunt and hesitant to affirm stuff, but Amato-san is by a long shot the most tactful of the new recruits. I mean, despite his obvious views and opinion, he still comes to talk with me, to actually hold a conversation with me despite being the son of a High Shinpan house. That's way, way more than what many others have done in the three years I've spent here.

"… Uh, thank you, sir. However, I… I do not believe I could handle any sort of issue that might occur." Hunching over a bit, lips turning into a small line, kinda seems as if he had swallowed brine.

"I mean, you're the most polite and proper of the flight. If someone has to handle the delivery of the reports to the Colonels, I honestly think it should be you."

"… And not because of my station, sir?"

"No, you just have to be like how you are when you talk with me, and you should be fine. I mean, I've been doing this for three years despite my manners. You have nothing to worry about, Amato-san."

"Is that so?" Easing up in his tension, he starts eating again.

"… I know that people also talk behind your back, and that part of that is thanks to me being your superior, but believe me when I say

you're doing fine so far." Lips shook for a moment, then he sighed and nodded.

Of course, being the son of one of the four Shinpan Houses of the fellowship, the direct underlings of the Koubuins, having him serve under a commoner hasn't been received well by all the onlookers. And as hard as it is for me, the whispers also follow the three boys that have been placed under me. I know my words might not have much weight for them, but recognizing their good points is all I can do for now, until another batch of mock battles come and we prove to the others what we're made of.

"Well, best of luck in this week. I guess now it'll be your turn to face the Colonels in the dojo." Cracking a smirk at him, he twitches at my words.

"Eh? S-Surely you jest, sir?"

"Ohoho, I'm not. I am leaving for a week, so you three are under the Colonels' watch for the armored kendo practices. May the tailwind remain at your back, Amato-san." Hunching over as he rubbed one of his wrists, he groaned quite wearily like a puppy looking at an empty bowl.

"Are the matches as arduous as the rumors say?"

"Yes. The Tsukuyomi Brothers are truly fierce in a dojo. So don't take it too hard if you lose badly, I doubt any of you will be able to best them or their fellows." And I know that for all the spunk you show when you come talk with me, you take the comments of the others equally as bad as I did before.

"Sigh… It's just like back home…"

"Hm? What do you mean?" Does he have a fierce kendo teacher in his house?

"N-Nothing, sir." Plucking his lips, still as a tree, he looks away. "… I shall perform at my best. In that regard, well, did you have any advice to give us for this coming week?"

"No, not really. Again, just try to get a feel for what the Zuikaku can really do in the JIVES. Focus on what you do best, and then keep an eye for your worst trait. Believe me, you will be made to know what it is."

"Ugh… I shan't let those words hamper my efforts." Clenching a fist, as well as his cheeks, a long, heavy puff of air left him once he let the frown melt away.

"Just don't take things too hard, Amato-san. Everyone starts from somewhere. Well, I'll be taking me leave." Standing up, we share a salute. "Good night, and see you in around a week."

"… It should be 'in a week's time', sir. Please do remember to keep your poise while on duty." Narrowing his eyes and brows a bit, I can't help but to chuckle at the last minute correction. "In any case, I hope your week of leave is pleasant for you, sir."

Nodding back at him, I take my tray back to the counter and leave the mess hall. Now walking slowly, no longer minding the stares and whispers, I retreat towards my room on the barracks on the Castle Grounds.

Still, it's hard to believe they made me into a flight leader despite not getting a promotion. All of them might be fresh out of the training program of the guard, but they're all nobles. Worst, Amato-san is a High Shinpan so his family must not be very pleased about this arrangement. Just imagine when they learned of this.

" *Hey, your son, that you've been raising to be at the top of this nation since birth, is now working under a baseborn!"*

And then, whoever delivered the news was cut in half and hanged on a pike or something.

Sometimes I wonder why Takahisa-sama does what he does, it feels completely random and out of place. I know I performed better than ever on these last mock battles against the Kagerou, but to put these fresh recruits, and the son of one of the four Shinpan Houses of the fellowship no less, under my watch… Why did he do that? After all the mess with me wanting to leave and them sending the daughter of a Shinpan to look after Takeru… I don't get it.

Eh, at least Amato-san is tactful enough. Sure, he also is oddly insistent in marking my mistakes and 'lacking speech', but at least we can hold a conversation. And for all the poise he tries to show off, he's just like I was when I had just come here, taking the whispers as hard as a kick to the nuts.

Reaching my room, taking my dress off, entering the shower, I simply relax. It's going to be a long travel back to Hiiragi. All these time… all these months…

How has he been? Put under Col. Kazora's daughter no less, I doubt she'd have much patience for him, knowing how stubborn Takeru is at times. And… And as precious as this time is… it's just a week. And then, I'm gone until the end of the year. For only a month. And then… Who knows when I'll be able to see him again?

…

No, I shouldn't… I shouldn't worry like this… He doesn't need me like this. Gotta get my shit together, he's hurting far more than me, I'm sure.

Getting out of the bath and taking care of what little was left to do, I threw myself on my bed, since I need to wake up early.

Yet no matter how much I turned and hugged my sides, it took me a long while to fall asleep.

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*Next Day. Near 6 PM.*

*( Hiiragi District. Near Takeru's House.)*

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I slowly walk on the streets of Hiiragi, feeling the pleasant warmness of summer starting to appear in our weather.

In just a few minutes I'll be home, and finally… I'll see him again. As well as the person that's been taking care of him. Still, Takahisa-sama himself said she was doing a good job. But this is Col. Tsukuyomi's daughter we're talking about. How on earth is she taking care of him? She… hasn't been harsh on him, right?

As if I have any right to complain, I left Takeru all alone in the end.

Unable to lift my face off the street, I keep walking back home. As I got closer, I could see some lights were on. I licked my lips as my finger halted its way onto the doorbell. Looking down again, I took one deep breath. What am I even going to tell him? I can't stay for more than a week, I'll have to leave him alone again.

Even if Miho asked me to keep working… Even if Takahisa-sama says he will look after him… Is this the right thing to do?

I ring the doorbell after hesitating for another while. Soon, footsteps reach my ears. The door opens to reveal a young woman with turquoise eyes, like those of the Colonel, dressed in a simple crimson and white dress.

"Good evening. I suppose you would be Kageyuki Shirogane-san?"

"Ah, yes. That's me. Um… You're Col. Tsukuyomi's daughter, right?"

"Yes, that is the case." The woman then did a short bow towards me. "My name is Maya Tsukuyomi. I have been entrusted with the duty of looking after your son. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"Yes, it's a pleasure. So, uh, is Takeru-"

"Please, do come in. I was preparing dinner, it will be done soon." She stepped to a side, making way for me to enter.

I bow to her and come in, taking my shoes off at the entrance. A strong scent reaches my nose as I walk into the kitchen. I don't know what she's making but it smells good.

"So… Tsukuyomi-san, where is Takeru?"

"Maya-san will suffice, Kageyuki-san."

"No, you're a noble. I can't use your name, and you don't have to address me so formally either." I say scratching my head as I give her a small bow.

"Please, I am working for you as of now. There is no need to show such stiffness in your words."

"Um… Are you testing me, maybe?"

"Testing you?" She looked straight at me as she tapped her glasses.

"Yes, your father did something similar to this when I had just arrived to the Guard." Once I relaxed and spoke in my usual way he rebuked me and told me I wasn't fit to be one of them.

"Do forgive me, but I am not my father." Despite not using the same words, her stare is as imposing as his though. "Furthermore, I am already acquainted to Takeru's speech mannerisms by now. I sincerely doubt you could be worse."

"… I see. How has he been? Where is he?"

"Oh, he should be upstairs. I shall be finishing dinner, please feel free to go to him. He has missed you much in these months." She doesn't seem to be a bad person… But I can't tell what she thinks behind that poker face.

"Alright, I'll be going. And… Uuh… Thanks for looking after him, Tsukuyomi-san. I really appreciate it."

"Sigh… No thanks are needed, I am merely performing the duty that was entrusted to me. And as I said, Maya-san will suffice."

"Okay?" I didn't think she would be so frontal. "So, he's upstairs in his room?"

"Yes, we can talk at large after dinner. In the meantime, please do go to Takeru's side." She gave me another small bow then turned around and went to the kitchen.

She… doesn't seem to mind being here as much as I thought she would. Or maybe she's just being polite. I leave my bag on a chair and go up the stairs. Going to his room, feeling my heart pounding against my chest, I manage to grab the doorknob and open the door.

"Takeru?" I slowly enter the room.

… And I'm met with nothing.

He isn't here. His bed is neatly done, so I can tell he isn't under the sheets. The room isn't so big to give him a hiding place. I look under his bed, but he also isn't there and he also isn't hidden in his wardrobe. And if he was hiding for whatever reason, he would have… come to greet me.

… Takeru isn't here.

My heart starts beating faster, now for a different reason. Entering into alert mode as if I had just heard the 991 Alarm, I rush down the stairs into the kitchen.

"Tsukuyomi-san, what is the meaning of this?!"

"Eh? Excuse me, whatever is the matter?"

"Don't play dumb! Where is Takeru?!"

"As I said, he's in his-"

"He isn't there. His room was empty!" And he would have heard me coming home if he was in the bathroom.

"Huh? What do you mean?" She moved away from the pots, narrowing her brows.

"You heard me. Takeru isn't on his room. Where is he?"

"He isn't in… For the Holy Emperor, don't tell me he…" Tsukuyomi rushed past me as she frowned.

I followed her and we wound up on the door that leaded to the backyard. It was unlocked, but she closed it immediately. She sighed and seemed to be rubbing her forehead.

"Takeru, why you… How could I forget to lock the door?"

"Tsukuyomi-san, where is Takeru? What is the-"

"Please rest assured, Kageyuki-san." She turned around and tapped her glasses, still frowning. "Whenever this happens, it means Takeru went to the Kagami's house. Forgive me, when I received a call that you would be coming home I was in the middle of picking up the laundry. I seem to have forgotten to lock the door." She gave me a bow, hands joined as she did.

"… Why? Why does Takeru runs off to Haruna-san's house? Is he not pleased to be here?" Takeru never ran away while Miho was here. Why would he… What is she doing to him?!

"Because he's bored."

"… Bored?"

"Yes, I cannot tend to him while I am cooking or working. So, from time to time, he goes to the Kagami's house to pass the time until dinner is ready after he does his homework. Though it has been a

long time since he did so without me noticing." She again tapped her glasses as her tone took that severe edge the Colonel makes all the time.

"So Takeru leaves to Haruna-san's house when he's bored? Have you not scolded him when he does it?"

"Of course I have, but I believe you would know how stubborn he is." Well, yeah. Takeru can be very hard to deal with when an idea gets in his head. "I will not complain about your reaction, considering how you must worry for him. That being said, I find your scowl and words towards me most insulting." She took a step forward, folding her arms. "I have been taking proper care of Takeru. I would like you to know that his grades have improved much since I have been supervising his lessons. You do not need to doubt me so, I know Father can be most abrasive even when unnecessary, however I am not such a hostile person. Your son is in good hands, you can place your trust in me."

"… Sorry, I shouldn't have screamed at you." Not when she's the one taking care of him and I'm the one who's never around. I hang my head, sighing the tension out.

"No apologies are needed. Please do go bring him here. I shall-"

"Can I ask you something, Tsukuyomi-san?"

"… Yes, you can. However, I believe I said you could simply refer to me as Maya-san." I ignore her complaining and exhale loudly, scratching my nose.

"Why did you accept?"

"Accept what?"

"Taking care of my son. I know many nobles dislike us commoners, I know this task must be something like a punishment for someone of your station. Why did you stay with Takeru?"

Both Tsukuyomis in the Guard are nothing short of the stereotype of the old prideful and stoic men. Being the daughter of one of them, having been raised as the member of a Shinpan House… What reason could she have to stay here? What did Takahisa-sama do to have her accept the orders and to stay here for so long?

She closes her eyes and remains silently standing there for a while. Barely opening them, she takes her glasses off to rub her eyes and brush some hair out of her face. Once she put them on again, she directs a calmer gaze my way.

"At first, I was most upset at this turn of events. To be frank, had Yohime-sama not been the one to give me the order I would have refused to be the caretaker of your son." She then brings a hand to her ear, playing with her hair. "However, in my stay here I learned many valuable lessons. I know my Father and Uncle have most assuredly been harsh to you due to your roots, however I realized there is no need to show such hostilities to my peasant fellows. Your son… was most kind to me when I was feeling dejected at this task I was made to perform."

"Takeru? What did he do?"

"He… praised me and remained by my side." Why did she stop for a second there? "Your son is a very kind person, and even if his manners do leave much to be desired I do not regret staying here. He also has aided my own sister on his visits to the Main House."

"Talking about that, why are you two going there?"

"Oh, Takeru said he wanted to learn kendo so he practices there on the weekends. I believe you had left him a wooden blade for that purpose?"

"… Ah, that's true." After Miho died I completely forgot about that present we gave him. "So… So you're getting along with him?"

"Yes, to the point that he refers to me as his sister."

"Huh?! Really? Sorry, he's just a kid. Takeru doesn't-" She extends a hand, her expression relaxed.

"It is alright. Again, I am not troubled by his usual demeanor. You can trust in me keeping him safe while you work, Kageyuki-san."

"So… Until when will you stay with him?" She suddenly furrowed her brows.

"I was assigned as Takeru's retainer, therefore I shall stay with him until the day you finish serving in the Guard. For that reason I was given a computer and a secure connection to aid my fellows in their work back at the Main House while Takeru is at school. And while I do not intend to boast, I believe him to be comfortable with me as his caretaker. Has someone suggested the idea of replacing me, by any chance?" She took a step forward, not letting go of my gaze as if she were an angry crab.

"No, no one did. I just… assumed you would want to return to your duties in the Guard."

"Well, I can still do some of them while I am here. Worry not, your son is in good hands." She's being honest, since she got really pissed off at my last words. So she really… is taking care of Takeru well.

"I see… Thanks… Thanks, Tsukuyomi-san."

"Please, Maya-san is enough."

"No, I'm… really thankful to you. Sorry for having screamed at you."

"It is alright. Please go for Takeru." I nod at her and go to the door.

She really is very patient. Sigh… What an idiot I am, screaming like that. She even said she's willing to stay here with him until I can finish my active duties on the Guard, whenever that is. And… I don't feel that rejection her father has in his words from hers.

Going back to the street, I reach the Kagami's door and ring the doorbell. Just a moment later, Haruna-san opened the door.

"Kageyuki-san?! I didn't knew you were home!"

"Good evening, Haruna-san. I just arrived. I was told Takeru might be here?"

"Oh! Yes, he's in the living room reading with Sumika."

"Does he come here frequently?"

"Haha, yes, he does. He says reading by himself isn't fun and so he comes to be with Sumika all the time." She says with the same sunshine she always has on her face. I am so lucky to have found such good people to look after him.

"I see. Thanks a lot for having so much patience for him."

"No, on the contrary, it's a great help to have him come visit. Come on in, please."

I enter her house, it hasn't changed at all since I last was here. Looking into the place, I saw the two little ones sitting on the small sofa that was near a wall.

"Takeru-chan, how come the granny survived being inside the wolf?" Sumika asked him as she leaned on his shoulder.

"How should I know that? Even the foreigners' tales are weird." He was plucking his lips at the book.

It seems that they were reading Crimson Raiding Hood. I simply stood by the doorway into the living room watching him as he read the book out loud as Sumika kept making questions about it. Once he finished it, he looked up from the pages. And our eyes met.

"Hey, Takeru."

"Dad!" He dropped the book and came rushing to my side. "Welcome back!" I crouched and gave him a hug as he got to my side.

"How have you been, Takeru?" I ruffled his hair as I took a good look at him. He seems healthy, has no bruises on him, sounds as fine and energetic as always.

"I'm fine, don't worry."

"So, what were you doing here?"

"I came to read with Sumika. It's boring waiting alone until Maya-nee finishes dinner."

"Maya-nee? Takeru, does Tsukuyomi-san let you call her like that?"

"Yeah, she said it's fine. Why?"

"… Nothing, don't worry. So, were you having fun with Sumika?" He smiles widely as he nods.

"Yeah, she always reads with me at night. Though…" His brows lowered a bit. "All these tales are really weird. Dad, how did the granny survive being inside the wolf if he ate her?" Sumika also came close, wanting to hear my answer.

"Huh… That's because… The wolf didn't eat her, he swallowed her."

"Isn't it the same?"

"No, to eat something you have to chew it. If you don't, then it doesn't count." I laugh as their widening eyes, how much did I miss fooling around with you.

"So… If I eat some fruit and I don't chew it, what happens?"

"A tree is gonna grow on your belly. So, you better start chewing your food, Takeru." I ruffle his hair as he raises his brows in surprise.

"Well, dinner should be done in a short while. Let's go home, Takeru."

"Yeah, let's go home." He grabbed onto my arm, a smile plastered on his face. "Well, we'll keep reading more tomorrow Sumika." He then went to Sumika's side and gave her a tight hug.

"Yes… See you tomorrow, Takeru-chan." He nodded and ended the hug.

"Thanks for reading with him all the time, Sumika." I went to her side and ruffled her hair. She giggled as I did.

"No, it's really fun. But all the tales are really weird." Takeru nods to her words.

"Haha, they are old tales after all. Well, we should be going. Thanks again, Sumika." She smiles and follows us as we made our way to the door.

"See you tomorrow, Haruna-san." Takeru said once we got outside.

"Yes, see you tomorrow."

"Thanks for looking out for him all this time." I give her a small bow, she sighs and then smiles at me.

"It's not a problem. It helps a lot to have him visit. Right, Sumika?"

"… Yes." The little one nodded, her eyes on the ground in embarrassment.

"Well, we should be going. Thanks again, and see you tomorrow."

I give her a small bow, Takeru waved at them as both of them did while we walked to our house, before then closing the door.

"So, do you come visit them often?"

"Yeah! Reading alone is boring, so once I do my homework I go to read with Sumika." He says, all smiles in him.

"I see… That's good to hear."

"Hey, Dad…"

"What's up?"

"Did Mom come back home too?"

"… Not yet. Let's be a bit more patient with Mom, okay Takeru?"

"… Yes. Are you going back to the samurai tomorrow?"

"No, I'm staying home for a week this time."

"Really?!"

"Yes, so we'll get to read together all the books you want." He then hugged my arm again.

"Thanks, Dad. Oh, but tomorrow I gotta go train. Will you come with me?"

I open the door and bring us both inside, after closing I look at him again.

"Takeru, what do you mean by training?"

"Hm? Maya-nee takes me to train with Mion and Shion. And I visit Yuuhi while I'm there too."

"But… What the… Takeru, since when have you been doing this?"

"Um…" He folds his arms and looks up, furrowing his brows as he groans a bit. "The first time we went was in March, I think."

Why did nobody told me of this? And more importantly…

"Takeru, when you say Yuuhi, do you mean Yohime-sama's daughter?"

"Yeah, we're really good friends." He smiles again as he nods.

"… And Mion and Shion are… the little sisters of the Tsukuyomi, right?"

"Yeah, that's right. The Pickles are also my friends."

"… Pickles?"

"Don't they look like pickles? Their hair is all green, and they're always so bitter… At first they didn't really like me, they were making this really scary face all the time, so I thought they were like those pickles Maya-nee made me eat once." He says as he puffs his cheeks.

As we go into the kitchen and sit, I think about what he just told me. It seems he's been made to interact with the young nobles, and nobody told me a thing about it. Why? Knowing how both Tsukuyomi brother think, I can't see them agreeing to this.

"And do they treat you badly now?"

"No, not anymore. Well, Shion sometimes does. She gets really angry from time to time when she doesn't do something as she wants. I don't get it, she's so good but she still gets so mad about stuff. She's such a dumb pickle." Takeru says puffing his chest.

Tsukuyomi-san was carrying some plates when we got to the kitchen, and so I helped her serve dinner while Takeru told me of his trainings. Of how he's starting to get better at shogi but still is learning the basics of kendo, of how he and Shion are evenly matched in juggling, of how he and Mion are reading together that book of pirates he didn't want to read back then. Tsukuyomi-san sent a glare at Takeru as she served him his food when he again called the young ones pickles.

"Takeru, I told you to not call them in that way. It is rude to refer to Shion and Mion in such a way."

"But they're always so bitter…"

"Tsukuyomi-san, why has Takeru been meeting your relatives?"

"Well, Takeru told Yohime-sama he wanted to learn to use a blade and she allowed him to go train in our dojo during the weekends."

"I see…" Is that really all there is to this? It can't be, why would they allow a normal boy to be so close to them? "And what about Yuuhi-sama? He said they're friends…" Tsukuyomi-san sighs as she shakes her head slightly.

"Yes, that is the case. Takeru approached her as he usually does when they met and she seems to have taken an interest in him. I believe they get along well as of now. He gave her a spinning top as a present, and since their birthday is on the same date, they promised to share their birthdays from now on."

"Wait, what? I… Wait, so you're telling me Yohime-sama and Takahisa-sama are okay with this?"

"… Were you not told of this, Kageyuki-san?"

"No, not a word. I mean… How did he even manage to get in her good side?"I look at Takeru, who didn't wait for us to sit down to start devouring his food.

"Well, Takeru can be very kind when he wants to. As nobles, Yuuhi-sama, my sister and younger cousin did not know what… friendship was."

"How do you mean? Why would they allow a commoner to be so close to her?" Just to be friends? That… doesn't sound convincing at all.

"… As I said, Yuuhi-sama was truly happy when they met, and albeit they didn't welcome his presence at first, both my sister and younger cousin seem to be growing to favor Takeru as well."

"… So, can you tell me how it happened?" She nods, once we both sit down.

She then tells me of how she saw their exchanges as we ate. Of how Yuuhi-sama was overjoyed to have a friend, of how her sister disliked Takeru at first and of how she's slowly warming up to him as they go visit them and play with the toys and books Takeru takes with him, of how her younger cousin started talking more and regained her smile thanks to Takeru helping her realize how good she actually was when practicing together and by simply wanting to read and have fun with her.

"He actually noticed how much time Shion takes before moving back during his very first practice against her. Then, he told Mion of it and thanks to that their duels are more even now. And thanks to his open friendliness, Mion is no longer as silent and stiff as she was. She even seems to have developed a sweet tooth thanks to him." Tsukuyomi-san said as we ate.

"A sweet tooth? How so?"

"That's because I told them to have cake and Mion ate it all herself once." Takeru said in a pouty voice before continuing to eat at his rice.

"… Cake? Did they have a birthday party?" She then sighs as she nods.

"Yes, Takeru suggested them to hold parties for their birthdays, which were around a month apart from each other. Mion enjoyed sharing cake with Takeru and Shion during the latter's birthday as they read one of those books about pirates, which was how Shion began to find him entertaining. So, when her birthday grew closer, Mion asked my older cousin to have cake as well. Her sister then

baked her one that she liked much, and then proceeded to eat most of it herself." Furrowing her brows, tapping her glasses, she sighs again. "Despite my Father and Uncle's repining at the time, Mion said she had much fun that day, and she smiled as she hadn't in a long time. Sadly, since then she seems to look forward to eating sweet food, and my cousin has told me she has come down with a stomach ache a few times."

"… So Takeru was a bad influence for them, huh."

"No, on the contrary." She again taps her glasses, then looks at him softening her gaze. "Thanks to him, my younger cousin and sister are getting along much better than before. While Shion is still rather rude around Takeru, he isn't a bad influence at all. They needed a friend to relax around from all the pressure of our training as Royal Guards, and he also seems to enjoy his time in the Main House."

"Takeru, do you like going there?"

"Yeah! It's really fun. One of these days we're gonna beat Shion at something." He rose a little fist up, puffing his cheeks again.

I smile and laugh at his reaction. So he's a friend of them… I let out some air, my shoulders relaxing a bit as I let go of the ball of nerves that was making my heart race in worry. If he's this happy about it, it means he isn't being treated badly. We kept eating as Takeru told me of his trainings and Tsukuyomi-san commented on his words. Once we were done, I took him to his room.

"So, you really practice with them every weekend?" I ask Takeru as we go up the stairs.

"Yeah, but I still can't win. They might be girls, but the Pickles are really strong. Did you also have to train like that to be a samurai, Dad?"

"Well, yeah." I was put under Col. Kazora's care for my kendo lessons when my induction was approved. My arms and rear are

crying all over again simply by remembering those days, at times it felt as if he would end up slashing me in half to be honest. "It was really hard, so I can understand how you feel perfectly." He never held back, not even once. It was like diving into a sea of fire, entering the dojo. "By the way, nobody treats you badly when you go to the Main House?"

"Hmm… They Pickles' Dads don't really like me." He plucks his lips as we get to his room's door. "They always have these scary eyes on their face, like they're always angry at something. The other samurais there also look at me kinda scary."

"I see… But they're not bad with you?"

"They don't really talk with me, and don't answer when I greet them. There's also the old woman that's always with Yuuhi, she also doesn't talk with me. But nobody is being mean like back in the other school." He then smiles, which means I can rest easy.

I will have to ask about what's going on here, though. They wouldn't… be planning to have him join the Guard as well, right? What reason could a Regent House have to let a simple boy like Takeru be so close to their heirs? They're always so detached from the rest of us, the common folk only ever gets to see them in the news or in some odd announcement.

I help Takeru to get in his pajama, sitting by the side of his bed once he gets under his sheets. I breathe in, softly ruffling his hair for a moment. All the aching I was feeling vanished for a moment, because he's alright. Alert mode finally turned off, I simply smiled naturally at him.

"Dad, can you read me a story?"

"Sure. By the way, does Tsukuyomi-san read you something before bed?" He pouts, looking a bit away.

"… Only if I'm good."

"Hahaha… Do you really like her, Takeru?"

"Yeah, she can be scary sometimes, but Maya-nee is really nice." And again, he smiles without delay.

"I see… That's good to hear. Really… That's good. So, what would you like me to read you?"

"Hmm… Oh, what about Banzel and Kretel? I haven't read that one yet."

"Lemme see… This one?" I went to the rack with the books, picking up a foreign tale. "I didn't knew you liked these tales."

"Me and Sumika wanted to see if they were also as weird as our tales. But I still don't get most of them…"

"Hm? Are they hard to read?"

"No, they're really weird." He raises a hand, then makes it a tiny fist.

He then told me of what he thought about Heater Pan, Crimson Hood, Liger in Boots, Binocchio, and all the other books he and Sumika have been reading, for school or just for fun. The, he complained about how Sumika doesn't like scary stories.

"So, there's a part where Binocchio gets ambushed by these two mean thieves… So, when we got to it, Sumika screamed when she saw them attacking Binocchio."

"Are they that scary?"

"Well… N-No." He looked away, so he's trying to play tough. You silly, little Takeru. "But they were all dark because they had these long, black capes covering their faces and it was raining, so the sky was all dark too in the drawing. I… wasn't that scared, but Sumika didn't like them at all, so we stopped reading then because she started complaining. So when I went to visit her the next day to keep reading, she had scribbled all over those pages!"

"Eh?! Really?"

"Yeah, she just grabbed a bunch of pencils and scribbled them over, and when I tried to read them she just passed them in a flash. We don't need to read this part, she said." He pouts, crossing his arms.

"What did Haruna-san said then?"

"She started laughing at us! I asked her for help, because Sumika wasn't letting me read, and she just laughed for a while."

I would have laughed at that too, I bet seeing Sumika doing that was too precious for her, considering what she told me before. She simply must have been delighted. I wish I could have been there to see you two quarrel about that.

"Well, don't worry. So, does this book have the scribbles?"

"No, that was Sumika's book. I asked Maya-nee to buy me this one so that I could read it all. She had me pass a history test with a good grade, though."

"So you're also doing well in school?"

"Yeah. Maya-nee is really strict about homework."

"And… you're not getting into more fights?"

"… Sometimes I do. Especially with that dumb Jouji."

"Is he mean to you?"

"Well… He's kind of a jerk." Furrowing his brows, again he pouts. "He thinks he's so great because he's good in baseball, and is always being so loud. He's not bad but… I dunno why he keeps bothering me."

He then tells me this Jouji usually competes with him to see who gets the better grades or does things better in PE, and that he's

always trying to convince Sumika that he's better. However, when I asked if he was also being mean to Jouji, he admitted he also poked fun at the boy whenever his scores were higher.

"Maybe he's just trying to be your friend, in his own way. Don't be mean to him, Takeru."

"Really? But, why is he always asking Sumika who she thinks is better?"

"Beats me, maybe he just wants to be friends with both of you?"

"Hmm… I dunno, he's so dumb if that's true. Why can't he just say he wants to play with us?"

"He might be shy, you never know. But remember Takeru, you don't have to punch anyone, no matter what they say." It would be troublesome if he did that in the Main House, and it's time for him to stop reacting like that too. Now that Miho is gone, I have to be more strict with him too. "If you get in trouble, I'll get angry at you."

"Okay… I'll try to not get into fights anymore. But then there's these girls, and they're really mean to Sumika."

"Oh, so you're defending her?"

"Yeah, since she starts crying on the way back home sometimes. I hate those dumb girls. Jouji also hates them, they're so mean."

"Sigh… Still, no fighting." I ruffle his hair softly, I can't blame him after all. It's what I did for Koetsu all those years ago. Until Dad reprimanded me for harming someone. "Can you promise me you'll be good?"

"… Yes. So… Will you be coming home more often?"

"… I don't know. I have a lot of work to do, but I'll see what I can do. Well, should we start?" I open the book, sitting by the side of his bed.

"Thanks, Dad." He got closer, giving me a kiss on the cheek before I started, making my eyes almost let out a few tears for a second there. Back on his pillow, he stared at me as he waited.

And so, I read him the book. I did so slowly, both to prolong this moment for as long as I could and to help him fall asleep. I enjoyed his stare on me, and his surprise at things he had forgotten. Once I saw him start to nod off, I lowered my voice, getting closer to him.

Once he fell asleep, I remained by his side brushing his hair off his forehead. Again simply lying by his side, our forehead touching, I closed my eyes and again let the minutes tickle away. A certain pleasant numbness spreading through me, I don't know how much time it passed until I mustered enough willpower to stand up.

Kissing his cheek once softly, delaying my exit for some seconds to whisper good nights into his ear, I left Takeru's side. I also left the shadows that had been following me all this time. No longer walking with strong steps, no longer with a pressure in my chest, my breathing calm and relaxed, I descended the stairs.

"Is he asleep now?"

"Yes. Thanks again, Tsukuyomi-san. For everything you've done." I give her a bow, remaining down for a second.

"… There is no need. I am merely doing what is expected of me."

"So, now that he's sound asleep…" I sit down on a chair, she sits in front of me. "What can you tell me of these visits to the Main House?"

"There isn't much more to say. He insisted on coming with me when I was called back for my report, and since I had promised to give him some basic sword training when I found him using that sword, Yohime-sama allowed him to go there each weekend."

"And why is that? Why was I not told of this?"

"I do not know. However, all I said is true. Me and my older cousin believe both Yuuhi-sama and our sisters needed a friend, a confidant if you may. Takeru simply was his usual self when around them."

"I see… And what about both Colonels? I doubt the other members of the Main House enjoy seeing him there, to be honest."

"While that is true… Our lord gave him his blessing, so you can rest easy for nothing shall happen to Takeru while he's there. I shall make sure of it." Tapping her glasses, she returns a straight gaze my way.

"Sigh… Thanks, really. So, well, forgive the question but… Nobody is planning on inducting him into the Royal Guard, right?"

"Perish the thought, Kageyuki-san." Her eyes grew piercing, her voice imposing as her father's. "I myself am against such an arrangement, and furthermore, Yohime-sama herself said she harbors no such intentions. Worry not, no one is going to force Takeru to join the Guard."

"Sigh… Sorry for asking."

"It is fine, and understandable. If I may, might I ask a personal question to you?" She said, tapping her glasses. I nod, resting an arm on the table. "Does Takeru know of his mother's passing?"

"… No, I couldn't bring myself to tell him what death means. Why do you ask?"

"He once… asked me not to leave him. He seemed to think you also had left somewhere and weren't coming back." Her gaze lowers, I can't even begin to guess what she's thinking about.

"I see. Could you… well, try to explain it to him if you find the right moment? I… I don't… know if I…" Again, a knot forms on my throat.

"It is alright. I shall find a way to deal with this matter." She said, in a business-like manner.

"Thanks, Tsukuyomi-san. And sorry for pushing this on your shoulders."

"No thanks are needed, I am merely performing my duty. Also, I told you Maya-san was fine." She narrows her eyes just a bit. I suppose she isn't testing me, so I could call her that, if it bothers her that much.

"Okay, thanks again Maya-san. Well, about these trainings… If not to join the Guard, what was the reason behind this?"

"As I said before, Yohime-sama said she merely wished for Takeru to be a friend to Yuuhi-sama, my sister and younger cousin. To be someone they can consult in the future. Since they don't interact with people outside of their circles, Takeru is the only one who can show them how it is the life of the peasantry. And he said he wanted to learn to use a sword to see you once more, so Yohime-sama simply allowed him to train there during our visits."

So Yohime-sama is as random as Takahisa-sama, huh? Are they really… just being kind to Takeru? No, why would they? Why him instead of any other kid, from those around Osaka even? I'm sure it must be hard to have him visit from so far away, would be really bad if someone came asking why was a commoner coming and going to the Koubuin Main House.

"But, why him? Why not another kid from the nearby area of the Main House?"

"I believe I said so already. Takeru was friendly with Yuuhi-sama instead of growing tense as others tend to do."

"… Just that?"

"It is no small feat, actually. Never trying to gain favors or ask for anything in return more than some time to play, honestly enjoying himself in their company while treating them normally, and coming from a family who we know has been loyal to our House, I doubt there are many young children who would act as your son does. Either they would grow respectful or… well, their families might try to gain a benefit out of the interaction."

"… Well, but now you're here taking care of him… You can't say I don't gain anything by this."

"Yet, this arrangement was a reward our lord Takahisa-sama gave you for your devoted service. Were you… wishing to ask for anything else?" Narrowing her eyes, I sigh as I shake my head.

"Of course not. I just… don't get it. I'm just a soldier, and Takeru's just being himself. Why would they let him be there?"

"Is it so hard to accept they see a good, honest fellow in both of you?"

"And just for that… they allow a commoner to be around the heir of a Regent House?"

"Well…" One of her brows lowers. "While I was told your services are much appreciated, and at first I also saw this as you do, I do believe it is doing good for all four of them. Perhaps that is why Takahisa-sama has given his agreement for this visits to continue. And to reiterate, I myself voiced my opposition to use this dream of his to induct him, so you can rest assured Kageyuki-san. Takeru won't be forced to join the Guard, not while I'm his retainer."

Her tone was strong enough to tumble down a TSF, her eyes had that piercing feel just like the Colonel's. She is being honest. Again, I let out a long sigh. Alongside it, the toxic thoughts that clogged my mind also left my insides. He's in good hands… Thank the Holy Emperor, he's in good hands.

"… So, I have one final question for today."

"What is it?"

"Were you told of what would happen to Takeru if I died during my duty?"

"… No, I was not. I suppose he would be sent to an orphanage."

"… I see."

Of course, they're already doing more than enough. Sending one of the Tsukuyomi here, letting Takeru go to the Main House… I am relieved beyond words to see he's in good hands. For now, that will be enough.

"Then, could I go with you to the Main House tomorrow? I would like to clear some of this stuff with Takahisa-sama or Yohime-sama if they have the time."

"Hmm… I don't see why not. We usually depart as soon as he comes back from school, would that alright?"

"Yeah, don't worry. And thanks again for everything, Maya-san."

"Please, it is alright. Did you need anything else of me?"

"Yeah, I was wondering if… you could tell me of how he's been all these months. I know you must be tired… But…"

"It is no problem. Now then… Where should I begin?" She brought a hand to her chin, moving her head as if she were nodding off. "Oh, I suppose I should start with our first week together. You see, Takeru gave me much trouble when he didn't want to do his homework. At the time, he-"

# Ignoble Integration

## Chapter 46: Ignoble Integration

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*June 17th, 1989 Around 2 PM.*

*(Near the Koubuin House.)*

**[Kageyuki]**

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After going to pick up Takeru from his morning classes in school, we were ready to depart to Osaka. I thought we would have to use the public trains, and that's why Maya-san had gotten up so early to ready herself, and why she asked me to go buy 'souvenirs' to take with us. I still can't believe they would send a freaking limo to pick us up at the station, even more to have had us use the Royal Guard's private trains to get to Osaka.

Even less for us to now be entering through the main gates, as if we were important guests. I remember seeing the main houses on TV, being amazed at how imposing they looked… But seeing them in person is completely different, I'm simply awestruck. Being but an inductee I was never called here, I always stayed in our outpost near the Osaka Castle. And, well, my 'fellows' don't exactly like me, so I never thought I would ever set foot in this place. To think Takeru did so before me… Life is weird sometimes.

"Maya-san, is this really alright?" I say in a whisper, while she was trying to keep Takeru from staring out the window.

"Hm? Yes, why would there be a problem?"

"Well, two commoners are coming in a limo, using your private trains, entering through the main gate. I think some people are not going to take this nicely."

"… I can understand you worry, but rest assured. As much as some would like to voice their opposition, this has been allowed by Yohime-sama. Let me be the one in the lead, in case anyone sees your presence with foul eyes."

"Yes, I agree. Thanks again, Maya-san."

"No, it is nothing."

"Say, Dad…" Takeru looked back from the window towards us. "Do you know why they put a pond over there?"

"… I think it's just for decorating. Back in my school, we also had a pond with Koi fish."

"Really? Why does my school not have one?"

"Well, it's kind of an old custom, so new schools probably don't have them."

"Ooh… Why were there fish in the pond? Did you eat them?"

"Of course not, Takeru. It was just to have some… sort of atmosphere set."

"… I don't get it." He furrows his brows, shrugging his mouth again.

"Don't worry about it. You'll understand once you grow up." Maya-san sighs as he groans in disagreement.

During that conversation, we had finally parked within the large state of the Koubuin Main House. Getting out of the limo, I saw a woman with emerald hair coming our way. I suppose she's Col. Bazora's daughter.

"Welcome, Maya. And I suppose you must be Kageyuki Shirogane-san?"

"Ah, yes." I stood up in attention by reflex, giving her a salute. "Good morning, Miss."

"Please, there is no need for such formalities. You are not here as a member of the Guard, Shirogane-san. You are our guest today." She smiled, more sweetly and caring than I ever expected someone of the Shinpan to do towards me. "My name is Mana Tsukuyomi, and regardless of my station you, as a permanent member of Takahisa-sama's squadron, are one of my fellows. I am pleased to make your acquaintance." She gave me a small bow, politely and without any tension or signs of rejection.

I gulped, hesitating a moment, thinking it may be yet another test of character. However, after a sigh, I returned the gesture. I'll just stick to doing my best speaking formally.

"The pleasure is mine, Tsukuyomi-san. Thanks for your hospitality towards me and my son."

"Ah, no, it is nothing. Also, Mana-san shall suffice. We are many Tsukuyomis in this house, so I do not mind you using my name to refer to me."

"In that case, shouldn't I use the -sama?"

"As I said before, you are our fellow. Also, I am used to little Takeru, so I do not mind. However, I concede using said honorific when around my Father and Uncle would indeed be the correct choice."

… Not like I was planning on calling the Colonels by anything other than their ranks. They're terrifying enough when they're not upset, and I don't want to return to my first weeks in the Guard.

"Oh, hi Mana-nee!" Takeru came rushing from behind me, coming up to Mana-san… and giving her a hug.

"Hello, Takeru. How have you been?" And she smiled… widely. Patting his head, she seemed to be in cloud nine. Does she like

children, maybe?

"I've been fine. But Maya-nee made me study until late for a math test… It was a lot." He complained, as usual. He really doesn't get along well with numbers.

"Oh, that is awful." She said, raising her tone a bit, purposely talking funny. She seems to truly like him, it's good to see at least someone else is honestly nice towards him. "You must have been so tired."

"Yeah… That was so mean." He replies in a pouty voice, making me chuckle when I see him puffing his cheeks. It's a surprise to be sure, seeing a noble be this warm to a peasant.

"Ahem…"

Maya-san had taken some steps forward, tapping her glasses as she did, looking just as her father does when he is about to begin berating one of us for something.

"Allow me to clarify that it wasn't anything you should concern yourself with, Kageyuki-san. I merely had Takeru studying half an hour more so that he could achieve the score he required to reach a respectable passing grade."

"Oh, I see." I would ask more, but her narrowed eyes and dry tone are making me think I should stay out of… whatever this is.

"I think you could have been slightly more receptive towards Takeru." Mana-san replied, smiling and caressing her hair. "Having someone study for longer periods of time does not guarantee success."

"Still, he achieved the score he needed, which proves I was right in my method." Maya-san retaliates.

"Even so, such approach could backfire, making Takeru unwilling to study for math in the future. Taking into account his own learning

pace is of utmost importance." She said as she patted Takeru's head.

"Thank you kindly for the suggestion Mana, but do remember that I am Takeru's retainer. Therefore, I do know more about his habits and limits than you."

"Um…" Both of them look my way, almost making me flinch. "I do think forcing him might not be a good idea, but Takeru can be really stubborn from time to time. Takeru, was studying bothersome?"

"No, I just don't get the stuff we see. I did manage to get some of the problems right thanks to practicing more, that's why I got a good grade on the test." He smiles, sticking out his chest in pride.

"See, Mana? My method was the right one."

"It was a lot to study, though." He continued, folding his arms and puffing a cheek. "You could have given me a small break to rest, Maya-nee."

"… You were saying, Maya?" Mana-san curved an edge of her lips into a smirk while placing a single finger on her cheek, lowering the inner side of her brows in what I can only call a smug gesture.

They then remain staring at each other for a moment, saying nothing. Maya-san with a stone cold expression, Mana-san with a slightly more relaxed but still somewhat confrontational smile.

What the hell is going on here? Are they… arguing over Takeru?

"Well… Yohime-sama is waiting. Let us go." Mana-san said, smiling my way.

As we walk towards the house's entrance, Maya-san made quite an obvious effort to place herself between Takeru and her cousin. I was on Takeru's left side, holding his hand. When Mana-san seemed to

bring something up in a low tone, making Maya-san focus on her, I used that chance.

"Hey, Takeru…" I whisper to him.

"Hm?"

"Do these two usually argue like that?"

"Yeah… Maya-nee and Mana-nee sometimes start arguing like that. Maya-nee then gets all angry, her eyebrows get all spiky and low. I don't get why they fight like that." Me neither, Takeru. Me neither.

"Kageyuki-san?" Maya-san turned towards me.

"Ah, yes?"

"Would you prefer to go meet with Yohime-sama now, or to join us in the dojo?"

"Do I get to choose? If Yohime-sama doesn't have the time, there's no way I'd demand to see her." Lowering my head a bit, she returns yet another smile my way.

"She seems to be free as of now, however, the lessons at the dojo have already started. Takeru would have to come with us there. What would you like to do?"

Well, for one, I would like some cold water. To see if I'm not actually dreaming. Why would they be treating me with such respect? I don't get it. Well… As much as I'd like some answers, I want to be there seeing him train. Just in case something happens.

"I'd like to accompany you to the dojo, I want to see how Takeru is doing." His grasp on my hand tightened a bit.

"Very well. Allow us to go there, then." She said, and then we four picked up our pace.

As we entered the house and they guided us to the dojo, while I asked Takeru about his fights in the dojo, I could clearly see some people throwing glances as we passed them, some clearly frowning. Sigh…

When we made it to the dojo, Mana-san excused herself and said she had to return to her duties. After giving her a bow, leaving what we brought from home in her hands, we entered the dojo and when we did I could see Col. Bazora overseeing the training of two little shapes in the normal protective gear. So they don't spar with the Armored Kendo gear? I would have thought they would prefer to use that.

The Col. sees us and gives a nod, finishing the duel as one got a certain hit to the other's abdomen.

"Welcome, Maya." She bows to him, he nods at her once she rises. "… I didn't expect to see you here, Shirogane." He looks at me in the eye, with that unchanging stoic expression and dull tone.

"Greetings, Colonel." I give him a salute, he remains inexpressive.

"Dad, his name isn't Colonel."

"Takeru, that's his rank in the Royal Guard."

"Rank?"

"I'll explain it later. Don't worry about it." He again furrows his brows and groans.

"Well… I suppose I should introduce you to your son's sparring partners." He said, moving to a side and gesturing towards the little shapes that had come closer, taking off their head gear. "The one on the left is my nephew, Shion Tsukuyomi, the one on the right is my younger daughter, Mion Tsukuyomi. Both of you, your greetings."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, sir." Both of them said in unison.

"The pleasure is mine… Uuh…" How should I call them? Normally, I would have to use the -sama, however, even if Maya-san said that wasn't necessary, the Colonel might not agree.

"You might refer to them merely by name, Shirogane."

"Oh… Ahem, would that be fine, Colonel?"

"Sigh… Your son does so all the time, I see no reason to force you to use an honorific on this occasion. I hope you understand the honor it is, to be bestowed this privilege."

"… Yes, sir. I am well aware." He nods, seeming satisfied with my court answer. "Then, it's a pleasure to meet you, Mion, Shion." Both gave me a nod, staring firmly at me.

"Well then, Shirogane, are you ready to begin?" He looked at him, Takeru gave him a nod, pursing his lips a bit.

"Dad… I'll do my best, so look really well. Okay?"

"Haha, yes, I'll be looking." I pat his head, his eyes seem to shine brighter as he smiles.

"Hehe… Get ready, Mion, Shion. Because today I'm gonna win!"

Maya-san sighed while the one called Mion smiled at him. Col. Tsukuyomi merely closed his eyes, tapping his forehead with a single finger.

"I wonder about that." Mion said. "You barely can trade blows with us after all."

"Uh… You'll see today! Shion, you too get ready to finally lose." Takeru said with a confident smile, raising another fist up. And yet…

The turquoise haired little girl folded her arms and looked away from him, seeming to be really pissed off for some reason. I can see she

is truly Col. Kazora's daughter, perhaps she doesn't like Takeru much. Maya-san said she was warming up to him, but still…

"Shion? What's up?" He got closer, staring directly at the turquoise eyes that refused to budge on their animosity.

"… You're late." She said, sounding upset.

"Huh? I'm here, I'm not late."

"Yes, you are!" Placing her hands on her waist quite hard, she glared at him. Feels as if her tone suddenly heated up, tightly shrugging her lips as she did. "We had to start training without you. I most sincerely dislike those who don't keep their word."

"Shion, we had to wait longer for a taxi to come for us." Minding my tone, getting closer and crouching by Takeru's side, I look into her eyes. "It's not Takeru's fault. I also had to come here, so we took some more time to be ready. Please don't be angry at him."

"I see… Um, did you bring the souvenirs at least?" She politely asked, cooling down her tone but still with her brows tense.

"You mean the sweets? Yeah, I went to buy them myself."

"Dad brought more than usual, so we have a lot of ice cream today!" Takeru said happily, nodding once.

I mean, Maya-san told me to go buy something sweet for the kids, and I just brought what we had when Sumika and Haruna-san visited us for his birthday, since there would be three kids. I also tried to buy something 'good' even if I know they would have access to better stuff. Maya-san said it was fine, though.

"Um… What flavor did you bring, sir?" Shion asked, this time clearly interested and leaving the anger behind.

"Strawberry, lemon, apple, and pear, all in their own separated packages. I brought a kilo of each, since Maya-san told me you

enjoy sweet food."

"Oh, I want the pear one!" Mion suddenly said, a small smile in her face.

"No, you always get that one." Shion practically hissed at her cousin, dropping her manners and puffing a cheek. "Today I get the pear, you eat the lemon cream." Mion grimaced for some reason, I guess she doesn't like lemons.

"… Takeru, are they always like this?" He nods, giggling as the cousins glared at each other.

"See? I told you they were always so bitter. Dumb pickles." He keeps giggling at the cousins' quarrel.

"That's enough." Col. Tsukuyomi said, as composed as ever. "The one of you who wins the most duels gets to choose first. What do you say?"

"Yes, Bazora-sama!" Shion immediately replied, smirking for some reason.

"… Yes, Father." Mion did the same, not as loud but still showing a resolution I didn't expect to see in a noble over some ice cream. Mion then looked at Shion, one of her hands shaking when she did so, and narrowed her eyes. "I'm winning today."

"In your dreams, perhaps." Shion replied with a smirk, clearly not intimidated at all.

"Maya, take Shirogane to the changing room." She nodded and grabbed his hand. I gave him a nod when he looked back, and then they went to the room. "You two, another duel." Col. Tsukuyomi said, and the two girls took their poses, beginning to duel again.

… They might be young, but they are really good. No wonder, they are members of the Tsukuyomi family after all.

"So, it seems you came along this time." The Col. says as he comes to my side, not letting the dueling duo out of his sight.

"… Is my presence an inconvenience, Colonel?"

"There is no need to force yourself to speak formally, Shirogane. It doesn't suit you."

"… So, does me being here bother you?"

"Not necessarily."

"Huh. Then, what is the matter?" He never speaks up without having something to say, so what's up with this?

"… Surely you noticed how the girls acted up at the mention of something as simple as the ice cream you brought."

"Are you upset at that, sir?"

"All the contrary." He made a small smile, grasping his chin. "It's thanks to such simple interactions that Mion finally began progressing. It was fine indeed to have been proved wrong."

"Did you disagree with Takeru being here at first?" He nods.

"I didn't think it would bestow any boons to anyone, as my brother did. I cannot speak against the results Mion is achieving now, however." I turn to see the girls, who were still evenly matched. "This would have been impossible months before."

"I see… How did Takeru manage to help, if I might ask?"

"He simply gave both of them some time to relax. I admit I was pushing both of them too harshly at the time. Your son isn't anything special, but his honest friendliness was welcomed by my daughters, so I have no complains as of now. Even more considering the results you produced during the test battles against the Kagerou."

"So, I take it no one is being harsh to Takeru?"

"Worry not, we would never allow him to be injured during the trainings. Your loyalty and efforts for our faction won't go unrewarded, Shirogane." His tone grew low, stern, yet somehow… accepting. It lacked the edge they always have when they reprimand me for a miss. "I suppose, you have no more reasons to quit your post, do you?"

"… If you've been this kind towards my son, there is no way I could want to leave now. It's just…" I look down, tensing my hands.

"What is it?"

"I don't understand why would you go so far. We're commoners, your image would suffer if this were known. Why do so much for us?"

It's unheard of, at least for me, for a Regent House to give this much good faith to an inductee without a history of service. Despite those who clearly don't see us commoners in a good light, the honor that is to be here, to be treated as an equal by the members working on a Main House… it's not something that's achieved easily. Hell, Koetsu is still a Tozama despite all the generations of service his family has dedicated to the Koubuin House, and he himself has said that he's only ever come here a few times. And I'm sure he wasn't treated this nicely, he probably wasn't here as a guest but as a vassal.

So… To give me and Takeru such an honor… when I haven't really done anything worthy of it… Despite the trouble that would give them with the nobles that would get royally pissed off at this gesture…

"I'm just confused, to be honest. I can't see why we'd receive such treatment."

"… Perhaps you are not seeing the value you have for our Regent, Shirogane."

"What do you mean?" I am just a useful pilot, nothing else. And that's being generous on myself.

"Your skills were vital in our victory in the last battles, as well as in all prior mock battles and trials. Your honesty is also welcomed, for we can see you are not one to lie."

That's just the minimal requirements to being a decent person. Who in the right mind would try to deceive a noble? Lies are short lived, nothing good will come out of hiding my own limits and failures.

"Considering your recent performance, despite what you were going through, I think it to be obvious that you should be treated with the respect you earned."

"Is that so…"

"You should be more proud of your results, Shirogane." His voice calmer than ever, taking a moment to look at me. "I believe Takahisa-sama has told you this before, but perhaps you should begin to see yourself as a permanent vassal of the house."

"… Wait, he was serious about that?"

"He never speaks if he isn't sure to follow through his words, as troublesome as that trait of his is at times." He narrowed his eyes, shaking his head a bit. "While rare, it isn't unheard of to have commoners become vassals of a Regent House. I believe you have earned the right to be a fellow of ours."

"Oh… I…" Blinking a few times, rubbing my eyes, and taking a moment to look at my hands, I see this is no dream. Huh… "… I wasn't expecting that, to be honest. The idea of being a formal member of the Guard never crossed my mind."

"Truly? After all your displays and the results you bestowed us?"

"Well, I just wasn't expecting any further rewards for my service. Becoming a permanent member of the Guard seemed like such an impossibility… I honestly still can't believe Takahisa-sama was being serious." I look back at the girls, that were still dueling.

"Sigh… Trust in my words when I say he never backs down from a promise. Furthermore, these three years have shown us you are deserving of the honor of becoming a vassal of this house. You should hoist some more pride after what you have achieved in this time, Shirogane."

"I'm just not used to… Wait… Colonel, when you say a vassal of this house… You can't be implying that Takahisa-sama wants to me to be under his direct command, would you?" He looks down my way, arching his brows as he does.

"Why, yes, that was his intention. I believe he was clear enough before. Would you be inconvenienced by that, perchance?"

"Wait… Huh? He was… being serious? Me, placed as vassal of the Main House?"

"… I can understand your surprise, more so considering how many see you at the Castle, but as I said before, your own efforts have granted you this chance. Hoist it with pride in your heart."

"Huh… I just… can't really believe this is happening…"

One thing was to make me a Flight Commander, but this? To become a formal member of the Imperial Royal Guard and being placed under a Main House… It's what the Fudais and Tozamas aim at, what the top spots of their ranks dream of reaching one day. Commoners getting this treatment is… well, it isn't as if this hasn't ever happened as far as I'm aware… but it's very, very rare.

"I see. Well, I think it's just a matter of time and bureaucracy. And if you continue to excel, I suppose we could make this arrangement of your son into a formal induction."

…

"… What?"

"Well, since you've been serving us so devotedly, and considering your son's situation as of now, I am sure you would be proud to see him following in your footsteps." Not a single spec of hesitation in his words, absolutely not a second of delay in them.

I look down, tightening my fists. That's the exact opposite of what I want. I don't want Takeru to have to fight in the war, all I've done… what I promised to Miho… If this is why they've allowed him to be here…

I see… That's what they're expecting in return of the promotion. Another family of vassals in their service… I see, now it makes sense. Hahaha… To think I once dreamed of having this chance, and now that's it's here… It's as if I had a noose on me, as if a chair was slowly leaving my feet.

"… You'll have to forgive my rudeness, Colonel." I somehow mustered a serious, low voice, despite knowing how my words will be taken. I inhale through my nose, clenching my lips into a line. "However, that's not what I wish for my son's future."

He slowly looks my way, brows arched. Scanning my face for a second, he puts a few fingers on his trimmed beard, I can pretty much feel the pressure of a bonfire irradiating from his stare.

"… So you're saying you do not wish for him to follow in your footsteps?"

"No, I don't want Takeru joining the Royal Guard. All the sacrifices I made, all I've done so far was so that he wouldn't end up entangled in the war." I look at him, arching my brows. And then, he moved his head back, rising his chin as his eyes narrowed.

"Despite the honor of being placed as a permanent member of the squadron, despite the offer to become a vassal of the Koubuin House, and despite all that has been done for your son… You do not wish for him to remain in our fellowship?" It feels as if I were talking with a Fort-Class, my knees shook for a moment under his emerald gaze, under his slow but clearly angered tone.

"I want him to be happy. Fighting in the war… will take his freedom from him, as it did to me. I know how much all what has been done for me means and what an honor it is, but if all this was done with the expectation of having my son become a vassal… Then, I will have to refuse your kindness." Giving him a bow, placing my gaze under his again forced me to take a few breaths to not recoil back.

…

He remained still, looking at me without changing his expression. Only the sounds of the wooden blades clashing against each other could be heard. He slowly folded his arms as he held my gaze, as I slowly breathed in, as I felt a twister turn in my stomach. I know that this will be seen as an insult, and I will probably be kicked out of the Guard. But I'll be damned if I let them have their way. I won't bow down and let them turn Takeru into a soldier.

After a moment, the door of the changing room opened and Maya-san's and Takeru's voices reached us. The Colonel looked at them and nodded.

"Well, let's begin the training."

"Wait Colonel, I don't consent to this." He looked back, somehow taken aback.

"You don't consent, huh?"

"I already said my opinion, I do not agree with what you're doing."

All of this makes sense now. The younger Tsukuyomis were being so respectful because they assumed I would become their vassal, and have Takeru do the same. Maybe that's why Maya-san chose to stay back home, to teach him how to 'behave properly'.

I had thought they were telling the truth back then, that Maya-san and Mana-san simply were being nice to Takeru, that they had taken a liking to him for some reason. What an idiot I was. We're just peasants in their eyes, after all.

"Dad, what's wrong?"

"Nothing Takeru, we're just having a talk."

"But my training is about to start. Why are you angry?"

"I'm just… discussing something with the Colonel."

"Shirogane, you're here merely as a guest." He said, folding his arms. "What reason could you have to be against this?"

"I believe I already stated it."

"Bazora-sama, what is going on here?" Maya-san furrowed her brows, seeming to not understand the situation.

"Nothing of importance." He then looks at Takeru. "Shirogane, you're ready to train?"

"My name is Takeru!" He complained as he usually does. "But yeah, I'm ready. Why were you arguing with Dad, Bazora-san?"

"Matters not. Go and take your pose."

"Wait a second, I don't-"

"Do you not want to see your son train, Shirogane?" He said, making Takeru look at me, I could see his eyes lower in worry.

You son of a bitch… Using him as a shield… I should have known better. What do they want from him? Are they using Takeru to make me continue serving them? Inhaling through my nose, a few fingers piked at my palms, hands shaking a bit. What have they been teaching him all this time? Leaving him in their hands… when they want to turn him into another servant…

"Shirogane, I am convinced you are looking forward to seeing how your son is-"

"Don't mess with me Colonel…" One of his brows twitched, I couldn't stop my teeth from grinding each other. "You're touching my son's future here…"

"Kageyuki-san, please calm down." Maya-san came to my side, still looking taken aback, placing a hand over my arm as I was about to take a step forward. "Please do take in mind how important this is for Takeru. Nobody will harm him, so please do not be so alarmed."

"Yeah, don't worry Dad. I'm gonna be fine!" He replied with his usual cheer.

"… You want to train Takeru?"

"Of course!"

"Okay… I got it." I send a look towards the Colonel. "I suppose we should have a talk later."

"… It seems so, yes."

Takeru gets in position, paired to fight with Mion. As they do, Maya-san circles to my right, standing close to me.

"What happened while we were in the changing room?"

"… Don't feign ignorance, Maya-san."

"What do you speak of?"

Takeru and Mion begin to trade blows, but it's clear she's not taking this seriously. Unlike Takeru, who is trying really hard, going by how much force he's putting in his swings and in his steps to not fall back.

"Heh, stop acting please. The Colonel told me you all are planning to induct Takeru into the Guard."

"Wha… Excuse me, *what* ?" Hm? I looked at her and found her squinting her eyes. "Are you being serious?"

"Do you think I would joke about this, Maya-san?" I return the harsh gaze, she then looks at the Colonel, who simply looked at us as if bored.

"… I didn't knew of this. What did he told you?" She's… pissed off. Just like yesterday.

She doesn't seem to be lying… so, is this idea something the Colonels have? No, Col. Kazora is pretty much allergic to commoners. Then, what's going on here?

Takeru's defense was broken, Mion struck his chest and won their duel. He started complaining.

"Next pair!" Col. Tsukuyomi said, Shion took Mion's place as Takeru's adversary. "Well done, Mion." The little girl bowed to her father, standing by his side.

The next duel began, with Takeru being in an even bigger disadvantage. What's the point of doing this? He is learning, but what do they gain? Someone to talk to? As if the nobles didn't have enough fellows, and they could simply have chosen someone from the local area, to avoid all the bother with the train and the limo from being noticed. It was obvious from the start, they were just disciplining a 'vassal'…

"Bazora-sama…" Maya-san had gone to the Colonel's side. "Is what Kageyuki-san told me true?"

"… Regarding what?" She gets closer, whispering her question. "Well, there is some truth to it."

Maya-san seemed to be frowning for a second, she tapped her glasses and took a step back. All the while, Shion had Takeru on the back foot without a chance to get out of her lock. It didn't took much for her to win.

The Colonel orders for the next duel and both girls take their stances in front of each other as Takeru comes to my side, hanging his head.

"Hey Takeru… You did a good effort."

"… But I still lost." He finally looks up, letting me see his low, dejected eyes.

I sigh, crouching to meet his gaze. Letting go of the anger that was flooding me, I pat his shoulder as I make a small smile towards him.

"Wanna know something? When I was your age, I still hadn't learned how to use a sword as good as you do now."

"Really? But didn't Uncle Koetsu taught you?"

"Yes, but that was in high school. You're doing great for having started just a few months ago." His eyes regain their usual shine, smiling widely.

"Then, will I get to join the samurais like you?" His tone was like cat seeing fish being dangled above it. I, on the other hand, sobered my face and lost some of my glee.

"… Why do you want that, Takeru? Being a samurai is really hard."

"Because then I'll be able to help you out."

"You don't have to worry about me. Dad is going to end the fight before you know it. It's a promise." I pat his head, covered by the cloth keeping his hair tidy.

"Uuh… Then, will you stay home then?"

"Yes, when that day comes. So, you just wait for me. You can practice if you want, but there's no need for you to fight. Dad is not going to lose, Takeru."

"Okay… But I wanted to help out." He sulks a bit. Sigh… Stubborn to a fault.

"You can help elsewhere. Once you grow up, you can decide what you'll do. But leave the fighting to me, okay?"

"… But what if you get hurt?"

"… I'm not going to. Have some faith in the samurais, Takeru. There is nothing we cannot defeat if we fight together." I force a smile, trying to sound like Takahisa-sama does whenever he gives us an important briefing.

"Really?"

"Really. So, you don't worry about me. I promise you we'll beat the bad guys soon." I again pat his head, this time more slowly. I stand up, Takeru comes to my side as he watches the duel.

"So, how good are you with a sword, Dad?"

"Well… I'm not as good as the rest of the samurais, but I can at least give them a challenge."

"Can you show me? Come on, we're here so have a duel!" He tugged at my arm, being again all smiles.

"We don't have any armors for me here, Takeru." And if I were to duel now, I'd probably would end up reacting aggressively towards someone. He puffed his cheeks as he groaned again, still tugging at my arm.

"Sadly, it is true. We don't have any armored kendo gear here." Maya-san said, coming towards Takeru. "Perhaps another time, Takeru."

He pouts, groaning again. Once the duel was finished, he was again made to face off against Mion while Maya-san practiced with Shion. The kids had some more duels, Takeru didn't win a single of them, and then Maya-san took charge of the training as they practiced their swings side by side.

It's amazing, how much he has learned in so little time. It took me three years of on-and-off practice to learn with Benmaru-san just the basics. I was mostly fooling around, but still. And yet… Why would they, specifically the Tsukuyomi brothers no less, have their heirs train with a commoner? Even if they expected us to become their vassals, this is too much for people of their station.

"It looks like you have something on your mind, Shirogane." Col. Tsukuyomi had come to my side, we were rather far from the kids so he had no need to whisper.

"One could say that."

"It is rare, seeing you unwilling to be open." He narrows his eyes.

"I think I already said what I have on my mind."

"I see… I had thought you weren't planning on leaving your post, alas it seems I was mistaken." He folds his arms, now looking at the kids.

It's like talking to a mountain. Another test, is it? I should have seen this one coming, of course the Tsukuyomi brothers were not going to let my wish to leave my post go without a single reprisal. I guess he thinks I'll turn tail one day, the question here is… Is he merely baiting me, or do they really want to induct Takeru? Or… Is their plot to use him to keep me from leaving?

As much as this angers me… I can't lose this position. Miho was right, if I leave I'll be called a traitor, and then Takeru will also be called that. Dammit…

You wanna test me again? Fine by me. I may not want to have Takeru be a Guard, but that doesn't make me a traitor. I'll say it as many times as it takes to get into their daft skulls.

"I never said I wanted to leave my post Colonel, just that I don't want Takeru to be inducted."

"That is… puzzling, one could say." He grasped his chin, a finger threading his beard. As the ceiling was scanned by his eyes, the confusion in 'em grew more when he finally looked at me. "Plentiful have been the gestures you have been bestowed with in these months. I cannot comprehend why would you not wish to become a vassal of our fellowship. What honor could best such a proposition?"

"It's not a matter of honor, sir." I lower my brows, feeling a small jolt run through my arms. "I do not wish to have my son join the Guard."

"And why would you not? If you became a vassal, you would receive an ample raise, be the one who gives your family a road to follow into the service of the Royal Guard. It is rare, to give such an opportunity to a commoner. For you to refuse the chance to stop being an inductee and begin to be a proper member of the Guard, a fellow of the Koubuin House…"

He took a few steps towards me, I remained still. As if I were a scarecrow trying to endure a downpour while simultaneously being pecked by lightning, I didn't lose grasp of his eyes. My hands tensed up to stop shaking, and despite knowing what words would come next I managed to stay calm.

"It means you would rather be serving elsewhere, 2nd Lt. Shirogane." His voice filled with contempt, he simply returned my gaze.

"That is not the case, Colonel."

"Then, why would you refuse such an offer?"

"I already said why. I don't want my son to fight, safeguarding his future has always been the reason why I've endured the pressure all these years. I know that if I do become a fellow, it will be expected of Takeru to also serve the Koubuin House. And I… don't want to take more things from him." I look at him, swinging that sword trying to keep the rhythm of the other two, despite beginning to clearly start delaying his swings. "I want him to be free to live a life unaffected by war. So, if all these favors you've given me were done with the expectation that I would formally join you… I will have to decline them. And if that means Maya-san has to stop looking after him, if that means ceasing to be a Flight Commander, then so be it."

"… Surely you know what you're saying? To knock away the hand of a Regent… Do you think this will go unpunished?"

"I am not insulting your or Takahisa-sama's aid. I wish to remain as an inductee, until the day you no longer find me useful. No other honors or privileges are needed, I'm content as I am." I frown, gritting my teeth for a second, choosing to simply let out my thoughts for a second. "I live for my son, his happiness is my priority. That's all there is to this."

And then, he simply remained staring at me.

I gulped, breathing through my nose. Feeling a small jolt run across my shoulders.

He slowly blinked, folding his arms. Scanning my face without a hint of an emotion in his.

I licked the inside of my lips, feeling as if my legs were being piked by iron barbs.

"… I do not comprehend it." He finally said, shaking his head.

"I believe I made myself clear enough, Colonel."

"Then, let me be frontal with you. Shirogane, you still wish to remain in the Royal Guard?"

"Yes, I am not displeased with my position." Even if some of my 'fellows' can go fuck themselves with a Destroyer-sized drill up their ass. Maybe then they'll be able to get their heads out of it.

"Then, why would you not wish to become a vassal of the house? Your son could be allowed to serve the Guard as well, perhaps one of your descendants will manage to earn the honor of being granted the rank of Tozama. And you could also aim to become a Captain in our forces."

"… Colonel, I said that I have no need for that."

"Do you not wish to safeguard your family's future? To serve your nation?"

I sigh, remembering my last talks with Miho. For a moment, I look down and could hear her voice again. When I meet the Colonel's eyes again, my face had relaxed.

"I made a promise to my wife before she passed away, to protect our son no matter what." And for the first time ever, he grimaced for a second. "If I become a vassal, then Takeru will also have to serve the nobility, and I don't think that's the best for him. You've seen how he is, I doubt the other nobles would take kindly to him."

"And yet, you have adapted just fine."

"Do you think I enjoy being badmouthed behind my back all the time, Colonel?" I narrow my eyes, he does too.

"I believe you said you weren't displeased…"

"I'm not, I just accepted that as part of this position. I know you and your brother dislike us commoners, as well as many others in the

Guard, and while I've endured this for Takeru's and my wife's sake, I don't want this life for him." I frown, crossing my arms again.

"I was under the impression that you had asked Takahisa-sama for aid so that, if you were to die, he would look after your son."

"Yes, I did. I only asked him to look after Takeru so that he doesn't end up in a cruel place, and only because he insisted on offering his helping hand. If it was out of place, I shall apologize." He grasps his chin, again silently staring at me. "I am not ungrateful… I merely want to keep him safe."

"Hmm… I still cannot understand you. You are given this chance, yet you would turn your back to it? You do realize that if you become our vassal you won't have to return to being a pawn of the IJA in the future, do you?"

I can't tell if he's upset or if he's still testing me. Why is he still insisting so much? He would have raised his voice and called me a fool by now, or worse considering what we're discussing.

It's not that I am ungrateful, and I do understand how rare this chance is. I once also dreamed of being a Royal Guard, of doing good for the people. I know that I'm still rejecting them, but I'm only doing that to keep Takeru safe. That's… the only selfish desire I have in me.

I don't think they would understand, though.

"… I just want to keep my son away from the war if I can help it. That's all there is to this, Colonel. I will keep serving as I have been, I'm not going to quit my post." If only because Takeru would suffer more from that than me.

"… I see. I suppose there is no further need to cross words." Still without showing emotion in his voice, he turned around and went his way towards Maya-san.

If they took offense… and in the end they'll brand me a traitor anyways… Then, I'll just leave. I don't think Takeru would understand, but it's for the best. I'll keep working as I have until they eventually kick me out. It was too good to be true, all this respect and favors they gave us. It was just obvious from their eyes, to wish to gain another family of vassals… And while I know that joining the Royal Guard isn't the sole path available for those who become part of the fellowship, I know Takeru won't be welcomed here. I don't want him suffering through those whispers as I've had to do.

The training is finished, and I go to Takeru to take him to the changing room.

"So… What did you think of the training, Dad?"

"You are better than I was at your age. So, good job Takeru." I pat his head, he giggles. At least he's happy for now.

"Do you think I could become a samurai someday?" He again asks once we had entered the room.

"… There's no need for you to do that."

"But I wanna be like you."

"Come on, don't be stubborn." I help him get his gear off, sitting by his side on the small bench that was in the room. "There are a lot of other jobs you can choose once you grown up."

"Hmm… But aren't the samurais the ones who help the people?"

"Sigh… Let's leave this talk for later. So, what do you do after this?"

"Oh, we go to play with Yuuhi." Smiling much, he nodded once.

"Huh… So, when do we go back home?"

"Hmm… Sometimes on Sunday's night, other times in the afternoon."

"You… stay to sleep here?"

"Yeah." He nods, simply and calmly.

Why… would they let him stay over? I know I asked Takahisa-sama to look after Takeru, but that was if I ever died. I never asked him to be put under the Guard's care…. I'm just a pilot. That's all I can do. There's no reason to go so far. Why would they do this? Even if they wanted us to become their vassals, this is just…

I finish helping Takeru get back into his clothes and then along Maya-san and the little Tsukuyomis we went towards where Yuuhi-sama should be.

"Maya-san?" I got closer to her as the kids talked with each other.

"Yes?"

"Is it true that we'll have to stay the night?"

"Oh, didn't you knew? I had assumed you already were informed."

"No, this is a first. Why would you go so far for Takeru?"

"As I said, Yohime-sama allowed it."

"… I suppose I should ask her if I want an answer?" Confronting her about this… Sigh… I can only hope I can leave with my head above my shoulders.

"Kageyuki-san, I assure you Yohime-sama has no intentions to have Takeru join the Royal Guard. She said so to me the first time we visited the house together."

"It's not that…" I briefly tell her of the proposition Col. Tsukuyomi said would come my way, and of what that means for Takeru. "… So, well, I suppose I am in a tough spot as of now."

"… Indeed you are." She taps her glasses, eyes almost closed. "I didn't think Bazora-sama would suggest such a thing, but I can see why you would be wanted as a fellow."

"Huh? Please, be serious. I'm just a pilot, I don't think I've done anything worthy of such an honor."

We're talking of having me join the fellowship of a Regent House. Not from a link with a lower house, no, joining under the direct service of the Koubuin House is what's being offered to me here. And there's also all you're doing for Takeru. I don't think I did anything to deserve this.

"Perhaps you have merits that go beyond your abilities inside a cockpit?"

"For example?"

"Well, I heard you are someone worth our trust, and you are Takeru's father. He might be rude, but he was been raised with good values. I believe you have served for three years already?"

"Almost three years, yes. Still, I… I don't want Takeru to be forced to become a vassal. I don't think that's the best for him, considering how I'm treated by the rest."

Maya-san looks down, seeming to want to agree with me but, due to obvious reasons, being unable to voice it.

"Hey, Dad?"

"Hm? What is it?" Takeru and the other two were looking at me, the little Tsukuyomis straight into my eyes like their fathers know to do.

"What do you do with the samurais?"

Right, I never told him much about my work. Though, I don't know how much I can tell them. Most of our tasks are classified, since they're to make new protocols for the Guard. And I doubt I want to

have Takeru saying I'm a pilot on Takahisa-sama's squadron, I don't want *those kind* of people to have more reasons to be harsh to him, both back home and in this place.

"Well, I work as a tester of sorts."

"A tester?"

"Yeah, I see whether things work well or not." He mulls over my words, not entirely happy with my answer.

"Sir, may I ask what is your rank?" Shion asked, shortly and coldly.

"… Why do you want to know, Shion?"

"I'm just curious about what kind of person Takeru's father is. I don't see why you'd not wish to answer." Her reply was rather… rude, I think she might have taken after her father.

"Well… I'm just a Second Lieutenant, and I wear the pale black uniform."

"So that would mean you belong to the bottom of the hierarchy, then?" Sigh… Here we go again. And from a child, no less.

"Shion, do not be rude to our guest." Maya-san immediately retorted.

"I only spoke the truth." She lowered her brows.

"… It's alright, I'm used to it." What did I even expect from a Shinpan? "So, is there anything else you'd like to ask?" Shion looked at me again, and this time she frowned.

"Why is Sister looking after your son, if you're in the lowest rank of the Guard?"

"Shion, don't be mean to Dad! He's still a samurai, whatever this low rank is." Takeru puffed a cheek at her, she folded her arms and looked away from him.

"I'm just asking a question." She then plucked her lips. "You're funny to be around sometimes, but why is Sister staying with you if your father is on the lowest echelon on the Imperial Royal Guard, with such a low rank to boot?" Takeru then looks down, plucking his lips. "As a Shinpan, I would like to know why an inductee is having Sister take care of you." Raising a finger, she pointed it at me accusingly, the same inquisitive frown of her father in her face.

I was about to react, not necessarily nicely, but Maya-san patted my shoulder. Looking at her, she had her eyes narrowed as her mouth became but a small circle. Seeing her, Shion stiffened up like a cat hearing a thunder, comically shifting from the serious expression to the open shock.

"Shion, apologize for your rudeness this instant."

"Eh? But I just asked a-"

"I'll have you know that Kageyuki-san asked the favor of having me watch over Takeru to Takahisa-sama in person."

"EH?!" The three kids shout in unison as they stopped walking, kitties and thunders all over again.

"Um… Maya-san? I don't think saying that is a good idea."

"Why would it not be? I know you are under secrecy, but I see no issue with telling them who you work for, as it would explain Shion's question." Her tone a business one, she still sent a scolding gaze towards her sister.

"Still, you should know how others will-"

"Please, it is merely the truth. Anyone offended by it is clearly an obstinate fool." Tapping her glasses, she nodded to herself.

"Dad, you work with Takahisa-san?!" Takeru asked, coming up to me with a shocked face as I haven't seen in him for a long while.

"… You know him too?"

"Yeah, I saw him last time I came here. He's even better than Yuuhi at Shogi." Takeru frowned, folding his arms while the other two nodded in agreement. "So, you work with him?"

"Well… Yeah, I work under Takahisa-sama." I do wonder why he kept quiet about it. I mean, he could… have said something… about how you were doing.

"Um…" Mion looked at me, tapping some of her fingers together. "Kageyuki-san, does that mean that you're a surface pilot?"

And there is the question I don't want to answer. I look at Maya-san, who nods in approval for some reason. But… I don't think Takeru should know. If he said something…

"Dad, what's a surface pilot?" Sigh… At least he doesn't know yet.

"Takeru?" Again, while I was doubting, Maya-san spoke. "What your father does should remain as a secret, you can't tell it to anyone."

"Is it something dangerous?" He looked at me, curving his brows and giving me the puppy eyes.

"No, it's not that. But…"

"It has to stay as a secret, and you can't tell it to anyone, not even to Sumika." Maya-san said, giving me a nod when she met my gaze. "If you ever end up speaking of it…" She then tapped her glasses right in the middle, arching her head back.

Both me and Takeru twitched upon seeing her piercing eyes glaring at us. Of course, she *is* the Colonel's daughter.

"I get it, I won't talk." Takeru said, with a creak in his voice. "So, are you a pilot, Dad?"

"… Yeah, I am. I'm in Takahisa-sama's personal group of pilots, which is why this is a secret. So don't tell it to anyone." He nervously nodded twice, almost made me laugh.

"U-Um… Kageyuki-san?" Shion was looking down now, the confrontational tint in her voice gone. "Forgive me for speaking rudely to you." She gave me a deep bow, one I know would make her father angry if he learns of it.

"No, it's fine. Sigh…"

"So… What's a surface pilot?" Takeru asked again.

"They're the ones who ride the TSFs, Takeru. You know, the flying robots?" Mion said. "Kageyuki-san, how does it feel to fly a-"

"Wait, Dad flies the robots?!" Takeru shouted his surprise, drowning Mion's question. This time I couldn't hold it in and I chuckled at his reaction, his voice is popcorn in the making.

"Yeah… So, don't tell it to anyone, okay?" He nodded again, this time his eyes shining like dawn.

"So, um…" Shion again tried to look at me, but couldn't. "How is it to fly?"

On the rest of the way I told them what little I could, exaggerating some parts of the flying experience. Shion and Mion seemed more knowledgeable than I thought they would be, asking me what was my highest altitude, if I could perform Kulbits, and other rather technical questions. It seems they have seen some mock battles in preparation for their duties, according to what Maya-san told me while we spoke, so it is possible they have seen me piloting already.

Takeru however just made the most innocent questions, if the robot was like the ones in the mangas, what 'special moves' I could use, and if my robot had a special name.

For a moment, I forgot about the discussion I had with the Colonel, simply enjoying the kids' curious questions. Until we made it to the room we were going to, where those standing guard gave me one nasty stare again as we entered the place where both Yuuhi-sama and Yohime-sama were awaiting us.

I had never met Yuuhi-sama before, but she seems to be as calm as her mother. Yohime-sama seems unchanged to the scarce times she has visited the Castle, it is the first time I am in her direct presence however. Both of them dressed in a traditional dress, the mother dressed in teal and lily matching her hair and the young one in a white one with some flowery patters in the same tone of purple as her hair. We bowed to them once we got inside, and my worries returned to my mind again.

"Good afternoon." Yohime-sama said, her voice being a soft caress of spring. "You may rise." We did so and I saw her face, her lily hair and amethyst eyes gazing at us with a calm smile, just as her daughter. "I believe it is the first time we meet in person, Shirogane?"

"Y-Yes, it is. It is an honor to be here, Yohime-sama." I'm face to face with a Regent's wife, in their Main House and as a guest. Maybe this is all a dream? All that's left is for Takahisa-sama to suddenly manifest himself out of thin air and we got bingo.

And yet… What I'll have to ask her isn't entirely pleasing. Sigh…

"It is a pleasure to finally meet you. Yuuhi, dear, your greeting."

"My name is Yuuhi Koubuin. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Shirogane-sama." She's so well mannered… And you're telling me she's friends with Takeru?

"No, the pleasure is all mine, Yuuhi-sama. And there is no need for honorifics, Shirogane is enough."

"Is that so?" She replied, slightly lowering her head. She truly seems to be a nice girl, she didn't take any offense at my words despite

being who she is. "Then, it is a pleasure to meet you, Shirogane."

"Well, I'm sure the children must be waiting to play, so let's leave them be. Mana." Yohime-sama didn't even finish speaking and Mana-san appeared right by her side.

Like… She just manifested herself there. How… did she even do that?

"The souvenirs are right here, Yohime-sama. The cards and board have already been arranged." She reported dutifully, as if it were an official mission's report.

"Thank you kindly. Now then, let us go to the hall." She stood up and we followed behind her.

Both young Tsukuyomis went to Yuuhi-sama's side, and then the girl remained looking at Takeru, waving at him. He looked up at me, grasping my hand.

"It's okay, go have fun." I smiled, he did too before going towards the girls.

… I wish I had that bravery to approach girls as he does when I was his age. If Miho hadn't been so forward with that cake she baked me, I would have ended up alone or forced into an arranged marriage.

Still… I feel so out of place here. The room is literally better than those expensive rooms that appear in TV sometimes, and here I am with my 'best' formal clothes, a modest attire to be honest. I'm like the young swan when it was an ugly duck in the pond, just that I'll never become a swan.

We went further into the room, where a table with the sweets and food we brought were laid on. On another corner of the table, there was a deck of cards and some notebooks and pencils, and some ways away there is a small table with a Shogi board set up ready to play.

"So, what have you brought on this occasion, Maya?" Yohime-sama asked.

"Kageyuki-san was the one who chose the items today. I asked him to choose a mixture of sweet foods he found proper, as well as other appetizers, while I brought a few of the latest picture books I bought for Takeru."

"I see. You have my gratitude, Shirogane." She smiled at me, looking like an angel incarnate.

"No… It was nothing, Yohime-sama."

"So, what manner of sweets did you choose?"

"I… Ahem, I choose to bring ice cream. I don't know if it'll be of your liking, but I bought what was best in the local stores."

"Um… What flavors did you bring?" Yuuhi-sama asked, to which I answer as I did before. She smiles for some reason. "Which one would be the strawberry one?"

"Yuuhi, dear, please show moderation." Yohime-sama lowered her eyelids, raising a finger at her daughter. She nods, but despite that she's pouting.

"I suppose she favors strawberries?"

"Indeed she does." Yohime-sama says with a smile, patting Yuuhi-sama's head. "Sadly, there was one time where Takeru brought a small cake with strawberry cream and… well, Yuuhi forgot her manners for a moment." She smiles widely at her daughter while running a hand over her purple hair.

"That is not true." Yuuhi-sama then protested, pout still in place.

"Hehehe… Well, you may play at your leisure today. Maya, I leave them in your care."

"Yes, milady."

And with that, the four kids marched towards their table. It seems Shion won the most duels so she asked to have the pear ice cream first, to Mion's complains. Yuuhi-sama, on the other hand, monopolized the strawberry one, only giving some to Takeru, that also asked for some of the apple one. If it weren't for the dissonance between his clothes and theirs, one could simply mistake this for an everyday scenery of some kids playing around.

And yet, that difference is all too important. Their gratitude aside… this is nothing they couldn't have bought, it's certainly much worse than what they could buy using their influence. Yuuhi-sama… seems to enjoy talking with Takeru, but why are they allowing this? A future Regent being this close to a commoner… I never heard of anything like this.

"Shirogane?"

"Ah… Y-Yes, Yohime-sama?" Shit, I was lost in thought again.

"Please do not be so tense. Do take a seat." She gestured towards her left, to a seat rather close to her in the table.

"Ahem… Thank you kindly for receiving me, Yohime-sama." I bow to her as I sit, remaining in position.

"It is alright, you may rise." She was still smiling, playing with a strand of hair. "I had heard you were a rather rude fellow, yet it seems those rumors were incorrect."

"No, I am merely doing an effort."

"I see. Please do not be so tense, you are my guest today."

"Thank you very much for your deference, Yohime-sama. So…"

"Yes?"

"Well… Is there anything you were wishing to speak with me?"

"Oh, yes." Resting her hands on her lap, again smiling like an angel. "First, would you be pleased with Maya's performance as your son's retainer?"

"To be honest, I think she's doing much more than the money I'm sending her."

"I see, it is good to see you have been pleased." She nods, still smiling. "So, am I right to assume you have no qualms with her staying in her role?"

"… Actually, I was meaning to ask something."

"What would it be?"

"Um… Don't misunderstand please, but, why has Maya-san been sent to take care of Takeru?"

"I chose her myself, based on the requirements the person who we had to sent needed to meet. Is there a problem, perchance?" She tilted her head, a slight change in her tone, now slow and stinging like hot wax, made me shift in my seat.

"It isn't a problem per se… It's just that I don't understand why you would go so far for a commoner like me. Maya-san is a member of the Shinpan, I'm sure you would need her somewhere else."

"Has someone told you she was required elsewhere?" Freezing over, her change in tone almost made me stutter.

"… No, I just don't understand why we received such deference from your House, Yohime-sama." I give her a bow, eyes closed.

"Rise, it is fine." I do so and see her moving her fringe away, letting some air out. "Well then, as for why we sent Maya, it was because we needed someone who we knew wouldn't divulge the specifics of

the mission and couldn't be tracked, while also being capable enough to tend to your son's needs."

"Well, but why go so far for us?"

"I do not see it as anything 'too far' myself, I only did what I had to do to ensure this task went as well as it could." She smiled widely while leaning slightly back and nodding, as if proud. She's as extreme as Takahisa-sama, maybe more.

"I see… Thank you kindly for your aid."

"No thanks are required. Now then, I suppose you are not against having Takeru visit the house on the weekends?"

"… About that, actually. Why did you allow him to come here, if I may ask?"

"Well, I had heard from my lord husband quite many stories about you." Smiling again towards me, clear as the sky in her acceptance.

"Huh? About me?"

"Indeed. Takahisa-sama is very pleased with your performance, and he believes you to be someone worth our trust, due to your stellar conduct while on duty."

"I… don't think I've done anything to deserve such praise."

"Well, he has seen you worthy of such words, so please do take them to heart." Her voice soft as silk, she remained smiling my way. "So, when your son came to visit us for the first time…" She then tells me of what happened that day.

"… Forgive him, please. He just doesn't know how to give others space."

"Please rise, I haven't taken offense. I found his interactions with Yuuhi rather… precious." She looks towards the children, I do so too.

The sound of their game fades into my ears, seeing Takeru completely relaxed and smiling from ear to ear as they play some sort of card game. Yuuhi-sama was sitting by his side, also smiling as she looked at her cards.

"As you can see, my daughter lacked what you would call a friend, someone who treated her as an equal instead of a superior. I was wishing to have Takeru be some form of confidant for her if they were compatible, and yet they are getting along far better than I ever thought they would." The clear joy in her words was contagious enough to make me smile for a while, despite my worries.

"So they're just good friends?"

"Yes, that is the case. As such, since it does both of them good, I allowed Takeru to accompany Maya on her visits, so that she could also be with her sister here. Does that answer your question?" She looks at me again, her aura overflowing with the grace of a peacock and the shine of a good jewel.

But… I still don't get it.

"Well, but why us in particular? If you wanted a confidant for Yuuhi-sama, I'm sure there are many others who could have taken the role, and without all the problems you have to deal with to have us come here, and leaving Maya-san back at Hiiragi." She bring a hand to her chin, curving her brows and lips.

"I do not believe this is something anyone could have done. We knew beforehand you are someone trustworthy after these years you've worked for us, and even if we asked, there aren't many who would act as naturally around us as your son does." She smiles as she looks at Takeru, who seemed to be winning the game this time.

"I just…"

"Yes?"

"I don't understand. For someone like me, receiving the honest compliments of someone of your importance, it truly… it truly is an honor to hear such words coming from you, but I haven't done anything to earn this deference. I know Takahisa-sama can be rather obstinate at times, but still, this is a privilege that I don't believe I've earned. The fact that I am allowed to be in your presence in this way, despite being a mere commoner, is hard to believe. I am just a normal person, I don't think I've done anything to earn these privileges from one of our Regents." Giving her a bow, I then remain in place in silence. After a moment, I hear her sigh quite strongly.

"Shirogane, rise." I do, and, contrary to what I was expecting, the graceful smile was still there waiting for me. "I have heard you have done a fine work in your position in these recent months, however."

"Well, perhaps, but I am just a pilot. And there are some who are better than me."

"I wasn't speaking solely of your piloting skills."

"Huh? Then, what else could you be speaking about?" My reports are, well, not bad but they're not what others expect of a Royal Guard with three years of service under his belt. I can't Keigo to save my life.

"You have helped us in disciplining our fellows, according to Takahisa-sama."

… What?

"Excuse me Yohime-sama, disciplining the other members? I never did anything like that."

"Not directly perhaps, however your presence has aided in bringing certain pressing matters to light. I am convinced you are aware of all those who speak ill of you behind your back." Sobering up, she stares into my eyes. I nod, looking down. "Tell me Shirogane, do you

know why the Imperial Guard employs different colored dresses for its members?"

"Huh?" Where does this come from? "To showcase one's station, wasn't it?"

"Indeed, that's one of the reasons. Do you know of the second?"

"… There was a second reason?" She giggles at my confusion as the shouts of the kids reach our ears.

"You see, we also have such an arrangement to force visibility upon every member of the Royal Guard."

"Visibility?"

"Indeed. By looking at a dress you can already size up who that person is likely to be merely by the color of the dress and the insignia of their rank. For example, people now could easily tell you are an inductee, but if you had the insignia of a Captain they would know you're actually a fellow. If a Tozama had such a rank, then it could be assumed they are actually a second-in-command of a higher ranking fellow."

"I see…" So it's for organizational purposes, huh.

"Then, the same is applied regarding what is expected of our fellows." Her smile waned, her tone also became dulled. "Someone from the Fudai will be encouraged to take action if everyone else nearby is of lower rank, and if that person were to behave in an unsightly manner, it would be easy to notice. In this way, since we are a small organization divided into other five smaller organizations, we have all of our members watching each other's back, for supporting one's fellows and notifying their wrongdoings."

Constant surveillance, all to push everyone to not slack off and do their share without any room for mistakes. I knew some people

usually kept staring at us, but I thought it was more due to my presence, and the fact that we are the main squadron of the Castle.

"In this way, your presence has allowed us to notice a… most shameful side of our fellows." She grimaces, and then… she gave me a small bow. "I can only apologize for the taxing situations you must have been enduring all this time."

"N-No, it's fine Yohime-sama! There is no need for you to apologize like this, really. So, um, I was some sort of bait to snuff out troublemakers?"

"Well, one could say that." Taking a moment to trace some of her hair in her hands, she again looked away, this time towards the ceiling. "When many people in the ranks begin to cover each other's backs for their own benefit, it brings harm to the overall structure. While you weren't intended to fulfill such a role, your presence, performance, and composed conduct during all these years have brought to light quite a few…" She narrowed her eyes, sending a jolt down my back. "… unpleasant attitudes in some of our fellows."

"I see… But still, it seems like a small matter compared to all you're doing for me and Takeru."

"I have deemed you worthy, as has done my lord husband. As our fellow, I ask you to receive these favors open handed, and to continue working as you have been until now."

… She called me a fellow. Despite the fact that I am still an inductee, despite who she is. I breath in, knowing the pleasant talk might as well be over. Still feeling the jolt running a race on my back, I lick my lips and look straight into Yohime-sama's eyes.

"Yohime-sama, might I ask why you referred to me as a fellow?"

"Hm? Because you are one of us, of course."

"But I am only an inductee, I am not part of your fellowship." And technically, I'm loaned from the IJA until further notice.

"I believed a proposal had been made available to you?"

"… Well, Col. Tsukuyomi did say something of the sort. However, there is something that… worries me about this situation." I gulp, let out some air and feel small, painful pokes in my stomach. "If I do become a vassal, then it will be expected from Takeru to also serve your house, is that correct?"

"Yes, that is the case."

"Well… Sigh… In that case, I will have to decline the offer."

…

"Might I ask to elaborate on your reasons?" Her smile disappeared like snow upon reaching the floor, yet her voice was as cold as it could get.

"I… I've been living for my family's wellbeing, Yohime-sama." I look down, towards my hands as I entwine my fingers, resting them on the table. "I don't want Takeru to go through what I had to. I know that all you've done might have been with the idea that I was going to become a vassal… And if that is the case I cannot apologize enough. But my son's future is my priority, and I don't want him to be forced to follow my footsteps. I want him to choose what he wants in his life once he is old enough. Therefore, well…"

"Is the matter a monetary one, perhaps?"

"Huh?"

"Would you be wishing to acquire an exemption draft for Takeru, and because of this you would prefer to work for…" She closed her eyes, bringing a finger to an edge of her lips, trying hard and failing at

restraining the small frown that surfaced. "… someone that gave you a better reward for your services?"

"No, that's not it."

"Are you displeased in your position, then?" She shoots out immediately after.

"No, it's not that either."

"Do you favor another Regent, perchance?" And again, instant retaliation.

"Of course not, Yohime-sama. I am truly grateful for all the chances Takahisa-sama has given me, I am not displeased in-"

"Then, why not accept our proposal?" She leaned forward, narrowing her eyes.

"… I said so a moment ago. If I accept, Takeru would be forced to serve in the Shogunate, either as a Guard or a public servant."

"I believe he does admire the Royal Guard, however?"

"I… I just…" I close my eyes tightly, sinking my fingers into their lock. Remembering our last day together, I had to choke on air to prevent some tears from running away.

"Shirogane, what is the source of such worry?"

"… My apologies, Yohime-sama. I already said what I wanted to."

"Please, do not think yourself capable of beguiling me." She scolded me, dulling the edge in her voice, leaning back into her seat. "What is ailing you to such lengths? I would rather not have to deliver such awful news to Takahisa-sama tonight, between your negative and your current complexion."

"I… well… It's a personal matter, I don't think it proper to push this onto your shoulders."

"I would rather not have to use my station to force you to speak… So, please feel free to confide in me if anything is troubling you." She smiled again, sweetly and kindly.

I let out some air as I relaxed onto my seat, the laugh of the kids seeming to be fading away.

"… I swore to my wife that… I would protect Takeru, no matter what. I know he might choose to join the Guard on his own, but I don't want to force that choice on him. I don't want to have him lose all I had to lose in these years. And since I am a pilot, it might be expected of him to follow in my footsteps and… I don't want that for him."

"However, if Takeru becomes the son of a fellow of mine, then he could be given a fine career path from under the options available in the fellowship, isn't that right?"

"And that would be equal to me forcing the path on Takeru when he is but a child. I already am an absent parent, what kind of guardian would I be if I also took his freedom away from him?"

For what was but an instant, Yohime-sama's hands shook unnaturally. She closed her eyes for a long time, caressing her hair. I thought I had angered her, spitting in the face of her goodwill, yet when she opened her eyes she was still emanating that kind glow she had for the most part of our talk.

"… I am glad to hear you harbor such thoughts for your son. And with all the more reason, I must insist that you become our fellow, Shirogane."

"Huh? Yohime-sama, forgive my rudeness, but I just said that-"

"Your main concern is taking your son's freedom, as well as having him fall on the wrong hands should something happen to you, am I correct?"

"Yes. That's correct."

"Well, if you become our fellow, you would be giving us a… connection to use to safeguard Takeru if the worst comes to pass."

"I… well, I don't really know much of how the child care services work, but I'm sure it must not be easy for a Regent to… well, prevent Takeru from ending up in the wrong place."

"Worry not, we have ample resources. We shall find a way to keep him safe while not compromising our standing, I assure you of it." Her voice could tear through a TSF with sheer willpower, it was enough to make me unconsciously give her a nod, to which she smiled. "And also, while we shall look over him, I will make sure Takeru isn't forced into any one path by anyone. He shall choose his own future himself, and he won't be forcefully inducted. The money you earn will also remain on his name, so that if he doesn't wish to stay in the fellowship he has the option to leave whenever he desires."

"However… Why would you go so far? To give me such special treatment, to protect Takeru in such a way… To still give me all the benefits of being a fellow while not expecting my son to serve you as well… I don't know if I'm worth your trust, what could I possibly do to pay back these deference?"

And then, looking up, she took a second to answer as she played with her hair.

"Well, you have already helped me in a very… delicate matter." She again closed her eyes, her tone slowing down as her hands rested onto the table.

"I… I have?"

"Yes… It is thanks to you that, perhaps, the night will one day set in this house once more."

"… What?"

"Worry not, I was merely thinking aloud." She waved a hand in the air, then sighed. What… caused her to show this much worry? Something I did… Something related to the night… No, don't have a clue. "So, I swear to you on my name that I shall make sure your son remains safe in case you were to perish. And he won't be made to follow any path forcefully, Takeru shall choose his own road himself."

"I… see." It's obvious she is being honest, she isn't even veering her gaze a little, and she spoke with such serenity, such conviction. But… Why?

"However, for me to be able to do what little I can, I would need you to officially become our fellow. And that comes with certain… responsibilities."

"I won't be able to return to the IJA, I will have to swear my loyalty to your house and mind my actions in public from now on, even when I'm not actively serving the House."

"Indeed. Your son will also have the choice to work for us, even if not as a Royal Guard. However, in your case, you shall become a vassal of this House, and will have to be always at the ready for our orders, even if it is during your breaks. Your military achievements will also fall under the Koubuin House's effects from now on."

"… I think I always did that, however."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, all the data I generated, all the test courses me and my squadmates designed and tested were given to Takahisa-sama himself back at the Castle." I thought that was the standard rule.

"Hehe… It isn't hard to see why he has you in such high esteem."

"I just thought that was what I had to do, since I am working under Takahisa-sama."

"Well, but there are others who would have tried to remain as the main beneficiary of such developments, or sell the data in the black market, however."

"Has that happened in the past?" She nods, seeming to be really angry now.

"More times than I'd like to recall. Many are the ones who insist on having their names be featured in what little achievements they generate." She let out some air, I relaxed once she seemed to have calmed down, a hand cruising through her long hair. "However, it is good to see your hesitation was not because of an inconvenience but generated by your duty as a parent. Such protective thoughts are what we need in our fellows, so that they can serve the people as well as they could. So, allow me to ask again… Would you be willing to become our fellow, Shirogane?"

"… You truly won't force Takeru to become a vassal?"

"If he joins us, it will be on his own volition. I shall keep him safe, it is the least I can do as your Regent's wife." She smiled while entwining her fingers. "Yuuhi would also be truly saddened if anything happened to him, so it is in my best interest to have Takeru be safe as well." She looks towards the kids and I do too.

Yuuhi-sama and Takeru seemed to be arguing about something, her pouting again with narrowed eyes…. It seems he won the card game to eat the last bit of strawberry ice cream and now she's upset. It's not like with Sumika, it's a more quiet, one sided argument, with Yuuhi-sama unmoving in her position, but still not angry or anything, and he trying to make peace with her, and failing spectacularly at it.

"… They do seem to get along well."

"Indeed they do."

Yohime-sama giggled as her daughter practically dragged Takeru to the Shogi table for a match to 'win the ice cream', Takeru scratching his head as he complains that they can share it instead, to which Yuuhi-sama seems to stall a reaction, seemed to have been pacified. And then, still holding his hand, she returns to the table, sitting right by his side as they begin to eat together.

"Hehe, she truly does show many amusing expressions when around your son." She giggled again as they began to play again, I couldn't help but to also chuckle as I looked on as they played. Yohime-sama coughs, facing me frontally once more. "So… Would you be willing to join our fellowship, Shirogane?"

I close my eyes and breathe in, then set my sights on Takeru, who waves at me when he notices I'm looking. I wave back and remain gazing at him for a moment.

"… You truly will look after him if I die, Yohime-sama?"

"… Yes. I know the pressure that… one feels at the prospect of losing one's own flesh and blood. I *will* make sure Takeru remains safe if the worst comes to pass."

"No one will force him to… endure those whispers I've had to endure?"

"No, and I shall be taking action to banish such attitudes from my fellowship. I know you perhaps might not see your actions with much worth, but you have earned such an honor. You can place your trust in me, I shall protect Takeru." Then, again narrowing her eyes a bit, she looked straight into mine as she folded her arms. "And I assure you that, regardless of the opinions of the Tsukuyomi brothers, I shan't allow him to be forced to join us. It is the least I could do, after what you've done for us."

Taking one last look at him, seeing how happy he was now compared to all the years before, then again looking at Yohime-sama and finding the angelical smile unchanged, the firm impulse of her words still resonating in my ears…

"Then… It will be an honor to serve you with my life, Yohime-sama. All I ask is for you to keep watch over Takeru, as you've said you would." I bow to her, finally relaxing my shoulders and losing the tension that was in my stomach.

"On the contrary, it is a pleasure to welcome you into my fellowship, Shirogane." She smiled at me, wider than before. "Worry not, your son shall be safe with us. Please do keep supporting my lord husband as you have done until now."

"Yes, milady. To my last breath."

# Lull in the Masquerade

## Chapter 4 7 : Lull in the Masquerade

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*December 1st. Near 8 AM.*

*(Classroom.)*

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Dawn broke to the scheduled patrols and meetings, to the chorus of breakfast, to the buzzing of the hangars. Undisturbed by the prior day's HSST event, business in Yokohama Base resumed as per usual at the start of the new month with soldiers lying in wait in meeting rooms, others scrambling to their daily duties, and those higher in the chain of command quietly debating key matters behind tightly bolted doors.

And in another habitual event, those present in the classroom of the 207th Cadet Squad were debating something or the other as they awaited the arrival of their Instructor after eating their fill of synth breakfast.

"Come on, stop it," Tamase sourly demurred, "I managed to do that because I could feel your encouraging me. It still feels surreal, to be honest," She then sighed, hunching over her desk.

"You still did great," Ayamine, yet again, then proceeded to pet her head.

"Nevertheless, I believe this topic to be but an obvious cause for concern," Mitsurugi remarked, a lone finger on her chin, "For should both you and Takeru were to be placed on the same team, I loath to admit the battle shall become one-sided."

"Precisely, which is why we're placing you besides him as of now on the list of concerns," Tapping her glasses as per usual, Sakaki said,

"Your marksmanship is the only surefire answer we have against Shirogane-kun's acrobatics. If you're covering his back, and he starts to do those aerial charges…"

"We're dead," Ayamine deadpanned, nodding slowly as Sakaki also did in agreement.

"Come on Kei-san, don't be so pessimistic," Yoroi smiled, leaning over her desk, "We just have to train more to learn to imitate his jumps, then Takeru's moves won't be such a problem."

"Yeah, we can't start bracing for something that might not come at all," Tamase said, looking at the others one at a time, "We should be focusing on how to improve from now on. After all, we're finally piloting our Fubukis today!"

"Yes, I suppose you're right," Sakaki said, relaxing onto her seat, "In any case, let's hope the Instructor doesn't force us to go against both of you."

Their talk was then cut off as the door opened, giving way to the sole male of the squadron to slug himself inside the room. Eyes half open and eye bags growing in both size and intensity, Takeru closed the door behind him making next to no sound and slowly approached the rest.

"Hey Takeru!" Yoroi rose a hand to welcome him, "How's it going?"

"… It goes, I guess," Waving back, he then proceeded to slump into his usual seat.

"Shirogane-kun, is everything alright?" Tapping her glasses, she asked while getting closer.

"Yeah, just… tired," He wearily replied, any signs of his habitual cheery attitude shining for their absence.

"Takeru, you wouldn't have been made to work past lights out, have you?" Mitsurugi inquired, arms beginning to fold as worry tainted her voice.

"It's what it is… It was…" Stalling a follow up, he looked out the window instead, "necessary to do that. I'm fine, for real."

"Special-kun, you sure don't look fine. Think you can do the trainings?" She asked, not liking one bit how his eyelids refused to fully open.

"Don't worry 'bout it," Smiling, he gave them all a look, "No way I'll miss our first mock battle. Or more like, no way the Instructor would let me," Shrugging, he started to chuckle.

While the two smaller ones of the group easily fell prey to his misdirection, chuckling along him, the other three hadn't missed the waning intensity of his laughter, the rather lethargic pace his gestures now took. However, before inquiries could be said, the door opened yet again and in stormed the Instructor.

Saluting her cadets, no time was wasted as she began the lecture with the last details she deemed necessary for the upcoming mock battle. All of them opened the textbooks, beginning to read the material, the cadets again on the receiving end of the never-ending stream of questions forwarded by the Reaper.

Amidst the questions and reviews, Mitsurugi and Ayamine couldn't help but to take peeks at Takeru, who was again absentmindedly staring out the window. Despite this, whenever he was called to stand he managed to deliver a correct answer as he always had. And yet, the tonality of his voice sounded off to their ears.

Ayamine having been on the sharp end of his assault, recipient of his reprimands, and Mitsurugi finally noticing due to her, in her mind at the least, furtive glances that he was for the first time twisting his lips in a saddened manner as he explored the clouded skies outside. Takeru hadn't made such a gesture when they had shunned him off,

what was just a hint of worry soon turned to mild concern as his disposition did not improve during the lecture.

Distracted, almost apathetic, despite his gaze returning to the classroom Takeru wasn't truly there at the time.

Closing the book and giving it a strong palm, the Instructor finished her lecture and freed the cadets so that they could go get changed for the battle. And while the other three remained chatting over the lecture, both Ayamine and Mitsurugi approached the one who was still who knows where.

"Takeru, are you truly alright?"

"Hm? Yeah, why?"

"Well, you've been out of sorts during the lecture," She repined, arms folding in as usual for her.

"Sigh… It's nothing," Halfheartedly replying, he waved a hand to and fro.

"Special-kun, you don't usually stare out the window so much. You sure you're feeling well?" Getting closer, perhaps more than Mitsurugi would have liked, Ayamine stared at him. Thinking that, in part, her behavior which made him fight to exhaustion was to blame.

"… I'm just a bit tired, is all," Scratching the back of his head, he then began to examine the ceiling.

"Perhaps, are you not allowed to speak of the matter?" Mitsurugi asked.

"Kinda, I guess. It just… wasn't what I was expecting." And again, his gaze lost itself upwards as he uttered no more words.

Slightly unnerved by this, both girls shared a gaze as he remained silent.

"Then, do remember to show some restrain during the mock battle, Takeru." Meiya told him.

"Don't go overboard today, got it?" Ayamine said, making a point of staring at Takeru at point blank.

"Heh, don't worry. I'm not that dumb. For real, I'm just a bit tired." He said, trying and failing to muster some vigor.

"You have already said that, however." Mitsurugi eyed him sideways.

"Take it easy, Monster-kun." She said, patting his shoulder. Which, unexpectedly to her, made him smile back.

"I will, don't wanna end up busted after all. Thanks for worrying, Kei," Still smiling, he so said.

Which gained him a shocked stare from Ayamine, who was not expecting him to again refer to her in that way as he had done when reprimanding her during their fight. Unsure of how to answer, she merely nodded back at him with a neutral expression.

"… Takeru, please do remember to keep that habit at bay," And he thus elicited such an answer from Mitsurugi.

"Huh? What're you talking about?" Dumbfounded, he replied.

"You just referred to Ayamine by name," She answered, fuming much at the little matter.

"Oh… Sorry, didn't notice. I tend to do that when I'm tired," Again scratching his head, Takeru gave a small bow to Ayamine.

"No worries. You're off the hook for today," Who returned a small smile his way, which spurred him to return to his usual cheer.

… Even if that only served to further bolster what embers were on Mitsurugi's eyes.

Finally shedding the shell, Takeru diverted the matter to the mock battle, if only to not suffer from Mitsurugi's glare, on what remained on the way to the changing rooms.

And seeing that they all could once more share a conversation, despite Ayamine's jabs catching him off guard today, he could finally sigh what heaviness remained on his stomach away, leave the coldness that enveloped his back since he awoke.

For amidst the memories that surfaced yesterday he saw for the first time who his father was in this world, how much he cherished him, and how much he had to endure on his own after his mother's passing. However, the dissonance that spurred on him when seeing little Yuuhi play with his small self was enough to keep Takeru awake for hours on end. Because for all the unbound joy that overflowed his heart when seeing said memory…

… An equal amount of grief was left in him this morning as he yet again saw a nightmare with himself trapped in a graveyard, running away to no avail from a piercing, ruthless voice that he could only attribute to Her Highness.

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*December 1st. 0 1 :43 PM.*

*(Mana's Room.)*

**[Mana]**

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"… And as I said before, his performance was not what one would expect out of a cadet." Kamiyo said, remaining bowing in place.

"Is that so? What of after he was back at the hangar?"

"The man seemed rather exhausted, Mana-sama. However, his squadron now seems to no longer hold any reservations towards

him…" Both tone and expression then turned solemn, "including Meiya-sama."

"Is the man free at the moment?" Daizaburou-sama inquired, to which she shook her head.

"No, General. No sooner was their exercise finished, Takamura-dono was already in wait for him. However, should you give the order, we could approach her and-"

"No, we shall desist for the time being," He says, my three subordinates as well as my two younger relatives stiffen upon hearing.

"… Mana-sama, may I?" Ebisu raised her hand slowly, trembling very subtly.

"What is it, Ebisu?"

"Well, we noticed a few odd things about Cadet Shirogane when we were following him and the other cadets on their way to the changing rooms."

"What do you speak of?"

"Well, we noticed him meeting up with that Yashiro girl before he and Takamura-dono returned to the lower floors." Yashiro… The foreigner that for some reason bears a Japanese name. Another one of the many mysteries of this base. A moment, wasn't she an ESPer? What kind of business could she have with him, I wonder.

Tomoe then takes a step forward and, after a small bow, speaks up.

"And we also noticed that… Meiya-sama was referring to him by his name."

"Eh?! She was?!" Mion and Shion replied in unison before me pr Daizaburou-sama could. All four of us shared a look, leaving the silence hanging.

We did ask Meiya-sama about what she knew about him, and told her that he might be a spy using a fake identity… or possibly one of our fellows. According to their talks during the CCSE, he said he had amnesia and seemed to truly be shaken to the core after the trial.

Without giving us respite, she proceeded to staunchly defending him when she thought we were judging him for being a foreigner. I've never seen Meiya-sama in such manner, so openly aggressive. As he would have said about Yuuhi-sama, it was as if fire was pouring from her eyes. Well they are twins, so I suppose it isn't odd for some similarities to exist between them.

Of course, she became truly anxious when we told her he might be a spy, and that the possibility of him being the person he claimed to be was very slim. But if she's openly calling him by his name and acting amicably with him… Is she being blinded by her feelings; or, is she trying to deceive him?

"I see… Did she seem tense in the slightest?" All three of them shake their heads in unison without delay, "Daizaburou-sama, what do you suggest?"

"We must not move until we're certain to reach our objective," He thus said, some vigor in his tonality now, "We shall deal with the man during a talk with him. You three, remain watching Meiya-sama as per usual."

"Yes, sir!" Thus they saluted, then turned on their heels and left.

We four then remained seated in silence, drinking some tea after having our afternoon meal. Sighing as I bring a hand to my hair, my gaze meets his.

"Daizaburou-sama, whatever shall we do? If the schedule proceeds as it should, we will again be stymied in our efforts to approach Ta… the man."

"We can await for tomorrow, to see if there is an opening available," He somberly said, "Otherwise, we shall have to employ an encrypted frequency to speak to him during the mock battle."

"Daizaburou-sama, sir, said matter has already been arranged, has it not?" Mion asked, slightly leaning forward.

"Indeed. While the UN wishes for us to use some of the modified Gekishins Mana's squadron has been testing thus far, I shall go ask for permission to at least allow her to deploy in her personal machine so that we can establish the connection with it as the antenna," He then sighs, taking a moment to look at each of us, "I know I am reiterating myself, however, you three are certain that the man is indeed him?" We all nod, holding his gaze.

"Sir, I know well why you harbor such doubts," Shion said as she gave him a small bow, "however, the answers he gave us were plentiful enough. I am of the opinion that the man is truly him."

"And yet, he has not recalled anything by interacting with you three, nor is there an answer regarding his supposed survival. Yuuhi-sama has been clear, Takeru is dead," Thus he solemnly said.

Both Mion and Shion lower their heads, frozen in place despite the palpable desire to continue to argue as they did when they returned from their talk with him.

"By the by Daizaburou-sama, have we received word from HQ regarding our report?" I believe we should already have received an answer, considering how we were dared to hustle in our efforts.

"Sigh… Yes, we did," He wearily answered, crossing his arms, "According to Maya, Her Highness is most adusted at our lack of definitive proof and continued failings to approach the man, reiterating that unless solid proof is presented that man cannot in any way be Takeru. Tsuhi also mentioned she was willing to request a talk with the XO should our plan prove unsuccessful. Both Maya

and Tsuhi also were *quite* insistent on learning of what we had gathered from our interactions with him."

"So we are understandably running out of time, huh."

Her Highness wouldn't lose her composure if she believed this man to be a faker, the fact that she's now asking for proof is a stark change from her initial position. I suppose it is obvious she was as astonished as we by his answers. However, for Maya to admit she is adusted at the situation, and for Tsuhi to be involved… Perhaps, she might have begun to show the fangs he sharpened for her during those years.

"… In any case, it is imperative that we speak to this man, to ascertain whether truly is Takeru or not," Daizaburou-sama thus spoke. Our orders were clear now, we had to act. "I shall be going to confirm the details of the mock battle, you three should go check the units the UN will be handing us," He then stood up, and we soon followed.

Sharing a salute as we left the room, he went his way as me and the cousins took a different hallway towards the hangars. Unwilling to pronounce a word, rigidly following me, no amount of meditation nor planning seems to be able to sooth the anxiety permeating their complexion.

However, it is completely understandable. For his first mock battle only showed what I began to affirm within. To hear proof that his skill not only hasn't waned, but that it has actually been further polished brings such elation to me. For him to be once more calm, for him to have learned to mind his pace.

And yet, this might be proof that it is not him but a spy, and that tears up my heart. If he is indeed an impostor, I myself will give him the torture most cruel we have on the Empire. After all, despite the similarities, it is odd to think he would find pleasing the idea of serving the UN nor that he would remain so serene after being

forced to endure this punishment. However, if all of our suspicions are indeed correct…

Then the UN will have to give us a good explanation for this. How was he rescued during Lucifer? And why didn't they sent him back? Of course, once the data was erased there was no possible way for anyone to know who he was, but he should still have been wearing his red suit of the Royal Guard. Why didn't they ask the Empire about his position? I cannot believe someone asked and we didn't notice, unless someone simply checked the databases, told the UN off and didn't even write that down.

It doesn't matter how this is resolved, our relations with the UN will suffer. If he isn't Takeru, we will have to take legal actions against them for this offense against the Empire. And if he is… I don't know what Yuuhi-sama may do to bring him to her side.

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*Same Day . 07:44 PM.*

*(Takamura's Office.)*

**[Takeru]**

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"I can't believe we're ready to start building it," Takamura's hands gripped her chopsticks tightly as she ate.

"Isn't that a good thing? In just a little over a week you'll be able to test the railgun. You're making great progress, right?"

"Yes, indeed. Nevertheless, I am most anxious truth be told," She said, unable to hide the creeping slowness in her tone, "It took us a half year to build a working prototype last time, and yet now…" Yeah, these guys are insane. The passion they have is truly enviable.

"Well, you already had data this time to fall on, so you could work more efficiently, right?"

"Sigh… Yes," She looks really tired as she keeps eating.

It most be a very heavy weight, and now that it's time to see the results she must be made a nerve wrack. It's the same for my own projects, even if I'm nothing but an overseer.

"1st Lt. Takamura, you don't have to worry so much. The railgun is gonna turn out perfectly, I'm sure!"

"Ah… Thanks, Cadet Shirogane. But that was not what I was mulling over."

"Huh? Then, what is worrying you?" She moves one hand backwards, moving her hair behind her ear.

"Well, the Professor asked me to participate in a mock battle a few days ago, and to be frank I am still recoiling at the exhaustion it brought me. It wouldn't be inaccurate to affirm that I completely collapsed after it," Huh. So she was spent after it too, and it's why she still looks super down.

"Did you had some trouble during it?" She closes her eyes, bringing a finger to her lips.

"Hmm… I believe that this could be useful for you," Nodding with a smile, a finger goes to her chin, "I had the advantage, technologically speaking. And yet, I was surpassed in skill. Don't ever underestimate your opponents because they use older models when you get commissioned," I give a nod and she continues, "Well, to be perfectly honest, I had to fight seriously to keep up and even so I almost lost. No… If I guide myself by the honor code, I lost to that pilot," She nods solemnly as she crosses her arms.

"Um… Why do you say that? First you said you 'almost' lost."

"My sword was knocked away from my hands. Losing my blade equals losing the duel, according to my samurai teachings. Of course, if I consider my TSF as my blade, then I can say I came out

victorious. And yet, I can't say that confidently," Eyes closed, she then softly sighs, "However, it was truly a welcome surprise. I didn't knew another member of the Royal Guard was stationed here," Huh? What did she just…

"Another member? You mean 1st Lt. Tsukuyomi?"

"Oh, you've met her? But no, I wasn't referring to her. I wasn't allowed to know who the pilot was, and I know the 1st Lt. wouldn't be piloting such a machine, but I recognized the patterns. Those were clearly the ones of the fabled Mugen Kidou style. But it is obvious, since the Shogun gave her blessing to this base when it was built. It is only natural she allowed one of her retainers to be here," She said, nodding as if in understanding, slowly eating again.

"Um… 1st Lt., I have no idea what you're talking about." I feel like I just accidentally stepped into something useful.

"Huh? Oh, right! You were abroad for a long time, didn't you?" She gives me a small bow, "Well, allow me to explain. You know I am a member of the Fudai, right? Well, I had to attend many meetings in representation of my house and I could see many test runs and the like, even before officially joining the Royal Guard. The Mugen Kidou is the name of the fighting style the House of the current Shogun uses, and so all of its members and retainers know to fight in it. It is easy to recognize by its quick frontal attack patterns and how it employs a few but precise blows. Though the pilot I faced was a bit peculiar in its movement, he most certainly employed the Mugen Kidou when in close range."

"I see. So that's how it is."

I grab the… dough, I guess, and finish my dinner. Of course, the Mugen Kidou was something like a family tradition in Meiya's family back in my world, it's normal it would be here too. Which means that since I know how to fight in it, I can use that to prove I am indeed Takeru Shirogane to the Royal Guard. I… hadn't thought of that.

"Yes, it was a marvelous match, even if I was on edge all throughout it," We both nod slowly, saying nothing for the moment. So we both were doing our best, huh. No wonder what we did to the ruins, "So, as I was saying, that pilot was truly something else. If I have to face that person again I'll end up exhausted, and that worries me a little. I was ready to work overtime for the railgun, but I most certainly did not expect to have to face such an opponent," She sighs again, dropping her shoulders as the cloud over her gets bigger. I might have been a bit too rough on her last time.

"Well, just do your best. Also, thanks a lot for helping during the evening trainings."

"No, it is nothing. However, seeing Tamase's progress today was shocking to be honest. I did not know she could manipulate the Feedback Protector with such precision," Smiling again, she says.

"Yeah, today was a surprise for sure," I might have been a bit off through the training, but they're all doing good progress. If only we could get the XM3 soon-ish… "Well, anyways, thanks a lot for helping. We're gonna miss your remarks once you leave the base," However, despite my smile and friendly tone, her expression sobered up in a flash.

"… What do you mean, when I leave the base?"

"I mean, the railgun is almost done, right? After that you may get a break from your duties when you return to the Empire." Her chopsticks stop suddenly, her eyes suddenly light up. Hoho, nice reaction indeed.

"I… My intention is to remain here, as a member of the UN," She breathes in deeply, looking to the ceiling, "Regardless of the result of this endeavor, I shall cleave a path forward for their sake," Small embers coming out of her eyes, she catches herself and coughs once, returning to her usual, "… Forgive me for voicing out my worries, Cadet Shirogane," And then, another small bow. She's too serious, even more than Chizuru.

"No, it's cool. But I didn't knew you wanted to stay here, you aren't returning to the Royal Guard?" Sensei, you didn't tell me about this! What could she have to do here? Monitoring me, perhaps?

"I know what you're thinking but not all of us see the UN with hatred, Cadet Shirogane. There is something I can only do here, and I won't leave until I've done it. But let's not get all gloomy, we have our dinner to enjoy. Tell me, how has your training been so far?" Did she change the subject because she didn't want to slip up?

I tell her of how everything is going in broad strokes, trying to catch anything in her expression. Nothing comes up, so I just chill and ease up.

"So, there is much to learn yet so I can't relax," She nods at my words as she eats.

"Indeed. The road never ends, so you do well to keep honing yourself," Nodding twice, she smiles, "By the by, have you given some thought to what I said before? About your piloting career?"

"… Well, being a test pilot might be hard work, but it does play a key role in our system," Takamura's eyes shine at my words, making it hard for me continue, "And well, I guess I wouldn't mind helping out, but I do think I'll fare better in the frontlines."

"It's not like test pilots never see battle, and you could save many lives with your developments. I do share the sentiment of wishing to be part of the vanguard, but someone has to stay behind polishing the new blades. Without skilled pilots fool-proofing our new TSFs we won't be able to gain an advantage in the war, wouldn't you agree?" Ugh, she's just like Meiya, she always has a convincing counter argument.

"Yes, I guess. Anyways, it's still to early for me to decide. I'll see when I get commissioned."

"Hm… Yes, that is also true. Well, I won't hold you any longer, go to the Professor for your evening orders. Good night, Cadet Shirogane."

"Good night, 1st Lieutenant." I salute her and then leave.

Walking slowly, watching my surroundings, it looks like no one is close by. Making use of the chance, I pick up my pace to make it quickly to the elevator. Once inside, I breathe a sigh as I lean on a wall.

… I can't read Takamura at all. Is she keeping tabs on me or is she being honest? I mean, those eyes and that smile make me think she's truly curious about me, but she is a member of the Guard. However, I'm amazed I got so used to sharing dinner with her. If I make it to the end of my punishment it's gonna feel weird going to the PX again.

After checking up on Hangar 90's developments, I go to my office. Let's send him a message… What should I say though? Hmm… Well, I do need to get more people to my side for the IST to become a reality, so let's be civil about it. Some court words, a formal request to meet up, and a reminder to keep this secret should suffice. Let's ask him to do something to prove he isn't going to back-stab me too.

After taking care of that and closing my office, I make my way to Sumika's room. Getting out from the elevator, my ears pick up some footsteps noises coming closer. Taking a turn, I see a black figure rushing to my side.

"Hey Kasumi, how's every-"

**TUG!**

**PULL!**

"K-Kasumi, don't pull me! Hey, what's up?" She stops and looks at me, with such a happy expression that the moon would be left

jealous of its brightness.

"I could talk with Sumika-san! Hurry, let's go!" Nodding back, I pick up my pace and we arrive at the dark room.

Kasumi quickly moves to the side of the cylinder, barely able to contain her eagerness.

"So, how did it go? What did you talk about?"

"It wasn't much, but she asked me about you. That seems to be the only thing she cares about," The bunny affirms.

Yeah, if she also went through the same horrible shit as the Sumika from the other world, the memory of her Takeru might have been the only thing keeping her sane.

"Do you think we could talk with her again?"

"Yes. I'll try to link your thoughts to hers, but I don't think I'll be able to do that for long. I'll do my best to give you as much time as you can," She moves her bunny ears and circles to my back, placing her head against it.

I close my eyes. The usual tingly feeling on the back of my heads appears, yet I can't feeling anything going on.

Taking a deep breath, trying to relax, I focus on the feeling like I do when trying to recover his memories.

Sumika, are you there? Can you hear me?

…

… Seems like not. Kasumi is doing her best though, so I can't just-

*"… ru-chan."* Huh?

"Sumika? Can you hear me?"

*"Is that… ru-chan?!"*

"Sumika, it's me! I'm here, just by your side."

*"Takeru-chan? Is it really you?"* Once it clearly reaches me, her voice sounds completely drained, broken.

"Yes, it's me. I'm right here besides you, Sumika." I hear something similar to a wail as a distorted image appears on my sight.

A dark sea, in the middle of a storm. The waves roar high, closer to the moon than the clouds, as they keep clashing against each other. Is this… how she's feeling right now?

"… Did you like the santa rabbit I brought you?"

*"Yes, it's just like the one you gave me before. Kasumi has been showing me some of your memories. I… I had forgotten about our friends,"* Her voice creaks, as if she suddenly got out in the middle of a snowstorm.

"Hey, it's alright. I can't even imagine how you must feel right now. But I'm here, like I've always been for you."

*"Takeru-chan, you were so awesome back then. You were always smiling, always finding new things to play with, and you always kept me company at night by the window when I felt sad. You were… my light…"*

*"Sumika… I've missed you so much. Forgive me… for leaving you alone."* Both last loop and back home, you were right besides me… and I couldn't even be there for you.

*"But Takeru-chan… You're not… You're not my Takeru-chan, right?"* She said, and the waves began to swirl more for a sec.

*"Huh? Oh, did Kasumi tell you about my memories?"*

*"No, I know that… that my Takeru-chan died," I can feel it, that tone… it's the same she made when- "I saw it. Those BETA… Those damn BETA! I'll kill them, all of them!"* Her voice again turns into that deranged one, screaming bloody murder away.

"Sumika, calm down! I'm here, I'm alive! No BETA will kill me."

"You're lying! Those damn BETA! They… They…" Her tone picks up on speed, repeating the same things over and over.

The waves of the sea roar high, shredding themselves on top of each other, meanwhile Sumika's cries continued to repeat themselves.

"Please, Sumika! It's alright, we'll take care of the BETA. I'll make sure they're gone forever, so please-"

*"No! No! It's not my fault!"*

"Sumika, please! I… I've been looking at the moon, just like you asked me to. You don't have to suffer alone anymore, we are here for you," It's still so hard to hear her like this. What could I possibly say to her? What can I do for her? Is there… even anything I could do? Feels as if I had knives thrusted into my sides, being unable to give her any measure of comfort.

*"No! No! You'll die again. You' re gonna die again! Don't go, you'll die!"* She keeps repeating that over and over, her voice becoming more twisted, her tone dropping with every word.

"Sumika, I promise you I won't! And I swear I'll avenge you, and all of our friends. So don't be so sad, I've been here besides you since a month or so. I'm… For this little while, I'm here all for you. Just like when we were little, right?" She then became silent, the storm in the sea calmed down a bit.

Everything slowly became darker and darker, until I could no longer distinguish anything.

Did Kasumi reach her limit? Or is Sumika in shock?

*"I'm sorry."*

"Huh? Why're you apologizing? Sumika, you did nothing wrong."

*"I'm sorry."*

She keeps repeating this for a while, not listening to a thing I say. It gets smaller and smaller as if she were fading away.

"Sumika, what happened? It's okay, please calm down."

*"Takeru-chan… I'm sorry."*

"Don't apologize, Sumika. Tell me, what is it?"

…

I can no longer hear her voice. The silence returns, filling me with a stagnant feeling in my chest. Opening my eyes again I let out a deep sigh as I wring my hands to bite back the frustration. For a moment, I stay there with my eyes closed, feeling empty all of a sudden.

"… Kasumi, how are you?" I turn around and she her massaging her temple.

"I… I'm alright," Her tone betrayed her words, so I patted her head again until her breathing steadied back, "Thanks, Takeru-san."

"Come on, now. This was all thanks to you, Kasumi," Patting her head a bit more slowly, she moves her bunny ears, "So, you sure you're fine?"

"Yes. However, it really hurts when she goes into shock like that. But it's the first time she says something different."

"Different? You mean she never started apologizing before?"

"Well, I've never got to talk with her for so long, but only when I mention you she gets so overwhelmed by sadness. Before you came she usually got enraged or terrified as soon as I mentioned or showed her anything that remembered her of the BETA," She sighs, looking down to the floor.

"It's not like I didn't expect his, considering the torture she had to go through and how she must be feeling right now. I froze up and didn't knew what to say to her. Last time she was already the 00 Unit when she reacted like this, so at least I could hug her. But now I can do nothing, and it felt that no words could get her to listen."

This must be the reason why Sensei gambled on me running away and making my world's Sumika's memories come to that other world, she knew this Sumika was too unstable. But I'm not willing to go back and have to make another Sumika go through that again, so I'll have to heal her heart somehow once she becomes the 00 Unit.

"I thought she would be happy to talk with you… Sorry."

"Hey, don't apologize. We can now work with this to at least have an actual conversation with her before we have to say our goodbyes forever."

"… Yes, you're right. Let's do all we can to stabilize her," I return her firm gaze, her crystals recovered their usual light. I then tenderly ruffle her hair again, and she again moves her bunny ears.

"Well then, think you can do the memory recovery session today?"

"… Yes, leave it to me."

# Left Behind

## Chapter 48: Left Behind

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*May 17th, 1992. 04:32 PM.*

*(Shirogane Residence.)*

**[Native Takeru]**

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"If you bite it and you die, it's poisonous. If it bites you and you die, it's venomous." Maya-nee said, tapping her glasses.

"But what if it bites me and it dies?"

"Then you're poisonous, Takeru. Could you please try to listen and think before asking such questions?" She sharpened her gaze on me, sending a shiver down my back.

I was just asking, why does she always get so mad?

"B-But… But what if it bites itself and I die?" Sumika asked, her eyes trembling at the images on our books. Again with the nonsense questions, Aunt Haruna should stop telling her all those fairy tales.

"Oh, that would be voodoo." Mion answered, caressing her ponytail.

"But what if it bites me and someone else dies?" Sumika then asked. Sigh… She's always saying this random stuff that makes no sense. How do they come up with this ideas anyways?

"Sumika, that's just impossible."

"That's enough, you three." Maya-nee tapped her glasses as she glared at us, making us shut up. "Alright, let's continue with the

lesson."

Back in school, we got assigned some homework about different types of animals. Me and Sumika got assigned to cover snakes and mushrooms, but things aren't going too well. Sumika hates snakes, so she hasn't even started her part. And I was just going to mention how both things are poisonous, but then Maya-nee corrected me and insisted on overseeing our work today.

… This sucks. Just when Mion and Shion came to play…

"Takeru, why are you not using the proper kanji again?" Maya-nee came behind me and looked at my paper, squinting her eyes.

"It's bothersome. You only save one hiragana with it, why would I use it?"

"Sigh… Takeru, how many times do I have to tell you a kanji's worth isn't measured by how many hiragana you save when you use it? It gives context, it differentiates similar sounding words. You have to start using more kanji in your writing. Otherwise, breaking the habit will become harder for you."

"… How could anyone confuse it? If I write 'eating a mushroom', what other meaning could it have? And anyways, writing 'ta' is faster than writing the kanji. There's no reason to- A-Aaah! L-Let go of my ear!"

"Takeru… You will write every kanji that you should already know in this assignment, else you get half dinner today and tomorrow." Speaking calmly, but with that quiet, angry tone she looked at me with the scary eyes again.

"Don't be mean, this kanjis aren't useful! If what I write is right, then that's good enough!"

"Stop being so contrarian! You will write it and that's that!" She let's go of my ear and softly smacks the nape of my neck. "Sigh… By the

Emperor, why are you this stubborn?"

"I'm not wrong."

"Don't you start pouting. Look at Sumika, she's not only writing as many kanjis as she can, her handwriting is so much more clear than yours." Maya-nee looked at Sumika's paper. She tried to hide it in embarrassment, but Maya-nee gave her an approving nod. "See? You should make a conscious effort to be better like she does."

"That's right, Takeru. You'll never be a samurai if you can't even write your own name." Shion teased me from the kitchen as she ate a manju.

Uuh! You dumb pickle… Fine! I'll write this dumb kanjis! Stupid mushrooms, snakes and all this nonsense. Why do I have to learn this if I want to be a samurai? This is stupid. School is stupid.

"Ah… I think it would be better if you used another page for the comparisons." Mion said, pointing to the paragraph with all the different types of snakes and stuff.

"Hmm… You're right. Thanks a lot, Mion!"

"Mion, do not make his homework for him." Maya-nee sent a glare our way. Mion's smile goes away as she looks down, her face now scared and tense.

"Don't be mean, I'm the one writing. Mion just gave me advice." Maya-nee is too serious when it comes to homework.

She sighs and returns her attention to Shion, while we continue to do this dumb homework.

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**Around an hour later…**

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"Uhh… I can't write anymore…" I slump onto the table. My hands hurt…

"Takeru, let me see." Maya-nee picks up my papers and starts reading them.

I sit up again, waiting for her words. I gulp, trying to calm myself a bit. W-What will she say? W-What if she gets mad?

"Hmm… See? You can do it when you try." She smiles for a brief moment and pats my head.

"Then… It's good?"

"Your handwriting still needs practice, but you did use more kanjis than usual. Well done, Takeru."

"Yay!"

"Good job, Takeru-chan!" Sumika raises a hand and we do a high five.

"Now, let me see yours Sumika." Maya-nee comes closer and I also take a peek at Sumika's papers.

… Her letters are so nice. How does she do that small writing while managing to write the things that well?

"Another fine work." Maya-nee nods, Sumika smiles as she taps her fingers together. "Well, you two earned your rest. You all stay inside, me and Haruna-san will go shopping. If anything happens while we're gone…" She taps her glasses again, looking at me.

"… Why are staring at me?"

"You know why, Takeru. No sword fights while I'm gone." Tch, she's so picky. What's the worst that could happen? I already broke the lamp that's outside last week. There's nothing else left to break outside.

"Don't worry, Maya-nee." Shion said, puffing her chest as she came closer. "I'll make sure he behaves correctly." She pats my shoulder strongly while smiling, showing me her teeth.

"But you're the one who's always taunting us."

"Oh? A samurai never puts excuses, Takeru. And you two have never beaten me yet." She then laughs quietly. Uuh! One of these days I will beat you!

"Shion, try not to tease them too much. Overconfidence is a slow and insidious killer after all. Well, you all be good with each other while we're gone." Maya-nee grabs a purse and after looking at us one last time, she goes towards the door.

"Well done Takeru, Sumika. So, what do you wanna do now?" Mion asked, "Shogi? Cat's Cradle?"

"I'm… not that good at Shogi." Sumika lowered her gaze. Right, she does not like that one…

"What about this?" Shion said as she came towards us. "Let's make a juggling competition. The one who can juggle for the longest time gets to pick the game." Again rising a finger upwards she smiled widely.

"… She says that because she's good at juggling."

"Yeah, she's just going to win again and pick Shogi." Me and Mion whisper, nodding to each other's words. Shion, you always do the same.

"Oh? What is it you two? What are you whispering about?" I really don't like it when she smiles like that, showing us all her teeth.

"W-We were just discussing what to do, right Takeru?"

"Yeah, just that."

"Really? You sure you weren't going to start kissing again?" Bringing a finger to her cheek, she started giggling. She's still mentioning that? Why is she so bothered by it?

"S-S-SHION! You promised you would keep it a secret!" Mion rose up and stormed towards Shion, her face was all red for some reason.

"And I am keeping it a secret. All of us here already know of that."

"Sumika didn't!"

"Oh, right. Well, it sucks to be you, I guess." Shion just shrugged Mion off, which made her start spouting steam from her ears.

"Takeru-chan… You… kissed?" Sumika's face was switching between different shades of blue. That lone hair of hers was down and all swirly.

"I was just trying to cheer Mion up. You see, we went to a forest last week and then we got lost chasing a squirrel. Then, Mion started crying, saying we were never going back. So, since I couldn't calm her down, I gave her a hug and-"

"TAKERU, SHUT UP!"

**THWACK!**

Gwah! T-That hurt… What's her problem?!

"Uuh… Mion, you dumb pickle! Why did you hit me like that?!"

"Y-You can't tell others of that! It was an accident! A secret isn't a secret if you go telling it to others." She puffed her cheeks and moved a finger up and down at me. Well… she does have a point. But still, there was no need to smack me like that.

"That was your fault for being dumb. We weren't that far away but you didn't stop bawling."

"You can be so mean. I was really scared! It was getting dark and all quiet…" She drops her gaze as her voice grows weaker.

"And then, Takeru gave you a smooch and cheered you up."

"Yes, and then… SHION!"

Mion starts berating Shion again, as she usually does. Seriously, why is she so embarrassed about it? Dad told me people give kisses to the ones they like, especially when they're sad or scared. How is that any different than all the hugs I always give them?

"… Takeru-chan." Sumika pulled my sleeve.

"What is it?"

"… Do you like Mion?"

"Yes."

"Eh…" Sumika opened her eyes wide. Her face again swirling through a wave of blue colors, she shivered a little.

"I mean, of course I like her. Just like how I like you, Shion and Yuuhi. Why are so surprised?" I don't get it, why is she looking at me like that? Girls are too dumb to not get this kind of thing.

"… I see. Hahaha… Yes, you like everybody in the same way." What's wrong with her?

"Anyways! Let's do some juggling! Takeru, let's go get the beanbags." Shion grabbed my arm and started pulling me to the stairs.

"I can walk, you know?"

"I do. This is just funner." Ugh, again with that smile…

We go to my room and after rummaging through a box we found the two beanbags.

"You have a lot of toys in here…" She was looking at them like how I look at natto rolls.

"Do you want to take one or two with you?"

"Eh?" Shion looked at me as if I had said a bad word. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. I mean, I don't use them all everyday. And we can play with them when I go over there."

"… You can be nice when you try. Good boy, Takeru." Shion started petting my head, that creepy smile still there.

"I'm going to get angry, Shion."

"Oh, I'm just being a good sister to you. Now, let's go back. I wonder how many times you'll juggle them today…" She said teasingly, winking at me as we leave my room.

We went back to the kitchen and started the juggling competition.

… Shion won again and we had to play Shogi. Since she's the only one that can somewhat play against Yuuhi, this didn't end well.

"Fuhuhu! Looks like I'm the winner again." Shion said as she finished her movement.

"Aah!… I lost… so fast…"

"Don't be sad, Sumika. Shion is really good at Shogi. I haven't won once against her." I pat Sumika's head softly, trying to cheer her up.

"You two can't win in Shogi or Kendo against me. You need to try harder! You'll never become samurais like this!" Shion grinned at us,

looking as smug as usual when she wins. Uuh! One of these days I'll show you up!

Me and Mion shared a determined nod and challenged her again.

And again we lost.

"We're back. Kids, where are… Oh, what's up?" Aunt Haruna stared at us.

Shion was smiling with flowers around her face, us three were slumped onto the table.

"You all lost again?" Maya-nee comments as she enters the kitchen.

"They're all no match for me!" Shion said, loud and proud. I would speak up, but having lost so badly I have no energy to do so.

"Well, you can watch TV or something. We'll start making dinner." Aunt Haruna said, leaving the bags on the table, giving us some drinks and a few sweets.

We passed the sweets around and turned the TV on, changing it to the TV manga channel.

Today has been so much fun. Shion and Mion rarely get to visit, and since I have exams coming up Maya-nee didn't take me to Yuuhi's house this weekend. So, they came to visit today. I'm glad they're also nice with Sumika, since we can't play with the others outside of the park.

Dinner was delicious as always, and just a little after we all had finished, Maya-nee's Dad came to pick the pickles up. I don't like him much, he's always staring at me with this scary face… What's his problem?

"See you next week, Takeru. Good luck with your exams." Mion said, giving me a smile.

"Don't you dare to fail, you hear? I'll get bored training alone with Mion." Shion commented, leaving Maya-nee's side and going towards the car.

"I won't. Tell Yuuhi I'll go see her next week. Did you two have fun today?"

"Yes! Visiting you is always fun. Thanks for today, Takeru, Sumika." Mion gave us a bow and Shion soon followed.

After giving each of them a hug, we say our goodbyes. I have to pass this tests or Maya-nee won't let me go to practice. And that means I also won't be able to visit Yuuhi. Mion and Shion got inside the car, and the old man said something to Maya-nee before getting in too.

With a loud noise, the big car zooms away.

"Well Takeru, let's go back inside. You have to wake up early tomorrow." Maya-nee said as the big car became tiny on the distance.

"I know."

"Sumika, we have to go home too." Aunt Haruna went back inside and grabbed Sumika.

"See you tomorrow, Sumika."

"Yes, see you tomorrow." I was going to hug her, but Maya-nee grabbed me and stopped me. Aunt Haruna laughed along Sumika as they went their way.

"Takeru, it's cold so let's go back inside."

"Uuh… I know." Stop pulling me, I can walk.

Now it's so silent. I would have liked Dad to be here today. Yes, next time he comes back we should all get together! Though I do wonder

why Mana-nee hasn't come in a long time. Even when we go to Yuuhi's house she doesn't come to say hi. Did she… go away too?

"Takeru, don't forget to go wash your mouth before going to sleep."

"I know."

"And no talking by the window tonight, you have to wake up early tomorrow."

"Maya-nee, I know!" She smiles and pats my head again.

"I'm just making sure you remember. Now, to the bathroom. The tube should be ready for you."

"I know… Thanks Maya-nee, today was really fun!" I give her a tight hug. She could have said no to Mion and Shion coming here, but she didn't and she helped me with my homework.

She smiles faintly as she pats my head, but then goes back to her usual face as she taps her glasses.

"There's no need for you to thank me. I'm just doing what I usually do. Now, be on your way. Otherwise it might get late."

I nod and go to the bath. She's always like that, I'm always the one that bathes first, the one that goes to sleep first. I once asked her to let me help her cook and she locked me in my room. So, if you won't accept my thanks, I'll just keep hugging you.

Well, I do have to wake up early tomorrow. I can't arrive late on an exam day after all. Maya-nee would get super worried if I did that. I just gotta do my best this week and pass all those exams! I can do it!

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*The Next Friday. 05:54 PM.*

*(Street.)*

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"I'm telling you, I'll be fine." Maya-nee was again holding my wrist, though not so tightly, as we went back home.

"Hmm… Well, we'll see in a few days." Why do you not believe me? I did my best so I should be fine.

"Maya-nee, can I ask you something?"

"What is it?"

"Where is Mana-nee? Why isn't she in Yuuhi's house as of late?" Maya-nee closed her eyes for a second, her lips moved a bit.

"Mana is… taking care of someone else."

"Who?"

"I can't tell you. It's something like us, she's there as the retainer of that someone."

"And she can't come visit?"

"Sadly, she cannot. Just like how I can't leave you alone, she also cannot leave that someone alone." Why is she saying 'that someone'? Who is that person?

"Then, can we go visit her?" Maya-nee stops walking and looks at me.

"Sigh… Takeru, Mana is very busy. So, visiting her would only give her trouble."

"Why? Then, can we call her?"

"Takeru… No, she's working very hard and we'll only distract her. When she has some free time, she'll go to Yuuhi-sama's house and you'll see her then." She starts walking again, ignoring my stare.

Where is Mana-nee? And what is this job? Hmm…

As we got closer to home, I saw a car parked right besides our house. It's one of those big black cars that are always in Yuuhi's house. Oh! Maybe Mana-nee came to visit!

"T-Takeru, don't run!"

"But someone came to visit! Don't you always tell me that it's not polite to keep people waiting?"

"Why do you have to remember my words at the most odd times?" She still keeps my wrist in place, not letting me rush towards the car.

As we got closer, someone came out of it to greet us. And I could see a familiar face, dressed in a white dress of the samurais.

"Uncle Koetsu!" I break free of Maya-nee's hold and run to his side. He crouches and hugs me back. "It's been so long! How have you been?"

"I've been fine, Takeru. I've been fine. How about you? How's school?" He ruffled my hair softly. Something is weird about him though. He's sad. His eyes are squinted as if he were cutting onions and his smile is not his usual.

"Are you okay, Uncle? You look sad." He opens his eyes wide at my words, but then laughs softly as he keeps ruffling my hair.

"As expected of Miho-san's son. Aren't you a sharp one, Takeru?"

"Good afternoon, Kurosawa-sama." Maya-nee came to our side and gave Uncle Koetsu a bow.

"Good afternoon, Tsukuyomi. May I come in?"

"Of course. Takeru, let's go." Maya-nee grabs my hand and we go inside.

Unlike how he usually is, Uncle Koetsu comes in quietly and sits down without making much talk. He's weird today. He's sighing a lot,

his eyes move around as if he were looking for something.

"So, how have you been lately Takeru? Is everything fine?"

"Yes, I'm doing fine in school and I'm getting better at Kendo."

"Oh, can you beat Mion and Shion now?"

"… Not yet." I look away, puffing my cheeks. Those two are too good, I always end up sitting on the floor trying to keep up with them.

"Haha… That's good to hear. It's good that you're healthy." Uncle gazed at me, though something feels weird about him.

"Uncle, is anything wrong?" He looked down for a second, licking his lips.

"Well, I don't know how to say this so… I suppose being frontal is the best way to do this." His voice sounds dry, he then takes out a letter from a case he had on him and passes it to Maya-nee. "The news came just a few days ago. Between the bureaucracy and all the papers, I couldn't come deliver it any faster."

What is this about? Why are his eyes so cloudy? I look at Maya-nee, that's reading the letter. Her eyes turn sharp, focused as she makes that scary look she does when she scolds me. What is in the letter?

"Takeru…"

"Yes?" D-Did I do something bad?

"Listen to me closely, okay?" What is wrong with her? She looks like Sumika when she sees a spider.

"What's wrong?"

"Takeru, your… your Father was… killed in battle, along the rest of Takahisa-sama's squad."

… Eh?

Dad was… killed?

By the monsters?

… Eh? B-But… But he said he'll be alright. T-The samurais were all there with him… Why?

I look down as my eyes gets filled with tears. My hands tightly turned into fists, I clamp my mouth hard. It's a lie. Dad couldn't have… He was… He promised he would…

It's a lie.

It has to be.

I mean… Dad couldn't have… He isn't…

"Takeru…" Maya-nee pats my head, then grabs my chin and makes me look up. "This letter here… is from your Father. He left you a message alongside his will."

"Eh? Dad did?" B-But…

Maya-nee hands me the letter, that was written in a smaller paper compared to the other, bigger one she had on her hands.

*My dear Takeru.*

*If you're reading this, it means Dad has gone to meet Mom and Grandma.*

*I know I couldn't be with you much, and that you must be feeling all alone right now, but I want you to know that you always gave me courage to keep fighting every day. You and your mother were the best thing that ever happened to me. If I left you alone, it was only because I had to do it to keep you safe.*

*Dad is going to go fight the monsters in only a few hours. It's not going to be easy, even with all the samurais here. But I won't run away. If you're reading this, it means that I lost. But I fought for you, Takeru. To keep you as safe as I could.*

*I love you.*

*I always did. You and your mother mean the world to me.*

*My only regret was not being able to spend more time with you and Miho when I could. Forgive me for never being there for you when you needed me.*

*Takeru, even if you're alone, even if Dad is gone, I want you to be strong. You have to keep smiling like you always did, like Mom would have wanted you to do. I only wish you can be happy from now on without me.*

*Life isn't over for you Takeru.*

*So, please promise me you'll do your best from now on. Live, Takeru. Live as happily as you can.*

*Be grateful to all the people that have helped you and make sure you repay their kindness. Please give Tsukuyomi-san and Koetsu my regards in my place.*

*Forgive me for not taking you to eat sushi on your birthday as I promised.*

*Forgive me for not taking you to see Chop-kun's show like you wanted.*

*Forgive me for leaving you.*

*And thank you, for giving me my happiest moments.*

*Thank you, for being always so cheerful.*

*Thank you, for being with Miho when I couldn't.*

*Thank you, for always calling me on my birthday.*

*I love you, Takeru. I only hope that all I left behind is enough to give you as happy a life as you deserve.*

*Goodbye, my son.*

*Kageyuki Shirogane.*

When I finished reading it, the letter was dirty with my tears and snot, and all wrinkled up by my shaky hands.

It's a lie. Dad isn't dead… H-He and the samurais were… Hic… He promised… he would come back…

"… It's a lie."

"T-Takeru… I know it must be hard, but this isn't a lie. Your Father is-
"

"It's a lie! Dad promised… He promised he wouldn't leave me! And he never lies!" I throw the letter to the floor and stomp on it. Dad didn't write this! It's all full of lies!

"Takeru, stop! That's your Father's last latter to you!" Maya-nee grabs me tightly from under my arms.

"Let me go! This is all a lie!"

I struggle but she's holding me tighter than usual. As that same feeling, that cold and hollow feeling I felt when Mom went away, comes back to my heart I stopped struggling.

And I cry. It has to be a lie… Dad wouldn't… He wouldn't…

Maya-nee hugs me and pats my head as I cry onto her.

I don't know how much time passed until I calmed down, until this needles stopped poking my heart.

"Are you calm now, Takeru?"

"Maya-nee… Is Dad… really gone?" I looked up at her, and my last little grain of hope was crushed as she nodded, looking as calm as always.

"Yes, your Father passed away." She said as she brought her hand to the back of my head.

"Takeru, please sit down and listen." Uncle Koetsu said, he was tightly holding his entwined fingers together. "Since Kageyuki is dead, that means you're now an orphan."

"An orphan?"

"Someone who doesn't have parents. And, well… You're nowhere close to being an adult, so someone has to take legal custody of you now."

I didn't get a single word of that. What does it mean to be an orphan? Am I… going away too? Are kids without parents bad?

"I don't get it." I look down as my hands start to shake. Am I bad? W-What's this about?

"Don't be scared. Well, since you have no blood related aunts or uncles, you would have to go to your grandparents. But, well… I talked with Kageyuki's parents before coming here and… they didn't want to accept you." Dad's Dad was alive? He never told me of them… I always thought Grandma was the only Grandma I had…

"Why do they not want to see me? I mean… I never knew I had more Grandmas or a Grandpa." Uncle Koetsu grimaces, closing his eyes tightly.

"That doesn't matter. The thing is, the laws can't force someone to take legal care of a relative if they refuse to do so, after the change a few years ago. So, that means that… You would have to go to an orphanage."

"What's that?"

"Think of it as a home for kids that lost their parents."

"B-But… But why do I have to go there? This is my home, I can stay here." It makes no sense. I have a house, and Maya-nee is here. I'm not alone. Dad… Dad might be gone… B-But I'm not alone!

"Takeru… You see, you can't stay here if you don't have a legal tutor with you. You're a kid, so you need someone to look after you."

"But Maya-nee is here." I look at her and… she looked away, closing her eyes.

"Takeru." Uncle Koetsu said, looking at his hands. "Neither me nor Tsukuyomi have a blood relation with you. So, we cannot take you into our custody."

… What is he saying? Maya-nee has been taking care of me since Mom went away.

"But… Maya-nee has been here for-"

"That is different. She was here hired by your Father to look after you. She's a retainer, not a familiar."

"Then, are you saying you want me to go away?!" I hit the table, Uncle brings his hands up in a hurry.

"No, I didn't say that! Please calm down and listen, Takeru. We cannot take you under us right now because we're not relatives to you. But there is a way for you to stay here, and that is… well, to get adopted by someone else."

"Adopted?"

"That means that someone takes you into their family."

"Then, why can't we do that?" I look at them, both look down avoiding my eyes and moving their lips weirdly.

"You see Takeru, to formally take custody of a child the laws require a number of things. First, a single person can't adopt a children, to avoid certain people from… well, doing bad stuff. I am engaged but not married at the moment. My fiancee is still fighting the monsters, so until she comes back we cannot get married. And Tsukuyomi is single as well."

"So… So you can't adopt me?"

"… Yes, that is the case."

"T-Then… Then, can't Aunt Haruna-"

"Takeru." Uncle Koetsu speaks up in a high, serious tone, making me shut up. "Even if Haruna-san was already married and has a child, she does not have the income to support two children. That's another requirement, if one is to adopt a child, said person needs to have the money to provide the child with all the necessities he or she might need."

"Then… Then…" I start shivering. That means… That means… That I'm alone.

Uncle Koetsu can't, Maya-nee can't, Aunt Haruna can't, Dad's parent don't want me for some reason.

But this is my home. Why can't I stay here?! This is stupid… This laws are stupid! The adults are being unfair!

"But this is my home! Why can't I stay?! Why?!"

"Takeru, nobody is taking your home from you. You'll just have to go somewhere else until someone that can take care of you wants to-"

"NO! This is my home! Why do I have to go away?!"

"… Takeru." Maya-nee tapped my shoulder. She looked at me with her usual serious look. "You cannot be here alone. Without your Father, the rules say that you need someone else to take care of you. Neither me nor Kurosawa-sama can fill the role, according to the rules. But… But once you find someone…" She couldn't finish. She looked down, her hand on my shoulder is trembling a bit.

"Maya-nee?" Is she… going to leave? She… She too…

"Takeru, listen." Uncle Koetsu said, bringing my attention to him. "Some people might say that finding a family for a ten year old kid is hard, but even if some people pressure you, you have the last say in it. If anyone treats you badly, you don't-"

"… Why?"

"Eh?"

"Why do you want me to go away?" Again, tears fall down. What did I do wrong? I passed most of my tests, I did all my homework, I didn't fight with anyone… Why do they want me to go away? What did I do?!

"Takeru… Sigh… If you ever need anything from me, all you have to do is call. I might not be able to do much, but I have a huge debt to repay to your Father. The social service should be coming in a few days I believe." He stands up and comes to my side. "Takeru, once you grow up, if you ever need me, I'll be there for you. And if anyone ever treats you badly… You tell me, and I'll take care of it. I'll leave my number here, okay?"

I can't even nod. He's going away too, I'm sure. They all seem to hate me now that Dad's gone.

Maya-nee was here only because Dad hired her. Uncle Koetsu was a friend of Dad. Now that he's gone…

"Takeru, you just… don't get too down about this. Just think the orphanage is a small vacation from school until you find the right person to form a family with again."

"And what if nobody wants me?" He bit his lips, his relaxed eyes got all wrinkly. See?! The orphanage is a bad place, and you want me to go there! You're all horrible… What did I do wrong?

"Just… Just know that if you need me once you're bigger, I'll be there for you."

Uncle Koetsu pats my head, I think he said something more but I didn't hear him well. Maya-nee went with him to the door. But then I heard another voice, an older voice arguing with Uncle Koetsu.

Looking up, I saw Maya-nee's Dad coming into the house with loud, heavy steps, dressed in the red samurai dress. He looked at me with that same stern face he always has.

"Maya, pack your stuff." He said without looking at her.

"Eh? F-Father, I-" Maya-nee looked nervous, but her Dad sent a look at her and she grew quiet.

"Did you not hear me? Pack your stuff. You didn't have much things here, if I'm correct. Shouldn't take too long."

"However-"

"Maya. I told you to go pack your belongings. That's an order."

"… Yes, Father." She bowed to him and went to her room in the back.

… Packing. That's what you do when you leave somewhere.

So… So Maya-nee is leaving too.

That's… Hic… This is…

I look down, clawing at my knees, bending my pants so hard they might break.

What did I do wrong? Why are they leaving? Was she only here because of Dad? Then… Was all she told me a lie?

… Where will I go? Where am I going to sleep? What about school?

"Shirogane."

I look up and see the sharp turquoise eyes of Maya-nee's Dad. His long beard in the same color, a small mustache and eyes that were more cold and piercing than Maya-nee's staring back at me with that scary look he always has.

"Go and pack what's most important to you. You're leaving now."

"… Eh? B-But…"

"Did you not hear me? You're leaving now. Go and pack already."

"Sir… I believe the social services will-"

"Kurosawa, I think you're overstepping your boundaries right now." The old man turned around and stared at Uncle Koetsu as he folded his arms. "Your time is up, you said your goodbyes to the kid already. You have no more business here. I'll be taking care of this. Leave."

"However, sir, taking him by force is-"

"I'm just taking him to the nearest orphanage. I'm doing our society a service, sparing the social services the work of coming here. That is all there is to this. Leave now, unless you have anything to say to me?"

Uncle looked at me once, biting his lips. Then after shaking his head slowly, he gave a bow to the man and quietly went towards the door without looking back.

"Shirogane, go and pack your belongings."

"… Uncle Koetsu said… that the people would come later…" I tried to say something more, but his glare made me look down, my mouth suddenly coming shut. A knot on my stomach prevented me from talking.

"And I'm telling you you're leaving now. Don't make us waste our time, go and start packing already!" He hits the table really, really hard. Maya-nee sometimes does that too, but never so strong.

… Why? Why is he being mean to me? What did I do wrong? Hic… I didn't do anything bad…

"Stop crying already. Go to your room and begin packing henceforth." He grabs my arm and drags me to the stairs, then pushing my back he makes me go up some steps.

I stopped at times, but I was too scared to look back so I kept climbing the stairs. Legs shaking, I went back into my room.

… So am I leaving? When will I come back?

… Am I coming back? What if… What if I never come back?

T-Then… I grab my small bag that I use when I go to Yuuhi's house.

But… But it's too small… I can't take my toys, or the books Mom bought me, or most of my clothes…

Why? W-Why…

"Hic… W-Waaaaah!" I don't wanna leave! This is my house! Why do I have to leave?!

Dad, why did you leave me? Why did you go away? Why is everyone trying to make me go away? I don't get it…

Kneeling by my bed, I rest my head on it as I cry. This isn't fair… I did nothing wrong… The adults are all mean… I don't get it! Why do I have to go away?

I hate this… This rules are all wrong… If only I were bigger… They're all wrong… Why do I have to leave?

"Takeru?" I hear the door opening and some steps coming closer "… Takeru, we have to go." Maya-nee shakes my shoulder a bit. "Come on, I'll help you pack some stuff."

"Don't bother, Maya. Waste no more time on this peasant. We've taken long enough already, let us go."

"Father, do you plan on sending him away with nothing on him?"

"Why should we care? Or, what is it? Are you going to oppose your Father?" He raised his voice a little. Why is he so awful with us?

"… I am merely-"

"Maya, bring the boy downstairs. It's high time you returned to your rightful duties. We're leaving. Now."

Why does he sound so angry? What did I do to him?

I hate him.

I hate him.

I hate him!

"Takeru… Please, let's go."

Maya-nee pulls my arm softly. She's going to leave me… Of course, she still has a Dad. And Mion and Shion. They're… her real family.

I grasp my sheets tightly. I don't wanna go… This is all wrong… This isn't fair…

"Takeru, please…" Maya-nee patted my head softly. "This isn't the end. You still have your whole life ahead of you. Let us say goodbye with a smile, please."

"… No. I don't wanna leave."

"Takeru, even if it isn't now, the people of the social services will come for you. That's just the way it is. It's the rules we live by."

I hate that. This isn't fair. The rules are all wrong.

"If all of us only did what we wanted, everything would fall into disorder. I cannot imagine how hard this is for you, but please Takeru… Let's go in peace."

"… Will you come visit me sometime?" I look at her, she closes her eyes and shakes her head.

"I will be going back to the samurais, so I won't be able to visit you." She stopped and crouched by my side, then she brought me to her and she gave me a hug tighter than any she ever gave me. "This… This is goodbye, Takeru."

I don't wanna. I hate this.

"… Let's go, Takeru."

Maya-nee grabs my hands and I get up slowly, without looking at her. She softly pulls me away from my room, away from my house. I look at her, but she avoids my eyes as she looks forward.

In the end… I'm all alone… No one will visit me…

I feel as if I had just went outside during winter with only a shirt on, as if I had ants walking all over my back. I try to not cry, and that makes my neck hurt.

Mom… Dad… I-I'm scared…

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**A/N:** And with this, we've reached the end of the first batch of new chapters. Once I'm happy with the drafts of the next chapters, I'll start bringing one a day until we're either back to the prior point this was at pre-rewrite or I take another small break.

Regarding the story, so far I've placed more flashbacks, both from stuff of the old The Days Before arc as well as some D&R bits, in this rewrite which has made the word count shoot up more than it was before. How did these long flashback segments felt? I'm mulling over on how much of D&R to put in here, to either keep doing two or three long flashback chapters every so and so, or to do a single character-centric flashback chapter, despite it probably ending up being really long.

Also, on a side note, I've not been entirely on the best mindset as of late and I'm sure that reflected on the writing being more angsty than before, especially in the case of Chapter 40 and Takeru's interactions with Kei before the fight, as well the openings of Ch. 37 and 39. A simple warning that some stuff might come out crude and raw, more angsty than before for sure, once I redo the old Paranoia arc. If I end up going overboard and make either Yuuko or Yuuhi OOC, let me know if you have the time.

As usual, thanks for reading. Stay safe.

Zuoriel

# Disciple

## Chapter 4 9 : Disciple

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*December 2nd.*

**[Takeru]**

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"Haa… Haa…" Gasping for dear air, I keep on running in between the rows of graves.

The fog thickens, the eerie voices do as well. Encrusting more and more rocks into my feet, my breath rugged as my throat begins to close up, once more that foreboding cold feeling creeps up my back until it rests on my nape.

" *I told you to release me!"*

Suddenly, one of those dark silhouettes appeared out of nowhere trying to strike at me. Using my arms as a shield, feeling as if they had been lashed at by an iron whip, I'm sent crashing down onto a tomb.

And yet, as I tried to catch my breath, the cold feeling rang out in warning once more. Rolling to a side, I barely dodged another strike from a different silhouette. Far more grand than the other, imposing in its posture, yet with a glare that breathed curses back at me.

" *You're leaving now. Don't make us waste our time!"* Following the scream, it also tried to pounce at me.

Again barely dodging it, a sharp pain in my chest as I exhausted all air in me, with wobbly movements I stood up, again fleeing the silhouettes, again feeling the skin of my feet being peeled off.

The more I ran, the closer the tombs got. Rising tall, far beyond the clouds and fog, the few patches of grass and moss withered, and the once lush earth turned to a desolate wasteland as I fled. The freezing vice grip choking my nape, another voice rumbled through the fog. It immediately filled me with dread, halting my stride dead.

*" Hereby, I declare you to be remov ed from the inner echelons of our fellowship."*

*My throat clamping up, a rain of glass might as well have pierced my chest just now. In that instant of inaction, something clawed at my ankles and began to drag me down.*

*The harsh, loathsome voice kept talking, splitting the ground apart as the crushing claws of the silhouettes* dug into my legs as they pulled me down. I grabbed onto the edges of the dried earth, feeling my nail beginning to bend as I fought their grip. However, as I got half of my body above the rift, that same cold feeling returned to my nape, cutting my breathing short as if it had been stepped on.

"… *Farewell, Shirogane."*

Losing my grip, I fell and fell. The fissure closed up, crushing me no matter how much I rebel. Acid burned from within, coughing and hacking I felt more and more ill.

Urgh… Head hurts… Hard to breathe… C-Can't feel my arms…

No matter how much I push, I'm locked in. Can't move… Can't even muster enough strength to scream… Urgh… I'm gonna be crushed…

…

Something moves me, slowly shaking me left and right. Unlike everything before, it feels gentle. Feeling the pressure ease up, my breathing steadying down, the shaking becomes a bit more strong.

"Takeru-san."

… That voice… Who was it from?

"Takeru-san."

The shaking keeps picking up speed, yet it is so tenderly that it's almost like a massage. The crushing feeling fades away, a small jolt runs through my limbs as I can sense them once more.

But the shaking feels so nice… so soothing…

"Takeru-san!"

Like rocking on a ship, I'm slowly massaged by the shaking. Easing up my tension, I simply relax and enjoy it. But… that voice… it was from…

"Mmmgghhh…"

"Takeru-san, you have to wake up."

… Kasumi's voice, right. Yeah… It was… Huh…

Barely opening my eyes, my blurry sight catches her figure as she shakes me again. Letting out a small groan, rubbing the sluggishness out of my eyes, my mouth opens wide as I yawn and shiver.

"Good morning," She says, smiling my way. Immediately after, I sink back into my pillow. She shakes me again right afterwards. "Takeru-san, you need to get up."

… So cold. Five more minutes… I wanna rest some more…

"No. Get up."

Something rustles softly on top of me, suddenly the cold got worse.

"… Kasumi, give me my blanket back." I look at her, not moving from my pillow, as she smiles again.

"Good morning."

" *Yawn*… Good morning."

"Are you still tired?"

"… Yeah."

She comes closer, giving me my blanket back and petting my head softly. Uuh… It feels nice.

"Was it because of the last session?" Her voice tarnished by worry, I drown a yawn as I shake my head.

"Nah, it's not… that. I'm just sleepy, is all," Don't remember what I was dreaming about, but I'm just in a kinda lazy tired mood. Like, not feeling like getting out of bed at all.

"Is that so? Do you think you can train with me, then? Maybe you should rest?" Dulling her tone as her hand leaves my head, her mood fell off the stairs.

"Nah, it's no problem. I just… am having a slow start today. *Yawn…* After all, it took me a lot to fall asleep yesterday."

To be honest, I'm having some real trouble in balancing what we saw with how he felt. Thinking about it just makes my head hurt but… I can somewhat see why he would resent the Royal Guard, if they took him from his house like that. Still doesn't explain how or why he joined them after that…

And it also feels different to the sadness I felt in the CCSE. That was… crushing, cold, and with a tint of anger. But the one of the last memory… is just plain sadness, complete and utter fear. In the end… they took Dad as a soldier, sent him to his death, and then

abandoned little me to his luck… I'd be lying if part of that wrath wasn't coming back up the more I think about it.

Sadly, that memory was too much for me and I ended up cutting the link forcefully yesterday. Left me out of breath, barely able to hold back the tears as he read Dad's letter, to say that someone tore my heart outta my chest and dropped a gallon salt water on the wound wouldn't make justice to how we both felt as we read Dad's last letter, and even more when that old bastard kept pushing him around. But due to how I closed up, abruptly ending the session seemed to shock Kasumi a lot yesterday, to the point that I had to help her to her room since she began to feel faint after the recoil of me shutting her off from my mind. Looking at her, she does look worn down.

"Well, but are you feeling fine, Kasumi?"

"Huh? Yes, do not worry about me."

"Hmm… You sure?" Rubbing my eyes, she nods back at me, "Well… Let's take it easy today, okay?"

"Yes, understood. It's almost seven, so please get ready. The training starts at eight," She says as composed as always.

"I know, I know. I'll hurry it up," Stretching to leave the stiffness back while still half-buried in the sheets, I smile at her. Promptly as always, she began to leave, "Hey, Kasumi?"

"Yes?" Looking back, she got closer again.

Then, tenderly grabbing her by the hand, pulling her slowly towards me, I gave her a hug, not too tight, not too soft, rubbing her back slowly as I did.

"Thanks a lot for caring, Kasumi. Your shaking helped me a lot right now," Brushing her hair, I tell her in a hushed tone.

"No… It's nothing…" She barely whispered it out.

"It isn't nothing for me, though," Ending the hug, bringing her face into my sight, I smile at her as I play with her bangs, "So thanks a lot, I don't feel that heavy now."

"So…" Her hands hesitate for a second before docking under mine, then they begin softly rubbing my back again as she returns the hug, "Did this help you with your nightmares?"

"I dunno if it was a nightmare today, but I've been feeling real tired lately," Returning the kindness, I ruffle her hair. She moves her bunny ears as she leans closer, they tickle my chin as they do, "So, thanks. And sorry for yesterday, I didn't meant to hurt you."

"No, it wasn't your fault… So, does this help you feel better?" Her hands' pace picks up, can't help but to sigh as my back finally relaxes completely.

"Yeah… Sigh… Thanks a lot, Kasumi," Again ruffling her hair, she nods while not moving away one inch, "So, uh, I should be getting ready. Just wait a while, I'll make it quick."

"Eh? But… If you're feeling tired, we could delay it for-" Bringing her closer for another hug, this one tighter, she makes a cute whimper, her hands forming a lock on my back.

"It's okay, I'm all better now," Drawing a circle on the back of her head, her bunny ears slap my shoulders softly as I do, "Plus, this is your training day. Let's do our best today, okay?" Again pulling her away, her hands hesitating for a second, a radiant smile greets me as our eyes met.

"Yes, let's do our best together…" Her hands tracing my arms for a moment before finally pulling away, her gaze took a second to admire the floor for some reason, "But… But you still shouldn't rush. I can wait for you and then we can have breakfast together, so please don't hurry up unnecessarily if you're feeling tired."

"I get it, don't worry. I know how to take care of myself, even if it doesn't look like it as of late," Extending my hand, her head lowers to welcome it as I ruffle her hair again.

"Understood. Well then… See you in a moment," Giving me her usual bright smile, we waved at each other as she left my cell, leaving the key on the outer lock of the door.

Yawning again, I stretch my arms up. Dunno what's up with my sleep cycle as of late, but thank God Kasumi is here to lend me a hand with it. Yet another reason to get cracking and do my best during our training today! I doubt she'd be able to imitate me perfectly, but I'mma give you the best glimpse of my skills I can muster as of now, Kasumi.

Getting out of bed, moving my ankles to wake 'em up, the coldness of the water as I splash my face brings me completely into focus. Shivering a bit, my feet refuse to move towards the shower, my shoulders again begin to cramp up, and my hands lag as they start to take my lithe clothing off me.

But I can't leave Kasumi waiting overlong… And I need to hear a report from Sensei about Mom and Dad too, since I freaked out yesterday… And, above all, I'm real hungry right now.

"Alright, no point in wasting time. Into the cold shower, now! Chaaarge!"

Not a second had passed after I opened the thing that I regretted my decision with all of my soul.

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*Some time after that.*

*(B17F. Hangar 78.)*

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Entering Hangar 78, now completely in my suit with the helmet and all, the buzzing and shouting of the teams reaches my ear as fast as the smell of oil and steel does towards my nose.

The walls made of a mossy green plating, taller but more compact than other hangars, it seems to make the sounds echo more for some reason. Streams of cables on the floor, the lifts right on the back end of the place, and the aisles for the maintenance teams left little free room to walk. Illuminated by the overhead beams, there's some dust clearly floating in the lights' direct shine.

Walking over the sprawling cables, the smell of dust and fuel intensifying, I reach the base of the area with the lone TSF the hangar had docked in. Painted in the standard UN colors, but looking as if they were fading a bit, as if it hadn't been used or even dusted off in a long while, thin stinger-like pods stretch from its arms, and odd-shaped sensors were in its shoulders. Some sharp and egg-shaped, others curved but hollow claws. And the curvature of its head, sunk in as if it were a triangle, does somewhat resemble the patterns the face of an owl has.

Slowly pacing around to get a view from different angles, I watch the Mindseeker as the engineers proceed to make the last minute checks to it. It looks nice honestly. I can see why it was nicknamed the Rock Owl, with a head like that. Though, it looks like it is a second gen machine. The overall shape of it does remind me of a Kagerou more than any of the third gen machines I've seen. Though, if it was made for Alt. III, then it makes sense. The Shiranui, the very first third gen TSF, was officially unveiled just the year before Alt. IV was started, if the notes I read are to be believed.

"So Shirogane, what do you think?" A PDA on her hand, Sensei strode towards me, smile plastered on.

"Looks nice. What will Kasumi do differently with this one?"

She moved closer, pointing to the shoulders of the Mindseeker, "She will control those extra sensors. I know you told me you've never

piloted a Carrier-based TSF, so I'll explain how you're supposed to operate," Bringing her PDA near me, an image of a cockpit was displayed in its screen, "The one sitting on the front controls the weapons, while the one in the back is in charge of maneuvering. For this test, I want you to focus on piloting as you usually do and let Yashiro be the one that decides when to attack. Due to her ESP powers and the sensors, she should have no problems spotting and taking down your adversaries."

So it'll be the opposite of when we rode the XG, I fired the weapons and gave the commands that moved the thing while Kasumi connected me to Sumika to actually move.

"Got it. So, you didn't paint it in ARP. Are the Valkyries going to be using the stealth protocol?" She then shakes her head, fuming a bit as she sighs.

"No, we still haven't even started to make diagrams for the modifications to the Takemikazuchis. We will hold some test against stealth units at a latter date, since the Shogunate will have access to stealth tech. Do be ready for that too."

Sigh… It's hard being a test pilot. Still, the odds are already tough for today, "So who will we fighting against today?"

"Hayase, Takahara, Isumi, Munakata and Asakura. Your comms will be distorted again, so don't worry about them finding out who you are. All of them in their new Takemikazuchis with the XM3 installed, of course," Beaming cheerily at the last part, she then chuckled a bit.

"Okay, I'll do my best. I see you did change the jump units on this one, though."

"Oh, yeah. I honestly thought of this just a few days ago, so it's not like I can just fit in one of our new internal engines in the thing and expect it to work. The sensors should be on par with what you're used to with Yashiro on board, so I only changed the jump units of the thing. You'll have one dagger in each knee, a sword on your

hand and two rifles in your back, since we can't mount stuff on the shoulders thanks to its sensors."

"Wait, so you're sending me against five Takemikazuchis, that are focused on CQC, with only one sword?" She chuckles at me, a smirk spreading like wildfire. Ugh… Dammit, Sensei.

"We can't help it, it's just how things are," Beaming again, she pointed at the machine, "The Mindseeker's arm joints are not fit for swinging the sword around, even if I improved them a tiny bit. Since this TSF is supposed to be a High Performance Hive Infiltrator, its knee blocks and tanks are larger than the rest of the other 2nd Gen. TSFs of its time. You have four magazines of 36mm on the left knee and six of 120mm on the right one, along your two daggers," Staring back at me, her tone sobered up as she again strode closer, "I know you prefer to fight in CQC, but let me see how you hold up as a ranged fighter against a team that has the clear edge over you in CQC. This isn't solely a test for Yashiro, got it?"

"Sigh… Roger. I can tell that this will give us nice data, but you really like to give me tough missions," I scratch my head again as she chuckles lightly.

"I do this only because I know that you can somehow pull this off. Your data against Takamura was better than I expected, though I did think you would win. I'm basically testing where your limits lie, and you did say that maneuvering is your biggest strength so go out there and show me what you have," Then, her eyes locked onto mine, unwavering. No longer smiling, she simply stared at me.

"Roger. I'll drive this thing to its limits. I do have a question about it, though."

"What is it?" Hand on her chin, she leaned in curiously.

"Are the pods on the arms' sides used for something?"

"Yes, they have extra sensors that will give you clearer data to move and attack. They should extend your effective range for you to shoot precisely from far away without missing, and to allow you to move much more nimbly in crowded spaces," She so remarked.

"Alright. I don't know how this will turn out, but I'll do my best out there," Even if this gives me another headache.

Sensei then smiles, brightly so, far more than the reflection of the lamps onto the Mindseeker, "That's what I wanted to hear. I'll be monitoring everything in the CP, so feel free to go all out," Arms folded, she gave me one firm nod I returned. She seems real happy for some reason.

As Sensei finished saying that, Kasumi walked into the Hangar in her suit. Briefly, memories of our last mission come back up, of the only time I saw her in that suit, of all the trainings we did with the XG back then. Though… I wonder what's different this time, to have her piloting a TSF. Why would Sensei risk her in this way? Because we have a surefire way to complete the 00 Unit, so she wants Kasumi to do something else of worth?

"Are you ready, Kasumi?" Giving me a small nod she then slowly paced to my side.

"Well, you two get in there. Go and check everything is working properly and get ready to fight," Sensei firmly stated, beginning to go her way out of the hangar.

"Roger. Let's go Kasumi."

"Yes."

We take the stairs to the railway and open the cockpit. It looks just like our usual units but with two seats instead of one. Slowly entering first, I sink into my place on the back seat as Kasumi sits on the front.

"Say Kasumi, have you ever piloted before?" I am worried she might pass out from the G-Force of my movements, but she looks back at me and gives me a wide smile.

"Yes, I do have some experience. Don't worry about me," Her small voice was firm as steel, those cerulean eyes of her showed hesitation when meeting mine.

"Alright then, just do your best. I know it might be a bit hard to aim with how fast I move, so tell me if you need me to tone it down a notch."

"Yes, you can count on me. I won't disappoint you."

Proceeding to bolt ourselves to our seats, after a small pause to double check that everything is in working order I connect to the Command Post.

"Here Viking 1, all systems green. Ready to launch whenever," Sensei's face appears on my view as the data link is formed.

"CP, roger that. Yashiro, how are you?"

"Viking 2, all green," She immediately replies, as composed as usual. Sensei curves her lips upwards as a lioness surfaces in her glare.

"Good to hear. Vikings, proceed to the launch pad."

The small rumbling of the cables coming off our shoulders shook us a bit, but the bracing system started and a jolt came from the controls as the rotary gears took us to the pad. All systems remain in working order as the hangar becomes more and more distant. Ending up in the usual aboveground railway, the ramp and everything was prepared already. The crew waving the light torches to signal the okay, a few taps onto the buttons and the jump units begin to heat up.

"You ready, Kasumi?"

"Yes, anytime."

On her positive, I push the control and step on the pedals, my back getting glued to the seat as I do, my arms pushed onto the sideways armrests, the impulse also docking my neck firmly in place. The difference in height compared to my usual gives me a slight feeling of disorientation at first, like when Uncle Koetsu made me ride in his car after he outfitted it with racing seats, but seeing the small bunny ears on a corned of my vision made me smile. It's nothing like when me and Meiya rode together, the point of view, the space available, the vision of the cockpit behind the projection… It's far more comfy than I thought it'd be.

The rumbling easing up, we proceed to steadily fly towards the spot marked in the radar.

"How're you feeling, Kasumi?"

"Fine," She gives me a thumbs up.

"Okay then, let's speed up a lil' bit."

Just a few minutes afterwards, we reach our destination on the eastern side of the ruins. And immediately after, the beeping of the CP opening the common channel came up.

"Vikings, your adversaries are already in place. The exercise will begin in one minute. The winning condition is total annihilation of the opposite team. That is all," Sensei leaves us as a timer appears on my view.

"Well, time to play. Kasumi, how do you prefer to fight?" She looks back with her usual blank stare, moving her bunny ears.

"I don't really have a preference. Just fight as you normally would," She's really calm about this.

Maybe it's because I never piloted a TSF along someone in a fight, but I'm kinda nervous. I mean, the only experience I have is when we struck down that rock to save that old lady and the XG. But this time I have to actually put some effort in moving in a way to allow Kasumi to do her thing.

"Alright, you take care of the ranged part of the fight, and focus on the sensors during CQC. Let me take care of the dogfighting."

"Roger," She nods as she answers immediately, smiling my way before facing forward again.

Sighing, I lean back as the seconds tick away. The clock shaves the timer down closer and closer to zero. Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath and fill my lungs.

Five Takemikazuchis. I had trouble trying to take one down. And with the upgraded Kagerou, no less. No stealth to help me this time, too. I guess I'll have to go seriously against them, without being too fast either. Like my world's Mikoto said, more speed is not the same as more mobility. Let's use the XM3's liberties to their fullest, like when I took on all those Forts. Otherwise, I'll get done in real quick, and that won't do anything for either Kasumi or Sensei.

The timer reaches zero, a siren blooms in ti signal the start of the match along the usual green message in my view. Wasting half a second, I open with a dash along the street. Gotta get close under some cover, and I need to scan the map to devise an escape route if the gang up on us.

However, as soon as I moved a bit into the city, a bleep appeared in my radar. Wow, this thing is something else, they're so far away and-

"Hayase-san and Takahara-san are coming after us," Kasumi informs me.

"Huh? You can tell which is which?"

"Yes," Looking back, she smiles again, "The sensors make it so that I can feel what's around our TSF. I can tell who is coming, at what speed, and with what weapons. They're coming at us with one sword and a rifle, to our Ten. Takeru-san, could you get into a sniping position?"

"Sure, is between those buildings fine?"

"Yes."

Erupting into a sudden boost towards two big buildings, I walk right between them and crouch. Tapping the switch, the left pylon moves upwards. Leaving my sword on the ground for a moment, I take aim with both hands holding the assault rifle.

Shortly afterwards, a small figure appears on my vision as the auto-aim warning appears. Kasumi was right, huh. The Mindseeker's arms move, Kasumi is aligning her shot. Her aim is… Yeah, a bit off. She should try to strike a bit lower, the auto-lock will do most of the corrections anyways. Zooming into the target should be what she should try out.

A tingly feeling suddenly appearing into my head, she then triggers manual aim and lowers her firing line. Well, this makes things easier for sure. After a second of wait, she fires off a 120mm round. The hit confirmation rings out, one of them begins to stagger in the air. Zooming in the view, looks like she hit the arm of that one, causing the Takemikazuchi to drop its sword. And from such a distance, too.

"Damn. Nice one, Kasumi."

"… I wanted to hit its cockpit," She sounds slightly upset at herself.

"Don't worry. So, do you want to keep shooting or do we go face them?"

"The others are already closing in, let me take that one out," Upon my agreement, she quickly starts sending more shots, the

Takemikazuchis starts moving erratically on the air, doing some side dodges, but they're no match for Kasumi's sniping.

After missing two shots, Kasumi hit the one from before again, taking one of its legs out, and directly after she assessed a hit at its cockpit. One down already, huh. Kasumi 1 - Valkyries 0.

Though, I can't believe they aren't doing barrel rolls, or diving under the buildings, or something! Do they think that just because the XM3's reaction time is better they can just speed up and dodge the fire? Like, for real, what the hell are they doing? The girls weren't that basic in their approach last loop.

"Kasumi, the other one is closing in. Let's go."

"Roger."

Once we pick up our blade and re-lock onto the lone charging hostile, I dash out towards cover.

As the Takemikazuchi on the air was getting closer, it dove to the ground, surfacing on it, and then boost jumped towards us, sword at the ready to slash and dice.

Halting our stride, canceling the movement, we bounce away with a short boost jump as the hostile's slash met the air. Kasumi opened fire against it just as I started to spin, sending a shower of paint in a circular pattern at the Takemikazuchi. However, it just dashes backwards and takes aim at us undeterred.

"Don't think you'll get me so easily, Eight!" Ugh, Hayase.

Her cocky tone was clearly full of glee as she sidestepped away from our shots, returning the pleasantry. We play with each other, going back and forth in between some buildings, giving 'em a new paint job. Kasumi's shots were badly timed with my jumps and dashes at first, but she slowly began to time them more precisely.

"Takeru-san, the other ones are in an inverted arrowhead just in front of us. They will shoot at us soon."

"Thanks for the warning. I'm going to-"

"Go full boost past Hayase and deal with them, right?" She moves her bunny ears at me. Alright, that makes things easier. Get ready Kasumi, after we dodge that next barrage, we're moving out! "Roger."

Hayase kept boost dashing on the ground with gusto, shooting at us, trying to lure us to the middle of the others' aim. However, I kept canceling my dashes and doing back-boosts, coming in and out with the rhythm of a wave on the shore while Kasumi fired just as I cancelled my dashes, forming a dread lock for Hayase to get close enough to strike.

So long as we keep her at bay she won't be able to get in CQC range, and then she'll get upset and charge at us. I know Hayase's boner for close combat, I know she won't be able to keep it-

"What's up, Viking?! Too scared to come closer?!" Lashing out, fuming much, she roared into another forward dash.

You know, it's kinda cute how she gets upset at these little things. Back in my training last loop she was the same. But just because she gets upset doesn't equal she gets careless, it's all on me to make the most out of what little frames she gives away. And to make sure she does give us an opening… Hehe.

"All I can hear is the tears of someone who can't even graze me," Returning to my cocky tone, I then chuckle. Her groaning comes up on the common channel. C'mon Hayase, charge at us.

"Viking 1, is this what you call a noob?" Oh God, Kasumi is the last person I thought would go around spewing insults. Thanks for following on my plan, Kasumi. She moves her bunny ears a bit then.

"Yep, she's a noob through and through. Can't hit anything outside close range, it seems."

"What was that?! I'll make you two eat those words!" She takes a step back and comes after us in a vindictive full boost, grazing some buildings as we took a corner.

Retreating and as she gets closer, I do a boost backflip while changing the angle of the jump units on mid air, arching our TSF above hers. However, she cancels her boost, comes to a complete halt, and shoots at us. Dammit!

The shaking dives my elbows into my sides, again glues my back to the seat. Kasumi reacted in a split second and opened fire as well while I did a roll to dodge the shots, but this was too close for comfort.

… Shit, we got hit. It's not heavy damage, but any more hits will leave our hands out of commission.

"Hehehe! Looks like you can't escape anymore!" Hayase seemed very pleased with herself.

"Takeru-san! Behind us!"

"I know!"

I did look at the radar as I landed, so no seconds were wasted on the following double boost jump to our left. Just as I did, the spot we were on was drenched, badly soaked in paint. And yet, the danger ain't over yet, not by a long shot.

Hayase was now tailing us, shooting at us every time she started to close the distance. Kasumi threw both arms backwards and started shooting back at her, however the Takemikazuchi did one jump cancel and boost dashed in the opposite direction, effectively evading any and all shots.

"Damn, we can't lose her like this," I've been using the tall buildings as cover from the fire of the other three, that are still rather far. But that won't work for much longer, either.

"Takeru-san, let's go after them. Don't be afraid to do your best because I'm here," Kasumi's usual calm tone was firm, but she's not the only reason I'm being careful.

"Once we get to the main avenue, I'm charging at them at top speed. Just do your best to keep up, okay?"

"Charge at the one on the right, if the Captain falls they'll be demoralized," She remarks. I think Hayase is still going to come after us, but whatever.

I keep canceling my jumps and doing my zigzags, somehow managing to get us away from Hayase as Kasumi keeps spraying paint behind us. She actually managed to graze Hayase's Takemikazuchi despite its greater speed and quick maneuvering. The bunny has a hawk-eye, for real.

Blazing into a dash to my right, a canister of paint explodes from above and soaks the spot we would have been in. Hayase seized my brief stop to full boost her machine in front of us. Barely managing a step back to dodge the swing of her sword, a short reposition in the middle, I trigger a crouch and then dash forward in a flash, extending one leg sharply to kick at her. As if I were a defender tackling a forward in a soccer game, Hayase fall to the ground after our fierce sliding foul-play.

Quickly canceling both the dash and the crouch, the Mindseeker stands up in one fluid motion and, without losing momentum, I storm into a boost jump towards the avenue, while Hayase is still getting up. Jumping once again and, stepping with only one foot as I land, I change our direction to move along the street as we break into a sprint.

Taking a second to switch the sword for the second rifle, juggling with the stuff in our hands and in the pylons, we're good to go now. We gotta get some distance between us while she's grounded. A beep comes up in the radar shortly after.

"Takeru-san, they're close by. Should we attack?"

"Yeah, let's," Smirking cockily, my hands tighten their hold onto the controls. It's time for the counterattack, Valkyries! "Get ready, Kasumi!"

Opening into another full boost as I dash towards the others, paint rounds rain down on us like a drizzle, but, thanks to the updated info on the radar, our rushing stride doesn't even fizzle.

"Takeru-san, jump in ten."

"Okay!"

As Kasumi asked I cancel my dash and go into a sudden full boost jump, leaving the chasing Hayase right in front of the others' shots. Practically a frame perfect dodge, using her teammates' attacks against her. Sadly, Hayase cancelled her rush and backboosted in time to avoid getting painted in orange.

Now on the air, Kasumi takes aim at the rest of them and locks on. I start dashing on the air towards them, doing one barrel roll to avoid their incoming fire, edging closer to the ground and descending. Kasumi then opens fire, and unlike theirs some of our shots hit.

The Captain lost her left arm, apparently. Landing with a loud crash, I then dash behind some buildings. I should take some distance, bait them again and whittle them down little by little.

"Takeru-san, please go into melee. The one in the back shouldn't be a problem."

"You sure? The thing is gonna shake a lot with my erratic way of moving," She then looks back, firmly staring at me through the projection.

"I want to learn as best as I'm able. Please?"

"Sigh… That ain't fair, you know," You cute, little bunny, when did you learn to use the baby doll eyes? "I'm glad you're trying so hard. So, if you're sure this will work, let's go for it."

"Yes, I'll update the radar as best as I can."

"Then, let's rumble!"

I dash backwards as the Captain and Munakata, going by the naming on the radar, open fire from both of my sides. The one who should be Asakura tried to snipe me, but, thanks to the sensors, I could easily read her and boost jumped out of the way. The radar updates, showing me a path along the ruins. All right, let's do this.

As the Captain and Munakata cancelled their attacks and went for a boost dash towards me, pulling out their swords and trying to do a flat-scissor as Kei and Chizuru were planning before, I took a step back and, upon contact with the ground, exploded into a full boost dash again.

The Mindseeker blasted past both Takemikazuchis, straight through the open space in between them, leaving them tilted and in off-side. As I follow the path in the radar, I take my Mugen stance while doing some more zigzags to avoid the paintballs that are coming from behind and in front.

Kasumi bends our left arm backwards and shoots what is left of our 120mm ammo, forcing the Captain and Munakata to put some space by back-boosting away. And now, we've got time and enough space to take down the one up ahead!

Asakura's unit comes into view as she keeps boost jumping sideways. That's a nice technique, she's canceling the jump as soon as she does it, and she keeps doing consecutive jumps as she practically glides over the ground. Her aim, however, is far from perfect. Probably not used to her new ride, mastering a Takemikazuchi is probably no easy task.

Now that I think about it… I'm piloting this kind of model for the first time but I'm not having much trouble with it. Half of it is thanks to Kasumi's help with the radar but… Listening to the shaking, to the response of the joints to my moves, and double checking the numbers after my reckless moves has been enough to adapt well enough. Are they not doing that, then?

Could it be that they're forcing the machine to adapt to them, and in doing so all they manage to do is end up trapped by the superior specs? After all, with such a nice piece of tech, it wouldn't be weird to end up being merely riding it instead of properly driving it.

After giving some time for Kasumi to change the magazines in our guns, I boost jump above a building, landing on its roof to do then jump again. Canceling it in midair, entering my Mugen stance again and moving the boosters backwards, again I blast into a full dash towards Asakura, completely avoiding the Captain and Munakata's feeble attempts to stop me.

Our Mindseeker draws an arc in the sky as we descend upon the Type-00C, nearing top speed. Asakura only tried to backboost away but a quick, simple slash hit her hands, making her drop her rifles. Landing hard, carefully shifting the weight backwards, I manage to turn around without wasted seconds and then, seeing she was still in range, I let loose a decisive strike at the cockpit. The Takemikazuchi falls back with a booming thud, crashing into the concrete and remaining unmoving. Vikings 2 - Valkyries 0.

No time to rest, though. I quickly retreat away behind more tall buildings as the other three's rain is closing in on my position. Now

that we took the newbies out, we're left with the real deal. The fight has just begun.

"Takeru-san, do you have an idea to take them down?" Kasumi sounds a bit tense, seems to be quivering just a tiny bit right now.

"Yeah, I'm going to charge forward and try to use the XM3's mobility to get 'em by surprise. You just focus on gunning them down."

"Roger."

Alright, they're closing in. We are slower than them, only by getting them by surprise we can do this. And I know how!

I rush forward and jump. Triggering the Variable Wings as I deactivate one jump unit to spin myself, I send our TSF towards a skyscraper. And as we approach it, tilting my controls our feet make contact with building as I activate my Jump Units to trampoline myself off the bricks. Then, I keep rebounding on the buildings in a zigzag patter, just like I did during the tournament.

We have the range, we have the speed, and we have the ammo. I'll rush through you as Kasumi pours her paint all over your frames.

"Get ready to be creamed, Valkyries!" One last pull of the controls, one last jump off the bricks, and their machines come into our sight.

Kasumi locks onto them in perfect sync with my jumps. I take one last, sharp, hard breath as I strengthen my grip on the controls to do one last full boost to make sure they can't catch me in the rush.

Paint flies from our spiraling frame as we dive hard towards the three Takemikazuchis. Since we have more range thanks to Kasumi and the special sensors, and also thanks to the patterns she displays in my radar to help me coordinate my cancels and spins with her aim, we avoid their first barrage as ours rains down on them hard.

I didn't chose this place for anything, they have two toppled down buildings right behind them. They can't escape so easily!

Not letting the pedals rest, keeping the boost on and off, then I cancel it, using the momentum to carry the rest of the distance while the boosters cool off. And as we begin to lose altitude, as full control returns to the boosters and our unit, I reactivate a full boost as our feet greet the ground. Again dodging their firing lines once I crouched, Kasumi starts firing just as the Mindseeker picked up its stride.

Hellfire raining over them, the Valkyries start retreating away to our nine. Once our boost had ended, Hayase's unit sharply took a turn, tumbling part of a building with her right shoulder, as she took out her sword ready to meet our assault while the other two take cover behind the rubble.

Quickly shifting the stick, pressing the pedals with my heels, I cancel the boost and align the thrusters to change my direction sharply. Gliding outwards but forward into the street, the Mindseeker power slides right under Hayase's slash, who thought we were going to clash with her in melee. The unnecessary impulse of her charge left her vulnerable, and a swift kick send her unit tumbling down again.

"Takeru-san, why did she opened herself like that?"

"Because she expected a direct parry, an outwards glide like I just did wasn't in her plans," Which means, they're not even scratching the surface of the XM3's potential.

An outwards slide into a crouch, followed by any attack, is one of the most basic moves of the XM3. It's what my world's Mikoto was so good at. Spreading the angle of the glide, as if trying to draw half a circle, does take some fine control of the boosters, but we're up against the Valkyries. They should be more than capable of something as simple as this.

I slowly ease up on the propulsion to soften my stride. Ending up hovering on a street parallel to the one the Captain and Munakata were on by the tail end of the boost, without wasting a second they open fire on me. Like I'll let this chance slip me by!

Almost in perfect sync, Kasumi dropped the guns to let me take out both daggers. Crouch, reposition to the left, cancel, and a forward dash! The Mindseeker avoided all the shots aimed at its body with the crouch and was now positioned under a Takemikazuchi, dagger rising at its cockpit. In a swift instant, another Type-00C fell to the ground.

However my feeling of triumph was cut short as I had to run away when Hayase came boosting towards me, and the other one almost got me at point blank. Dashing on the ground, kicking Munakata too while I was at it, and docking my daggers in the same motion, once I locate the guns and pick them back up, we ran away for dear life. Quickly dashing into another street, I keep taking turns when I get the chance, but I can't lose them.

"Kasumi, I'll do some consecutive jumps to get away from them!"

"Be careful, they're too close. And I'm low on ammo."

"Don't worry, this will end up just fine."

Unable to gain ground, Kasumi starts shooting the 120mm to keep our distance. I speed up a bit, doing some more cancels and jumps as I try to get away. They're not doing any flashy movements as they chase me, I can't lose them so if they went for some triple boost jumps they could get me in trouble.

Munakata is circling to my right, if she gets any closer she might land a hit. Starting a double boost jump to my left, I have to cancel it immediately.

"Come and face me already!" Hayase full boosted through a building, landing right in front of me with a vengeance, slashing her

sword about towards me.

Damn! A side step to my left, one step backwards, crouch, cancel, backboost! The sudden shaking, the intensity of the movement, clamps me to my seat. Gulping my tongue to not bite it, lashing it against the back of my teeth as my knees buckled hard to not release the pedals, I could hear Kasumi let out a small pained groan.

"Think that will be enough?!" She opens fire, bending her pylons forward and pointing both guns at me.

Shit, Hayase! I boost jump away from her in a frenzy, noticing Kasumi isn't following up with her shots. A beeping reaches my ears, barely managing to do a barrel roll to dodge Munakata's shots. But one hit my left arm, disabling it. I backboost to give us some space, but we are getting worn down.

"Hey Kasumi, you alright?"

" *Cough*… Yes, I'm fine. The shaking was… a bit too sudden, so I couldn't brace for it," Her voice crumbling down, a weary whisper compared to her usual.

Damn you, Hayase… If her slashes had connected, even I might have bitten my tongue off. What's her damage? To come at us so violently… Kasumi's bending over, clearly exhausted after that last tight dodge… *How dare you bring harm to her… Let's see if you find it funny when you're o n the receiving end of the axe.*

"… Takeru-san? Are you alright?" The strange tinge of worry of her tone refocused me back to the cockpit, where I found her staring right at me.

"Huh? Yeah, just bracing," She remains staring for a moment as she groans, as if not convinced, "So Kasumi, seems like we reached the end of the line. Wanna go out with a blast, or would you rather call it quits?"

"… No, let's fight until the end," She moves her bunny ears, facing me with a dead serious expression, her tone again blazing up. For her, anyways.

"If that's what you want, let's do this then. Keep your mouth shut, and your tongue behind your teeth. Don't ever move your mouth for anything, alright?" She nods, tightening her posture.

I rush out of my cover and do a crouch dash to avoid Munakata's fire. While remaining like that, I do a boost jump as I veer to my right.

"That's how I like it!" Hayase shouted over the common channel, stopping her guns and taking a fighting pose with her sword facing at us. She boost dashes towards us, ready to trade strikes with us.

Now, let me see if his technique works with mine. You gotta slowly arch the knees, move the torso a little bit to the right… As we got closer and closer, I tried to envision Maya-san's training again. The XM3's most vital strength is not its increased sensibility that gives us more speed, both to move and to process data.

The best trait of the XM3 is how it allows us to make more precise movements in closed spaces! All that superb processing power is used to its fullest when you have to make frame-perfect moves in quick succession, cancel after cancel! I'm gonna flow into you Hayase, with the might of an unending waterfall!

Sharply canceling the boost, grounding myself in the process, repositioning the Mindseeker for the attack as I take out the sword. Kasumi must have read my mind, as she pointed the pylons forward to shoot while I charged. Her shots delaying Hayase for the second I needed to take my Mugen Stance in the right moment of my stride, the coming slash goes at her in all its power.

Our blades clash, we keep struggling against each other for a few seconds. I take a step back and dash backwards into a building. Cancel the dash, jump in quick succession, use the bricks as a trampoline again, end up veering to my left. Cancel the bracing after

landing to then do a double boost jump as soon as I hit the ground, sending us upwards in an arch above Hayase.

She apparently couldn't keep up with the sudden movements, and as we were landing Kasumi opened fire at her. Hayase reacted in an instant, barely managing to avoid a hit to her engine, but ended up losing her right hand.

"Tch, don't think you can just take all of us out!" Munakata started firing at me from behind, forcing me to take cover.

"Munakata, don't get in the way!" Hayase breathed fire on top of her eruption over the common channel back at her partner.

"What are you saying? We have to coordinate our attacks to-"

"Munakata, do I have to spell it for you? **They. Are. Mine.** Get it?"

I can't see her face, but going by her bloodthirsty tone I can tell she is pissed. Heh, looks like Hayase deems us worthy enough for a one on one resolution.

"Takeru-san, she seems really happy for some reason." Kasumi's bunny ears dropped, confused and lost.

"Well… That's how she is, as reckless as it might seem."

Munakata boosts away, after a really heavy sigh, and Hayase faces us with her sword at the ready again.

Once more I boost forward but Hayase's movements become more fierce and fast. She keeps canceling her slashes, moving to our left side, trying to overpower us. Kasumi is having trouble keeping up with the speed that I have to make to drive her swings off, so she can't lend me any firing support.

Mostly thanks to my footing, we're able to slip past her charges and get some breathing room in between her onslaught. However, Kasumi can't get the timing of the cancels of her attacks right, so we

can't outmaneuver Hayase's onslaught even when we do get to a position where we could have taken her down. Kasumi is too green to keep up with me, and at this rate this won't end well for us. So, I gotta guide the bunny as her teacher!

"Kasumi, get ready to pick up a dagger."

"Huh? A dag… Takeru-san, that plan is too risky."

"Hey, it's just a mock battle. Let me see how good your reflexes are."

"Hmm… If you want to do this, I'll follow you. But I might miss the timing," Hey, don't sound so sad. Hayase is the weird one here. "Takeru-san, you can keep up and avoid her attacks," Oi, are you saying I'm weirder? Don't give me that smile!

"Whatever. Get ready, she's coming!" Hayase's yells roar over the common channel as she rushes at us.

We parry her strike, moving to our right. I boost away from her, cancel the boost, and come at her again. Kasumi takes a gamble to shoot our remaining ammo, only for Hayase to jump over our firing line as she had been doing.

The Takemikazuchi stops in its tracks as it lands, sending a slash to our head. Reacting in the nick of time, we parry the offense only for her to start boosting. We're being pushed back, unable to meet the force of the Takemikazuchi.

Damn, I just need to find an opening. Wait, what if… Kasumi immediately catches onto my thought, displaying some dots on my radar. Then, diving the Mindseeker's heels onto the concrete for a second, our sword moves backwards as we spin on ourselves.

Her blade losing its parrying partner, the impulse makes Hayase fall forward, freeing us from her rush. Backboosting with all I've got, I ready the Variable Wings for the next step.

Hayase chases after us, she's too close for her own good. Blasting into a boost jump, making us spin in the air, I move my arms back as if I were preparing to swing a bat. And just like in that memory I saw, out Mindseeker throws the sword at the charging Takemikazuchi, and Hayase has to suddenly stop and jump to avoid getting a sword to the cockpit.

Now, Kasumi!

She quickly makes both daggers come out, letting me focus on out position and landing. Using the last of the momentum from the spin I throws one dagger towards Hayase, who didn't see it coming. Her Takemikazuchi's head got struck by the dagger, I think it should have been disabled.

I land and break into a run towards the Takemikazuchi. Moving so that our right hand is facing forward we close in on Hayase, and after a crouch cancel I aim it right at the cockpit.

Hayase, however, did not want to give up. She activated the Retractable Dagger on the right hand, that thankfully had a safety sheathe on for the practice, and dashed forward swinging it downwards as we were charging forward at her.

Both of our TSFs clash into each other, driving the daggers into the other's cockpit. The impact shook us left and right as Hayase's Type-00C collapses on top of our Mindseeker, molding me into my seat and stirring my stomach.

… Ugh.

Man… That was rough… I can feel my heart on my neck, sweat flooding my forehead, and I can't stop gripping the controls. Phew… Damn…

"CP to all units. The exercise is finished. Return to your respective Hangars, that is all," Sensei's usual bored voice reached my ears as I had my eyes closed. So we lost, huh.

Hayase slowly moves her Takemikazuchi and gets off of us, easing up the pressure on our unit.

"Ugh, that was more shaky than I expected. How are you feeling, Kasumi? You alright?" She rubbed her head a bit in circles very slowly.

"My head hurts a bit. These last few minutes were too intense. But I'm fine, don't worry," She then looks back, smiling radiantly again.

"Sigh… That's a relief. So, what did you think of your first training session?"

"It was… harder than I thought. Sorry, I couldn't help out at the end," Hunching over, her prior glee clouds over.

"Hey, you did great. You're better than I thought!" She blushes a bit as I pat her head but returns her usual calm look at me after a while.

"That's only because your thoughts are simple. I can follow your ideas very easily, since you think in simple terms. Instead of thinking on how to do a certain movement with complicated terms, it's a sequence of 'Move-Cancel-Move-Direction'. It's very easy to get a hang of that pattern, even if you think scary from time to time."

"Huh, neat. Glad you found it easy. What do you mean by thinking scary, though?"

"Well… Sometimes it feels as if you were screaming, your aura felt all dense and spiky…"

"… You mean people don't scream internally in this world?"

"Not like you do. Why do you do that?"

"It's… like… a habit? Like, when I sing anime openings, or say the name of special moves, I can't help but to shout like that to hype myself up."

"Is that so… You still sound scary."

"Hahaha… Well, besides that, you found it useful?" Then, she beams at me, nodding with much impulse.

"Yes, very much. Could we keep practicing together, please? When you have the time, of course."

"Anything for you, little bun," Patting her head again, her bunny ear move slowly as her gaze burrows away, "Maybe we could practice with the Stallion from now on? Can we still use that?"

"I think we should. Anyways, thanks a lot for this, Takeru-san." Aww, she looks so cute when she's beaming like that. And now she's all embarrassed. Hahaha!

**Chop!**

"Hey! Don't hit me, I'm just messing with you, Kasumi."

"Don't tease me," You look even cuter when you shrug your lips like that. "Stop it, please," And she keeps chopping me.

"Ahaha, sorry, sorry. Well, let's go back. By the way, how is the Mindseeker holding… Oh…" As the images appear on my view I can't help but to tense my brows as a whiff of cold air comes out my mouth.

"Oh, indeed. Everything is red," Kasumi let out a few surprised yelps at the state of our TSF as she shuffles around the images with the state of the Mindseeker.

I have crashed my fair amount of TSFs in my loops, but aside from that time on Mt. Tengen and when I literally destroyed my Fubuki during the XM3 trials, I have never left a TSF in such bad condition. Everything is on red numbers. The joints, the legs, the arms, the hip block. I literally almost broke it, the Mindseeker is hanging together by a miracle apparently.

"Let's be kind to it on our trip back," She moves her bunny ears to agree, and I can see her reflection on the panel. She looks real worried at the numbers.

I slowly boost upwards, taking off towards the launch pad that'll take us to Hangar 78.

"Hey, Eight." Hayase connects to the common channel as her unit comes closer.

"Viking 1 here, what is it?"

"Say, you're the XO's bodyguard, right?"

I think Sensei told them that I was her personal guardian or something along those lines, and considering our state of affairs that isn't wrong.

"Yes, something of the sort. What about it?"

"So, like, when are you joining the Valkyries?" Clear and serious in her curiosity, yet firm as well, expecting a definitive answer.

Well, duh, I just forced her to a draw with a super inferior TSF, of course she'll be curious.

"That is for the Professor to decide. As you can see, I'm helping her test many things within the base, so I cannot join the A-01 STF in their missions just yet."

"Oh, I see," Deflating fast, she took a moment before continuing, "But you will join us at some point?" Oh shit, she's got me on her sights. I can already hear her petitions for a rematch.

"I may or may not. Depends on the Professor entirely." And since I'm a hazard right now… that day might never come.

"Huh. Well, I will be looking forward to it. Don't think I'll let you off like this, I am going to make you kiss the ground someday!" First she

sounded terribly disappointed, now she's all fiercely motivated. She can swing her mood faster than her sword.

"Hayase, just be honest. You've been asking about the Viking since we worked together in Niigata," Munakata, with a nice amount of sparks in between, just couldn't help yourself.

"Munakata! Shut it! I am just happy to have someone decent to spar against."

"Yeah, sure. To spar in the bedroom, perhaps?" Ouch. She's on literal fire today.

Maybe she's angry that Hayase told her off during our fight? I can see Kasumi trembling a bit on her seat.

"S-Shut up! That's insubordination. I'm the second-in-command here, you can't diss me like that. A hundred squats for you!" Ouch, Hayase's also really angry. I never thought I'd get to hear an embarrassed Hayase ever.

"Mitsuki, you need to be more honest with yourself. There's nothing wrong with getting interested in someone." Haruka-san too?! Friendly fire is on, apparently.

"Haruka! You're betraying me?!"

"Oh no, I'm just doing you a favor. Since you were so happy when we were told we could spar against them, I thought that you should seize the chance to-"

"Aaah! No more! Shut up! Vikings, these two are just messing with me, it's all just a big teasing, okay?!" I would have laughed along, if not for the blades coming from Hayase's tone.

"Of course. In any case, it was a pleasure to cross strikes with all of you," Kasumi nods too.

"Uuuh… I couldn't do a thing. Why did you take me out so fast?!" A voice I don't recognize, a feisty and energetic one, speaks to me as another Takemikazuchi gets closer.

"Takahara, you got careless again. You're so confident in your speed that you don't factor in the other's accuracy," The Captain scolds this Takahara, as calmly as always, making her groan loudly, "Look at Asakura, who's not as fast as you. She still managed to keep up decently."

"But in the end, I also got shot down," Another voice, more calm and sweet, speaks this time. This is Asakura, I guess, "It was a surprise when you did that sudden dive. I almost couldn't react, I didn't think the XM3 could allow us to do that."

"Yes, as I showed you today, there are many combinations of moves you can do with it. You should try to break through the usual conventions and patterns, there is a vast ocean of possibilities yet unknown waiting to be made a reality with this OS," The Captain hums in agreement and speaks up.

"Viking 1 and 2, I thank you for your assistance in our training today. I was told you have very tight schedules, so you have my utmost gratitude for giving us this chance to spar with both of you. I await the day you can become part of our squad, I'm sure the new recruits will benefit much from your skills," Cpt. Isumi firmly stated to take the reins of the conversation, probably to stop Munakata from teasing Hayase further.

"No, the pleasure was ours. And I hope we can work together in the future too."

"Yes, it was a nice experience," So Kasumi enjoyed herself, despite the violent shaking? She then nods twice.

"Likewise. We did think we would have the clear advantage with our new units, but it's clear we still haven't mastered them yet. Again, thanks for your cooperation today. Best of luck in your endeavors.

Valkyrie 1, out." The rest of the Valkyries also send us their parting words and close their channels.

"Well… At least this went well."

"Yes, it was fun, albeit a bit too shaky," She insisted, again rubbing her head.

"Don't worry, you'll get used to the XM3 in time, even if my style is too crazy for you. Just keep on training, Kasumi," She nods, again beaming at me.

Reaching the base again, we ride the launch pad and begin our descent towards Hangar 78, Kasumi asking me questions about my decisions on the way down.

# Interference in the Masquerade

## Chapter 50: Interference in the Masquerade

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*December 2nd. Near Noon.*

*(Hangar 78.)*

**[Takeru]**

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Moving my shoulders for a while as the cockpit opens, Kasumi descends first. Double checking that my helmet is in place, the faint smell of oil and the buzzing of the mechanics greets me once more as I leave the Mindseeker. Soon after, the initially curious whispers burst into bewildered shouts.

"What's with this damage?! The carbonic actuators are almost out of order!" A hoarse, old voice with a thick accent, one that was clearly not from Japan, fumed about.

"Sir, the left hand is completely unresponsive to our checks. We can't even get a reading through the data link," A younger, more panicked voice this time.

"It would seem the boosters' auxiliary arm is also in need of heavy repair, Major Sergeant, sir. Perhaps a complete replacement of the block would be in order," A female voice this time, also foreign, was dismayed at what showed up in her monitor, then took a brief glance towards me and Kasumi as we descended to ground level, "Just what sort of maneuvers did they do to abuse the craft to this extent?"

"The shutters of the boosters are also on the brink of getting stuck for good, and that's saying nothing on the noise the turbine is doing now…" And again, all of the mechanics give us the evil eye, making

Kasumi hide behind me, "How the hell did they do something like this in a single battle?"

… Well, to be fair, I fought with all I had. Making multiple double boost jumps by alternating the jet and rocket engines of the jump units, manually setting the angle of the shutter to what I prefer for short but intense bursts of speed, and the constant reposition of the things to veer my angle of flight right after doing one of said full boosts must have done a nasty number on them. And I didn't even do a Gliding Charge or a Sky Rend today, the Mindseeker would have broken down in awesomeness if I had done that.

Well, if he was the Swordbreaker, I'm the TSFbreaker then I guess. I wonder if you also left your machines in tatters? Oh, but I do this because I learned through Valgern-On. Even if his moves were real good, he shouldn't have been as reckless as I am, given that my style is practically madness to everyone else in this world.

… I guess that would work against me if I try to prove who I am to the Guard, even if I try to use the Mugen Kidou as well. Not like they seemed to care much about little me in that memory, anyways.

"Viking 1, everybody is scared of us," She whispers, still using me as a shield from the gazes around us, "Also, really angry."

"It's understandable, it's a one of a kind TSF and I almost sent it to the scrapyard. At least this data will be of use for the Shin, 'cuz if it can't take this much, then I'm gonna to need a Shiranui for sure," Sighing as the whispers continue, along a complain or two once they see yet another damaged section, I keep on slowly pacing to the exit of the place.

"But they might be right. You moved way too fast at times," And she holds the fort behind my back.

"What, you scared too?"

"… Somewhat. Some turns made me a bit dizzy," Not lifting her tone from a whisper, she slows down her pace.

"Hey, why didn't you tell me? You holding up alright?"

"Yes, don't worry. I didn't want to get in your way, and the Valkyries weren't going to give us a breather."

"… Was it when Hayase broke through a building?" Hesitating for a second, she then nods.

Goddammit Hayase… Leave Kasumi out for a sec, I could have bitten my tongue at the sudden intrusion. She didn't sound hostile on the way back, but an elite like her should know better. Hmm… Maybe she isn't used to the Type-00C as of yet? I mean, reckless she might be, but Hayase is no one's fool. Perhaps I'm the first that forced her to use a full boost since she switched models.

"Well, from now on I'll try to be more careful when we pilot together. It might be for the best to start training on our own instead of against others, until you get used to the G-Forces of my stunts, if you wanna keep training with me of course."

She then shrugged her lips, looking unnerved as the grip on my arm got a bit tighter, "I do, so if you find some time, please give some more lessons."

"Got it, but still, we should take our time. I wonder if we can use the Stallions again…"

As we were getting closer to the exit, 2nd Lt. Pyatkh entered and told us to go report to Sensei in person. Thus, we left the echoing chamber full of complains towards the usual elevator. Once we reached Sensei's floor, Kasumi went to her room to change so I made my way to the office, where I found her reading something in her laptop while drinking coffee, again without anything to eat nearby.

"Hey, Sensei. Pleased with the battle?"

"It was truly a surprise, to be comple- What are you doing in the suit?"

"… I mean, I was told to come here immediately, and can't exactly get changed in a normal changing room without someone noticing I left right after the Viking entered, right?"

Sighing a bit too strongly, a rather disappointed glare came at me, "Your clothes are in the cylinder room, weren't you told? Go and get changed then come back."

"Yes, yes…"

Sigh… Why didn't she tell me that? Is she so out of sorts she outright forgot that? Eh, whatever.

Quickly going back to the office after getting into my clothes, leaving my suit in the steel box that was near where my fatigues were waiting for me, I sit in my usual sofa as she passes me a mug and some muffins.

"… So, how did you see everything?"

She chuckles as she sits down, spinning slowly, "Spectacular. I didn't think you'd drive the Mindseeker to its literal limits. Why didn't you ever fight like that until now?"

"Well, during Niigata you explicitly told me not to do something stupid and I was using an unpolished XM3 at the time, and showing off all my cards during training wouldn't have done us any favors in disguising the Viking," She nods, humming as if bored, "And during the development of the XM3 you never placed me against anything that demanded my outright best performance."

"Is that so… If I might ask, what is in your opinion your best performance?"

"Hmm… If I go by numbers alone, it has to be when I offed like a thousand BETA all by myself in-"

"Blurgh!" Without any warning, Sensei spit out her coffee and began coughing real bad.

"H-Hey, you alright?"

Then, she shot me a vicious glare, subduing the coughing fit, "One. Fucking. Thousand. That's what you said, right?" Fuming much, she took off her now drenched in coffee coat, never taking her eyes off me.

"… I mean, yeah? I don't remember the exact number, though. I was more focused on the Fort-Class back then."

Still not leaving me out of her sight, sending a cold shiver down my back, she began to grab some papers that had been splashed by coffee, "Is that so… Then, how many did you kill during that mission?"

"Twenty something, I guess? Again, don't remember the exact number but it was around that. Uh… Sensei?"

Now clutching the papers, bending them real hard to the point I don't think she'll be able to fix 'em, her blazing eyes never leaving mine, she began taking small steps towards me.

"You took down…" One step, narrow eyes, "twenty Forts…" Two steps, tone freezes over, "aaall by yourself…" Three steps, she tilts her back, filling my view, "and you kept quiet about it because…"

"… You never asked?"

…

"Sigh… What else have you not told me then, hmm?" Eyes still blazing, her expression sharpened even more, "You're not gonna tell me you also took down a hive all by yourself now, are you?"

"… I mean, I do remember telling you I did take down a Reactor and a really large number of BETA on the worlds after Babylon. Sure, it's all blurry, but I clearly recall the shine of the reactor and the way to it, in pieces at the least."

And in all this time, those memories haven't cleared up at all. Save for the nightmares of Iceberg, that is.

Then, she remains staring, blinking in quick succession for a moment. As I wondered whether to speak or not, she finally restored my personal space with a quick turn towards her seat. Sigh… What's with her now?

Leaving the crumpled paper on the desk, sitting with a loud thud, she then faced me with quite some fire still in there, "So, this is your limit then?"

"Well… I haven't tried to do a Gliding Charge or a Sky Rend yet, and I was sort of trying to be careful since Kasumi was there. But I did do a serious effort, so yeah, you can say it's close to my best," Finally easing up, I let the coffee help my relaxation.

"Is that so… In any case, your performance was astounding. Taking down four Takemikazuchis, piloted by the Valkyries no less, with a modified Tomcat…" Sighing again, she begins to spin once more.

"Well, to be frank, Kasumi did help a lot with both the first kill and the navigation," Half of the result is hers, after all. No way can I shoot in midair while doing a barrel roll with such precision.

"I see… By the way, do you still feel fine? No headaches, no dizziness, no fogginess," Taking a moment to again stare, seems as if she were scanning me whole.

"No? Sure, I did some reckless stunts back there, but I'm holding up well," Giving her a thumbs up, eating the muffins, I sink into the sofa as I stretch my legs comfortably.

However, she says nothing for a while, still staring.

"… Good enough, then. Even if you left the machine in tatters, the data you produced will be of much use to the Shin project and the XM3. Was Yashiro satisfied in the end?"

"Oh, yeah. She seemed a bit scared of my stunts, though."

Sensei chuckles as she starts spinning again, "I suppose that is to be expected, from the piloting of someone who subdued twenty Fort-Class all by himself."

… She's not gonna let that go now, huh. Why is she so pissed, again?

"So, now that we're done with that…" Now facing me in complete sobriety, she entwined her fingers and rested them on the desk, leaning in, "The Guard tried to pay your cell a visit while you were piloting."

"… I see. And? Did they insist?"

Fuming much, she nods, "Much, very much. Even went as far as requesting official permission, saying they wished to inquire about who you obtained the blade from. I missed the moment when you neutralized Isumi thanks to that," Doing a fast, sharp spin, it does nothing to placate those embers, "By the way, who gave you that blade? They were particularly insistent on that point."

… My world's Meiya.

The one who I couldn't save despite being right there, the one I left alone for two years.

"If it's someone who's dead or missing I could… Shirogane?"

In the end, I wonder how's everything over there? I know going to check is out of the question, but… Did that world get reset after I left? Are they safe back there?

"Ahem…" Looking back up, she held my gaze with a completely solemn expression, "Who gave you the blade again?"

"… Someone we can't use."

"Are you insinuating you don't want to answer?"

"Why do you wanna know? We can't use that person as a shield."

"Your position in Alt. IV as the tuner of the 00 Unit requires your safety to be assured, let me remind you," One brow sinks, her tone does too, "Who gave you the blade?"

"… Sigh. You really wanna know, even if you can't do anything about it?"

For a second, her complexion blazed up again before sobering into the usual bored expression, "Are you, perhaps, holding some reservations towards my influence, Shirogane?"

"I mean, what exactly *can* you do to use Meiya for this?"

And, she got tilted.

Blinking fast for a second, confusion spreading as she stared right back, until she rebooted.

"You're saying Mitsurugi gave you the blade?"

"Yeah, well, not her exactly, but it was her sword. By the way, Maya-san was the one who gave me the thing, so we can't use that either."

"Is that how it is, huh… Nothing we can do, it's true," Then, why are you still spewing fire? "Well then, I suppose you should at least have a talk with them before they get any weird ideas in their heads. Did you get anything out of yesterday's session in the end?"

"… About that… I don't think… I can go and talk with 'em today."

"… Huh, what do you know. Another thing you didn't tell me about."

"Come on, now. It was… hard, even for Kasumi."

"So, what was it about?"

"Sigh… Did you get any intel on my parents in the end?"

"Do you even have to ask, really?" Very quietly lashing, she picked up some stuff from the piles, throwing them my way, "Both died when he was still young, as you had told me your father was a Royal Guard here, and he perished during Operation Swaraj. Let me tell you one thing, though. Your mother was registered with her single surname, and neither had any intel on their profiles regarding marriage or having a son. Whoever wanted to hide you did a thorough job indeed."

"… Huh."

Didn't knew Mom had health problems, dammit. Why was that not a problem back home? And anyways, why would they have had to live in some rundown town? Mom wasn't from the city, sure, but they had moved together once they started dating. I don't see my grandparents, from Dad's side, letting them live in the sticks. To say they were super chill and welcoming would be an understatement. Maybe this world also changed them somehow?

But… But if anyone went to this length to erase his past…

"So Shirogane, what did you see yesterday, and why do you not want to speak with the Guard now?" Fingers still entwined, gaze unmoving from my shape, she awaited the answer.

"… Remember when I asked you if this was safe and what not?"

"Hm? What has that to do with this?"

"Well, back then I asked you if you were sure that Yuuhi was on good terms with him, remember?"

"… Yes, I recall. And I told you Her Purpleness is most likely fond of this world's you. Did you see anything that disproves this assumption?"

"No, not really. I think she liked him, at least when they were kids."

"So then, what's the issue?"

"… That we never put into question if he was on good terms with her."

…

Stalling a reaction, the sober facade let way for a hawkish glare to flourish, "… What are you talking about? How could he not be on the Shogun's good side? I told you he joined them when he was but a teenager, and all this protection, all this insistence hints that he was, indeed, someone important for them."

"… And what if he despised that?"

"Enough with the questions, start answering. What did you see?"

"… The day when he got the letter of Dad's passing, and how they wanted to send him to an orphanage."

Breathing through clenched teeth, I start telling her of what I saw yesterday, of how I ended up cutting off the recovery as his fear overwhelmed me, and how Kasumi was kind of groggy due to that, which is why we didn't give her a report.

How he was beyond broken at the news, how Maya-san's dad was a dick to him, and how she didn't do anything to stop him. And how it seemed that, after using up Dad, they threw little me away without a single care. *Heh, what did I even expect of those dastards, really? Silly me, believing the nobles would treat me fairly.*

"It was… It was too much for me, so I practically shut down the projection as I heard his inner thoughts," Sighing as I hunch over, the

last drops of coffee fail to clear the raspy taste in me, "And even if it feels different to the sadness of the CCSE, it got me thinking. What if this world's me didn't like Yuuhi?"

"Then, why did he join the Royal Guard?" She presses immediately.

"Well… I dunno, but-"

"Shirogane, if he had been sent to an orphanage, he would have never been able to join the Royal Guard afterwards."

"Bu-"

Not giving me an inch, she takes a mile while leaning onto her desk, "Furthermore, the place you said was your house remained under your father's name through the years, so nobody adopted you."

"They could have changed the databases, though."

"True, however, want to know what we found in it?"

"Huh? You… went to inspect my house? Why?"

"Well, first to see if 'your room' had vanished as you said it had. And yes, it did. However, in the remains of the place we found some… interesting things to be sure," Smirking a bit, she gets up and goes to a steel locker. Taking out a folder, she hands it to me, remaining close as I begin to look at what's inside.

And in the thing were… pictures of my house. Of a ruined version of it, with a different table than the one back home, with less furniture on it.

But there were photos in the walls, in the entrance hall. Photos of my parents, of them with little me and Uncle Koetsu, and… a picture of their room, left intact save for the dust and damage of the war. Even those same dumb orange sheets Mom liked so much… As well as my own room, even with my jet poster and all…

Sighing softly, can't help but to smile as I see the place, "… I see. So it was left in peace…"

"Indeed. If you had been adopted or if it had been sold, your house wouldn't have been left in this state. I assume you can confirm this was your parents' room?"

"Yeah, even that dumb sheet… Yeah, this is my house. Not exactly the same, but it is," Looking up, our gazes meet in silence for a moment, then another, "Why did you keep quiet about this, Yuuko?"

"… I didn't really, this was merely to confirm your room was truly gone, to scan the place for any possible hints about how the transfer worked," The slight veering of her eyes, the faint grumbling in her tone just now tells me she didn't find anything useful there, "And the team only took more pictures of the rest of the place as a protocolar measure. Didn't think it would be of use, to be honest," Shrugging, she rolls her eyes, letting me see she's telling the truth, "So, if your parents' bedroom was left alone despite both of them being dead for almost six years when this area had to be evacuated, then it is obvious this world's you wasn't sent to an orphanage nor adopted."

"Then, the hell happened to him? Did they erase him back then?"

She then stares at me, very dismissively, "A child, really? All of this bother for a toddler?"

"… Okay, that was dumb on my part. But what could have happened?"

"How should *I* know? You're the one getting memories from him. You're sure he had some manner of animosity towards the Shogun?"

"Towards the Guard. I… to be honest, I don't see how he could have remained on good terms with any of 'em, seeing how they treated him after Dad died. And… I know I tend to get emotional under pressure, even if I try not to. So, well…"

"You're not confident in your ability to convince the Guard of your identity since you could react negatively to their probing, which could then make them believe *someone* is manipulating you to see them in a bad light?"

"Yeah… save for the second part, I didn't think it that far. You think they might believe someone is influencing me?"

"Not someone, more likely me," Crossing her arms, again she fumes, "I bet you anything you want that they'll blame me for your 'sudden distrust' towards the Guard if they truly believe you're this world's you. And if they don't it's all the worse, since they'd get against both of us and assume I was planning to use you to influence Her Highness. Which means…" Shooting a look at me, the devouring tension returned to her, "You absolutely need to ascertain what happened to him after your father's passing. Shirogane, as soon as Yashiro comes back, you're going to do another memory recovery session."

"Sigh… Got it."

A hand going to her chin, she again began to scan me, "… Why are you hesitating, again? Do I have to remind you of the importance of this matter for Alt. IV, and by extension your wish for a peaceful life?"

"No, I know that… It's just…" Leaning back onto the sofa, gazing at the ceiling, parts of his words as they took him away come back and I can't help but to grimace, "Something… doesn't feel right. I dunno how to put it in words… but part of that sadness was in the CCSE… And, well, I guess we could just use these early memories as proof, without risking me getting negative due to his emotions, right?"

"Don't be an idiot," Ruffling her bangs, she again goes for a spin, "Inherited memories, more so in the case of forced ones, cannot influence someone in any meaningful way in such a short amount of time. This is all on you getting emotional when seeing these flashes," Facing me again, making me recoil under her gaze, her tone again froze hell over, "So, if you wouldn't mind, I'd like you to stop wetting

the pillow over someone else's life. Start to take the necessary steps to ensure our plan comes to fruition. You're just gathering intel, and if you're getting emotional over it, it's all on your shoulders."

"H-Hey, you can't… It's not that simple."

"Yes, it is. Stop being such a pansy, are you truly the same man who killed twenty Forts all by himself? The veteran who wants to end large scale wars and reach a peaceful world?" Leaning into her desk, her glare intensifies, another layer of dry ice on her tone, "What can I expect you to do for Alt. IV if this is enough to take you down, Mr. Ace Pilot?"

Feels like I got stabbed multiple times in a row, can't even hold her gaze anymore, "… Just because I'm a good pilot doesn't mean I'm immune to sadness, you know. After what happened in my world… It's not easy seeing him also lose his everything like that…"

Leaving the silence hanging for a sec, the calm but sharp whisper teared right into and through me, "It's on you. If you let someone else's life bring you down, it's your own damn fault. Could you get a grip already? We need to ensure your safety, so that you can remain here without issues. Do I truly have to remind you of what and who we're dealing with here?"

Stealing a gaze at her, I only found more and more fire. As I broke eye contact, I only could hear more and more frustrated groans and a really heavy sigh, followed by a few fast steps towards her seat.

Yeah, I know. This is on me. Yuu… No, Sensei doesn't have to care about my own problems. She doesn't need a crybaby on her team, she needs someone who gets shit done. As Hayase said, don't throw your burdens onto others. If you can't smile when talking about it, if you're just looking to vent… Shut up and keep it inside, deal with it on your own. Your problems are yours, don't go pawning them off on the rest first chance you get.

This is my cross to bear, can't really expect anyone to lend an ear when it comes to the mess of my world… And she doesn't have to understand what I'm going through, she doesn't have to listen. Yeah… Remember it well… She isn't the Yuuko I fell for… She's merely someone I work with, and you don't vent your personal problems while at work.

And to reach my own goals while trying to help this world as much as I can, both for mine and his own reasons, pacifying the Guard is a must.

Now that I got the squad to accept me, I can't let this stop me.

Even if it hurts, even if it only confirms he indeed wasn't in good terms with 'em…

… The ball is on my feet, the dice is on my hands. It's a play I gotta do all on my own. Otherwise, if Sensei doesn't find me useful… She did say she only would keep helping me 'so long as I helped her', so if I fail to meet her expectations…

*It's all over for me. As the stranger I am, I can't expect anyone to spare me any sympathy anymore.*

*This is my own fight.*

"Sigh… I get it, I'll make sure to endure the visions."

"Good," She begins spinning once she sits, looking up and back to the poker face, "I'd like to solve this matter today, before the mock battle if we can help it."

"… Mock battle? What're you talkin' about?"

"Hm? Oh, right. The Guards requested a mock battle with your squad, on the grounds that they wish to test Mitsurugi. They shall be using the modified Gekishins with the parts we developed, save for

the older Tsukuyomi in her Takemikazuchi. That happens tomorrow, by the way."

"… Huh, neat. So… You think they might try to harm me during it?"

"Or worse," Simply saying it, not even fazed at the prospect, "They also seem to be setting up an encrypted frequency in their units, probably to contact you or Mitsurugi during the fight. Which is why I'd rather solve this peacefully, if you wouldn't mind cooperating."

"Drop the blizzard already. So, why are you not calling them out on it?"

"Hm? Well, because, in the case that they do not believe your words, I can use the encrypted channel as a deterrent. Accusing them of wanting to break UN protocol, or effectively doing that, could give you a window to flee your cockpit and get to the underground before they approach you. If that happens today, I could delay the talks and accusations for a moment, and my presence would probably be enough to make them reticent to chase after you, but they'll assuredly come after your head soon enough if you don't convince them."

"… And what then?"

"Well, I suppose that if they actually press charges for identity theft… I'd have to kill you."

…

"Haha… Ahaha… So it comes down to that, huh."

"Seriously, what did you expect?" Rolling her eyes, she sighs afterwards, "I cannot, under any circumstances, lose the Royal Guard's neutrality towards me. Should Her Highness begin to hoist animosity towards me, if this matter makes too much noise, couldn't that be used to spark up the third incident you mentioned?"

Oh right, Sagiri. Considering all the deals for the parts, the railgun project, and the loan of the Type-00C, I'm sure many of the more fervent members of both the IJA and IRG are very nettled right now. Any excuse would work for them to try and wrestle things back to the 'proper order', and no way those plotting against Alt. IV will let that chance pass them by.

All it takes is Yuuhi saying or hinting at being displeased with the UN, or either anyone actually going the identity theft route… That just might trigger the coup.

If the UN became an enemy in their eyes… Yeah, the rebels would also come after us. And in this more nationalistic world… maybe more soldiers would take their side… maybe the Royal Guard would…

… Maybe Yuuhi would legitimize the coup here…

I cannot leave any option out of the table, not after what happened last loop with the butterfly effect my actions had back then.

So, yeah. If it's either me or the Empire, the choice is obvious. Of course she'd dispose of me… *Of course she'd abandon me… I'm a stranger, after all. What a fool I am, how could I have placed any measure of trust in her? Someone so powerful, so influential… would only ever see me as a mere pawn.* It's on me, I was the one who got unreasonable expectations of camaraderie in the first place, the idiot who thought we were allies rather than circumstantial partners.

*Repining about it will bestow me no answer,* moving forward is all I can do. *In solitude,* just as it was when I arrived.

"So Shirogane, I expect you to-"

"I know. I'll do my part, Vice Commander," Standing up, I leave the mug on her desk before turning around.

"And, exactly where do you think you're going?"

"To the restroom. I rather be ready when Kasumi comes back."

"You do know my room is literally a door away, right?"

"… If you'd excuse me, I rather have some alone time now. I'll be back in a sec."

Walking to the door, she didn't lock it again so I could leave unimpeded. Stomping my way to the floor's restroom, I saw Kasumi coming closer in the opposite direction. Hesitating for a second, her complexion seemed to tighten as she got to my side.

"Did anything happen, Takeru-san?"

"No, nothing. We just were talking some serious stuff, Sensei should tell you we need to do another recovery session. I'll be back in a sec."

"Um," Timidly grabbing onto one of my sleeves, her eyes admired the luster of the floor, "I'll try to… not hurt you during the projection. I will… do my best, so…"

"It's not on you, Kasumi," Patting her softly, I raise her chin and smile back, "You were not at fault yesterday. I just gotta… Sigh… get my shit together. So, just wait for me in the office, okay?"

"… Yes."

Limply dropping the hand that held my sleeve captive, she remained in place as I went my way. I waved back, then she began to go to the office.

Turning around, slowing down and sighing hard, after reaching the restroom, taking some off time in the toiled, and cleaning my hands, I splashed quire some cold water on my face. And again. And again. Resting my hands on the sink, my eyes return my own reflection's gaze unblinking, enduring the strain

I know… I always knew… I was alone here… She made it clear after the CCSE, that she would only help me if I'm useful for her. Someone who just follows orders ain't an ally, that's just a pawn. That's… all I am for this world's Sensei, just like last loop.

Finally closing my eyes, becoming aware of my breathing, I take a rhythm as I hold the air, only to let it go after a second, time and again.

So… This is all on my shoulders… In a way, it's a good thing. My life is on my own hands, no one else can screw me over now.

"… And like hell I'll let this hold me back. I haven't even confirmed if my world is safe or not yet…"

I just gotta brace up and brave through those memories, as he did as well when he was little. *Like I'd let the Guard screw me over again.* Time to get my shit together, *I'll despair after I'm dead.*

# Enduring the Restart

### *Flashback Arc I: Oblivious Misfit*

### Chapter 51: Enduring the Restart

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*May 22nd, 1992.*

*(Takeru's House.)*

**[Native Takeru]**

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"B-But I haven't packed anything-"

Kazora-san sent me another scary look, groaning quite a bit, "You had ample time, Shirogane. We are leaving, now."

"Father, please," Maya-nee said, her voice getting lower than before, "Why can you not wait but a moment? What image will this course of action portray?"

"… He won't need much in the orphanage, that small bag is plentiful enough as it is. Let us go, posthaste," And without waiting, he goes to the front door.

I look at Maya-nee, who avoids my gaze as she begins to pull me towards the street.

Why? What did I do wrong? I thought… we were like family…

Sniff… In the end… In the end… I'm… Hic…

**Ring! Ring!**

"Ugh, a call at a time like this… It was ringing a second ago, too. Let us go," Maya-nee's Dad grabs her suitcase and goes to the door.

**Ring! Ring!**

"Who is calling here now? Why would anyone…"

"Maya, let's go."

"Father, if someone is calling then let me answer it. If it's one of Takeru's friends, it's better that I explain the situation now, isn't it?"

The old man groans a bit but he nods at her, "Fine, make it quick."

Maya-nee leaves me by the stairs and goes to answer the phone. Who's calling? Nobody ever calls. I mean, Uncle Koetsu sometimes does but he was just here. Jouji and the others are studying for the tests and we had no group homework to do. So… So, who's calling here? If Dad is really gone…

"Hello? Eh… Yohime-sama?!"

Huh? Yohime-san is calling? Why? She never ever called here before… Kazora-san's face went pale like a paper right now. What's wrong with him? I mean… Yohime-san was who chose Maya-nee to be with me… Maybe she's just calling to have her go to Yuuhi's house faster…

"Um… Yohime-sama, why did you call? No, I have no such… Yes, understood. Father, Yohime-sama wishes to speak with you," Looking really serious, Maya-nee offered the phone to her Dad.

The old man seemed surprised, almost scared somewhat. But then he returned to his stern face and took the receiver quite harshly from Maya-nee's hands. What's his problem? It's their fault that they have to talk now… What does she even want, calling out of the blue? Adults are so weird…

"… Yes? Yes, it is me, Yohime-sama.… I was merely going to take the boy to… Huh?! You cannot possibly be serious!" The man hunched over and placed a hand on the wall. His eyes looked about to pop out of his face, "Yohime-sama, please reconsider! This is… No, I am not criticizing your judgment, however… I do have a complain, he's but a peasant! What could he have to… N-No, I am not opposing you, milady. I am merely-"

… What are they arguing about now? The forehead of the old man was now full of sweat, he's giving me an even scarier look. Maya-nee came behind me and placed a hand on my shoulder. What's wrong with her? Her hand is trembling…

"… Shirogane, Yohime-sama wishes to speak with you," The old man said as he looked towards me, handing me the receiver.

With me? W-What does she want from me? Dad is gone now… Will she also scream at me? Tell me I have to go away?

…

I slowly go towards him and grab the phone.

"… Yohime-san?"

"Forgive the screams, Takeru. I did not wish to have Kazora-san raise his voice. How would you be? You're healthy, I hope?" She's not angry, sounding as nice as always.

"Yes… I'm fine."

"Now then, I believe you were already told of your situation?"

"… Yes, I'll have to leave somewhere."

"Yes, that is the case. However, would you instead wish to avoid going to the orphanage?"

"Eh? Y-Yes, I would! But… But they said that-"

"Yes, I can surmise what you were told," Her voice got scary for a second, only to return to her usual, "So Takeru, I have an offer for you. Please listen closely to what I'm about to tell you," I press the receiver hard onto my ear. If I can stay… I don't care if I'm all alone if I can stay in my home. "On your current situation, you will have to be sent to an orphanage. And even then, finding a suitable couple who would like to adopt you at your age shall be a tall ordeal, more so in these harsh times we are facing. So, I have a proposal for you. Would you agree for me to be the one to adopt you?"

"… Eh? You? But… But there's a lot of rules and-"

"Takeru, let's just say that I amply fulfill all the requirements, being from a samurai family. There are some conditions that will be forced on you if you become one of us, however."

"Conditions? Like in the raffles that come in the cereal packs?" Those things that say you need to have the paper to claim the prize, and send a letter somewhere, and a lot of other bothersome things. Me and Sumika never won any, and we don't know anyone who did.

"Yes, something of the sort," She giggled a bit before continuing, "You see, being part of the nobility, all of our members and retainers have to dedicate themselves to our nation, in one way or the other. While I am aware that you've been training very hard every weekend here, it is not the same as if you trained here every day. And the education that you receive in your school cannot compare to the one Mion and Shion receive from their tutors. If I were to adopt you, you would have to start training here every day, just like they do, and you would have to live according to our rules."

"Um… What does that mean? Would I be a samurai then?"

"You would be trained to be one, yes," Then, her usual happy tone disappeared, getting all quiet and serious, "However, being a samurai is no easy task, Takeru. It takes more than swinging a sword to be able to fulfill the role. If you choose to become part of my

House, you will have to live a life similar to the one your Father lived."

"Eh? Similar to… Dad?"

"Yes, your Father wasn't able to spend as much time by your side as he desired, right?" Groaning as I nod, my eyes water a bit, it feels as if a lot of needles were hitting my chest, "He had not the freedom to do as he wished. You can now opt to go to the park, to do or not to do your homework today, to go to sleep at the hour you so desire, to watch TV until late if you so please, to choose the future you wish within the options you have. Do you follow?"

"Um… So… Now, I can do what I want, that's what you're saying?"

Did I get that right? I mean… They weren't letting me choose here, they were taking me away without listening. And Maya-nee never lets me watch TV until late, even when I pass my exams.

"Yes, that is right. Even if you end up in an orphanage, you would still have certain freedoms available to you. However, should you choose to let me adopt you, that freedom will be taken away from you. You will have to train when you're told to, go to sleep when you're told to, and follow the career that you're told to. It is also very likely that…" Leaving the silence hanging for a little while, she sighed and then her tone got all scary again, "you might have to fight against the monsters earlier than everyone else as well."

A cold shiver went up my back when she said that. The black monsters that appear on TV, the monsters that killed Dad…

Those awful monsters… That destroy the flying robots so easily…

Me? Fight them? But… if Dad and the other samurais couldn't win… What could I do?!

Kinda going back to her calm tone, Yohime-san continues, "Your Father had to sacrifice much while he was alive, and being a

samurai eventually sent him to his death. So, I cannot blame you if you hate us now. However, allow me to extend a helping hand to you. Sadly, I can only ask you once. If you go to the orphanage, there will be little I will be able to do without… drawing certain eyes upon me."

"Eyes? What do you mean?" Why do the adults always talk like that? I don't get what she's trying to say. Is the orphanage so scary that even she doesn't want to go there?

"It matters not. Point being, once you leave I won't be able to help. I know asking this of you now, just after you learned of your Father's passing, is a cruel thing to do. However, it is all I can do. Takeru, do you have an answer?"

… An answer? I… I don't know… I mean… I don't wanna go away… But… if being a samurai is what killed Dad… If I have to go fight the monsters…

And… And if she adopts me… I look back, at the scary old man. I would have to live with them, and he hates me. I never beat Mion or Shion in our duels, despite being girls they're much stronger than me. I'm not that good…

I don't understand that about having to do what you're told, how is that different than what Maya-nee always does? But… But… If Dad was killed by the monsters… What can I do?

Then the cold feeling comes back.

Because then I'll have to go to the orphanage. I'll never see anyone I know again.

I'll be all alone. I'll never come back home.

…

"Takeru? Are you there?"

"… I'm scared." I start shivering in place, closing my eyes tightly.

"Huh?"

"I'm scared. I mean… If Dad couldn't win, what can I do? If all the other samurais got together and lost…"

"Takeru, that's why we train every day. To turn our failures into victories."

Maya-nee also says that. But… But Dad died! There's no training that will make him come back!

"But… If Dad died…"

"Takeru…" She then speaks with that silky, kind voice she sometimes uses, "Your Father fought to protect you. And even if he perished, he didn't 'lose'. Because you're still alive, he reached part of his objective."

"Huh? I… I don't get it…"

"I'm saying that your Father's death wasn't pointless. He loved you and wished to protect you above everything. Even if you don't choose to come to us, at the least know that your Father didn't die in vain for being a samurai. Giving the fight and not 'winning' doesn't mean you can't achieve your objective. You are his victory, Takeru."

I'm Dad's victory? B-But… But I'll have to go away…

I inhale a bit… Dad's letter said… That he fought for me… He asked me to be strong and do my best… Mom also asked me to keep smiling before going away…

If I go away… I don't know where I'll go. I don't know who will want to adopt me. Maybe no one will. What happens then? Uncle Koetsu made a scary face when I asked, so I don't want to know. It must be something like those horror movies Maya-nee doesn't let me watch, the ones that air past midnight.

One thing I do know, I won't be able to be with Maya-nee, Mion and Shion anymore. Will I still be able to go to school? What about Sumika and the rest? Will I still be able to see them?

I don't know… I'm scared… My legs are shaking so much, my neck is all tight as if someone were holding my head underwater. I don't know what should I do… But… But Dad asked me… to do my best…

And if he fought for me… T-Then… Then, could I train to one day be as good as him? Can I help out too? If Yohime-san says she'll train me to be a samurai… even if it's hard… If I can stay with Maya-nee… But… But what if…

"Um… Yohime-san?"

"Yes?"

"What would happen if… if you trained me but I ended up not being good? Would you then send me to an orphanage?" Would they send me away then? Would they start screaming and being mean?

"Do not worry, there are many positions you can take. And you won't be expected to excel in any of your courses. I was merely wishing to let you know that if you become one of us, your work will be chosen for you and you won't be able to say no. I shan't send you away, Takeru. So choose freely without fears. Would you like to come to us?"

"You won't send me away if I'm bad?"

"Of course I won't."

"And you won't scream at me or be mean to me like the old man?"

"I will not," Then, her voice got scary again, "And I assure you, I shan't allow anyone to do anything of the sort."

"R-Really?"

"Yes, truly. I know it might be hard to grasp for you, but once you become our fellow you'll be part of the House, so nobody would ever try to be unnecessarily mean to you as long as you behave."

So they won't be mean? Then… I look towards Maya-nee, who had her eyes filled with clouds as they were half closed. The old man was still glaring at me.

What do I want to do?

I… I don't want to be alone. I don't want to go away.

But… Can I do it, Dad? Can I be as strong as you? I don't know… But… But… he asked me… to do my best…

So… All the other adults were mean, they all said they could do nothing because of these 'rules'. But if Yohime-san can help me… She's always so calm, so kind… Will she really help me?

"Yohime-san?"

"Yes, Takeru?"

"Are you really… going to adopt me?" It took a lot to say that without stuttering.

"Yes, if you agree."

"Then… C-Can you do that, please? Please don't leave me alone. I don't wanna go away. I'll do my best so… Um…"

"Don't worry, Takeru. From now on, you're one of us. Please, pass the receiver to Kazora-san."

"Yes… Um… Kazora-san…" The old man slowly came to my side and took the receiver, not so harshly this time.

I quietly move away from him. My hands are still shaking, I still feel cold all over… My neck hurt and my nose is running… Ugh…

"Takeru…" Maya-nee came to my side and cleaned my face with a handkerchief, "You were really brave right now."

"Huh? Brave?"

"Yes, it takes a great effort to ask for help when you're so scared. I was sure you were going to start crying. How are you feeling?" She crouched by my side, placing a hand on my shoulder.

"… Scared. What's going to happen to me now?"

She taps her glasses, looking concerned, "Well… I suppose we'll have to go arrange some paperwork for the adoption. I also believe you'll have to come with us and live in Yuuhi-sama's house from now on."

"Huh?! But… What about this house? This is my home!"

"Yes, but… well, until you finish your training you'll have to stay there with Mion and Shion. That being said, are you sure of this?" She stopped and placed a hand on my cheek, scanning my face "Training to be a samurai is not an easy task. Let me tell you I was holding back on you all this time. What awaits you is a much more harsher training, Takeru. And you will have to become a public servant, regardless of your wishes. Are you sure you wish to come with us?"

"… You don't want me to go with you?"

"That's not it. I am merely worried about you. Even if you end up alone, you still are free to choose what to do with your life. If you come with us…"

I would be just like Dad. Dad wanted to be with me and Mom, but he couldn't. Mom always said that all we had was thanks to Dad being a samurai. I don't know what a public servant is, but if I can be like Dad… If I can help out Maya-nee and the rest…

I can't be scared, Dad asked me… He asked me to do my best. I don't know why they didn't tell me this before, instead of scaring me with those rules… B-But…

"Maya-nee, will you be with me if I go? Even if I'm bad at studying?" I look at her, I can feel a few tears running down my cheeks.

She wipes them off and gives me a smile, nodding, "Yes, I will be looking after you whenever I can. Matters not how you perform, I won't leave you alone."

"And you all really won't send me away if I'm not good?"

"Of course not, perish the thought."

"What about the rules?"

"Well… Certain people are strong enough to be able to… navigate around the rules," Again tapping her glasses, getting all serious, she looks away. What does that mean? You adults are so complicated… "But rest assured, Yohime-sama can meet all the rules needed to adopt you. So, do you truly wish to come with us?"

"Yes, I'll go. I-I'll do my best so… please don't leave me alone…" I hug her and she hugs me back, patting my back, making that awful cold feeling go away.

"There, there. Don't worry, it'll be okay. I'll be with you, Takeru. So don't be scared, okay?"

"Yes…"

"Maya, Shirogane, Yohime-sama has ordered us to go back to her. Just to make sure, you are prepared to be one of us, kid?" The old man said in a loud, harsh tone as he glared at me again.

"Father, please stop trying to frighten Takeru. He already said-"

"I wish to hear him, Maya. Move aside and let him speak," He said in a loud tone, giving Maya-nee a harsh glare.

"Father, he is but a child. What do you expect you gain from this?"

"I told you to move aside! Have your ears gone daft, Maya? Let me remind you that-"

"S-Stop bullying Maya-nee!"

"What did you say, Shirogane?!"

"I told you to stop bullying Maya-nee! Why are you so mean to us?! I hate you! Bleh!" I hug Maya-nee tightly, giving him a nasty glare back as he groans.

"Why you… You think this kind of behavior will be tolerated?!"

"You're the one that's being rude! Maya-nee is awesome, don't be mean to her!"

"Grr… See, Maya? A kid like him won't-"

"Father," Maya-nee pets my head as she looks at him, her tone cold and scary as it hasn't been in a long time, "I believe that Takeru speaks the truth. You've been unnecessarily hostile since you arrived, especially to a young boy who just lost his father. Perhaps speaking in a more amicable tone would yield better results? Surely you're capable of that."

"… Hmph, to think you would talk back to me." They remain quiet, glaring at each other. After a while, the old man sighs and rubs his beard, "So Shirogane, are you prepared for training to be a samurai? If you choose to come with us, no matter how much you cry later you won't be coming back." And again, stared at me with those scary eyes.

… I know. I know that I'm not as good as Mion and Shion. But… I just gotta learn! If Dad could do it, so can I! And if he fought to

protect the ones he loved… Then I'll do the same! I'll be just like Dad!

… Even if my legs are still shaking and I'm really scared of being with this old man. I don't want to leave… But if I have to leave, I rather go with Maya-nee and do my best with her.

"Yes, I'll do my best in the training. And I won't cry."

"Oh, really now?"

"Father, I'll have you know that when Takeru affirms something, he usually manages to do what he says. He is very stubborn and hard working when he wants something." Maya-nee says as she taps her glasses, glaring at the old man.

"… I see. I suppose you have been teaching him a good thing or two. In any case, let's not waste another second. Yohime-sama is awaiting us," Kazora-san then turns around and quickly goes to the door.

Maya-nee pats my back and gives me a smile, then she pulls my hand. I follow her, and before leaving I take a look back.

… Will I ever come back here? How will I do these trainings? What about school and my exams?

I'm scared. And sad. Dad is… Dad is really gone? We'll never talk again? Never read again, never eat anything together again… Sniff…

And… now I'm going away… B-But… But I'll do my best… Mom and Dad… I'll become a samurai you can be proud of! Even if the old man is really scary… I don't know what I can do or how I'll do it, but I'll do my best effort to be good from now on.

Once we got inside the big car, I looked at the shape of my house as it became tiny in the distance.

When I couldn't see it anymore I leaned on Maya-nee's arm, grabbing it tightly.

And then I cried. I cried and cried quietly until I fell asleep.

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*Same day. 10:24 PM.*

*(Koubuin Main House.)*

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"Takeru… Takeru, wake up."

"Mmgh… Yawn…" I rub my eyes, feeling someone shake my shoulders, "… Maya-nee?"

"Are you awake, Takeru?" She said in a low voice, still shaking my shoulder.

I blink a few times until I see everything clearly. Nodding as I rise up from where I was sleeping, a sudden cold gusts makes me shudder.

The long car had stopped and it was really dark outside, Maya-nee was looking at me from outside the door. Getting out of the car, I saw that we were already on Yuuhi's house. It's really cold and dark though, what hour is it?

Maya-nee grabs my hand and takes me towards the door. There, a lot of samurai rangers were waiting for us. They looked at us and gave us a bow as we passed the big wooden gate.

A man with two coffee-colored spiky horns of hair on the side of his head came towards us as we got closer to them. He was wearing the uniform of the samurai in a red that was stronger than the one Mana-nee uses.

"Col. Tsukuyomi, we heard the news, Yohime-sama is waiting. This way, please," All of them immediately stood aside once Coffee Horns

said that, bowing to Kazora-san as he walked to the door.

As me and Maya-nee followed behind, I could see some of them gave me those same scary eyes Kazora-san made when we were back home. Maya-nee pulled me closer to her as we entered the house, her hand feeling really tense.

… What are they going to do now? Yohime-san said she was going to adopt me… but how will she do that? What about the rules?

I still feel really, really nervous about this… What if I'm not good at all and they send me to the orphanage? Dad… Mom… Will I ever go back to my house? I shiver and look down, thinking about how it will be to live with Kazora-san and the rest, about what may happen now. I gulp and grab Maya-nee's hand tighter as we got to Yohime-san's room.

As we enter, I saw that Yohime-san and the other old woman that's always around Yuuhi were sitting on their usual spot. Then, as usual, we give her a bow.

"Welcome, please take a seat," Yohime-san said with a smile, sounding as always as we sat down.

"Yohime-sama, if I may," Kazora-san didn't sat down though, and instead took a step towards them, "I would like to have a word in private with you."

"There is no need, I believe I have made my wishes clear enough." She looked at Kazora-san as she stopped smiling.

"Even so, I must insist. Is this truly the best course of action, milady?"

"I believe Takahisa-sama already had a talk with you regarding this matter. When a samurai gives his word, he must see that his vow is never broken. And now, it falls to us to ensure his words are followed upon. I assumed you adhered to the honor code as well, Kazora-

san. What is it that has you speaking against the wishes of both of your leaders?"

I didn't knew Yohime-san could be so scary. She slowly moved some of her hair off her face, giving Kazora-san an angry glare like how Maya-nee does when I get in a fight in school.

"… Nothing but worry towards the outcome of this decision. Shirogane is not qualified to walk this path," He threw another scary gaze at me as he said that.

Why does he hate me that much? I didn't do anything to him… I look down, tightening my lips.

"In that case, you should banish all worry from you, Kazora-san," She said, again calm and kind, "We shall ensure Takeru is comfortable enough here. And you, as a servant of the Koubuin House, will undoubtedly do your best effort in aiding him to familiarize himself to his new lifestyle, I am sure," Again, she made that scary face as she rested her chin on her fingers. Kazora-san stood there for a second, then bowed to her and sat down by Maya-nee's side, "Now then, Takeru?"

"Y-Yes?"

"Considering Kazora-san's fair placed worries… Allow me to ask you one last time. Do you truly wish me to adopt you?"

"… If you don't, I'll end up in an orphanage, right?" She nods, "Then, yes, I do. I promise I'll do my best from now," I couldn't keep my hands quiet as I spoke. I will do my best, but what if I'm still not good enough?

"I see," She then smiled as sweetly as she always does, "Worry not, Takeru. From now on you're one of us. Now then, allow me to first give you an explanation of what you'll have to do from now on. Chamberlain, the papers please."

The other old woman came towards us with some papers. Yohime-san explained to me that people can't just adopt a child because they want to, the rules say the child has to also agree. That's why there's a lot of rules in what the new parents have to do to adopt a kid, just like Uncle Koetsu said, to prevent bad people from ever taking a child with them.

They told me all I had to do was know that Takahisa-san had prepared some papers before he and Dad left with the other samurai, and that when tomorrow someone from the care services would come to talk with me all I had to do was say I wanted to stay here. Yohime-san said she would take care of all the bureaucracy, whatever that is, and then she explained to me what I had to do from now on.

"So I can't go back to my school?"

"No Takeru, you cannot. For the following months, you'll be home schooled here," Yohime-san replied.

"But what about my tests? Or my friends? Can I still go visit them?"

"Hmm… Well, I suppose we could allow you to visit your friends from time to time. However, from now on you'll have to study here. Once we see how good you are and which role we'll bestow you with, we'll assign you to a school after summer vacation."

"I don't get it, what's this about a role?"

"It means you'll be studying in a special school designed to prepare you for your job," Maya-nee said.

"Exactly as Maya said," Yohime-san nodded, "I believe I did tell you that you would become a public servant if you chose to be one of us, did I not?"

"Oh, right. Um… What is a public servant?"

"Someone who serves the Empire. Think of police officers, doctors and teachers," She again smiled sweetly, entwining her fingers together, "It means you will have to work for the good of this nation. Whether it is in a public role or as a member of one of our businesses will be decided after these next months."

"So… After you see how smart I am, you'll tell me what it is that I can do?"

"Precisely. That being said, I suppose… Did you wish to become a Royal Guard in image of your father?"

"Yohime-sama, if I may, I believe Takeru shouldn't-"

"Maya, stand down. This is something Takeru has to decide on his own,"

Why are they getting so upset? I mean… I know the samurai have to fight against the monsters, but…

"Milady, forgive the rudeness, however I do not think it wise to offer Takeru such a position. You should know he is nowhere near the same skill of Mion and Shion," Maya-nee sounded weird, worried and tense but… also scared?

"They are a year older than him, so I do not find the comparison fair," Yohime-san is still calm as always, though, "Regardless, you shall continue to monitor his performance in these days to come."

"The training he'll need to become a Royal Guard is one too harsh for him. Takeru isn't-" I pulled Maya-nee's sleeve and she stopped.

"Maya-nee, I want to be a samurai just like Dad. Why do you not want me to?" Closing her eyes for a second, then she tapped her glasses as she relaxed again.

"I am merely worried about you. No one receives special treatment here, no one will wait for you to catch up. I don't think you're ready."

"But if Dad became a samurai, why can't I?" Her lips moved weirdly for a second again.

"… Being a samurai is not an easy task, Takeru. Are you certain you wish to train to join the Royal Guard?"

… I really don't know. I mean, I know Mion and Shion are smarter and stronger than me. So that means I'll have to study a lot, and a lot of math and history too. But… But Dad could do it, so I can too. And if they give me another of those roles I might not be able to be with Maya-nee anymore… And I don't want that. So… I just have to do my best!

Plucking my lips as I give a nod, my eyes don't leave hers. Maya-nee remains staring at me for a second until she also nods at me, Kazora-san was now giving me an even nastier look. My stomach felt empty and hurt under his glare, but I refused to look down this time.

"Well, I believe Takeru has made his wishes clear enough," Yohime-san said, smiling again, "Now then, it is late already. Maya, take Takeru to his room. He'll have to rise early tomorrow for both this paperwork and his first lessons to adapt to his new home. Takeru, please do rest assured. You're safe with us now," Her eyes softened up as she slightly tilted her head, it somehow… reminds me of Mom's gaze.

I nod and Maya-nee got up, helping me up as well. Kazora-san stayed behind, though. After we gave Yohime-san a bow, we got out of the room and one of the samurai rangers in gray lead us to what was going to be my room from now on.

Still… Yuuhi's house is really big. If I have to live here now I'm gonna get lost. Did Dad spent his days in a place like this? How was it for him, to be a samurai ranger? He never told me anything about that, always said it was a secret, and Takahisa-san also said the same.

Did the others look at Dad with those same scary eyes? Were they also mean to him? Dad… How did you become a samurai? Why did you lose, if all of you were together?

Again feeling as if I had slugs crawling on me, but that were slowly biting needles into me too, my chest gets all cold and tensed up, as if I had ran a lot and had to gasp for air. It's like that poem said, like a fruit of a tree wildly slashed by the wind, falling and rolling away from its roots. I feel like that, like an apple that fell to the street and got crushed by a car.

After walking a lot, we arrive at what they called the dorm area. Though, the place still looks like rest of the house, just with more doors on the sides. It's not like my house, the walls and doors look really thin. My house… will I ever go back there? What about my stuff?

"The third room down this hallway shall be Shirogane's room from now on," The gray samurai that was coming with us said, "The few belongings he brought with him should already be there. I shall be taking my leave here," She gives us a small nod, turning around.

"Well, let's go Takeru," Maya-nee pulls me and we go to my new room.

We slid the door open and enter. It's a bit smaller than my room, there's a futon instead of a bed, a small window in front of us, and a wardrobe like the one back home. The small bag I brought was left on the floor near a wall.

Maya-nee helped me put my clothes in place, and, after getting in my pajamas, she sat on the floor by my side as I got inside the futon. She looks kinda sad, her brows are all tense and wrinkly.

"Maya-nee… Will everything really be alright?" She pats my head softly as her face relaxes.

"Yes, everything will be fine, Takeru. However, do you truly wish to follow in your father's footsteps?"

"Is being a samurai that scary?"

"Well… It is a harsh work. You'll have to follow the rules closely and mind your manners, but above all you'll have to shoulder many responsibilities. You will have to study much if you wish to stay here, but even more if you wish to become a Royal Guard. Also, you should start using that term instead of samurai rangers."

"… Maya-nee, did Dad also have to do the same to become a samurai?"

"I suppose so."

"And…" I grip the edges of the sheets, pursing my lips a bit, "We are gonna be alright? The monsters… aren't coming here soon?"

"Don't worry, we're safe here. Takahisa-sama and his fellows fought bravely so that we can be at ease now."

"… Is Dad really gone then?" Unable to look up, I ask.

She ruffles my hair slowly as she sighs, "Yes, that is the case. But don't be scared, no matter what path you're made to follow I'll be keeping an eye on you from my position. Now, try to sleep as much as you can. I'll come for you in the morning."

"You can't stay with me until I fall asleep?"

"No, I have to go back to my own room and rearrange my belongings as well. Do not worry, you're safe here," She stood up, went to the door and flicked the light switch, "Good night, Takeru."

"… Yes, good night."

As Maya-nee left, I looked at the window from where I was. I can't see much from here, but some light enters from there.

… What will happen from now on? I wonder how hard these new classes will be… Dad, did you also have to go through this? I roll to a side, hugging myself. I inhale slowly through my nose. I can't be scared, everything will be fine… Maya-nee is here, Yohime-san was nice too.

Despite having heard their words and seeing they were saying the truth, some tears still come out. Dad is gone… Just like Mom. Can I do it, Dad? Sniff… What will happen if I fail all the tests?

I cough a few times as if a cloud of dust covered me. Mulling over what may happen as I slowly cried a bit, remembering both Dad's letter and Kazora-san's yells as I rustled under the sheets, I closed my eyes and tried to fall asleep.

# At Square Zero

## Chapter 52: At Square Zero

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*May 23rd. Near 10 AM.*

*(Guest's Room.)*

**[Native Takeru]**

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Maya-nee came to wake me up really early today, to have a light breakfast just the two of us. After that she took me to a room that looked like an office where Yohime-san and some other samurais were, and there we waited for a while. When the people from the social offices came, they started asking me a lot of questions but in the end everything was fine.

Yohime-san had to sign a lot of papers, but she told me not to worry. Smiling as always, she said I would keep my last name, something about how nobles can't just adopt common people out of the blue or something. According to her, since Dad was their fellow, whatever that means, I now was also a fellow of them. I don't really understand it well, but it must be like with Uncle Koetsu. People you like become almost like family or something.

After that, Yohime-san said it was time to arrange some important matters and, after we gave her a bow as usual, she left the room along the other samurais. Me and Maya-nee were told to go to another room, since we had to meet someone else now. Yohime-san had said this person would help with these 'important matters'.

"Is this about something bad, Maya-nee?"

Remaining calm as always, she replies, "Nothing of the sort. Someone else has come to meet us, is all."

"Who?"

"I wasn't told. Let us make haste, you have to start your preliminary classes today after all."

I narrowed my eyes at her as we picked up our pace, Maya-nee also doesn't seem to know this time. Which is weird, why wouldn't they tell her who we're meeting with?

Reaching the other office, Maya-nee opens the door and we enter. Inside, a gaze of light blue eyes looked at me as we got in. Sitting on a chair on the right side of a table, the person in question nodded my way after Maya-nee closed the door and came to our side, giving us a bow.

"Good morning, Tsukuyomi. As punctual as ever."

"… Yoroi-san. Are you the one who has come to speak with us?"

"Yes, that's right. Yohime-sama asked me to… gather some intel regarding the little boy. Do not worry, I am not going to be pressuring him much."

I peeked from behind Maya-nee, staring at the smile of the woman. She's weird, everybody else is really stiff when talking with Maya-nee but she's really calm now.

"Well, let's start," Maya-nee moves to sit down while I follow her, as the woman also returned to her chair. Then, after tapping her glasses, she looks at me, "Takeru, this person here is Yoroi Koume-san. Do be honest with your answers."

Yoroi-san gave me a smile and a nod, "Good morning, Shirogane. I am Koume Yoroi, it is good to meet you."

Her short cyan hair slowly moved, letting the lone, long strand of hair on her left side to dangle down her shoulder. Wearing a business

attire similar to those people that appear on TV but in pale blue, the rather petite woman kept smiling as she looked at me.

"Good morning, Koume-san. But my name is Takeru, don't call me Shirogane,"

She giggled at me, I puffed my cheeks a bit. What's with her? "I was told of this preference of yours… It is intriguing, to think you'd allow this, Tsukuyomi."

"Sigh… I have tried to mend his rudeness, alas he refuses to change his ways," I pluck my lips at Maya-nee as she again gives me a rather worried glance.

"So… What did you want to talk about, Koume-san?" I look back at Yoroi-san, who again smiled at me while she giggled.

"Don't worry, I'm merely going to inquire about your life for a moment."

"… Okay. So, are you a samurai too?"

"Samurai?" She said, looking a bit confused.

"Takeru refers to the Royal Guards with that word," Maya-nee stated, tapping her glasses again.

"Oh, I see. Sadly, I am not a samurai. I am… someone more suited to work in the backrow," She then made a rather weird grin, a hand going to her lone, long strand of hair.

"Backrow? Like the pieces of Shogi?"

"Ahaha… Well, something of the sort. I am good at… catching people by surprise."

Maya-nee now looked rather serious, a hand on her chin. It's really weird, she's usually so cold but this time she's keeping quiet. Who is Koume-san? What does she do in the 'backrow'?

"Well, as I said before, I came here to ask you some questions, Takeru," Koume-san leaned onto the table, locking her fingers together, "First, allow me to ask, would you be interested in going to live with your grandparents?"

Eh? They… But they said that… Feeling a shiver on my knees, I remained quiet for a moment as I looked down.

"But… But Uncle Koetsu said they didn't want to be with me."

"Yes, that was the case. However, it seems they somehow found out about… your father having joined the Royal Guard," Koume-san narrowed her eyes, twisting the edge of her lips.

As she heard the words, Maya-nee's nose got full of wrinkles for a second, almost closing her eyes as she made a small groan. I don't get it, what has that to do with anything?

"So, due to the new laws passed some years ago, you can refuse to go with your family now that they refused to take you in before. However, the decision is yours. What would you like to do?" Koume-san asked, tilting her head.

"No, I'm staying here," I then hugged Maya-nee's arm, really tightly. She moved a bit, somehow surprised at my fast reply.

"I see… Well, that's it with that, I guess," Koume-san leaned back into her seat, sighing.

Maya-nee looked at me, back to the usual calm face, but said nothing, "Ahem… Yoroi-san, what other matters did you wish to discuss?"

"Let's see… There are some questions I wanted to ask you two, regarding Takeru's acquaintances."

She then asked us of who we were friends with on Hiiragi, so that she could explain my situation to them and the school once I get

'officially' adopted.

"Yoroi-san, might I propose a suggestion?" Maya-nee said as I finished telling Koume-san of my last week back home.

"Hm? What is it?"

"Would it be possible to place Takeru under the training program of the Tsukuyomi House, reporting it as an early induction due to his circumstances?"

Huh? Training… as part of her house? As if… we really were family?

"… Why do you wish to do so, Tsukuyomi?"

"Considering our… losses from a few years back, the Tsukuyomi House has been looking for recruits to train as guardians for our Security Forces," Losses? Did they also fight the monsters some years ago? "If Takeru were inducted, it wouldn't be far off for him to be appointed to our House as our protegee. This would also allow him to retain his surname without arising suspicions, which would make your work easier, would it not?"

"Maya-nee, didn't Yohime-san said she was going to adopt me? That I was one of you already?"

"Yes, that is the case. However, we must present the papers in the right way to not cause her unnecessary trouble, Takeru."

"… I don't get it. Will I be part of your family then?" I grab her arm a bit tighter, feeling a few feathers tickle my sides when she gives me a faint nod.

"Well… It is a possibility that's available to us, is all I'm saying," She taps her glasses, trying to sound composed again.

"Ahaha, worry not," Yoroi-san waved a hand as if she were one of those small cat toys that seem to bring good luck, directing a nod to

Maya-nee, "We will take care of this, Takeru. So Tsukuyomi, may I hear your thoughts on this matter?"

Maya-nee nods and lets some air out, shifting in her seat a bit, "Perhaps, this whole affair should instead be filed as an early induction without any sort of hidden meanings. His father having perished under service to our House and his family refusing to take custody of Takeru, instead of being sent to an orphanage the House offers to take care of him under our own training program, since he is the son of one of our fellows. That is not unheard of, albeit rare. Even more so for a commoner. However, I believe it would be the best course of action, to not burden Yohime-sama or your fellows."

"Maya-nee, would Yohime-san get in trouble for adopting me, then?" If I'm giving them problems… Maybe this isn't a good idea.

But then she shakes her head, patting mine softly, "Nothing of the sort, this is no trouble. However, should we arrange your situation in this way so that you fall under the Tsukuyomi House's care. It might not seem too different from your eyes, but it is easier to manage the papers for us if we proceed in this way. Are you… against it, perhaps?"

"Of course not! I'd love to be part of your family," I hug her arm really tight. "But why is it easier?"

"… Let's simply say it is easier to justify you becoming a samurai if you join the Tsukuyomi House," She said, not wanting to speak more.

I still don't get it, but I'm really, really happy. So I'll be really part of her family from now on… I feel my chest flaring up, like when her or Dad praised my test scores, the cold slugs all over me running away, leaving only the feathers around.

"This would mean we still need to report his stay here as him being a recruit after the paperwork is filed," Koume-san said as she looked at

some papers she had on her, "Are you certain he will meet the requirements to be inducted into the Royal Guard?"

"… Takeru made his voice clear as the sky. You can speak with Father if you wish to hear his opinion on the matter. In any case, it would be less troublesome for us if we presented the matter in this way, provided Takeru does manage to meet the expectations desired of a Royal Guard trainee."

"I am going to!" I puffs my cheeks as I tug at her arm. Maya-nee sighs again as she looks at me.

"In any case, Takeru, is there anything you would like to bring from your house in Hiiragi here?" Koume-san asks as she rests her chin on a hand.

"Hmm… My book about poetry, some of my toys, and a picture of Mom and Dad. By the way, am I going to visit my home soon? Can I see my friends over there?"

"… After you finish your tests, I suppose," She smiles slowly, the softness of a spring breeze reflected in her words, "Now then, allow me to inquire about your studies in your past school. How has he been faring so far?"

Then, we tell her of my daily routine back home in detail along the last tests I took. Koume-san doesn't seem to be a bad person, she doesn't have those scary eyes or that harsh tone in her voice. Still, Maya-nee remains as serious as before. Koume-san then asks me about our Kendo lessons, and I tell her of the stances Maya-nee taught me and what we did when I came to the dojo here.

"It is good to see he has confidence in himself. It is such a shame we don't have any free time…" She looked down, almost closing her eyes, looking as sad as a dog looking at an empty bowl.

"Hm? Is something the matter, Yoroi-san?" Maya-nee asks.

"Oh, nothing much. You know, my husband always wanted to have a boy…" She smiled wryly, running a hand over her hair as she looked down.

"Do you have kids, Koume-san?" Maybe we could be friends if she does.

Her smile waned, her hand seemed to slightly tighten it's hold over her hair, "Well, yes. But regardless of that, I have one last question for you, Takeru. If you don't manage to become a Royal Guard, which path will you-"

"I will become a samurai," I narrowed his brows at her, letting my tone be like Maya-nee when she gets upset.

How was it that the book said? A small pebble soon to become an avalanche tumbling down if she says I won't, that's how I tried to sound.

"… I see. I do wish you good luck, Takeru," But she smiled back, not intimidated at all.

Maybe I should have tapped my brows like Maya-nee does with her glasses… That always work with the bullies back at school.

"Tsukuyomi, I'll come meet with you once the papers are properly arranged. I shall be contacting you for advice on how to file this induction if it happens. However, I do not know whether I will come back to bring the papers, so do expect my husband to come deliver them."

Husband? I wonder what kind of person he is. Maya-nee… tensed her brows and lips. She doesn't like him.

"… Is there no way you can deliver them yourself, Yoroi-san?"

"My, Tsukuyomi. It sounds as if you didn't want to meet Sakon for some reason," Her smiled curved like a moon, giggling for a while.

"I merely have trouble dealing with him," Maya-nee taps her glasses, sending a sharp gaze at Koume-san.

"I do know he can be hard to understand from time to time, but please be patient with him. Well, I have to be going. Takeru, good luck in your trainings," Yoroi-san came closer and offered me a hand.

I softly grabbed it and then shook it with my usual spirit, "Yes, thank you. See you later, Koume-san."

"See you later to you too. Tsukuyomi, we shall be seeing each other in due time," She gives us a bow and then we exit the room.

Yoroi-san goes into the hallway to our left, towards the gate, while Maya-nee took me to another hallway.

"… Maya-nee," I pull her sleeve as we walked.

"What is it?"

"What is this about papers? Is it really that much work?"

"We need to present the right papers to send you to your new school, regardless of whether you become a Royal Guard trainee or not."

"Okay. So, why did Koume-san come to ask me so many questions? What is that backrow she said she was?"

"Do not worry about those matters, Takeru," Mmgh… She closed her eyes and looked forward, making her fringe move a bit, "We told you before, this is to properly explain your past school of your situation. We have to follow the regulations, otherwise this will only cause us trouble."

"Hmm… I see," I don't buy it.

"In any case, there is something I want to ask you," I look up at her, unlike how she usually is Maya-nee delayed her question for a

second, "Are you certain you do not wish to meet your grandparents? You might never get another chance to do so."

"… They weren't there for Mom and Dad, so I don't want to see them," I tightened my hold on her hand as I puffed one of my cheeks. "And I'm with you now, so I'm not sad anymore," Relaxing a bit, I leaned on her arm.

Smiling as we walked, I slowly took some breaths as I calmed down. Maya-nee seemed to be smiling a bit, until she realized I was looking at her.

"… In any case, let us make haste to your classroom. We have to give you the customary explanation."

"I see. Say Maya-nee, am I really gonna be part of your family if I become a Royal Guard?"

"Well… One could say that you'll formally be recognized as our protegee, just like how you were these two years."

"… I don't get it."

"Well, don't worry. Simply focus on what you can do now. Let us make haste, your classes should start soon," I nod and we start walking a bit faster.

She then guided me around the house, showing me where the baths were, where the dining room was, how to get to the backyard and garden, reminding me I couldn't play or break anything here now as I groaned back at her, and then we returned to the room we'll use as a classroom.

"Well then, Takeru. I have to attend to some matters, so I will leave you with the professors here. Do behave as you should."

"I know," She then pats my head before leaving.

I sit where the books were put on a table, an old woman dressed similarly to Maya-nee then entered the room.

I wonder how this will go… But I have to pass these tests too. I coil my fists for a second, breathing deeply. Remembering Mom and Dad for a second, pursing my lips really hard, I opened my eyes and looked at my new teacher.

"Well… I shall be your teacher in math and arithmetic for these coming months. Shirogane, how far were you in your classes?" She seems nice, at the least. But, she does teach math.

"Um… We were doing stuff with fractions and some graphs."

"Can you show me?" I open a notebook and start making one of the last problems from the last test. The teacher grasps her chin, her eyes growing smaller, "I see, it seems you're far behind than what I expected. What are they doing in the commoner's schools anymore…" She then shakes her head and sighs, seemed to be really bummed for some reason.

"So, what are we going to be doing today, Sensei?"

"Do you know what the words sine, cosine and tangent mean?"

"No."

"Well… Looks like this will be a tall ordeal. Open that red textbook on page thirty four."

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**One very long, and painful, math class later…**

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"I suppose this is all we can do for today. I recommend you practice on your free time."

"… Yes."

I hate this. What is this even? We were making some stuff with one or two letters back in school, to try to see what number X was, but this is nuts. I wanna dive under a pillow and cry, these problems are too hard! Who even thought about this?! Stupid math, stupid equations…

"Ahem…" The teacher placed her books under an arm, looking at me, "I know this might be too hard for you, Shirogane. However, let me tell you that this wasn't what the other young heirs are seeing. You're still far behind them, so if you wish to become a Royal Guard you'd be well served in polishing your knowledge."

At least she had patience with me, unlike the teachers back in school. Yeah, she wasn't a scary teacher.

"Yes, Sensei. Um… Why does everything have to do with math?"

She narrowed her eyes a bit before answering, "Well, most, if not all, of our endeavors are reliant on mathematical operations. Let me give you an example you'll understand, when you go buy groceries you need to know how much money you can spend, do you not?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Then, when you buy clothes, books, silverware, you also must know how much they cost to see whether you can afford them," I nod, "You also need to know how much of a certain ingredient you use when cooking as well, am I right?" I nod again, "So as you can see, numbers surround our everyday life. And to make sure everything regarding this House is kept functioning, we need to have our numbers polished. Once you learn more, you'll see how important it is to be well versed in math. I was not told about your situation in much detail, but you'd do well in doing an earnest effort to bridge this gap in knowledge you're facing."

"So I just gotta study hard, right?"

"No, just reading won't be enough. To properly gain the knowledge you study, to properly apprehend these concepts, much practice is required on your end. Let's see how you progress these next days first, however. Well then, I shall take my leave here."

"Okay… Um, thank you very much for your help, Sensei," I give her a bow like how Maya-nee taught me to. She briefly smiles before saying her goodbyes and leaving.

Is Maya-nee coming now? I'm kinda hungry… Two hours of math, this was a lot. Did Dad also had to do this when he became a samurai? How did he learn all of this?

… And despite knowing this hard stuff, they still lost. Even if I want to, I can't ask him anything anymore… What went wrong? Dad… wouldn't break a promise so easily. I wonder if I could learn how to always win if I'm good at math.

… But studying alone is really hard. Will my classmates be nice? Or, will they be like Kazora-san? I wonder how they manage to understand all these things…

Imagine Sumika trying to solve this. Jouji would rip the paper in half as he screams or something! Heh, of course they'd do something like that. This is so nuts, after all.

…

"… How are they now?" Did Sumika try to visit me? How will they be when they find out I'm not going back?

… They won't forget about me, right? We're still going to be friends, right? I rest onto the desk, burying my face into my arms.

After a short while, another teacher came into the room. This one was a short man who was wearing glasses and a black suit with a tie like those people that sometimes appear on TV giving those really

long speeches that Maya-nee hates. I stood up and gave him a bow, he nodded at me.

"Good afternoon, Shirogane. I will be your teacher in your classes of Civic Education."

"Civic… What is that?"

"You never had Civic Ed classes before? Were you never taught how the Parliament works, about our laws and such?" The man tapped his glasses and his voice sounded as if he was trying to scare away a stray dog.

"Hmm… Do you mean Social Studies maybe?"

The man furrowed his brows and then asked me to tell him what I knew of that. He didn't seem very happy about it.

"Sigh… What have I done to be put on this position, Yohime-sama…"

"What's wrong, Sensei?"

"… Nothing. Open that cyan book, we'll have to start from the beginning. I hope you behave as you should, we have much to cover it seems."

"Um, can I get something to drink? I didn't have a break during math class."

"No, you'll get your break after this class is done with." Eh?! But… How long will this class be? What if it's another two hours? "Now then, let's start."

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*Same Day. Around 6 PM.*

*(Hallway.)*

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"It was really hard! They only gave me twenty minutes to rest too."

"I did tell you the regime was going to be severe," Maya-nee said as we went to the dojo, "What did you think of your classes?"

"I hadn't seen anything of what they showed me today. It's all really hard to understand."

"… If you do not wish to continue under this course, you can simply say so Takeru. You don't have to force yourself if this is too much for you."

"But then I won't become a samurai. It's really hard… But I'll do my best!"

Maya-nee looks at me for a moment as she stops, then she sighs, "You do not need to force yourself. The same applies for the lessons in the dojo. Don't push yourself needlessly."

"I'll be fine. I won't give up," Dad told me to do my best so I can't get down so easily. And… if I give up, I may end up alone.

I don't want that to happen, not when I might really be a part of your family from now on. I would like to talk with Sumika and the rest… I don't want to stop being friends with them… But… I guess I just gotta study until I pass these tests, and then I can call them or something.

Once we arrive at the dojo and enter, I see Mion and Shion were already here. Kazora-san was here too, he came towards us as we entered.

"Welcome. Maya, the girls are ready to train. I shall leave them under your guidance."

"Huh? What about Takeru, Father?"

"I shall look over his efforts myself," He said as he gave me another of those scary looks.

"Father, I am Takeru's-"

"Not anymore, Maya. You're no longer a retainer of his now that he has joined us. He's but another servant, and no one deserves special treatment. Shirogane, you'll come with me to the other end of the dojo after you've changed into the gear. Maya, I leave the little ones to you."

Maya-nee pursed her lips as she looked at her Dad, she then looked at me for a while and then gave a nod.

"Takeru, do as Father says. No getting angry."

"I know, Maya-nee," I puff my cheeks, you always tell me the same whenever we come here.

I go to the changing room and put on the arm and leg guard. Once I get out, I saw Maya-nee watching over the Pickles as they begin to practice. Keeping an eye on their duel, Kazora-san, who was already in the armor too, approaches me.

"So… What are we going to do, Kazora-san?"

"It's Tsukuyomi-sensei for you, Shirogane. How many times do I have to tell you?"

"But your name is Kazora… If I called all of you Tsukuyomi you won't know who I'm talking to."

"I believe you were told you had to cease this foul habit of speaking back you have. You shall refer to me as Tsukuyomi-sensei while we're here. Now, take your stance," He took some steps away, getting his pose done.

What did I do to him? Why does he hate me so much? Back home too, he was awful to me and Maya-nee. He's horrible, I don't like him. Taking some steps back, I do the pose Maya-nee always taught me to use.

"Are you ready, Shirogane?"

"Yes!" I said as I tensed my feet to charge forward.

He blocked my attacks without problem, even when I took that step back Maya-nee told me to do sometimes. Coming forward and doing two swings at me, I barely manage to block them somehow.

He keeps advancing, doing just a few swings. Forced to keep going back and back, I can't stop him. He then did a rising slash at me, sending my sword away like Maya-nee always does. I again end up sitting on the floor.

"… So this is all you can do? You think you can become a Royal Guard with this meager skill?"

"I just have to keep practicing!" I say as I stand up and go look for my sword. I return to face him, taking my pose again.

"That won't be enough. Mere effort cannot bridge the lack of talent."

"Then… Then I'll keep doing my best."

"Sigh… Shirogane, perhaps you don't realize it yet, but you don't have the time."

"Huh? Time? Why do I need a watch to be a samurai?"

He shook his head again, another bothered gaze coming my way, "No, I was not speaking about a watch," His tone sounded like Maya-nee when she scolds me. He relaxes his pose, bringing his sword to one of his shoulders, "You see, you have until the end of June to show us where your talents lie. If by then you're not deemed worthy, you shall be sent to a school where you can hone whatever skill you possess. So, if that happens, you'll never become a Royal Guard."

"Eh?! But… But that's just a month away!"

"Precisely. I suggest you give up on this futile dream of yours. I can see you're nowhere near the skill necessary to become a Guard from this one bout. It would be more productive for you to focus on learning something that is in alignment with your natural talents, something that will aid you more in the future. As is, you're just wasting our time here," Again, his tone got all serious and cold.

… I know that I'm not that good. But I wanna fight like Dad, I want to be like him. And… And I don't want to leave either, I want to stay with Maya-nee, Yuuhi, and the Pickles. I'm not going to give up just because you tell me to, dummy old man.

Puffing my cheeks, taking my pose again and pointing my sword at him, that makes him shake his head again. Then, Kazora-san takes a different pose now, similar to the one Maya-nee showed me once with the sword above the shoulder.

This time, he attacked faster than before. It was like when Shion is on a bad mood. I'm just holding my blade tightly and planting my heels firmly on the ground. My hands start to hurt a lot just from parrying the swings.

But… If he's like Shion… He'll take the step back in just a while! Then, as I watched his attacks while barely parrying them, I saw that he was moving for a downwards swing. I parried it, almost tripping backwards, then he took the step back. But I could tell he was going to and I kept pushing forward, taking one step and swinging my sword at him with all I had. But then…

**SWISH!**

He reacted super fast and sent my sword flying again, making me fall backwards.

"Hmph… You fell right into my trap. You can't even tell when an opponent is baiting you."

I stared back at him as I got up, frowning. I did my best… It's not my fault you're already so good… You're not like Maya-nee, you're just beating me up. You're no different than the school bullies.

"Father, I do not think this will bear any fruits," Maya-nee got closer and helped me get up, "Takeru, are you unhurt?"

"… Yeah, I'm fine."

"Father, this is not what you were supposed to do. He's learning nothing from this."

"He's learning how much skill he lacks. I am the one who'll oversee his training for this month. Stand back, Maya. Shirogane, go pick up your sword."

"Father, please. What do you-"

"Maya, Mion and Shion are waiting. Leave him to me, that's an order. Do not forget, I am the Head of the Tsukuyomi House as of now. My orders are absolute," He sounded really scary, Maya-nee gave me one look and went back to the other two, that were also looking towards us. But they didn't say anything. "Shirogane, waste no more time and go for your sword!" Why do you scream at me? I didn't… You're…

"You're… You're…"

"What? Speak up, kid. I cannot hear you. What is it?!"

"You're just a bully! You're not teaching me anything!"

"Oho, so that's what you think. Clearly, you are not made to be a Guard."

"Why are you so mean? Were you like this with Dad too?!" His hand moved weirdly for a second. Looking up, once more he put his sword on his shoulder.

"… You're as uneducated as him, as well. Do you think that you'll become a good Royal Guard by shouting in this manner? Or, have you given up on the practice?"

"Uuh… I'm not giving up!"

"Then, go for your sword. I want no more whining from you until you can assess a hit at me!"

I bit my lips as I went for my sword, groaning much. Taking my pose once I got back, this time going for quick attacks to finally hit him once.

…

In the end, I couldn't hit him once. He kept winning in no time, sending me to the ground and my sword away. Always saying I was never going to be a samurai, that I wasn't good enough. I'll show you that I can be a samurai too… I'm gonna beat you one of these days, just like how I beat the bad boys in school.

"Well Maya, take the girls to the dining room," Kazora-san said as I remained hunched over, my mouth open as I gasped for air.

"… What about Takeru, Father? Surely you are not planning to continue to practice with how exhausted he is."

"Perish the thought," He said as he again looked my way, another serious expression in his face, "I merely wish to have a small talk with him. On your way, you three. We shall join you in a moment."

Maya-nee and the Pickles looked at me for a second, but then they bowed to Kazora-san and went into their changing room. Wiping the sweat of my forehead, I walked towards my changing room, with Kazora-san following behind. Entering the room, dropping myself onto a chair and gasping for a little while, I then started to slowly take off the armor pieces I had on.

"Allow me to aid you in getting off your gear, Shirogane," He got closer and helped me take off the shoulder gear, and removed the lock so that I could also take the leg protection without much trouble.

"… Thanks, Kazora-san."

"It's Tsukuyomi-sensei, Shirogane," He said, groaning a bit, as he started to take off his gear too.

"Why are you always so mean with me? What did I do to you?"

"I am not being hostile to you because I enjoy it. If you wish to become a Royal Guard, you need to learn to hoist our values, to follow our code. And if you cannot show a sliver of respect towards your tutors, you will never become a samurai," His eyes grew smaller, sharper and scary, his tone was even rougher than before.

"… Then, what do I have to do to get better?"

"It's not a matter of being 'better' or 'worse'. There are signs in your conduct that show you are not fit to walk this path."

"What? If you don't tell me what I do wrong I'll never get better. Aren't you supposed to be my teacher?"

"… And yet, you refuse to even refer to me as one," He shook his head, sighing really, really heavily. Like when me and Maya-nee made it out of the super during the days with discounts, "However, you bring up a fair point. Let us discuss my impressions of today's training before dinner."

Having finished changing into my clothes, we both got out of the changing room. Kazora-san told Maya-nee to go ahead again, I waved at the Pickles as they left. All three of them were looking at Kazora-san like how I look at Jouji after he gets in trouble, or when he falls down the games at the park.

I sat on the floor as he sat in front of me, twirling his beard for a while as he groaned. I rub my arms as I wait, they hurt a little after training so much. Are all of them that good? Were they always holding back on me? How did Dad…

"Um… Kazora-san?"

"What is it?"

"Do you know how… how was Dad's life when he was a samurai?"

Letting both of his hands rest on his lap, he closes his eyes, "Your father… Kageyuki Shirogane was a rather… unorthodox member of our Guards."

"What does unorthodox mean?"

"… That he did not match what was expected of a Royal Guard, even less a member of our private squadron. Your father was very much like you, despite his efforts he could not show the proper respect to the authorities."

"He also called you Kazora-san?"

"No, he wasn't as rude as you," And again, he gives me another nasty scary glare, "However, one could not deny that he was both skilled and loyal. Your father was a very hardworking person, and he was as honest as a fellow can be. For that reason, he was allowed to join our ranks and become our fellow."

"And did he also have to learn all this complicated stuff to be a samurai?"

"Royal Guard is the proper term, Shirogane," He crosses his arms, making another scary gaze again, "… In any case, yes, he also had to partake in many trials to demonstrate his abilities. And even before his induction, he had to train very harshly to become a soldier."

"… Was he strong?"

"Yes. Even if 'strength' is not the most appropriate word to describe it, he was a very skilled soldier, in and out of the battlefield. Despite his fruitless efforts to learn Keigo and poise, he was indeed a fine Royal Guard."

"Then… W-Why did he lose?"

…

"Sometimes… No, most times victory cannot be obtained without sacrifices."

"And why did Dad have to… to die?"

Why are the monsters even attacking us? What did we do to them? Biting my lips as I sniff, trying not to cry, I look down and make tight fists with my hands, remembering the letter Dad left me.

"… Your father was not the only one who perished. Takahisa-sama, along most of his squadron, fell on the last battle."

"Huh? Takahisa-san… died too? But… But he was really strong! How… How could he lose too?"

He always won in the Shogi matches we played when he was home during my visits, and I still remember how he defeated Maya-nee really fast in a kendo duel once, and how scared Dad was when Takahisa-san joked about facing him after that. How… How did he lose? It's a lie, isn't it? Kazora-san is… just trying to scare me.

"Indeed, tis is truly a tragedy," Kazora-san looks down, his forehead getting all wrinkly as he closed his eyes really tightly.… He wasn't lying, "Such is the reason for why we must continue to hone ourselves, especially now that our Lord Regent has passed away. That is why our Royal Guards must be the best of the best, elites

within the elites. And is the reason why I do not believe you should pursue this path, Shirogane."

"Why? Dad… Dad told me to do my best, and I don't… I don't…" I don't want to end up alone. I don't care if he thinks I'm not good enough, I'll show him I can be a good samurai just like Dad was!

"It's not merely about effort. I do not think this to be a wise idea, considering your attitude."

"But you're not even giving me a chance, you're always screaming at me. You're not a good teacher," I puff my cheeks and fold my arms, looking away from him.

He remains looking at me as I furrow my brows, stroking his mustache again. Kazora-san then looks up, his face losing all wrinkles, "Shirogane, has Maya taught you what meditation is?"

"Meditation? She told me to do that whenever I get angry at school."

"And do you effectively practice it?"

"Well… Not really. I end up asleep when I do."

"… I suppose relaxation is another path to clearing one's inner clouds," He nods a few times, eyes closed as he keeps stroking his mustache, "Has Maya told you why meditation is of such importance to a Royal Guard?"

"No? Do samurai need to meditate a lot?"

"Sigh… Royal Guards, Shirogane. Use the proper term."

"You don't call me Takeru, so I'll keep calling them samurai."

It's unfair. Why do you get to call me however you want, but I can't keep calling the samurai like that?

He puts a finger between his brows, massaging them slowly, "Well then, I suppose I could teach you the reasoning behind my actions. Shirogane, what did you think of today's practice?"

"Huh?" What has this to do with meditation? "You kept beating me up, and I couldn't even counter you."

"And what did you do in front of such adversity?"

"… I did my best to fight back and failed," I puff my cheeks, looking down. I'm sure he'll start saying I'm bad, that I can't do it, that-

"And how did you fight back?" He looks back at me, kind of like how Maya-nee did when she helped me with my history homework.

"With all I had."

"No, that's not… One could say you fought back with aggression, did you not?"

"… Yeah."

"And, did I ever fall to such aggressiveness while we sparred?"

"You did keep beating me up, so yes."

He narrows his eyes at me, "I never returned a strong swing, did I? I was not using my full strength on you. Do you know why that is?"

"Because you would have hurt me?"

"Indeed. A Royal Guard must remain calm during active duty. Meditation aids the mind and body, it then reflects in all endeavors one pursues during the day. You lack calmness, Shirogane. Skill and knowledge can be obtained through practice and repetition, but if you yourself do not change your ways, you shan't be allowed to join our ranks."

"So I just have to stay calm?"

"No, that alone isn't enough. It's a way of living, a way of conducting oneself."

"I don't get it. Do I have to meditate all day long, then?"

"Well… Allow me to tell you of the code we of the Imperial Royal Guard follow. Ponder these words tonight and the coming days, if you still insist on pursuing the path of the warrior. Ahem…"

Kazora-san cleared his throat and inhaled for a while, eyes closed. I gulped and also inhaled deeply, waiting for his words. If this helps me be a samurai, if Dad also went through this… Then, I have to learn this code and why being calm is so important. Kazora-san opened his eyes slowly, and, rising his chin a bit he looked towards me, he started to talk.

"Within the warrior, only two roads are seen. The just and the unjust ones. Nurture your own honor, to never lose your path.

Within the warrior, dread must not make nest. Nurture your own valor, to luster your life and mind.

Within the warrior, selflessness must flourish. Nurture your own compassion, to be your fellows' guiding light.

Within the warrior, there is no place for vainglory. Nurture your own poise, for your acts are a mirror of your values.

Within the warrior, there is only place for truth. Nurture your own honesty, for one's word should be followed by one's actions.

Within the warrior, there is no need for masks. Nurture your own judgment, for your name shall be forever tarnished should you betray your honor.

Within the warrior, no hesitation is shown upon conflict. For you are a blade and a shield, guardian of your fellows.

A warrior ends all struggles swiftly, to the ultimate consequences. We, the Royal Guard, are those who protect the Empire's peace.

Reject fear, for you have a road to follow.

Reject passion, for you have a duty to uphold.

Reject hesitation, for you have a vow to protect.

Reject vanity, for you need no further honors.

Embrace death, to free yourself from your shackles."

He then closed his eyes again and inhaled deeply, exhaling through his mouth.

Furrowing my brows as I plucked my lips, groaning a bit, I can't make heads or tails of what he said. I don't get it… What's with all those weird words? But… But…

"Kazora-san, why does that poem say that we have to hug death? That's… horrible. I want to live and I don't want anyone to die."

"No, it isn't to be taken literally Shirogane. But let us discuss this on the way to the dining room, we have stayed for too long here," He stood up and I followed behind him as we left the dojo, "So… Regarding the poem…"

"Yes? Why does it say death is a good thing?"

"… It does not mean that. You see, if you fear death, you will be frozen when it is time to act. However, if you restrain your fear, if you accept death is an inevitability, you will be able to fight and move without anything holding you back. The meaning of that line is to release yourself from anything that might impair your actions. We of the Royal Guard are servants of the Empire and our own individual lives matter little when compared to the nation as a whole."

"That's… sad. Your life does matter, Kazora-san."

"I never said it didn't. However…" He sighs as he starts walking slower, his hands going from being relaxed into a fist, "A warrior must never waver, not even in the face of death. I am sure your father also mastered this teaching."

"Huh? Dad did? But… But he never told me anything as sad as this!"

"Ponder it for a moment," He looked back at me, raising a finger upwards. "Your father must certainly being fearful during this battle with the monsters. He must have wanted to survive to see you once more. If he had succumbed to fear, the fight might have been lost. But he chose to be brave, to see beyond his own selfish wishes, to do what would be better not only for you but for his fellows. As Yohime-sama said, even if he perished your father managed to secure the greatest victory he could achieve, for you are still alive and healthy."

"… But he's gone now."

"As true as that might be… You were something worth protecting. We of the Royal Guard see the Empire and all its citizens as what must be protected at all costs, and so, we must be steadfast to not lose sight of what must be done. If you wish to become a Royal Guard, someday you might face a battle similar to the one your father was in."

"But that doesn't mean I want anyone to go away," I look down, shivering as I feel again as if someone was throwing snowballs at me.

"However… If you could save Maya, Shion and Mion… Would you fight with all you have?"

"Yeah! I don't want to see them hurt."

"Then, you should meditate on the words of the code. When you're serene, calm and in peace you will find your own answer to the struggles you will face. Only when you control your fears and

emotions, only then you will truly be able call yourself a Royal Guard. Shion also suffers from this problem, even if your stance is far more rougher than hers."

"So… I need to be calm when we fight?"

"Yes, and you also must not lose heart on your studies. Letting seeds of anger sow in your heart will only hurt your performance."

I see… So it's like what Maya-nee said once, I can't keep getting angry at everything I don't understand. Dad… Dad could do it. And Mom asked me… to be good with others too.

Kazora-san… isn't so bad after all. He might be scary like how Maya-nee was during our first days, but he is trying to teach me this poem. Even if I still don't agree with it. Dying is… not nice. Nobody should tell you to not care about you, that's just horrible. Even if Dad kept fighting, there must have been a way to win without him having to die. And what about Takahisa-san? If he was also there, how did they lose?

"Kazora-san, was Takahisa-san also fighting with Dad?"

"… Yes, that is the case."

"Then, how did they lose? He was so strong and smart, Takahisa-san was so awesome I don't see him losing a fight."

Kazora-san stops walking and looks back at me, his brows almost touching as it looked like he was cutting onions, "One could say it's… a matter of numbers."

"Why does everything have to do with math?"

"No, it's not… Ahem, allow me to use this as an example. Let's say we are playing Shogi," I nod, "But then, instead of using the usual amount, I am allowed to use double the amount of pieces in the game."

"You can't do that, it's cheating."

"But I can. Then, you'd be at a disadvantage, wouldn't you?"

"Of course! How can I win if you have so many more pieces?"

"And that… is what might happen sometimes. The enemy won't hesitate to… cheat if it gives them victory."

"Then, why don't you call them out on it?"

"They won't listen, Shirogane. Did the bullies in your school listen when you told them to stop harassing you?"

"… No, I had to punch them to make them stop."

"And it is a similar state, this fight. They won't stop, so we cannot remain idle. And sometimes… people will have to die to give us victory, just like how you sometimes need to sacrifice a piece to win a round of Shogi. If you believe this to be cruel… then you should not become a Royal Guard," He then started walking again, faster than before.

… So the monsters are like bullies. And… And then people have to go away because of them. Maybe that's why they're being so harsh on me? To make the new samurais better than the older ones? Then… Then, if I get strong enough, I can fight without letting anyone getting hurt, right?

My hands shake a little, thinking on what Dad had to do. If even Takahisa-san lost… then, what can we do?

"Kazora-san, do you think we're safe from the monsters?"

"Yes, worry not Shirogane. Takahisa-sama made sure the Empire remains safe."

"T-Then… Nobody has to go and fight with them for now, right?"

He stops walking again, looking my way as his lips twist a bit, "Worry not. We are safe and sound, and no one will be called to battle for the foreseeable future. You can all train safely, so that we may one day protect our home together if the need calls," His eyes look still scary, but they have a small light, like Dad when he said his goodbyes, as he gave me a nod.

So… we can still train and get better. But if I don't become a samurai, I won't be able to be with them or even fight. I gulp as my neck feels all tight and cramped, I don't know how I can get better by just being calm but I have to try. And…

And I want to help out. If Dad helped Takahisa-san, then I can help out too. Maybe then nobody will have to give hugs to death anymore.

But what happens if I fail? I don't know, but I'll never be a samurai like Dad, and then I won't be able to stay with Maya-nee, Mion and Shion. I know I'm not that good…

But… But I have to keep trying. Even if Kazora-san is really scary, even if this new lessons are really hard… I can do it, right?

When we arrived at the dining room, the food was just about to be served. We gave them a bow, and Yohime-san welcomed us, telling us to sit down. Kazora-san sat near Maya-nee, while I sat on the other side of the table, between Mion and Yuuhi. As I did, the old woman that's always near her sent me another of those scary glares.

"Takeru, are you alright?" Mion said as I sat down.

"Yes… I'm fine."

"Father wasn't too harsh with you?" Shion pursed her lips as she leaned on the table, "Don't let his words get you down, Takeru. You had no chance against him, so it's obvious you were going to lose today."

"But if I don't get better in a month I'll never be a samurai."

"Hm? Why is that?" Mion tilted her head as she heard me.

"Kazora-san said I have one month until the adults decide to which school they'll send me after summer," I puff my cheeks as I look down.

"Children, please be silent on the table," The old woman that's always around Yohime-san said as she served our food, giving me a nasty look.

It smells really nice… How do they make the food like this? I grab my chopsticks and, after waiting for Yohime-san to start, we all began to eat.

Hmm… The rice is so nice! It's firm, but I can still taste the spices in it. Though… It does lack something. I dunno, but Maya-nee's rice still has something this one doesn't.

"Say Takeru," Shion smiled widely at me from my side as we ate, "what do you say of us helping you out during the weekends?"

"Helping me out?"

"Yeah, we can help you study and with your sword practice. Do you have your Sundays free?"

"Yeah, I think."

"Ahem…" Maya-nee tapped her glasses as she looked at us, "I suppose we could allow it, Father?"

"Well, they can spend their free time as they see fit," Kazora-san said, resting a glass on the table, "However, you two cannot fall behind in your own studies because of this. I'll be monitoring you three tomorrow, to make sure this session is a fruitful one," He then gave us another scary look, and we three nodded at him.

"Thanks a lot, Shion."

"Hehehe… Don't mention it. I am your older sister too so I have to look out for you," She then laughed quietly while doing a big, evil grin showing me her teeth.

"I can help out too," Mion puffed her cheeks a bit, "I know history is hard for you so I can aid you in your efforts if you like."

"Yeah, thanks a lot you two. Oh, can you be serious when we fight in the dojo from now on? I wanna fight with you to get as good as I can," Both of them shared a look before nodding.

As I began to eat again, I felt a poke on my arm. Looking towards it, I saw Yuuhi staring back at me, a pout on her face.

"… Good evening, Takeru."

"H-Hi, Yuuhi," Why does she look so upset? Her eyes are again full of that weird blue fire that appears when she gets angry, for some reason. But then, as she eyed me in silence, her lips shrugged as if worries.

"It would seem today has been a most toilsome day for you," Speaking weird with a serious gaze, her eyes stopped on a small bruise I had on my arm, "Your complexion does indeed look fatigued, are certain that you are feeling well?"

"Yeah, don't worry," Giving her a small smile, she seems to ease up a bit. Thanks for always worrying, "It was just a lot of stuff to read. But don't worry, it wasn't so bad," Except for math.

"I see," Seeming relieved, she smiles as she gets closer, "Takeru, I heard from Mother that you would be residing here alongside us from today onwards. Is that true?"

"… Yeah, it's true," After all… The orphanage was the other choice… Now that Dad's gone…

"Takeru? What is the matter?"

"Eh? Nothing… Well, some people told me it was because I'm fellow now… Do you think it's weird?"

She shook her head, placing one of her hands above one of mine, squeezing as she smiled, "Of course not, I'm truly happy to hear that. So… If you ever need to talk or have a question, please do come to me first."

"Thanks, Yuuhi. Really…" Returning her smile, she beamed back at me.

Even when she also lost her dad, she's still nice enough to worry. Sniff… Yeah, I gotta do my best for her too! Since now we're together, I gotta do my best for her and Yohime-san too, to not give them trouble.

We kept eating as she asked me about how I had been today, what games I was looking forward to play, and other small things to get my mind off things.l

"But the lessons were really harder than what I had back home," I pout, remembering what I saw of math today.

"I was told you would have to study much, I hope you can get acquainted with your new home soon," Still smiling, she nodded.

Uuh… You're so nice, as always, "So, uh, how have you been lately?"

"Oh… I've been well," Looking a bit down, losing her smile, it's clear she's lying, "I've accompanied Mother on some of her meetings, but I have not had the time to read many books as of late… or play Shogi…" Her voice fades to a whisper, but then she leans closer, trying to smile again, "So… since you'll be living here from now on, if you would agree and had some free time, perhaps… we could read something together tomorrow?" She tapped some of her fingers together as she looked at me, holding her breath.

"Maya-nee, can we?" She furrowed her brows, looking at Yohime-san.

"I am afraid you won't be able to," Yohime-san said, sounding a bit sad, "Takeru has to study much this coming month, Yuuhi. Sadly, he needs all the time he can afford to polish his skills."

We both look down, so I won't be able to play with the rest either? Looking at her, Yuuhi was sulking really, really hard, but no fire was coming out now. For the first time… she looked really sad.

"Now Yuuhi, dear, do not be so restless," She extended a hand to pat her head, trying to cheer both of us up, "Takeru isn't going anywhere, he will have a free day where you can play together to your leisure."

"Truly, Mother?" She bounced up, again smiling.

"Indeed, so do look forward to it," She nodded, and Yuuhi also did the same, then smiling my way with much, much sunshine, "Maya, which day does Takeru have free?"

"Sundays, milady. However, you cannot sleep in as you used to, Takeru," Maya-nee said as she looked at me, making me groan, which makes Yuuhi and the Pickles giggle, "This is something you need to do to get used to your new life. You will have your coming Sundays free, but you'll be best served using them to practice. Once you regain the rest your free time after this month you'll be able to play with the rest again."

"I see…"

"Well, could you tell me what you thought of your first day here, Takeru?" Yohime-san said, smiling as usual.

I told her about today's classes, Yuuhi laughed as I commented on how little I understood of what I saw of math today, while Maya-nee sighed as I told them about what the short teacher taught me.

Yuuhi and Yohime-san both lost her smile in a flash when I told her of how strict Kazora-san was with me, Yuuhi pouting a bit while Yohime-san sent him a really scary look when I told them I didn't like the end of that poem. The other old woman didn't even look at me as I was talking, though. I think she also doesn't like me much.

"Takeru, regardless of what Kazora-san says, you have the last say in the matter. And worry not, you won't be sent to the orphanage even if you don't perform well in this month," Yohime-san said as she smiled again.

"Indeed, you're part of the House now," Yuuhi said, making a point of placing her hand above mine again as she gave him a mean look.

Yohime-san then asked Maya-nee about what she did on her first day back here, and then the Pickles told us about how they fared in their classes. After we finished eating, we stood up and said our goodbyes to them.

"Thank you very much for the food," I give a bow to the old woman, who squints her eyes and looks away. Why did I do to her?

She ignored me and went to Yuuhi's side, "Yuuhi-sama, we should return to your room."

"Yes, we should," Yuuhi, however, turned around from her stood up, coming closer to me, "Takeru, I wish you good fortune on your studies," She grabbed my hands and smiled at me, as I did too, "You must not doubt when it is time to make an effort. I'm sure you'll do well if you keep your good spirits."

"Don't worry, I'll be fine. Thanks a lot Yuuhi. And, um, good luck in those meetings."

"Hehe, thanks. I hope we can read something together again soon. See you tomorrow, Takeru," She then gave me a nod and went with the old lady out of the room.

Yohime-san stood up and came closer. She petted my head, smiling faintly, as she sat down in Yuuhi's place.

"So, I suppose you must be tired after such a long day. Did you find your training too difficult perhaps, Takeru?"

"Well… It was hard at times," I rub my arms, Yohime-san sends a gaze towards Kazora-san as he finished his dinner.

"I see. Worry not, I shall make sure you are not pushed unnecessarily. Now then, I heard of Maya's proposal, of having you join the training program of the Tsukuyomi House. Are you in agreement with this, Takeru?"

"Yes. I can train with them if I become a samurai, right?"

"Of course. However, it will be a harsher regime than if you were to join as a simple commoner. It does make the paperwork easier… But even so, are you certain of this? You still desire to join the Royal Guard?"

"… Do you not want me here? Am I being a bother?"

"No, nothing of the sort, dear," Again, she patted my head, her hand than going down to my cheek and also rubbing it slowly, "Did anyone utter any such words towards you today?"

"Well, the second teacher seemed kinda upset at me, and Kazora-san was raising his voice as always during the training."

"I see… I will have a word with them tomorrow about this matter. However, you are no bother to us, Takeru."

"What about all the papers and stuff?"

"Haha… That is but a trivial matter," She smiled as sweetly as she usually did while stroking my cheek, "Even if you do not join the Royal Guard I shan't be sending you away, be sure of that."

"So, I'll still be with Maya-nee?"

"Well, not as usually as you do now, but you will still meet her," Giving me a nod, she rested her hands on her lap, "I know all of this must be very taxing on you, but you will be fine from now on. Do not let Kazora-san pressure you in any way,"

I nod, bringing my hands together, "And… I will see my friends again, right?"

"After this month, you'll regain some more free time, so I suppose you could. So, you merely focus on doing your best efforts in your classes for now," Patting my head again, she gave me a serious gaze as her voice lost the sweet tinge it had before, "Once you're given a role, everything will be dealt with, I assure you."

"So, we really are safe?"

"Indeed, why do you ask?"

"Well… The monsters… aren't coming here?"

Smiling again, petting my head slowly, she shook her head, "Worry not Takeru, we are safe and sound here."

"I see… And… Um, Yohime-san, how did Dad and Takahisa-san lose?"

Her smile vanished, her eyes got all sharp, "… Who told you about him?" Her voice turned really, really cold as she shot a look towards Kazora-san, who then quickly left the room.

"So, is he gone too?"

"… Yes, sadly," She closed her eye really tight, letting a sigh out slowly, "Please do not mention his name to Yuuhi, she was very afflicted by this loss."

I mean, of course she would be sad. I don't get how they can smile like that, it was really, really hard to stay calm today for me.

"I know, I won't do that. But I can still play with her sometimes?"

"Why, of course. Please do keep her company if you have the time," I nod quickly, and that makes her giggle, "I'd truly appreciate it if you could find some time to play with her. However, your studies come first, yes?" I nod and she smiles.

"So, um, are we really safe? If Takahisa-san lost, with how awesome he was, will we be able to win someday?"

"Worry not, that is why we are working today. This does mean your training will be a truly harsh one, for we need to surpass those who fell. If you ever have trouble, please do tell me. I do not wish to see you getting hurt," She placed a hand on my cheek again, slowly rubbing it.

"Yes, I'll be careful. Um, thanks a lot Yohime-san, for letting me stay here. I… I will do my best to become a good samurai and help you all."

"Haha, no thanks are needed, my dear," Again smiling as sweetly as always, going back to her warm and nice tone, "I know this must be a tall ordeal for you, however, there is nothing you should fear," Resting her hands near her belly, she gave me a wider, kinder smile, "You should reflect on why you so wish to be a Royal Guard, and you must not shy away from this new responsibilities and subjects you'll face from now on, even if some voice their opposition to your stay here."

She was still smiling, but something in her eyes was different. The small embers of fire that sometimes peek out of Yuuhi's eyes returned to hers as she tensed her brows.

"I hope your efforts can be fruitful, and I will be looking forward to hearing about your progress. And worry not, I won't allow no one to

mistreat you from now on. So, please do rest easy and focus on your studies for the time being."

"Yes, Yohime-san. I'll really do my best from now on!" I nod at her with a smile, she giggles as she pats my head once more. Then, she calls for Maya-nee and we leave after giving her a bow.

But… for some reason… I feel like I'm forgetting something. It's not like they were different than how they usually are, Yohime-san does use weird words from time to time, but… but something felt weirder in her words this time.

"Takeru, let us go to your room," Maya-nee placed her hand on my shoulder as we left the dining room.

… That's right. I'm not going back home tonight. I'm staying here… Until when?

When will I be able to go home again? Will I see Sumika and the rest again someday? This kinda feels like when the guys threw too many snowballs at my chest, I don't like this feeling.

Mion and Shion made jokes with me along the way, trying to tell me some stuff that should help me in my studies until they had to take another hallway.

"Maya-nee, will I have more long classes tomorrow?"

"Yes. You have four hours of classes, your lunch break, and then another four hours of classes, another small break, and then two hours to do your homework before going to the dojo. This is why I told you it would be too much for you. If you wish, you should-"

"I'm not giving up."

"Sigh… If you ever feel it is too much, do tell me. You can't expect to surpass all your tests with passion alone."

"… I'll do my best. Why don't you believe in me?"

She furrowed her brows slightly, "I do have faith in you. However, it would be more productive for you to focus on your innate abilities instead of chasing a dream that might never come. You saw how Father was with you today, and the pacing of the lectures won't ease up after this month. You will need to prepare yourself for your new school, including polishing your manners," We took a turn and reached the hallway were my room is, "I do not wish to see you pushing yourself needlessly, Takeru. No one will treat you unfairly even if you cannot match Shion's and Mion's academic performance," She pet my head and opened the door.

"But I won't be able to stay with you, the Pickles, Yuuhi or Yohime-san if I fail to join the samurais."

"… That may be so, but I am confident you will be fine in whichever path you decide to walk. Your future won't disappear just because I am not by your side everyday. Also, do not be threatened by that… poem Father told you about. Simply focus on learning as much as you can this coming days."

Maya-nee stayed with me until I got into my futon, and told me to not stay awake. But I couldn't really fall asleep despite how tired I am.

All the teachers gave me a lot of hard stuff to do, I didn't understand most of it. And I only have a month to convince them to let me be a samurai. I again grip my sheets really tight, feeling the snowy hands on my back again. I shiver under the sheets, it's as if I had ants crawling on my sides.

What would happen if I fail? How can I get better? Dad, what did you do to become a samurai?

"What can I do? How can I learn all of this?"

…

I won't get all these new things if I don't keep reading. And there was a lot of stuff to read, I didn't get to finish reading in the two hours I

got to make my homework.

I got out of the futon and went to pick up the books I had in my bag. I take a deep breath as I rub my shoulders. Let's keep reading for a while, I need to be better if I want to pass this dumb test! And I should also write down what I think of that poem before going to sleep.

After all, if I do well, then I'll have more time to play with Yuuhi. I'll do my best, both to be more like Dad and to be there for her.

# Guidance of the Claret Hollows

## Chapter 53: Guidance of the Claret Hollows

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*May 25 th . 07: 3 5 PM.*

*(Dojo. Koubuin House.)*

**[Native Takeru]**

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"Ugh!" I fall to the floor again, my sword goes flying towards the wall once more.

"You haven't improved your form at all… I told you that such aggressiveness shouldn't be present in your stride, Shirogane," Kazora-san shook his head again.

I slowly get up and go look for my sword. Gasping for air, dragging my feet as I go towards it, my teeth press onto my lips. It's always the same with him, I am getting better but you're just too good for me.

I won't cry, I won't cry in front of him again like when they gave me Dad's letter and told me to come here. Gritting my teeth, putting some tension in my arms as I take my pose, again I begin to attack.

But no matter what I try, how I attack, he always sends me to the floor in the end.

"If you still can't trade a few blows with me, this will be a pointless effort," He says, shaking his head, "Shirogane, you should stop trying to become a Royal Guard."

"… Why do you hate me that much? What did I do to you?!"

"Hate is a too strong word," He rested his sword under his arm, looking away, "I simply don't see how you could become a decent Imperial Guard with this meager skill."

"You aren't giving me any advice, you're just beating me up."

"Sigh… I have told you already, you should not be so aggressive in your stance."

"But if I don't attack I'll never win."

"And as I said before, you must not fall to emotion. It is clear you are not meditating on the code's teachings. It would be better for you to study for a different path, or to rest well from your efforts."

"… I don't wanna. I'm going to become a samurai."

He shakes his head again, taking his pose once more, "Can't you see you're only wasting your time? It would be better for you if you focused on studying more instead of being here."

"Well, Yohime-san said I could try. I won't give up until the end of the month!"

"Sigh… Whatever is to happen to you, you won't be able to surpass the expectations placed on a Royal Guard with your abilities and this attitude of yours. It is what it is," He then nodded and readied for another duel.

Again, I dash at him and try to break his guard, but after just a few seconds he starts pressuring me and I can barely keep up. Blocking his swings feels like trying to walk against a strong wind, like those times it rains so hard the umbrellas fly away even if you hold onto them hard. My feet hurting from trying to not fall back, elbows and wrists feel stiff and sore the more I parry, I again try to breath deeply to not end up slipping.

I was expecting him to knock my sword away or make me fall back, but he stops in the middle, breaking his pose. I remain quiet, sword in midair, as he furrows my brows and starts groaning.

"I'm sure you can see how fruitless this is for you, Shirogane."

"Huh?"

"You haven't improved at all, and you still can't determine how to approach me in our duels. Your inexperience is grand, your form is lacking, and you still do not have an ounce of poise in you. It would be a disgrace to the Imperial Royal Guard to let such a barbaric person join our ranks."

"Then, how can I get better?"

He sighs again and folds his sword under one of his arms as he crossed them, "I already told you what you should do, and yet you continue to fall prey to your anger. If my words and actions have not brought a change in you, however small, in this time, I can only deduce you simply won't improve."

"… You don't know that. And you always speak weird during the lessons."

"… Then, come at me and show me whether or not you have what it takes. Surprise me once, see if you can do that much at the least."

Again I took my pose and attacked him.

**SWISH!**

But I can't break his guard. What can I do? How can I win?

I try to go from his right, doing a rising slash towards his wrist. He blocks it, I keep going forward and do a downward slash. He parries it again and pushes me back. In a flash, my sword is sent flying again.

"… See? You are not improving in the least."

"I haven't lost yet. I'm not giving up," I slowly go for my sword, looking at the floor.

"It's pointless, in the end nothing will change. You can't expect to bridge this canyon in a mere month. I am telling you this for your own good, Shirogane. You should desist in your efforts to be a Royal Guard."

"… No," I sniff a bit, biting my lips to not start sobbing.

"Don't be this obstinate. You are staying overtime to train unlike Shion and Mion, and you still haven't improved. I do praise your dedication, but effort alone cannot bridge this gap. You should be using your time to hone your innate talents, wherever they lie."

"… I want to be a samurai. I… I am not giving up, Kazora-san," Maya-nee said we'd be like family. I won't… I won't let this stupid test take them away from me.

"It's Tsukuyomi-sensei," He grumbles for a while as he shakes his head, "I am only being honest. You have many expectations to meet if you desire to continue down this path, those are the rules we live by. And you… do not possess the abilities that are necessary to be chosen for this role. There are moments in life when you have to possess the courage to back down from a pointless fight. Your struggles will be pointless if you continue chasing this dream."

… I don't wanna give up.

If I do, Maya-nee and the rest will be gone. I'll be alone. I don't think I'll be able to make friends, the adults here all look at me with those same scary eyes Kazora-san sometimes has. If everybody else is like that, if I can't see the Pickles and Yuuhi, if I can't go back to see Sumika and the rest… Sniff…

I look down, trying to hide the few tears that come out. The hand that has my sword trembles a bit.

Stupid rules… It's not fair that I always have to fight against him. I am doing better than before. This isn't… This isn't…

Still crying, I frown and look up at him, taking my pose again. As he slowly takes a common pose instead of the one Maya-nee also uses, I could feel my head beating. It hurts… It feels as if I had water in my ears and someone was pressing my head from behind.

I take my first step and attack him, this time trying to do it faster than before.

"See? You're only using brute force. This is pointless, you should know better by now!" He pressures me, I take a step back and block him, "You should know how this will end. Stop chasing after impossible dreams, Shirogane."

"No! I won't… I will keep trying!"

He again makes me go back, unable to hold him off. I barely manage to meet his swings, almost losing hold of my sword for a moment. Gasping for air as he starts to move a bit faster, feeling as if my hands were hurt after carrying many heavy bags from the super, my heels dive onto the floor to not end up slipping up.

I won't give up… I won't lose anything else. I won't accept I lost yet. Raising my blade and returning the slash, gritting my teeth, my heels stomping hard as I hold my ground, as he keeps attacking, as my head began to hurt more. It felt as if I had dirt on my mouth, like when I get into a fight and my lips end up bleeding a bit, as if many mosquitoes were picking on my neck and arms all at the same time.

As Kazora-san rose his blade, I bent my knees and parried his swing and started pressuring him. The water left my ears, I inhaled through my nose and rose my sword above my shoulder as I kept going forward, enduring the itching on my neck.

He again blocked me as usual, but I aimed my sword a bit lower on the second slash, trying to hit his hands. He blocked me again, but when he went for his follow up, I took my step back and countered. And he parried again.

If I let him do his stuff he's going to tire me out again. I have to push forward and hit him once! So, breathing deeply with my nose, I stomped hard with my heels and moved forward, lowering my sword when Kazora-san had to take a step back.

***SWISH!***

***THUD!***

"Ugh*…"* I again was left on the floor. My back hurts a lot. I couldn't even see what happened just now.

I feel a hole in my stomach… I'm hungry… Also, my head hurts. How did he even block me and counter so quickly?!… Ugh, it's as if the floor was moving.

"… Shirogane, what was that?" Kazora-san moved closer, his voice slow and deep like those serious people that appear on the news at night.

"… What? I lost again," I got up slowly, avoiding his eyes. Oh, I didn't lose my sword this time.

"I am not speaking of that. When did you… When did you learn to move in such way?"

"What way? I just did what I always do."

"You weren't trying anything different?"

"… No, I was just trying to be faster. What is it?"

He remains standing there, saying nothing. Now what? Is he going to say I'm bad again?

"… This was enough for today. Go take your gear off."

"Yes," I give him a bow as he also does the same.

I go into the changing room and take off the gear. And then, I let the tears come out as I twist my lips shut. Burying my face in a towel as I cry, my arms hurt a lot… And I'm feeling kinda dizzy. I rub my forehead slowly, making circles as I try to calm myself down.

Sniff… I just have to try harder. Everything will be fine… Just remember Maya-nee's advice and you'll be fine… I'm sure…

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*Next Day. Near Noon.*

*(Dining Room.)*

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"But it's a lot, really," I complain, since I wasn't able to finish all my homework during the class.

"You shouldn't let this impair your efforts, regardless," Maya-nee said. It feels as if she were going back to using a lot of weird words again, "Have your tutors not given you any advice?"

"Well, yeah…" I sit down, she places my lunch in front of me, "Are you not eating, Maya-nee?"

"My food hasn't been brought yet, so I'll go to the kitchen now. You remain here, and remember not to-"

"Yeah, I know. I won't be rude if anyone else comes,"

Holding my gaze for a second, she then nods, "Very well. I'll return in a moment, so do start eating, Takeru," And so, she turns around and goes to the door.

Mmgh… I know already. Why is she back to the weird words, though? I didn't do anything to make her angry…

Eating my food, stealing glances at the door, I wonder what could I do to get better. The classes are really hard, I'm having a lot of trouble just to understand what the teachers explain to me. And it's not even what I'll have to see if I wanna be a samurai.

Even when I do my best… I'm not getting any better… Maybe that's why she's mad? Is she… disappointed?

Then, the door opens. But as I look towards it, Maya-nee doesn't come in. Instead, a short samurai in a red dress, that's stronger than the one Maya-nee uses now, with his hair combed backwards, in a softer shade of purple than Yuuhi's, and an odd horn coming forward on above his forehead, was the one who entered the dining room.

He looked at me and we remained staring at the other for a moment. Tilting my head, furrowing my brows a bit, I return his stare but he says nothing.

"… Who are you?"

Seeming to blink fast for a second, he coughs a bit, "That is my question. What would you be doing here, little one?" He also speaks weird.

"I'm eating lunch."

"Yes, that I can see. However… Why would you be here?"

"… Because I'm eating lunch?" Tilting my head again, I give him a confused gaze. Can't he see I'm eating?

"No, I… Ahem, this dining room is for members of the House. Who brought you here?" He asked in a soft, calm voice, not looking angry or anything.

"Maya-nee brought me here, like always."

"Oh, so…" Then, he suddenly stops and stares at me, really surprised for some reason, "A moment, who did… By 'Maya-nee',

are you perhaps referring to Maya Tsukuyomi?"

"Yeah, who else?" Pouting at him for a moment, I go back to my rice when I see him keeping quiet again.

What a weird samurai, what other Maya could I be talking about. Often, the other samurai either give me a scary gaze or they just leave me alone. What is it with him now? Walking slowly to the other side of the table and sitting in front of me, looks like he was staring. What? Is he gonna be mean too?

"Excuse me, I didn't introduce myself," But then he smiled, sounding friendly, "My name is Masahide Amato. Who would you be?"

"I'm Takeru Shirogane," Hesitating for a moment, I offer him my hand. He takes it and gives me a slowl handshake.

"… Could you be Kageyuki Shirogane's son, perchance?"

… Huh?

Did… he…

"Did you know Dad?"

"Yes, I was one of his fellows in the Royal Guard," He says as he ends the handshake, leaning back into his chair.

"Um… Did… Did you fight against the monsters with him?" Unable to look down, I barely manage to whisper the question out.

"… Yes," Making a pained face, he also remains quiet.

"Um… Was Dad… a good samurai?" Picking at my food, I watch him as he seems to go back to normal.

"Yes, your Father was a fine Royal Guard, indeed," Making a small smile, he again looks my way, "If I might ask, why have you come to the House, Shirogane-kun?"

Can't help but to puff my cheeks at him, "My name is Takeru, don't call me Shirogane."

But he doesn't seem upset, instead he chuckles a bit, "Do forgive me. So Takeru-kun, why have you been brought here?"

He doesn't sound mean… and he did greet me back. But I can't tell him I'm part of Maya-nee's family.

"Hmm… Maya-nee told me I shouldn't tell other samurai, because they might get upset."

"Huh? How do you mean? Why would I be…" Then, he grabs his chin, groaning for a while, before looking at me again, "Could it be that you are not visiting, but are living in the House?"

"Eh?! How did you guess?!"

"Well, I heard once from your Father that you had no other relatives," He said, slowly nodding, "If you are eating here, brought by Maya-sama, and a 'samurai' might take offense in your presence… It is one of the possible deductions I can reach."

Looking into my dish, it feels as if ants were crawling all over me. What do I say now? He might get mad if I tell him the truth, like the rest have been until now. But he did knew Dad… But Dad never talked about his time in the samurais. He's still gazing at me, keeping quiet.

As I wondered what I should say to him, the door opened. Maya-nee entered the room, a few maids behind her carrying some food. They gave Masahide-san his plate as well as place Maya-nee's one by my side, and both of them thanked them as they left.

She then sat by my side, gazing at him, "Is something the matter, Masahide-san? Is the food not to your liking?"

"No, nothing of the sort," He replied, still calm, "Actually… If I may, might I ask why have you brought Takeru-kun here, Maya-sama?"

… So he does have a problem with me. Why are they all like that?

"I suggest you to not inquire into this matter. Yohime-sama was the one who allowed Takeru to reside in the House," She said in the scary tone.

"… Is that so?" He doesn't seem scared, though, "However, that is not what I wished to ask. Why did you bring the boy here? Leaving him alone, where others could come in and find him. Takeru-kun did say other nobles might take offense at him being here, you should be more careful Maya-sama."

Is he just worried then? I don't get it… Why are they arguing now?

"I would like to ask you to refrain from speaking of matters you know nothing about, Masahide-san," She narrowed her eyes, tapping her glasses. But he still keeps calm, returning her glare without flinching, "Whether you accept it or not, Takeru is now a fellow of us. I would mind my tongue if I were you."

"… A fellow? Is he not a vassal?"

Maya-sama scowled at him before calming down again, "Tell me Masahide-san, what do you know of Takeru?"

"Maya-nee, why are you angry?" Pulling the sleeve of her red dress, I ask. He seems surprised at this, for some reason.

"I am not angry, Takeru," She says, still sounding a bit upset, "It seems Masahide-san does not fully understand your position, therefore I suppose it falls to me to inform him of your situation."

"… Since you said he is a fellow and not a vassal, that means Takeru-kun is going to join the Royal Guard?" He asks, raising a brow in confusion.

"Indeed. He is currently being trained to determine his placement in our ranks, even if his induction's area has not been decided yet."

"I am going to join the samurai!" Puffing my cheeks, I glare at her. Why won't she trust in me?

She looks at me and sighs again, "As I was saying, due to his father's contributions and his personal situation, Yohime-sama extended a helping hand to Takeru. He is now one of us, and he's currently taking a test to determine which path he is to follow. Ergo, speaking against his stay here is tantamount to going against Yohime-sama's wishes," She finished tapping her glasses once more before starting to eat, sounding scary again.

"I never spoke against his situation, however," But he's still calm, drinking some water, "I was merely surprised to see a commoner being allowed to be here, of all places. I do recommend you to be more tactful with him, Takeru-kun did display clear worry about others' views of him. It would be harmful to him to be put in a delicate situation."

"Takeru, is this true? Did anything happen?"

"Well…" I slowly swayed from left to right, avoiding Maya-nee's stare. When she didn't stop staring, I nodded, barely lifting my voice, "Yesterday, a few samurai came here before you and left really fast saying I smelled bad."

They said that they didn't stand the 'reeking stench of a lowborn', whatever that means, and left as quickly as they entered. I dunno what they wanted to say, but they were obviously saying mean things about me, that same scary glare some give me in the hallways. And I don't even know what I did wrong to anger them like that…

Masahide-san sighs heavily, shaking his head as he places a hand on his wide forehead, Maya-nee's brows get all low and spiky.

"… Is that why you stayed more time in the bath last night?" She asks and I nod, lowering my head to the table, "Pay no heed to those foolish words. Remember my advice, do not flare up in vain. Serenity is a key virtue of a samurai, Takeru." She petted my head and I returned upwards, giving her a nod. "Ahem…" She then looked at Masahide-san again, a finger on the outer rim of her glasses, "As I was saying, he is now another fellow of ours. Therefore, I suggest you to not-"

"I have nothing against him. Do not forget I fought alongside his father, Maya-sama," He said, now sounding a bit upset, "I am merely at a loss of words towards these news. For a commoner to be admitted into our House, for you to show such concern over his situation, it is something I never expected to hear. Even less for the boy to be the son of one of my comrades in arms."

Hey, what did he mean about Maya-nee? He isn't being mean to her, is he? Looking at her, her brows lowered just a tiny bit… She's angry.

"I see… However, may I ask what do you mean regarding my… concern over Takeru's situation? Are you insinuating anything, perhaps?" And she's back to the scary voice, too.

"… Do you truly not remember the time we were tasked to patrol the city together during our training? What did a certain someone do when a pair of children started arguing about what sweets they wanted to buy?" He asks, giving her a dubious gaze.

"That's… That was only one time."

"And what of that time a little girl that was crossing the street didn't want to walk after the lights turned red?" He again asks.

"That girl and her mother were in serious danger. You should be well aware of that, Masahide-san. I only did what we obviously had to do."

"That may be so, but you could have grabbed her arm instead. I believe that girl's ear is still red to this day after such a strong pulling,"

Huh… I do see Maya-nee doing something like that, though. Giggling a bit, she then glared at me and I stopped short.

"And what of the times our civilians asked you for directions? If I recall correctly, you-"

"Masahide-san…" Maya-nee tapped her glasses, her lips twitching, "I suppose you are saying I am not the most tactful member of our ranks, am I correct?"

"Well… Takeru-kun, what do you think? Do you think Maya-sama is perhaps too strict?"

"Hmm… Sometimes," He chuckles, one of Maya-nee's hands seemed to tense for a second, "But she's really kind, you know. So stop saying bad things about Maya-nee," Pouting at him, I arch my brows while giving him a mean gaze.

But he chuckled again, making another small smile, "Do forgive me. However, if I may, why does he refer to you in such a personal manner?"

"Well… Takeru refuses to speak formally, no matter how much I tried to make him do so," She answered, going back to her food and a calm tone.

"But for what reason does he refer to you as a sister?" He insists.

Maya-nee's eyes lowered, her hands stopped and laid atop the table. She got all quiet… W-Why does she not want to answer?

"Maya-nee? What's wrong?" Couldn't help it so my voice creaked as I stared.

She looked at me, not seeming angry or anything, then closed her eyes for a moment. Grabbing her sleeve again, she tapped her glasses before opening her eyes once more. Going back to the old cold face she used to make, she waited to answer for a moment to look at me again.

"… I was tasked with the protection of Takeru for some time, Masahide-san," She began slowly, "During that time, he became attached to me and I allowed him to refer to me in such a way. And now, Takeru is aiming to join us in the Royal Guard. Therefore…" She narrowed her eyes at him, embers and sparks heating her tone, "I suppose that allowing him to continue to refer to me as his sister would do good to him, considering his circumstances. Again, I suggest you to not oppose his stay here, even if he should mend his manners."

"… Does that mean that you are acting against the code, Maya-sama?" He asks, now sounding serious. What's his problem?

"Whatever are you talking about?" And she sends a sharp slash at him with her glare.

Why is she so angry? Am I giving her trouble? And again with that sad code, too.

"You're acting on emotion," Keeping the serious eyes but without any fire in his voice, he leans on the table, "The you I knew would never allow a peasant to be here in such an arrangement, much less to display such closeness to your person so openly. A single generation of service should not bestow this privilege to anyone. And yet, here you are… Allowing a commoner to be trained as a fellow, allowing him to address you as family."

Couldn't help to look down, plucking my lips as I let go of Maya-nee's sleeve. So I am being a bother, then? Maya-nee left the silence hanging for a moment, when I looked up she was giving him a really nasty glare, as angry as I haven't seen her in a while. He didn't look away, or even seem scared.

"Masahide-san, must I remind you that Yohime-sama herself allowed Takeru to reside in the house? Are you speaking against her wishes, by any chance?"

"Do not dodge the question, please," Leaning forward, he insisted, "How do you explain, justify these actions? I wish to hear that answer, considering how you were before you left this is nothing short of a shock."

Mmgh… Feeling my fists beginning to tighten, my lips too, I wanna scream at him. Why is he being mean to her? What does he know? But if I do… I'll just give her more problems… But I don't like how he's talking about her now… Ugh…

"The code orders us to protect our fellows," She shoots out immediately, "Takeru, being the son of one of our men, has been taken under our care for this very reason."

"And yet, the code forbids us from acting on emotion, from showing favoritism to anyone," He replies, still calm as he meets her eyes, "All boons must be earned. His father being but an inductee, this would raise many questions. Even more towards your… relation with him. The little one seems to like you much, and I suppose you have been taking good care of him to earn such affection. Isn't that right, Takeru-kun?" Then, he looks at me, nodding with a smile.

"Yeah, Maya-nee is awesome. Why are you being mean to her?"

"I am not, I'm just surprised is all. Maya-sama used to be…" He runs a hand over his hair, giving her a look, "far more colder than how she has been today."

"Well… That's true, Maya-nee was kinda scary at first," I nod, and then hear her groan a bit.

"I see. Well, it is good to see you're comfortable with her now," Still smiling, he nods again. He doesn't seem to be mean, then, what's up with him? "So, Maya-sama, I don't ask for all the answers but, what

caused this turn of events? Why go against the code so obviously? If this were noticed by anyone, I am sure many would be the troubles coming our way."

"… No one is acting against the code," Narrowing her eyes even more, she leaned back on the chair, "As a fellow of us, we shall be watching over Takeru from now on. He isn't merely staying here, as I said before he will either become a public servant or a Royal Guard. As a soon-to-be recruit, it is only natural for him to be around us, so that he becomes accustomed to his new life."

"I see… Perhaps we could continue this little matter at another time?" He asks, almost hesitating, and then she nods.

I don't get what just happened… Are they friends or not? How did he get along with Dad?

"Um… Masahide-san?"

"Hm? What is it?" Looking at me, he doesn't seem to mind I used his name.

"… Can you tell me how you worked with Dad?"

Giving a nod, he then answered my questions as he ate. At first I tried to be polite, but since he seemed nice I ended up talking as always. Chuckling when I did, saying I really resembled Dad, he kept telling me stories of how they patrolled around a Castle and made some reports or something.

"Well… It is time for you to return to your studies, Takeru," Maya-nee stood up, cleaning her mouth with a tissue and then grabbing my arm.

"Eh? But I wanna talk with Masahide-san a bit more."

"Takeru, do remember to be respectful," She then sighs when I pout at her.

"It is alright. He is but a child, I have not taken offense," He raises a hand, still smiling.

"I see. Then, we shall be on our way," Holding hands, we stand up and go to the door.

Masahide-san also stood up and exited the room, but as we did a samurai in a pale gray uniform was coming towards us. Standing tight and doing that hand thing to her forehead, the woman then looked at Maya-nee.

"Maya-sama, your Father is calling for you. Please follow me to the meeting room."

"… I see. However, I have to take Shirogane to his classroom, therefore-"

"Kazora-sama told me to bring you to him immediately," She replies, giving Maya-nee a small bow, "It seems he needs to relay an important message to you, Ma'am."

Maya-nee tried to stay cool, but still sent me a rather worried gaze for her. Mmgh… So she still doesn't think I know where the classroom is?

"Maya-sama, if duty calls for you, perhaps I could take the boy to this… classroom he has to go to?" Masahide-san suggests, kinda hesitating.

"As much as I'd like to accept your offer, I am the one tasked with watching over him," She said as firm as always.

"However, your Father is now calling for you. You've made his situation clear. I will merely accompany him to this room in your stead," And he insists.

She closes her eyes, thinking for a while, "Very well, I accept your offer. Remember that he is under our protection, Masahide-san," He

nods, then she looks at me, "Do work hard on your afternoon classes, Takeru. I shall go for you at the usual time."

I nod, slowly, and she goes away I wave at her, but she doesn't even turn back. Pouting a bit, furrowing my brows, I just keep watching her back until she takes a turn.

…

"Well, shall we go to this classroom, Takeru-kun? Do you know where it is?" He asks, coming closer.

"Yeah…" Turning around, my feet drag themselves in the direction of the classroom, "Say Masahide-san, is it hard to be a samurai?"

"Huh? Well… It is not an easy job, that is true," He nods once, sounding serious, "Why do you wish to join the Royal Guard, Takeru-kun?"

"I want to be like Dad. And if I don't…" Looking down, I feel a cold shiver as I thought about what would happen then.

"What is it?"

"Well… I won't be able to be with Maya-nee anymore."

"You truly do like her much, it seems."

"Of course I do! Why are you so mean to Maya-nee?"

"Haha, forgive me. It is just that I am accustomed to how she used to be. It is a surprise to see her in this new light, that is all. By the way Takeru-kun, what are you going to be doing now?"

"I have physics and then… I think it was another history class?"

"So, you're being instructed. I assume you do know how harsh the training will be for you if you do join the Royal Guard's Training Program?"

"Yeah, Maya-nee has been telling me that I shouldn't worry and stuff. Masahide-san, how did Dad become a samurai?"

"… I don't really know. When I joined the Guard he was already a member of the squad I was assigned to."

"Uuh…" Just when I thought I could get a hint or something… "So, um, what do you do with the samurai?"

"Me? Well, I also am a pilot as your father was. However…" Looking kinda sad, he starts to slow down, "due to my station, I've quite the number of burdens on my shoulders."

"What does that mean? Are you in trouble?"

"No, nothing of the sort. What I meant to say is that, since I returned from the frontlines, and I'm the only son of the Head of my House, many people are expecting much from me now and… well, it is exhausting at times," He sighs, as heavy as Maya-nee has been doing lately, getting more and more sad as he rubs one of his arms.

"So you're like the Yuuhi of your house?"

"Eh…" Saying nothing, leaving his mouth open, looks like a cat after a thunder, "Takeru-kun, are you acquainted with Yuuhi-sama?"

"Well… Yes, we're friends," Looking down, then stealing a gaze at him, Masahide-san doesn't seem angry like the others. So he's just surprised?

"What in blazes… However, you truly are friends with her?"

"Yeah, we play together on the weekends. Why? Is it weird?"

"Shocking more than anything, to be honest," Crossing his arms, he sighs while arching a brow, "I suppose she must cherish you much for you to be allowed to use her name in such fashion. You're truly one surprise after another."

But I always called her like that… What's so weird about it? It's her name. Adults are so weird sometimes.

"But, in the end, are you something like her for your house?"

"Well yes, something of the sort," Smiling again, he chuckled a bit more, "Because of that, both my family and fellows are placing many expectations on me, so… I do understand how arduous your days must be, trying to appease such insurmountable exigencies," Clouding all over, he again rubbed his arm.

"Does your arm hurt?"

"Huh? Oh…" Chuckling as he saw his hand, again he smiled at me, "No, I'm merely bracing for the coming duels that will assuredly be requested of me."

"Why do you have to fight? Did someone sent you a challenge?"

"In a way, yes. You see, my older sister is very dedicated to her kendo lessons so…" Again looking a bit sad, and scared, a hand goes to scratch his ear, "I'm convinced she'll request many duels from me in these days."

"I see… So the samurais have to fight in many duels, huh."

"Well, while that isn't untrue, in my case it is more of a… family custom, to be honest."

As I asked him why, he told me that since he was part of the Shinpan, who are apparently the red samurais, the other samurais are expecting much from him. And because of that, it seems his sister is really motivated to be a good samurai and also pushes him to do his best too. Even if she seems kinda scary, considering how blue his face looks when speaking of her. I wonder if that's why Maya-nee is also tired, since she's also a red samurai.

But maybe… He hasn't gotten mad, and is talking to me without a problem. Maybe… Could he give me just a little help? "Um… Can I ask you something about my training?"

"Of course, what would it be?"

"Um, well, Kazora-san says that just making effort isn't enough, that I need to be calm and stuff to truly learn how to be a good samurai… But I don't really understand that well. How can I get better?"

"Hmm… So you're also familiar with Kazora-sama, huh?" He sounds calmly surprised, to call it something, as he stares at me.

"He doesn't really like me much," Can't help but to puff my cheeks, remembering the lessons at the dojo.

"I suppose you should start with the code. Also, managing your time is of essence."

"Managing… my time?" Tilting me head, I stare at him.

"I meant knowing how much time you dedicate to each subject. How are you studying as of now?"

We kept talking as we went to the classroom, as I told him of what I saw so far on my classes. He recommended me to not stay up until late, to properly use my time instead of exhausting myself, as well as other pointers about math. Despite how I'm talking normally, he doesn't seem offended or anything.

When we arrived at the room, no one was there. We kept talking as I showed Masahide-san my exercises and what I was reading now, but no one came to the room as the minutes passed.

"Perhaps something happened to your instructor?" He suggests, looking at the clock that's on the wall.

"It's weird. They're always here when I come back from lunch," I mean, twenty minutes passed since the hour when the classes

usually start here.

What happened now? Maybe… they don't wanna teach me anymore? B-Because I'm bad?

Then, he patted the books, giving me a smile, "Well… I am no expert but I do know how this works. Until your teacher comes back, what do you say I aid you in your homework?"

"Really?!"

"I have not been called to a meeting yet, so I can assist you for a moment if you so wish."

"Thanks a lot, Masahide-san!" Getting closer, I shake his hands with much impulse, making him chuckle a bit.

Finally having someone to talk with, I quickly sit by his side and we begin to study. Masahide-san could give me new, more clear explanations on what I should try to do, even on those dumb subjects that I don't get well. As the minutes passed, he also gave me some advice on my writing, and how I approach my homework. Just as we finished part of what I had to see today, as I was getting a bit tired, he instead closed to books and began asking me questions.

"So, are you also being trained in the way of the sword, Takeru?"

"Oh, yeah. I go to the dojo after my classes are over. Kazora-san is the one who fights with me but…"

"But?"

"He always wins and doesn't give me any advice," Once more, can't help but to pout, "He keeps repeating that weird code, how I have to be calm and all to really learn, but he doesn't tell me what I'm doing wrong," Then, I bury my chin onto my arms.

"I see. What do you think of the code, Takeru?" He asks, curiously.

"Hmm… It's really weird. It says I can't be scared, angry or anything. That I have to stay calm and meditate. But it also says I have to hug death. I don't like that part."

"Well… Perhaps one could… understand the code in another way." Eyes closed, his tone changed a bit, getting slow and a bit hesitant, as he thought.

"Hm? How?"

"For example… Fear and passion are usually regarded as negative characteristics, however, it is due to them that one can surpass oneself. While remaining in control of one's feelings, by silencing all internal turmoil, would let you focus, it also… binds you, in a way."

"Um… What does turmoil means?"

"It means your mind becomes stirred, distraught. Let me give you an example. Normally, a pond looks to be calm, doesn't it?" I nod, "However, if the fish that live in it start to swim and try to eat each other, the water will be filled with ripples, would it not?"

"Being all messy on the inside… Is that what this internal turmoil means?"

He then nods, seeming happy, "Yes, that is precisely what it means. So… Ahem… What I'm trying to say is, you don't have to force yourself to always being calm and focused. While being aware of one's feelings is important, it is a hard state to reach and even more to remain in. But that doesn't mean you cannot be upset from time to time. If you never express your thoughts, in time that will cause grave harm to you. At least, that's what I believe."

"Ooh… So I have to try to be calm, but not all the time. Enough to not get angry, right?"

"Something of the sort, yes. And regarding the 'hug to death' part… It does not mean you should rejoice in death. Sometimes…"

"Sacrifices and stuff, I know," I again pout.

"Well… Precisely," And he again nods, sighing this time.

"Masahide-san, why is the last part of the poem so sad?"

"Sad? I do not think it is particularly saddening," He rose a brow as he looked my way.

Then I try to explain to him, with my words and gestures, what I think of these last lines. How they're telling me I'm weak because I get afraid and angry, that I can't have dreams because a samurai is but a servant, that I can't ever doubt, and that it's alright for people to 'go away' or die. Masahide-san folds his arms, his eyes almost closing, as he thinks on what I said. Seeming to be lost in thought for a moment, when he looks back at me he wasn't angry or anything. Narrowing his thick brows, he nodded before speaking up in a serious tone.

"Well… I think that feeling fear and being controlled by it are different states of mind. The second one is what the code tells you to beware, but it is only human to feel fear Takeru-kun. You shouldn't fear death, but that does not equal you not caring about yours or your fellows' lives."

"But Kazora-san says I can't be afraid or I'll end up failing."

"You shouldn't act on your fear, but it isn't a sin to be afraid," He says, smiling at me, "The same goes for passion and anger. You surely will become upset at times, but you shouldn't act on the impulse. At those times is when you should calm down, clear your mind."

"So… I'm not bad for being afraid or getting angry?"

"But of course not. Kazora-sama's words most probably mean that you need to be ready for when… it's time to part ways with someone, but it doesn't mean that life doesn't matter," Sighing a bit

heavily, he leans back on the chair, "Perhaps he sees how easily you fall prey to emotion and is only enforcing this teaching to aid you solve this problem of yours."

Crossing my arms, I groan a bit, "Well, I know I shouldn't get so angry… But Kazora-san said that one servant's life is nothing compared to the Empire. I think that's really sad."

Seeming to agree with me while grimacing, he nods, "… He is right, however. One person is nothing compared to the Empire, but the Empire is made up of all those individual people. It is a complex matter to explain but… You shouldn't let selfishness bind you, everyone is as important as the rest."

"Hmm…" I rest my head on the table, groaning a bit, trying to understand, "So, the samurai have to protect everyone?"

"They try to. That line means that you need to be ready to sacrifice your own time to protect and serve everyone else. To fight to the last breath for those you love, those you wish to safeguard, that is the ultimate duty of a warrior."

"Um… Did Dad believe in that last line too?" I look at him, unable to stop my hands from shaking a bit. Did he really… think something so sad was right?

"… I suppose he did, because he fought to the end to make sure you would remain safe. However, you shouldn't overthink this. In time, you will reach your own answer, Takeru-kun."

"Really? But I don't have much time. If I don't convince them soon, I'll never be a samurai."

"Even so, you will remain here in the house. You do not have to force yourself to join the Royal Guard."

"Mmgh… But I wanna be a samurai. I won't be able to stay with Maya-nee if I'm not."

He then closed his eyes for a moment, arms crossed again. After a moment of silence, he looked at me, "Takeru-kun, what is the subject you're having the most trouble with?"

"Hm? Math and history. And I still haven't won a single duel in the dojo." Sulking a bit, can't help but to be sour as lemons.

"Well, let's review some of those lessons in the mean time."

"Eh?! But… But, what if the teachers come in the middle? Aren't you busy?"

Then, he smiles, "Let's make a deal, then. If you manage to surpass some of the exercises, I shall try to give you some pointers regarding your Kendo efforts. Does that seem like a fair deal to you?"

"Really?! Then, I'll do my best," Raising both of my fists, I nod fast twice. If he's willing to help me… then I just gotta do it!

"Then, let's begin. I might be called to a meeting, so let us not waste time," We nod at each other, opening the books again.

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**Around an hour later…**

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"Might I ask why you take such an aggressive form?"

"This is how Maya-nee fights so I wanna be like her," I answer, getting out of the stance.

"I see… Sadly, I am a user of our customary style so I do not know how Maya-sama's could be enhanced. Perhaps you could try different stances until you find one you are comfortable with? Is there any step in your stride that you have trouble with?"

"I can't even hit Kazora-san. I have to at least do that once, he said that only then he'll accept me to be a samurai."

Masahide-san groans, making a rather pained face, "Well, as I said before, managing your steps is crucial. Remember that the blade is meant to deal lethal damage regardless of the strength of your swings, so you do not need to put so much force into them. Your leg work is what you should focus on to ingrain the basics as good as you can."

"… Why do you all speak so weird?"

"What I meant to say is, focus on your steps and on how you move first. Your posture is what you should polish first," He remarks, and I smile back.

Then, the door opened and Maya-nee entered the room. She looks slightly troubled, her brows are a bit arched.

"… As I thought, you remained by his side. Masahide-san, has Takeru given you any troubles?"

"Why, of course not," He replies with another smile, "I merely remained by his side since I wasn't called back."

"Maya-nee, what happened to the teacher?" Once I get closer, she ruffles my hair.

Her eyes look at me for a second before answering, looking kinda tired, "Nothing you should concern yourself with. Your next class shall begin shortly, so prepare your textbooks," She then looks up towards him, tapping her glasses, "Masahide-san, Yohime-sama is calling for you. Please follow me."

"I see. Well, it is time for me to leave. This was a fun studying session. Goodbye, Takeru-kun," He came closer, offering me his hand.

"No, I don't like goodbyes," Pouting, I got closer, "Since we're gonna see each other again, it's 'See you later'." I then gave him a short, but firm, handshake, and he returned it.

"I see… See you later, then. Good luck in your training from now on. If I ever visit the house again, I'll come see how you're faring."

"Thanks for helping me today, Masahide-san. Good luck to you too!" Smiling widely at him, then he ended our handshake and went to the door.

Maya-nee told me to sit down and then the teacher entered the room, who then bowed down to both of them. Waving at them, Masahide-san waved back with another smile as he left, as Maya-nee also did before closing the door.

# Stranger

A/N: And we've reached the end of this batch. Answering some of the last reviews, I know this is a great diversion from the plot but I feel like this has to be placed now.

Those who read it before should remember how sudden Takeru's paranoia was, how most of the stuff related to Native was kept behind bars, and, how a reader aptly put it, most of the cast was falling to the Awful Truth trope before. It ain't perfect, but I'm trying to fix that with the constant flashbacks.

Yes, I know many would rather have me jump into Sadogashima but I don't wanna have some sections come out of left field later. Also, fair warning, there's still two flashback chaps left, those who read D&R should know what's ahead and how it plays into the Paranoia arc.

Won't make any promises about lenght and pacing, one of the next chaps is gonna be huge again so it'll take time until I post again. Sorry if these chapters drag on.

As always, thanks for reading. Stay safe.

Zuoriel

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**Chapter 54: Stranger**

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*June 1 st . 06: 5 2 PM.*

*(Dojo. Koubuin House.)*

**[Native Takeru]**

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"Ugh!" I take a step back, avoiding Mion's attack.

"What is it, Takeru? You're not afraid now, are you?" She taunts me, smirking much.

"Of course not, you dumb pickle!" I raise my sword and go at her.

Mion starts pushing me back again, but I slowly stop attacking, watching her moves. When I think I see an opening, I take a sidestep and send a slash at her wrists. She blocks it and then does a follow up, hitting me in the chest.

"Another victory for Mion," Kazora-san says from the sides, "Shirogane, I believe I told you to stop doing those sidesteps. During a kendo match you must face your opponents frontally."

"I still do, I just dodge her attacks."

"No, you should not. What did I tell you before? Think as if you were fighting on a bridge, you cannot move to the sides in such a case."

"Mmgh…"

"Well, let us proceed. Shion, now you shall spar against Mion. Maya, I'll leave them in your care," Maya-nee nods as the pickles get in position, "Shirogane, come with me to the other end."

I follow him, sighing heavily. I'm totally spent today. My teachers said it was time to give me some tests to see how much I learned in this week. Back in school, I used to think that tests that have a lot of questions were super scary. But today I learned something real nasty. Exams that have only a few questions are way scarier.

They only had three or less questions, and most stuff wasn't like the exercises in the books. I think I didn't do very well in them. And I still can't do well enough in the dojo, Mion and Shion won super fast and move really well too.

Kazora-san stops walking, but doesn't get in the area where we usually practice.

"What is it, Kazora-san?"

"Tsukuyomi-sensei, Shirogane," Again with the narrowed brows, what's with him? "In any case, practice your swings and footwork here for the moment," He hasn't fought with me today yet. He's being kinda weird.

Oh well, whatever. I take a pose and start swinging the wooden sword. When Kazora-san claps, I do one more slash. When he whistles, I switch to another pose and do a different swing. Frontal downwards, frontal upwards, belly slashes, wide slashes.

"Haa… Haa… Sei!"

I inhale sharply with my nose as I keep practicing, trying to not break the flow. I can somehow taste my sweat in my mouth, my feet are as upset as a kitty falling into a pool full of water.

"Alright, that is enough."

"Haa… Phew… So how was today's training, Kazora-san?"

"… You simply refuse to refer to me as you should," He shakes his head, folding his arms, "Also, your footwork is still formless. Even when you reach a steady pace, your feet refuse to focus on a trail."

"… I don't get it. What's up with my feet?"

"As I said, you should try to fight as if you were fighting on a bridge, however your movements are… odd," Giving me a hard stare, he seems confused, "It's as if… you were wobbling. Instead of being quiet in position, why must you sway from left to right?"

"… What do you mean, why? I can't dodge if I don't move. How can I make good attacks if I only attack from the front?"

"Sigh… Shirogane, you should not take this approach. It is one thing to aim at your adversaries' sides, and another entirely to move sideways during a duel. Before advancing further, you have to master the basics."

"But in the mangas the samurais don't always have to face their enemies in a bridge. What if I have to fight in an open field one day?"

"While it is true that in a real fight you have to avoid your adversaries' attacks, you must first polish your form."

"But why can't I keep moving like this if in the end I'll have to do that?"

"Sigh… You should stop talking back, as well. This is the most proper way to learn, if you don't master the basics you will never progress further than that," He folds his arms, nodding to himself.

"… Fine, I'll try to stop moving like that."

"Now, do remember to keep your poise. It is understandable that you would be upset, however you must-"

"Not get angry. I know, Kazora-san."

He again shakes his head, "Then, let the teachings show in your actions Shirogane. Well then, let's see… It seems that duel is over with."

The Pickles had finished their duel, Mion was smiling while Shion puffed a cheek as they took off their headgear. So Mion won this time, huh?

"All right you three, that shall be all for today," Kazora-san said, "Us two shall remain here for some more moments," They then gave him a bow, Maya-nee looking straight at me.

"… Very well. Please do not be late for dinner, Father," Kazora-san groaned a bit, closing his eyes, "Shion, Mion, let us go to the

changing room."

"Shirogane, we should also."

We all went to our changing rooms. Getting back into my comfy clothes, I joked with Mion once I got out, making Shion frown and say it was the last time she was gonna lose. I waved at the pickles as they left, Shion still pouting and marching away with loud steps as Mion giggled. Maya-nee nodded at me before closing the door.

"Shirogane, seiza," Kazora-san said, pointing in front of him as he sat down in the middle of the dojo. I sit in the way he taught me to, and look at him as he caresses the top of his head for a while, "Well… It has been a week since you started living here."

"Yeah… Are you going to give me a test too?"

"… One could call it that, yes," Hauu… Don't tell me it has just a few questions too. He then looked at me, resting his hands on his knees, "Shirogane, I am sure you already know what I am going to say."

"… That I'm not good enough," I puff a cheek and look away.

"Indeed. I know Yohime-sama would not agree with me, however I believe it would be better not only for you, but for the rest as well if you accepted your limitations," He insisted, twirling his beard.

"What do you mean, the rest? I'm not being bad, I'm not giving Maya-nee or the Pickles any trouble!"

"I know you have been behaving well these last days, but that is not what I am talking about. As a father and uncle, I simply cannot let this matter rest," He folded his arms, looking straight at me, "Allow me to cut to the chase. Shirogane, I suppose you are still determined to become a Royal Guard?"

"Yes."

He squinted his eyes really hard for a second before going back to normal, "Then, do you truly think yourself able to reach your goal with this lower than average performance?"

"… I am getting better."

"Indeed, but not fast enough. And if were you to fail, my daughters and Mion will be truly saddened, as well as Yuuhi-sama," He closes his eyes and breathes with his nose, then looks at me again without the scary eyes, "I do want you to know that I see what meager improvements you're making, however, they are in no way enough."

"But… I don't wanna give up."

"Have you thought about what I just said? How would the others take your failing?"

"Huh? I… I don't know…"

Stroking his beard, he looks up, "As much as I denied it, I can only admit your presence did help Shion and Mion to stop clashing with each other as they did before, as both Maya and Mana said."

"… They're still bickering all the time, though. Especially over the sweets."

"Well, yes, that is true," He then smiled and chuckled for a little while, "However, they're no longer as cold as they were when you first met them, are they?" Hmm… I nod as I fold my arms. They were kinda mean back then, "And precisely because of that, you need to give up on this dream of yours."

"Huh?! What has that to do with anything?"

"… More than you think. Simply put, if you were to be put in another role, you wouldn't be able to meet them as often as you do now. And I believe… they will suffer your absence much," He winced, his voice

getting a bit harsh, "The same goes for Maya, of course. I believe it best for you to slowly take some distance from them and-"

"No!"

"Shirogane, it is rude to-"

"No! I'm not… I'm not going away. They… They said we would be like family if I pass these tests. Why do you want me to go away if you don't hate me?"

"… Do you truly love them as if they were your family?"

"Yeah! Maya-nee has been with me for a really long time, and the Pickles are also really good friends. Why do you want me to go away? Are you going to start screaming at me like when you came to my house?" I gulp as I wait for him to answer, feeling my breaths rush in and out and my heart beating really fast.

He sighs heavily, ruffling his hair, "If you truly do care about them, then think of how they will take your absence or your failure. I know you are but a child, but try to see the impact your words and actions have on others."

"Eh?"

The impact… on others… For some reason, my neck got all tight and I could feel a lot of ants walking on my back again.… I don't like that phrase.

"Shirogane?"

"I… don't like that word."

"Hm? It is the truth, however," He points a finger upwards, his tone getting slow but still serious, "They will be truly saddened to part ways with you, as you will be too, no doubt. And that will affect their daily performance, I am sure. However, before you retort as you always do, it is not only a matter of results."

"What do you mean? I've been doing my best, now what do I have to do?"

"… You still do not follow our rules as you should," He folded his arms again, "You do not refer to me as you should, do not speak as you should, and do not conduct yourself as you should during dinner, to give you some examples. It's as if you were an outsider instead of the fellow you should be."

… So he does think I'm a stranger. Am I that… different? I can't… do anything about that?

"That is why you should turn back before you and the rest end up suffering unnecessarily."

"Why… Why don't you believe in me? I can… I can be polite when I have to!"

"It is not about 'when' but about 'always' being polite. Maya has been sighing much lately, ever since you were made to live here. Care to guess why that happens?"

"Is it… my fault?" He nods slowly, "But I've… I've been good! I didn't fight or break anything!"

"That is a very low standard, if we can even call it that," He ruffled his hair and shook his head as Maya-nee sometimes does, "If you wish to be one of us, you should have been acting in image of our own ways. And it is clear that… you truly favor a more relaxed way of being. A Royal Guard must be polite and proper, and since you seem to not be able to even show some manners in your usual stance, people will continue to see you as an outsider."

"Really? But… But I've been trying to be good…"

"Frankly, I do not comprehend why Maya hasn't taught you formal speech after all these years," Shaking his head, again he sighs, "You need to always be polite, otherwise we must always be on the

lookout to see whether you are getting yourself into trouble. Surely you do not wish to burden Maya or Yohime-sama any more, do you?" I nod, looking down, feeling a faint shiver in my neck, "If you truly dislike being forced to use such manners, if you are beginning to feel overwhelmed in the dojo or in your tests… Perhaps it would be for the best for you to be given a common role, where you won't need to shoulder as many burdens as you're asked to as of now."

"But I won't be able to stay with Maya-nee."

"… And if you keep clinging to them, you will only make the separation all the harder on all of you," He nods, looking straight into my eyes.

"Why do you keep saying that? Why don't you want me here, Kazora-san?"

"I said so already, you are not scoring good results, you are not acting as you should. This is nothing but a waste of time."

That's not true… I'm not a waste of time… I'm getting better…

"It is clear you are not adapting, and a mere month will do nothing to reeducate you. Setting such expectations on your shoulders is truly iniquitous, in my opinion."

"But I… I've been doing my best…" Looking down, a few tears come down to my hands as I clawed at my pants.

"Well, you are indeed making a commendable effort, but it is clearly not enough," He says, as cold as when we first met, as when he went to my house, "I highly doubt you'd change overnight. Therefore, I suggest you to evaluate if this is truly for the best. Not only for you, but for the others as well."

"Are you saying I'm… a bother to them?" Looking at him, another cold shudder came up my back when he nodded.

"Another plate of food on the table, all the teachers required to instruct you, but above all, the constant worry that you might say something out of place, all of it is clearly beginning to show."

"But I've been-"

"You need to show results, Shirogane," He harshly said, giving me another scary glare, "Waiting until the last day isn't an option, the choice will be sealed by then. If you cannot adapt soon, then you should stop chasing this futile dream of yours. That is all," He then stood up, and started to go to the door.

Following behind, not looking up from the ground, I couldn't even muster an answer. Feeling all cold, barely answering with hums on the table at Yuuhi's questions, she had to step on my feet to get an answer.

She and Yohime-san don't seem bothered now… But if I need to take part in those meetings… then one day, someone is gonna get angry at me, like the other samurais that still give me a nasty stare when I come and go on the hallways.

But what can I do? I can't speak as weird as them, I've been doing my best so far…

"Hey, Yuuhi?"

"Yes?"

"Um… How could I start talking better?"

"How? Well, by practicing, of course," She says, a wide smile in her, "If you don't employ what lessons you apprehend, you'd assuredly find yourself in a harsh plight indeed."

But that's what I've been doing, I've been studying and practicing a lot… And it's not enough…

"Is something the matter?" She tilts her head, a bit worried.

"No… It's nothing."

For her it's just obvious, talking like that. But for me… Since I'm different… I can't do it fast enough.

She kept asking me about some shows on TV, on the mangas I was reading back home, I answered as usual, trying to smile. But she isn't talking like when around Arisa, or even how the Pickles talk to her.

Maybe… I need to really work harder than my best… before it's too late…

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*June 3rd. Near Noon.*

*(Koubuin House. Takeru's classroom.)*

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Gripping the pencil really tightly, I return the evil stare of the problem as I pluck my lips. Mulling over what I could have done wrong, I retry the math.

But it still isn't giving me an answer. Both X and Y can't be negative in this case, right? Or was it the other way around? Stupid math, why does it has to be so complicated… Give me back my numbers, these letters are so dumb. Why do I gotta use letters in math?!

I groan a bit, deciding to leave that problem and start focusing on another.

"Uuh…" This isn't going like in the books. Then, what do I do?

Alright, let's try something else. If I can't reach the answer from this part, maybe I can reach it by backtracking from the last number that's in the question.

So, if this has to be more than that, and this one has to be positive…

… I wanna scream.

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**Around half an hour later…**

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"Well, the class is over. Shirogane, your test please."

"Uuh… Here," Sensei takes the papers and, without looking at them, she puts them in one of those brown folder things.

"I was expecting you to have some difficulty, however seeing you struggle this much is concerning," She says as she looks at me, arching her brows.

"… Is it really that bad?"

"If you're having this much trouble adapting, then your options look very bleak. Math is a key component in many of the possible roads you could be bestowed, so failing to meet this level of aptitude will assuredly close those doors."

"Eh?! T-Then… Um…"

"Worry not, we still have this month to prepare you. So, do reread what you found most complicated."

… That means I have to read everything again.

"Okay. I'll try… harder from now on," I give Sensei a bow and she smiles, playing with her hair as she grabs her purse and leaves the room.

I have been studying better, but these things are too hard. Dad… Mom… How did you pass these questions?

I thought I would have many small exercises like before, but there were only three. And they were more complicated than all the ones in the books so far. It's not fair, I didn't have anything like those to

practice. How could I have known that they were going to have many different stuff on the same question?

Wait, maybe I could try to solve exercises in pairs? Like, having to get a right answer for both questions instead of solving them one by one? Oh! That might work! Hehehe, next time you won't win, you dumb test.

But writing why stuff happened is kinda hard. Sensei said I had to use 'proper' words when he read over my test, and I think I forgot some stuff.

I slowly rub my arms, Shion hit me so hard yesterday she gave me a bruise. She did apologize, but… I couldn't do anything. When they started using the Mugen whatever-it's-called I couldn't even parry. My swings simply didn't connect, it was like when I first met them.

All this time… I thought I was getting better…

"Takeru?"

"Oh, hi Maya-nee," I stand up, putting my case inside my bag, "You took some time to come here, did something happen?"

"… No, nothing of the sort," She taps her glasses, closing her eyes really slow, "Follow me, it is time for lunch."

As I put my bag on my back and got to her side, she swiftly closed the door and, without wasting a second, marched off to the dining room, without holding my hand as always, without looking at me, storming off so fast I had to speed up to not lose her.

"Takeru, I've something important to tell you," She said, barely gazing at me.

"Hm? What's up?"

"Today I shall be busy, so you should prepare to leave the classroom as soon as you finish your next classes."

"Oh… Okay," Nodding, I finally get to her side. But just when I was about to grasp her hand, she sped up again.

She does look kinda tired now compared to how she was back home. Maybe something's wrong today?

"Maya-nee, did you get in trouble?"

"Huh? Why would I be in any trouble?"

"Yesterday at dinner, Yohime-san was kinda weird, didn't talk much after all. And you spent a lot of time talking with her after dinner was over. You never leave me waiting alone in the hallway for that long."

"Sigh…"

"See? You're sighing a lot these days, too. Is it because of this thing you're busy with today?"

"It is nothing you should worry about, Takeru."

"… Am I giving you trouble?"

"What? Why would you think so?"

"I mean…"

"Takeru…" Maya-nee stops, crouches and places a hand on my cheek, "You are no trouble. There are some sudden matters I needed a detailed briefing on, nothing else."

"Really?"

"Yes, worry not," She ruffles my hair and then stands up, grabbing my hand again, "So, how did you fare in your tests?"

"… Not good, I think," I say as we begin to walk again, still not holding hands.

"I see. What did you find to be the most troublesome subject?"

I explained to her what I found weird about the exercises on the way. She remained looking forward in silence as I talked, until we reached my room. Leaving the bag near a wall, I walk up to my closet.

"And also, there were very few questions," I say as I take off my 'school' shirt, putting a more comfy one on, "The problems had me doing a lot of stuff so I got stuck many times."

"I see. And what of your history test?" She softly says, still seeming tired.

"Sensei said I did some things right, but that my writing wasn't proper enough," I puff a cheek, getting out of the room.

"I did tell you to beware of that habit of yours. Have you been practicing your writing?"

"Yeah, I did try harder than before… But I don't have time for everything."

Thanks to Masahide-san's advice, I can now study well without having to stay up late. Instead of just memorizing where stuff goes into a chart or in the questions, I talk with myself to see whether I can answer my own questions.

Sometimes, my Senseis here says I speak weird even when I'm right but I am getting the right answers so I don't care. It's still a lot of stuff, and I do miss some questions sometimes. But it's not as scary as I thought it would be.

Because there is an answer. I just have to find my way to explain what I read. But… But on the dojo is not the same.

And even with Masahide-san's advice, I can only do some things everyday. Tackling everything the adults tell me I need to is impossible. But… they said I'm not even close to what I should know

to be a samurai… I'm sure Maya-nee and Yohime-san will be angry if I don't get better soon…

"Sigh… Well, you should focus on polishing your weaknesses," She isn't even looking at me, staring forward as she picks up her pace again, soundind tired and a little bored, "So, do you feel ready for the tests of this afternoon?"

"… No, but I'll do my best,"

We kept talking until we made it to the usual room. No one was there so we had lunch just the two of us, with her giving me more advice on how to study from now on before taking me back to the classroom.

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*Same Day. 05:52 PM.*

*(Classroom.)*

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"Ugh…" I can't think anymore… I'm at my limit.

"Hmm… Your writing seems to have improved ever so slightly, color me surprised," My linguistic teacher said as she looked over my test, "Well, you did manage to at least address all questions in detail, it seems."

"Yes… I did my best today."

"Good. Do remember to reread some exercises for next Friday. Until then," I stand up and give her a bow, she nods and, grabbing her purse and not even giving me another look or a goodbye, she leaves.

Crashing onto my chair and slumping into the table, feeling a pencil under my chin, I let out a long groan. This was nuts too. I think I was proper enough this time… My stomach grumbling, opening my

mouth wide as I yawn, and my back turning into a race track for a cold shiver, I close my eyes for a little while as I stretch my arms.

"Takeru? Are you asleep?"

"Oh, Maya-nee."

She comes closer, but looks a bit upset, "I believe I had told you to quickly prepare to leave today, did I not?" She says as she grabs my notebook and puts in my bag, kinda too fast.

Oh, right. I forgot she told me she was busy.

I nod as I put my pencil case back in, and once I had everything in my bag Maya-nee quickly grabs my hand and leads me out of the room. It… kinda hurts.

"Maya-nee? What's wrong?" She looks weird. Her eyes are really sharp, and her steps are kinda fast too.

"Nothing, let us go to the dining room. By the way, today you won't be able to go to the dojo."

"Eh?! Why?"

"There is another important meeting arranged in the house for tonight, so Father, Shion and Mion, as well as me, are busy for this evening. And before you ask, you cannot be part of it."

"Why?" I pout at her, she sigh again while tapping her glasses.

"Because it is restricted only to those who are already members of the Royal Guards."

"The Pickles aren't samurais yet."

"But they belong to my family, so they have to be present. Sorry, but this time you truly cannot come with us," She remarked, sounding firm and serious this time.

… Just like Kazora-san said, since I'm not from a samurai family… I'm like a stranger here.

"… Is it because I'm bad?"

"Of course not. This is a more formal meeting for a very important fellow of us, so you simply cannot join, as many others in the house also won't."

"Okay… Then, I'm going to have dinner with the rest later?"

"No, as I said, we will be busy for today. You'll have your dinner delivered to your room later at night," She then picked up her pace, seeing that there was no one around, no longer looking at me.

"Then, what will I do until night?"

"You shall stay in your room. Use this free time to study well for the coming tests."

"… Yes."

We didn't talk any more on the way to the dining room. After she left me there, I ate alone, watched by a guard dressed in black, since Maya-nee was busy and couldn't stay. Once I finished, he took me back to my room. Then he told me, in a harsh tone and with an evil glare, that he would bring me my dinner and take me to the bath later tonight, and that I should remain in my room, that I shouldn't wander around or go to the inner gardens.

Left with nothing else to do, I started studying again, trying to solve the exercises how I thought to do before, but I stopped after a while.

They had an important meeting but Maya-nee still had to come pick me up. And she left so fast too. This time they didn't let me go with them. Am I really not a bother to them? Why did she seem so angry, then?

I look outside the window, to the darkening sky. Gazing at the sky in silence, feeling like crying or screaming but not finding any strength to, my legs buckle like paper under rain, I end up sitting on the floor as I look outside.

Did I do something bad? Or… I rest my hands on the glass, looking at the clouds. Maybe I am a stranger here, and Kazora-san was right? How did Dad manage to be accepted as a samurai by the rest?

"Sigh…" I look at the clock that I had brought from home. 07:33 PM, huh?

I open the window and go outside, as I usually do when I can't sleep since it's right by the side of the gardens in the back. Tiptoeing as slow as a turtle, to not make a sound, I peek around the corner of the wall. There's no one here, so I should be able to stay as always, right? They told me to not go to the central gardens, they said nothing about the one in the back.

I walk to it, drop myself on the grass, and then the smell of the garden reaches me while I'm looking up. Relaxing under the flowers' perfume, the clear sky looks so nice today… And, unlike from the window at home, I can see a lot of stars now.

My tests didn't go that well, Yohime-san is acting weird, Maya-nee seems angry again, and now they leave me here as if I had done something bad. Am I… really that much of a problem? What happened with the papers Koume-san had to present?

Kazora-san said I have to adapt quickly, that I won't be like them if I don't. What if… everybody in my class is like that? At least I had Sumika and the rest back home, but what if I can't make new friends? What if everyone thinks I'm strange?

I wanna do my best, I wanna be like Dad. But… I hug my sides, sniffing a bit. Feeling the cold wind of night rustling around, I again look at the sky and clouds.

"Dad, Mom, everything gonna be fine, r-right?"

# Lupine Seed

## Chapter 55: Lupine Seed

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*June 3rd. Near 9 PM.*

*(Koubuin House. Rear Gardens.)*

**[Native Takeru]**

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"Takeru-kun… Takeru-kun, wake up."

A faint voice whispers, something shakes my back a bit. Rustling my shoulders, my arms close up on me yet I don't find my sheets.

"Mmgh…" A cold wind blows, did I leave the window open?

"Takeru-kun, you have to wake up. Can you hear me?" The voice gets a bit louder, it feels as if it were lifting me off my bed.

"Ugh… Mmgh…" Five more minutes, Maya-nee… Why did she took my sheets off anyways?

A few fingers reach my cheek, pinching it softly. They're not cold, they don't stop pulling. Blinking a few times, yawning hard, my blurry gaze falls towards the person that was near.

"Good night, Takeru-kun," Masahide-san says with a smile.

"Masa… hide-san?" Huh… So he came to wake me up today… Wait, what? "… EH?! What are you doing here, Masahide-san?" And why is he wearing one of those old styled dresses, too? It's all in a strong red and white, unlike his samurai dress.

"That's my question. What were you doing sleeping on the garden?" Giving me a worried gaze, he helps me sit down.

"Sleeping?" I then look around, at the garden in the back, "Oh… Ahaha… I… came to watch the stars and then… I just closed my eyes for a second," Scratching my head slowly, looking down, I avoid his gaze. I don't even remember when I fell asleep.

"Sigh… You should be more careful. Had I not found you, it is quite probable that you would have fallen sick," He stood up slowly, offering me a hand, "So, where is your room?"

But then, I remained on the ground. Even if I go back there… it's all the same. I rather watch the stars for a while longer.

"… Is everything okay, Takeru-kun?" He asks, again with a worried gaze.

"… I don't wanna go back yet."

"What are you saying? Are you not feeling well?"

"No, but…"

"… Did something happen?" He sits back by my side, looking up to the stars.

Rubbing my eyes as I try not to yawn, bringing my legs closer, hugging my knees, a cold shiver goes down my back, and not because of the wind, "Well… I don't know."

"How do you mean? Did Maya-sama get upset at you?"

"I don't know," Couldn't help it and my voice creaked a bit.

"… Can you tell me what happened?" He looks at me for a moment, but I look down.

… Because he might say the same as the rest, since he's a red samurai. Again with the screams, with the mean gazes, saying I'm…

"Masahide-san, do you… think I'm a stranger?"

"Huh? Why would I?" Sounding surprised, he was raising a brow, "I know who you are, and you are the son of a fellow. You're no stranger, Takeru-kun."

"… Really?"

"Indeed. What has caused you to ask such a thing?"

"Well… Kazora-san says I'm like a stranger here, since I don't come from a samurai family and I'm too rude."

"Oh, I see…" Closing his eyes as he nods, seeming to understand why, I couldn't help but to feel a needle on my heart, "Then, are you still wishing to remain here?" Giving me a through gaze, he seemed a bit worried again.

"Yeah… I wanna be a samurai, I don't wanna give up yet. Masahide-san, was Dad also a stranger when he came here?"

He then grimaces, looking up, "… I believe he was treated as one, at first. Some of his fellows weren't… very welcoming towards 1st Lt. Shirogane," Sounding really sad, but then his gaze shone again as usual, "However, your father remained undaunted at the challenge. Never returned the words of those who saw him as a stranger, never did that affect his performance in the slightest. Your father… truly was a most amicable fellow," Slowly, a smile appeared in his face.

We both looked up at the stars in silence for a moment. But if Dad could do that… "Then… D-Do you think I could be like that too?"

"Why would you not?" He answers immediately, giving me a puzzled stare, "I was under the impression Yohime-sama allowed you to stay here, and you are being instructed under Maya-sama's care."

"Yeah… But… I think that I'm giving them trouble," My gaze falls to the ground, my fingers drawing circles on the grass.

"Have you argued with someone lately?"

"No, it's not that…"

"Then, whatever could be troubling you?"

"… You won't get mad?"

Raising a brow at first, he then nods, "I give you my word, I shan't become upset."

"You promise?" I stare, hugging my elbows really tight, but he nods with another smile.

Then, while still drawing circles on the grass, stealing glances at him, I tell Masahide-san of how my scores in the last tests weren't good at all, of how Maya-nee and Yohime-san seem to be more distant and in a bad mood lately, and of how today they left me in my room as if I were being scolded.

Sinking my chin onto my knees, another cold shiver runs down, "That's why… maybe I'm giving them trouble now, and… since I'm a stranger they might want me to go away soon."

"… I see, so that's what made you worry so," He didn't get upset, he made a rather sad face instead.

"Yeah… They're being weird. So, I came to see the stars for a while, to think on what I could do," Furrows my brows, puffing a single cheek, I give one punch to the grass, "But I couldn't find an answer… And then I fell asleep."

"… Then, does that mean that you would like to return to your prior house?"

"No!" Giving him a nasty stare, he flinches back a bit, "I don't wanna leave… but I don't wanna give Maya-nee and Yohime-san trouble."

Nodding as he coughed, he spoke up slowly again, "In that case, you'll have to redouble your efforts. Sadly, that is all you can do as of now. It would be truly a shame if you didn't reach your goals after all 1st Lt. Shirogane did for you."

"… Did Dad talk about me when he worked?"

"Hm? Well, not with everyone, but he did mention you much in his free time," Smiling again, relaxing onto the grass, he again looks to the stars, "He truly did his utmost effort to be better, thinking on your wellbeing. Which is why this conundrum is truly saddening, since there is no simple answer to your plight."

"… What does conun… what does that mean?"

"Oh, it is another word for situation in this case," Scratching a cheek, he gives me a nod, "Sadly, just as he did, you can only buckle down and push forward if you truly wish to become a model Royal Guard."

"I see…" Sigh… So there are no secrets or anything, it's all in how hard I try. But I've trying really hard all these days, "Masahide-san, how could I stop being a stranger?"

"Hm? Well… I suppose you should try to employ our words first. If you mend your manners, people will have less motives to seclude you."

"… I don't think I can talk as weird as that."

"Haha, it is a matter of creating a habit. Your father managed to be proper enough, despite never employing a speech as formal as mine," Giving me another small smile, he starts ruffling my hair, "If he could do so, I am sure you'll be able to as well."

"Really? You really believe that?"

"Yes, it might take some time but you will surely be able to improve so long as your efforts do not wane," He leaves his hand on my head for a moment, making a serious face as his tone also did, "Even if it might seem impossible as of now, you'll assuredly be able to grow more comfortable with our way of speech in time."

"But what if people still say I'm bad?" I know Kazora-san is kinda right, since I do tend to talk back without realizing, and my words aren't like theirs either, but… but I've been trying. He did say he knew I was trying, and he did give me some advice but…

"However, no one has been unnecessarily harsh towards you, right?"

"… But they're mean. I'm doing my best, and all they say is that I'm bad," Can't help but to pout, remembering how much Kazora-san goes in circles every time he lectures me.

Again ruffling my hair, his voice softens up, "I'm certain people here are only wishing for you to adapt faster, which is why they reiterate their lessons and double down on your sore points. Even I had to go through this at one point."

"Really?"

Chuckling, he moves his hand in circles, "Indeed. My initial kendo lessons were truly arduous for me, and I was also made to learn Keigo to its perfection," Still smiling, his eyes remain on me for a second, "Do not be discouraged, you're certainly on the right path."

"… Thank you, Masahide-san. But… Do you think I can be a samurai?"

"Why wouldn't you be able to? Are you still having trouble studying?"

"Well, that too… But I still haven't won at the dojo, and Mion and Shion seem so strong… I don't know what else to do."

"Have you been minding your steps as I recommended?"

"Yeah, but I can't win. If I stay defending, they start attacking me really fast and I lose. If I attack, they always take that step back and try to knock my sword away. And Kazora-san said I have to start dueling with them seriously… But I don't know what to do." Can't help but to puff my cheeks, hugging my knees really tight again.

Masahide-san then closes his eyes, beginning to groan really hard. Lost in thought for a long while, his arms crossing a bit, a lone finger went up and down that weird spike he has on his hair. Then, he suddenly smiled.

"… Takeru-kun, you liked folktales, if I recall correctly?"

"Oh, yeah. But they're all very weird."

"Haha, is that so? So, do you know of the tale of the duel between Masamune and Muramasa?"

"Hmm… Oh! Those were the names of some legendary swords, right?"

"Of the forgers of said swords. Do you know the tale of their duel?"

"No, I didn't knew they dueled. So, which one won?"

"Well… It depends on your point of view."

"Huh? What does that mean?"

"Well, allow me to tell you the story of how Masamune and Muramasa had a duel to see which one's sword was the finer one. The tale goes as such," And so, he begins to narrate the story

" *They both went to a river, and prepared themselves to slash its surface with one of the swords they themselves had forged. Muramasa's blade cleaved through the riverbed, slicing water, boulder, and fish alike in one fell swing, sending them crashing to each side. It is said the mountain from where said river had been*

*born was also made to suffer the brunt of the attack. A testament of the blade's sharp edge and violent prowess.*

*Yet, when it was time for Masamune to attack, his slash did a much calmer slice. The water parted calmly to each side and the boulders were also splintered. However, the fish within the stream were left unharmed in their stride. That was not only due to Masamune's self control, but due to the nature of his blade. For it was not meant to be a destructive weapon, but one made to protect others. Only destroying its target and harming nothing else, with clear precision."*

Coughing once, he leaves the silence hanging for a second, "… So, which one do you think won the duel, Takeru-kun?"

"Hmm… I mean, Muramasa's blade is the more powerful one, right?"

"Indeed, that would be the case."

"Hmm… But, Kazora-san says the samurais have to protect the people. Then, that means they need a sword that doesn't harm everyone, right?"

"Well, that could also be the case. So, which one do you think is the victor?"

"… I don't know," He starts chuckling, I pout back, "Don't laugh! Which one did win?"

"Well, it depends on who you ask. Different sources cite different outcomes to the duel. However, the worth of the tale isn't in it's resolution," Covering his mouth as he coughed again, no longer smiling, he got all serious and I gulped nervously as he stared, "Look Takeru-kun, there will be times where you will have to be like the Muramasa. Cleaving through everything in your way, no matter what stands before you. At other times, you will need to employ the moderation of the Masamune and remain serene and at peace."

"This is just like what Kazora-san tells me. I already know that," Sourly pouting, I look away.

"Yes, I remember. However, there will also be times where you will have to be both at the same time."

"Huh? Both?"

"Indeed. There will be times where… people won't listen to you, no matter what words you employ," Looking down, this time he grimaced really, really hard, his voice crumbling for a second, "At some point, you will be faced with a dilemma that cannot be solved by serenity nor aggressiveness on their own. Then, when faced with such a situation, you will have to be as fierce as the Muramasa but as calm as the Masamune,"

"… I don't get it," Why do they always have to speak in riddles? How could I be both calm and angry at the same time?

"In your case, you need to learn to be polite and proper, but without losing heart at the adversity," Patting my head, he comes back to a calmer tone, "Even if you are a 'stranger' for many as of now, you should remain as determined as you were, but ignoring their words. You need to tackle what is giving you the most trouble with all your might, without letting it ruin what's around you.

"So… I need to slash the mountain in half without harming the fish on the river?"

"Pfft… Ahaha! Yes, indeed. That is precisely it," Still chuckling, he nods, "Keep doing your best, but without falling to anger. Keep being as you are, but using more polite words every day. When you feel exhaustion setting on, don't push yourself and rest well. In the dojo, try to remain on the offensive but without compromising your steps, without giving anyone an opening to strike your blade away. I believe Maya-sama's style was based on such a principle. The best defense is a great offense."

"Oh, she did say that once."

I think she did, with that weird poem she once told to Shion. How was it? Uh… The advice to move better… It was… Striking like a waterfall or something, right? Um… Yeah, it was 'attack like an unending waterfall', I think.

"So, I have to attack without lowering my defense, right?" He smiles, nodding a few times. Seems like I got it right.

"Indeed. However, the road that awaits you is truly a perilous one," Staring at me, he remarked in a scary tone, "If you wish to become a Royal Guard, you will need to learn to not react to the mean words many will say, and you will need to get used to such level of study. And that will take time."

"But I don't have time."

"That is not true. You still have a month at your disposal, do you not?"

"Well… Yeah. But Kazora-san said I need to show results now, that I can't wait until the end of the month."

Sighing really hard, he pats my shoulder, "Then, focus on what you can do now. If you begin to think that you're going to fail, all you'll achieve is decrease your morale."

"But I don't know how to get better. I'm trying hard to learn more… but everything is still so complicated."

"Hmm… Oh, I know. I will have to stay in the House for the time being so, would you like me to aid you in your studies during my free time?"

"Eh? Really? I won't be bothering you?"

"Of course not, it could also be a way to relax for me. Perhaps, we could read some books together after we are done with this studying

sessions?"

"Really? Thanks a lot, Masahide-san! But… Are you sure? I'm not bothering you?"

Then, he again pets my head, "You're no bother, Takeru-kun. I'm the one offering so, would you welcome my help?"

"Yeah! Thanks a lot, Masahide-san!" Then I leap forward, giving him a hug.

"C-Come on, you do not need to shout."

"Oh, sorry. But thank you very much, really," Slowly letting him go, I give him a bow and a bright smile, "Your explanations were more clear than Maya-nee's, so please come study with me if you can."

"Is that so? Are Maya-sama's methods hard for you?"

"No, it's not that…" Crossing my arms, I furrow my brows, "Maya-nee speaks really weird sometimes, and always tells me to do things in one way. Your advice was easier to understand, and you tried to explain things in different ways when I didn't get something."

"I see… Didn't you ask Maya-sama to do that for you?"

"Yeah, I tried… but then she got mad, saying her teaching wasn't… flawed?" I tilt my head as I look at him. He nods at me, and I nod back, "So, she got really mad that I wanted to do something in a different way. I don't really get why, though."

"Sigh… I suppose she must want you to learn her way," Placing a hand on his head, he makes a troubled face for a moment, "Well, worry not for I shall come to aid you in the weekends. So, please do not lose heart from now on."

"Yeah, I'll keep doing my best! But, why are you coming here? Will you help Maya-nee with her work?"

"Something of the sort, yes. Now that some time has passed since my return from the frontlines, it is time for me to resume my duties… Sigh."

"Why are you sighing, too? By the way, why are you in this dress?"

"Well… I had an important meeting here tonight," He barely whispers out, sounding tired all of a sudden.

"Oh, is it that thing that got Maya-nee all nervous? Is that why you're dressed like the old people?"

"Yes, that would be it. However, was Maya-sama truly anxious today?"

"Yeah, she was in a rush since morning. Why?"

"No, it is merely surprising to hear. I believe I told you we both were trained together before, right?" I nod, he continues, "So, I'm not accustomed to seeing her troubled by any task."

"She never had bad grades?"

"By goodness, no. Maya-sama was one of the best of our generation. To think she would be troubled…"

"I see," Well, Maya-nee is awesome, "But, what kind of meeting did you have? Is it your birthday?"

"Oh… No, it isn't something as cheerful as that," Looking down, clouded by sadness, he sighs again, "You see, today a celebration was held to announce my proper return to my duties after having gone to fight."

"I see… So it was a party for important samurai?"

"Yes, indeed. It was like a welcome party, I suppose."

"And did it went well? Did you have fun?"

But then, grimacing again and really hard, he hunches over, "I do not truly know…

"… Why? Did you fight with someone?"

"Eh? Well… You truly are good at guessing, huh," Then, he chuckles a bit.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, your father once mentioned that despite your unassuming character you tend to be rather sharp when least expected."

"… I'm always doing my best, that's mean," Pouting, I give him a mean stare, which only makes him chuckle more.

"I'm certain that's the case. So, well… You see, I had a slight disagreement with someone, so I came here to clear my head for a moment."

"What happened?" To make him look so worried, for his voice to creak like a log throw in a fire…

"Sigh… Worry not, it is mine own problem."

"Why? You helped me out, why can't I lend you a hand?" Getting closer, I hold his stare, firmly as when I argue with Maya-nee over my homework.

Smiling a bit, moving slowly and with his eyes still clouded, he gave me a nod, "Thanks for caring. Well, do you know what the Head of a House is?"

"Um… Those were the leaders, right? Like Takahisa-san."

"Huh… So you also knew him."

"Yeah, he was really awesome. Did you fight with him against the monsters?"

Smiling brightly for a second, he nodded firmly, "Indeed, it was an honor to me," Serious, firm and… wistful, he looked up, "Well, the matter is, my parents are wishing for me to become the Head of my House."

"Eh?! But… Aren't you really young? Don't you have to be older and have a mustache to be a leader?"

"… Why a mustache in particular?"

"I mean, Kazora-san and Bazora-san sometimes cut their beards but never their mustaches. Aren't they kind of important?"

"… Ahaha, I suppose that for the elders they are, indeed," He keeps chuckling, ending in another sigh, "However, regardless of my age, it is a family custom. A new Head has to be appointed soon, and… well, many are wishing me to be the one to take the role."

"And why are you troubled about it? Aren't you a good samurai?"

"I'd like to believe I am… But, to become a Head, it is recommended to take a wife beforehand."

"So you have to form a family first?"

Eyes almost closing, very slowly he shakes his head, "It isn't like that in the slightest. I'm merely required to find a partner, nothing else."

"But… But you have to like the person you're with, right?"

"That… is it precisely, the core of this conundrum," Eyes closed for a moment, his voice froze all over, "You see, my parents are wishing for me to take someone in particular as my lady wife, and I'm, well, not entirely in agreement with them, is all."

"Do you hate that person?"

"No, nothing of the sort!" He says, a bit agitated, "It is nothing like that… I… do find that person most charming, truth be told."

"So you love her, then?"

His brows furrow a bit as he groans, "I cannot ascertain that, not entirely. While I am attracted to Kaori-sama… and I do admire some traits in her, the manner in which I'm being told to proceed is troubling me."

"… I don't get it. If you like her, what's the problem?"

"Hmm… How could I explain this to you?" Again groaning for a while, he fumes a bit, "Well, one could say that it isn't as if I'm choosing her, but as if the choice was being forced on me. Since I need a partner to be eligible for the position of Head of my House, I'm being somewhat pushed into taking Kaori-sama as my lady wife."

"But why do you not want to be with her?"

"That's not it. You see… Since many are being sort of mean towards her, she can't truly refuse," Sighing again, this time deeply and hunching over, his saddened eyes cannot look up, "Due to her being scared of the whispers of the rest, she didn't listen at all to my words when I tried to deflect the conversation or give her some reassurance. She firmly insisted on politely extending an invitation towards me as if I were her superior, and I could barely muster enough willpower to say I'd think about it," Sighing again, wincing as if he had a knife stuck on his chest as he ran a hand over his face, he finally looked up, "Which is why, if I go down this path as she is now, Kaori-sama… won't truly love me, she'd be choosing me out of fear, she'd remain docile to not upset me regardless of what I say. Oh, sorry. This must have gone over your head."

"So… Uh… The other samurais are being mean to her, and since she's scared that they'd get mad if she says no, you think she doesn't like you?"

He stares at me wide eyed for a second, "Well, precisely. However, there is little I can do to aid her. Furthermore, it is in my best interest to become engaged," Tugging at his dress, arms crosses tightly, he

sighs once more, "Finding someone else with boons to rival hers will be impossible, and I do not wish to cause any further divisions in the Guard. So, well, I'm conflicted on the matter. Perhaps my parents are in the right and I should heed their advice, and merely accept this is what would be better for my future…"

"But… But that's horrible!" He twitches, seeming shocked, "She's gonna be sad if you act like the others, and then she'll really think you're like the bullies."

"Eh? Ah… I suppose…"

"You like her, right? Why don't you help her?"

"… I do admit I find her charming," His cheeks get a bit red as he looks away, running a hand over his hair, "However, it is also true I need to look over my House. And while I'd be elated to have a fine a woman as Kaori-sama as my lady, there is little I can do as of now for her. She didn't move from her stance when we talked moments before, after all."

"But you're helping me out. If she's a samurai, why can't you lend her a hand too?"

"… It isn't as if I didn't want to… However, what could I do? I'm still young, and have little to no influence here," Hunching over again, his whisper almost fades out, "How could I possibly aid Kaori-sama in her woes as I am without upsetting my parents?"

"What is Kaori-san having trouble with? Is she also bad at manners?"

"Haha… No, she's actually older than myself, and more talented than me in all honesty."

"Huh?! But… If she's so good, why do the others treat her badly?"

"Well… You could say her job is the simplest of them all. Kaori-sama is merely a patrol guard on the Castle your father and I worked at before, and take into account that both of us had more responsibilities at the time than those she has as of now," Getting all serious, and quite a bit angry, he fumes while nodding, "This makes others look down on her, and she has other…" He frowns for a second, seeming really angry, "troubling circumstances that make many speak grave unpleasantries behind her back."

Huh… So she's older but has a worse job than Masahide-san, and many speak badly of her… Oh, I know! This is like how some people are mean to Haruna-san back home, saying she has a bad job despite being older, how those bullies say mean things about me and Sumika in whispers, or how some teachers think they're better because they teach harder classes. I still remember how the history and chemistry teachers began fighting during the last cultural festival, one saying 'hard science' was better for our class theme than… philosophy, was it?

Hmm… So the samurais have mean bullies too, huh. Since Kaori-san has a job they think sucks, they are being mean to her. And since she's scared people will treat her worse, just like Sumika was when we met, she simply nods and says yes, afraid to make Masahide-san angry. Which is why Masahide-san is worried, he doesn't know if she really likes him because she's always saying yes. Just like how Sumika was when we met, she's too scared to be his friend openly.

But that means there's an easy solution to this problem!

"Then, all you have to do is being by her side. If she isn't alone anymore, the bullies won't be mean to her, right?"

"It isn't so simple. I'm in no position to aid her since I'll be staying here and she'd be in the Castle," Barely speaking again, his eyes again cloud over.

"But why can't she work with you here? Maya-nee seems really tired, so I'm sure she could use some more help."

"No, it isn't- A moment, working with me?"

"Yeah, why can't she work here? If she's really good, and Maya-nee or you need a hand, she could help you out. And you'd be helping her out that way too!" Just like how me and Sumika do when we help each other in the classes we have trouble with, and the same goes for when we work with Jouji and the others.

Looking up, mouth half open, he remains quiet for a while. Blinking really fast, his eyes widen like Mion's when she sees cake, "That… could actually work… However, I doubt my parents would agree… They already reprimanded me quite harshly for not gaining an affirmation, and in no way do I have the power to request her transfer on a whim…" And he deflates again.

"Why don't you ask Yohime-san, then? If she takes your side, everything will be fine, right?"

"However, were I to request such a thing out of her… I fear my parents won't take kindly to it, and there's the chance that she'd disagree too. I'd be out of place for me, to have the gall to make such a request."

"But… But Yohime-san really kind… And you would be asking this to help Kaori-san. If you do nothing, then what will happen to her?"

Eyes close up, as his heart seems to do too, "… I do not know. Perhaps I should merely accept my shortcomings and bring her under my wings. That may be the only choice I have left."

"But if you do that, everybody will still be mean to her!" Pulling his arm, he again seems shocked at my sudden yelling, "If you don't help her out, won't she think you see her like the rest? Won't she believe you're just another bully?!"

His face twists in fear, quickly looking away, "H-However, there isn't much I can do. Even if I try to speak with Yohime-sama…"

"But then she's gonna be really sad… Did you not say she couldn't refuse?"

"… Yes," Whispering it out, he weakly nods, "She has many reasons to accept and few to refuse."

"And if she says yes, she'd think you're like a bully, right?" He nods, eyes focused on the grass, "Then, what happens if a mean samurai talks with her?

His hands freeze, seems like he stopped breathing for a moment, "You mean… if someone else invites her to a meeting?"

"Well… You said she can't refuse, right? Can't the bullies force her to go along with them?" Just like those dumb kids tried to do with Sumika when I had just transferred, until I kicked them.

"Ah… I suppose…" Biting his lips, one of his hands shakes a bit as it rests on his stomach, "I suppose she'd have no choice but to agree… if they threaten her with spreading further unpleasantries were she to refuse."

"But you don't want that, right?" After a while, he nodded, "So, if you help each other out, then the mean samurais won't treat her badly again. She'd have a nice job and you'd have another friend! Then, you could ask her if she really wants to be with you."

"… Yes, I suppose you're right," He looks up, his voice regaining some impulse, the fog clearing away from his eyes once he nods, "If I could gain Yohime-sama's support, then this would be easy enough to deal with. Sigh…" But then, gloom blooms in his face again, "I wonder if I could have milady agree to this so suddenly, however…"

"Don't get all down, you won't make Kaori-san smile if you give up so easily!"

"Eh? Making her… smile?"

"Yeah, Dad told me that I had to try hard to make the people I like smile, to not give them trouble. You wanna make Kaori-san smile, right? Wasn't she gonna be your wife?"

"W-Well, that isn't set in stone yet… However, I do wish to aid her… and she is most charming whenever she smiles… Yet, to spawn even more discord within us…"

"You're already a samurai and a fellow, right? And… and… you fought the m-monsters and survived, right? So… So you can do this, I'm sure. Yohime-san wouldn't let people be mean to someone if she knew about it."

"Yes… I do think she'd agree, if I manage to present the matter tactfully enough. I suppose that, if I wish to bring a change to our fellowship, my veneer must remain strong. Sigh… I wonder if I can do this…"

"Come on!" Again pulling his arm really hard, I pout at him, "Dad told me that you gotta try hard for the people you care about the first time he was in the black dress. You're already a samurai, so people will hear you out. And you can actually help out… unlike me…" Letting go of his arm, I scratch my head for a second, "So you have to try at least. She must be feeling cold and lonely… You can't leave your wife all alone like that, Masahide-san!"

Then, he gags on air, seeming to stammer as his face gets more crimson than his dress, "T-That has not been decided yet."

"But you love her, right?"

"Well… I shan't deny that I do find her most attractive… yet I don't know if I can call this love," He folds his arms, looking away.

"You adults are so weird and complicated… You like her and want to help, right?"

"… I do admire her, besides my views of her figure. And yes, it doesn't sit right with me to remain idling, to simply prey upon her vulnerability… I suppose I do wish to bequeath a smile to her future if I could, regardless of how this affair of my House is resolved," Breathing in deeply, sighing really hard again, this time he smiles again, "Thanks, Takeru-kun. For reminding me what your father had taught me."

"Huh? What did Dad tell you?"

"About how he wished to keep you safe, to bestow a smile to your future," Ruffling my hair again, slower than before, a small ember was now in his eyes, "You're absolutely right. I may not hoist love towards her, but aiding Kaori-sama is something I desire to do, to bring forth a change in our fellowship. And I was allowing my insecurities to blind me once more… Thank you kindly, for reminding me of my own resolve."

"What is this about a change? Is this your new mission?"

"No, it is a personal goal of mine. Hmm… In your terms, I'd like to have the 'mean samurais' stop acting so harshly towards the rest. However, it is most disheartening to see many do not hear 'my' words and merely nod along to not upset me."

"And what about all that of being firm? On the weird code to not falter and all that?"

"Ahahaha… I suppose you've won this round," And again, he pats my head, "Indeed… I should act on mine own words as well. Little might be my power, yet I cannot surrender without struggling first."

"Yeah, do your best! I'm not giving up either, so you can't quit."

"Ahaha… Indeed, we cannot falter so easily. Well, I suppose I should be going to Yohime-sama posthaste. So, might I ask how did you come here on your own?"

"Eh…" Crap, he might get mad… And if he tells Yohime-san, she might instead. Scratching the back of my head, I look up to the stars, "W-Well… I opened the window and got out of my room, since I couldn't see the stars well from there."

"Sigh…" Smiling again, he slowly shakes his head, "You should return before Maya-sama notices you're gone."

"Yeah… It is getting cold, too."

He smiles as he offers me a hand to stand up, and once I do I dust my pants off as he does to his dress. Then, I heard some footsteps getting closer. Looking at the wooden steps and hallway that were close by, I saw a rather tall woman coming closer.

She descended the wooden steps into the garden, and her eyes widened as she us. Dressed in a cerulean kimono, with lily hair like Yohime-san's but with sharp spikes on the sides like Masahide-san's one, her purple eyes worriedly scanned him up and down as she hurried closer, shrugging her lips really tight.

"… Masahide? Whatever are you doing there?" She says, sounding both angry and worried.

"Sigh… I am merely resting," His voice lost all energy, now he was rubbing his forehead as he placed himself between me and the woman.

"Masahide-san, who is she?" I peek at her from behind him, waving a hand towards her when our eyes met.

"What on the Heavens is a peasant doing in the gardens?" She frowned really hard, giving me the evil eye, her tone cold and harsh like the other mean samurais I sometimes see in the hallways. I see… So she thinks I'm a stranger…

"Sister, I suppose you were sent to take me back to the hall? Let us go," He says, now sounding a bit upset, as he took a step forward.

"Eh? Ah, indeed," And she immediately agreed, nodding. But then, she gave me another mean glare, that I returned this time, "Allow me to tell you Kaori was looking for you, I believe it is imperative you gain confirmation for a meeting," She said, imposingly and firm, as she gave him a stare.

"Look Sister… I'd be wishing to deal with this matter on my own terms," He affirmed, holding his ground. She arched her brows, looking upset.

"What nonsense are you saying? Her eyes were clearly stuck to your back as you left the hall, and she even came to inquire with me about your whereabouts as I was on my way. Waste no more time, the chance you were awaiting is right in-"

"Don't be mean to Masahide-san! He just wants to help Kaori-san," I yell, giving her a mean look. He seems to twitch, she again frowns.

"… The gall… How dare you raise your voice at me…"

"Sister, please let it go. I am in a hurry as it is," He then grabbed my hand, a bit too tightly.

"Masahide-san, are you in trouble?" He said sister, so she's his family. But she's being really mean… Maybe she's one of the mean samurais.

"No, nothing of the sort. Now, we should return to your room," He then took some steps towards the small wooden stairs.

But she placed herself in front of him, locking her fire-filled eyes on me, "Wait a moment. You, child. Do you not know how to address your elders? Apologize this instant, or else."

W-What's with her? She was the one who started it… Seeing I was keeping quiet, she let out some air, her frown blooming into a scowl, the small embers turning into wildfire. Hiding behind Masahide-san, I looked down. Why? I just defended him…

"Sister, please. He's but a child."

"Nonsense. Why should you tolerate such disrespect?" Even her voice is a flamethrower, "No, why is a peasant even allowed to be in the gardens of the Koubuin House in the first place? We should report this to the patrols at once."

"… You will not do anything of the sort," His voice sounding really cold, her eyes seemed to widen for a moment, "The child was merely stargazing with me. That is all."

"Still… This should not go unpunished. To let their children roam freely on the Main House…" Her hands were sinking into her arms with too much force, once more she gave me another nasty glare, "It would set quite a foul precedent. The child has to be admonished for his mistake."

"I did nothing wrong. I just came to see the sky," I quickly retorted, and she again frowned.

"You shan't speak to me in such a way. Such disrespect… How dare you talk back to someone of my station… This shall be reported to-"

"Sister, that's quite enough. Move aside, I'll take him to his room."

"What? Are you suggesting to let this baseborn's defiance go unpunished? I am merely-"

"Sister…" Again, his voice got all cold, she seemed to flinch. For some reason, despite being taller than him, his sister doesn't want to make Masahide-san angry, "He is only a child. Please, do not let your temper flare up so," He pats my head, ruffling it again.

She then sighs, her gaze drifts away as she loses her tension, and the fire goes out, "… You're right, I shouldn't pay any mind to a baseborn's prattling," She nodded, he grimaced.

"I'm not a baseborn… whatever that means. My name is Takeru!"

"Takeru-kun, you shouldn't speak up in such a way," He asked, looking tense and worried, face full of wrinkles.

"But she's being mean. I didn't do anything to her," Puffing my cheeks, I give her another glare. I'm just trying to help you, but she hasn't stopped to talk badly to both of us.

"That might be so, but remember that you must not let words spur a reaction from you."

"Mmgh… But she started it," Sighing, he pets my head slowly.

"Hmph… How was this child raised to have such lacking manners?" The woman folded her arms, looking very angry, "This is why we shouldn't let the inductees bring their families to the Main House, they're nothing short of a hindrance, an unnecessary burden on our shoulders."

… Huh? A burden… I'm… a burden to the rest? But… But I've been trying…

"I'm not a burden! I'm doing my best to be good!"

"Pah! You're not even worth the air you breathe," Scowling, another fire blast roared in her eyes, "Someone like you has no place in this house."

"But… But…"

"Sister, that's quite enough. I'll return to the hall after taking him to his room, so let this matter rest." He firmly said, taking another step forward.

However, she rose her chin as she stared right at me with those eyes full of fire, exploding into a voice filled with smoke and embers, as if something were burning the inner parts of my ear, "What madness are you saying? It is clear that this is nothing short of a burden on our shoulders, to have to withstand the rudeness of the

baseborns in our own houses. Such disrespect should not be tolerated, this coarse peasant has no place in the Koubuin Main House!"

…

I've no place here? But… But I've been trying… Yohime-san said I wasn't going to leave…

"Sister, you shall-

*"Sniff… Hic…* I… I'm not a burden…" Shaking as tears ran down my cheeks, my throat felt like it was closing and I began to choke.

"Takeru-kun, it's alright. Don't cry…" Masahide-san crouches by my side, wiping my tears and running a hand over my cheek.

"Oh, and now he begins to cry…" She said, in that same angry tone, "Sigh… This is why commoners shouldn't be here, he's nothing but an eyesore to us."

Ugh… That's not true… I've been… trying… Hic…

"Sister, that's enough!"

"W-What… Why are you this adusted towards me? The boy is just a peasant's child, I only reprimanded him as anyone would. He should not be here, that is all."

"Why are you so mean with me?! I didn't do anything bad to you!" I wail amidst my tears, only to see another frown, only to hear another harsh shout from her.

"You are a commoner, someone like you has nothing to offer to our fellowship. I believe you should be leaving this house as soon as you're able."

"Sister!" He shouted, sounding really, really angry, she just folded her arms, seeming puzzled.

"What? He's inconveniencing both of us, and I highly doubt such a coarse baseborn is actually part of our fellowship. He has nothing to bestow the Koubuin House, therefore he should be taking his leave posthaste," And again, she gave me a nasty glare.

"I… I don't wanna go away…" Crying again, I hugged my sides.

"Takeru-kun, it's alright. Don't cry anymore, please," He ruffled my hair, and I hugged his arm, fleeing from her mean gaze as I cried.

"… Why are you looking at me in such a way?" She asked, as if puzzled, "What are you upset about, Masahide?"

"That's enough. I'll go to the hall later. Leave."

"What are you saying? Father sent me to-"

"Sister, could you kindly leave? You've done enough already."

But… But now they're arguing… because I was here. If I hadn't… then this wouldn't have happened…

She remained firmly in place as they argued, and Masahide-san kept ruffling my hair as I calmed down, but then another set of footsteps seemed to be coming closer. Looking at the hallway, my heart froze when I saw Maya-nee approaching us.

She's gonna scold me… She told me I couldn't get out of my room… She's… gonna scream again… Ugh… Hic…

As she got closer, I hid behind Masahide-san while he stopped arguing with his sister.

"Oh, so you already found… What is going here?" She asked, seeming to be looking at both of them.

Masahide-san's sister then sighs and sends a hand to one of her spikes, looking towards Maya-nee, "A coarse peasant boy was in the

gardens, and I admonished him when he disrespected me. Then, he began to cry… And Masahide is trying to calm the boy down."

"A… peasant, you say?"

She sounds… upset. Masahide-san moved away so that she could see me, and then… She frowned for a brief instant, returning to that cold glare she always used to have during our first days together. She's mad… She's mad at me…

"I see… Forgive the inconvenience, I shall be taking the boy to his room," She… didn't even call me by my surname…

"If I may Tsukuyomi, why is it allowed for inductees to bring their children to the Main House?" Masahide-san's sister asked, quite angrily, as she was folding her arms.

"… They are not. It was only due to the preparations needed for the meeting, since they would not have been able to pick them up from school otherwise," Maya-nee said as she tapped her glasses, not even looking at the woman.

"Takeru-kun, come on," Masahide-san released his arm from my hold, patting my back towards Maya-nee.

… I can't look up… She's gonna scream again… She must be so mad… I trembled and looked down, not wishing to move. I wanna dig a hole and hide, she's gonna tell Kazora-san and Yohime-san I was bad… T-They're gonna… Ugh… Sniff…

"The boy did nothing wrong, Maya-sama. Please, do not scold him," Masahide-san said as she got closer.

"Well, let's return to your room," She quickly and firmly grabbed my hand, keeping it in place. Twitching at the strength of her hold, she forced my feet to move as she stormed off.

Masahide-san waved at me when I looked back, giving me a smile, so I waved back softly with my free hand, only to have his sister scowl again as she sent me another glare.

"I apologize again for the inconvenience, Raiko-sama," Maya-nee gave her a small bow, "Please do not mention this to anyone, it was merely an oversight on our part. My sincerest apologies, the child meant no disrespect I am sure," The hold on my hand tightened.

So… She's taking her side… She's apologizing even when I didn't do anything wrong… So she thinks… the same…

"Sigh… Understood," The woman… Raiko-san calmed down and nodded, "The meeting was splendid, so I won't let a baseborn's misconduct ruin this night you prepared for Masahide. I shan't say a word," Maya-nee's lips seemed to twitch, but then she bowed in thankfulness.

Sniff… So that's what… she really thinks… She also thinks I'm a stranger…

…

She lied to me.

"Thank you kindly, Raiko-sama. I assure you, this shall not happen twice."

"So I expect. Had the Amato House remained as the retainers of the Koubuins, such a blunder would never have occurred," Raiko-san smiled for some reason, making Maya-nee's hand tighten again, "However, my lips are sealed. I shan't taint the splendid night you prepared for my lord, this baseborn won't ruin his celebration," And again, her words burned my ears, "However, why would such a lackluster peasant be allowed to mingle in the house? Who allowed this, if I might ask?"

"Please, it was only an oversight. I shall take responsibility for this, if it would appease you," Why is Maya-nee… speaking so humbly?

Wait… Is this what Kazora-san meant when he said they had to be on the lookout in case I made trouble? But… I didn't do anything… She was the one who started it, why do we have to apologize?

Then, Maya-nee looked at me, sharply, "Apologize to Raiko-sama for your rudeness."

"B-But… But she started-"

"Apologize, this instant," Her grip on my hand tightened, hurting my wrist.

"I-It hurts!"

"Maya-sama, please," Masahide-san comes closer, speaking slowly, "We both were merely stargazing, and Sister did lose her temper first."

"Pah! Anyone would have in front of such disrespect," She fires off, giving me another nasty glare.

"I see… However, apologies are in order," Tapping her glasses, she held my gaze.

*Gulp*… If I don't, then she's gonna get more pissed… but I didn't do anything wrong… *Sniff*… This isn't fair… But… But Raiko-san would be my fellow too, right? Mmgh… I can't make more trouble.

"… I'm sorry, Raiko-san."

"It is Amato-sama to you, baseborn. I do not recall allowing you to refer to me by name."

"W-Why are you so mean to me? I'm apologizing and all… Aren't we all fellows?" For some reason, Maya-nee again tightened her grip, her lips were twisting in as if she were biting them.

"You, my fellow?" Raiko-san grimaced as if she were smelling something rotten, then shook her head quite strongly, "You cannot possibly hoist our values with these dull manners, and in no way do I see someone of your kind to be able to bestow anything to our fellowship. You're not even worth the breath of my retort."

"Sister! That was uncalled for!" He yelled, fire finally coming to his eyes.

"What are you saying? What can he possibly do for our fellowship? Why is this baseborn child even here? If he cannot offer anything of worth with his service, then he has no place here, plain and simple."

"But… *Hic…* I've been trying my best to be a samurai…" Clawing at my palms, I tried to hold her gaze.

"That is a noble goal to aim for, for you to revere the Royal Guard since such an early age," She nodded, folding her arms, dulling the fire, "However, you clearly do not possess the minimal required manners to be a fellow, much less the intelligence to even be considered in the first place, going by your lexicon. This might sound harsh to your young ears, but mediocrity has no place in the Royal Guard. Regardless of your efforts, something that anyone can accomplish holds no value, and you do not seem particularly gifted at first glance. That would mean that you are only a burden on our shoulders. On that regard, milord, we should return to the hall posthaste. Let us waste no more time with this baseborn," She then gave Masahide-san a deep bow, remaining still as she waited his word.

"Sigh…" Frowning much, he looked away from her, bitterly biting his lips, "Takeru-kun, please do not take this to heart. Sister has no idea about how hard you're trying," He patted my shoulder, smiling my way, "You cannot give up before struggling to the end, right?"

"… Y-Yes… I'll do… my best… *Sniff…"* Rubbing the tears off my eyes, I manage to nod back, and he pats my head.

"Sigh… Why even give him false hopes?" Raiko-san shook her head, Masahide-san frowned at her, "However, I shall accept the apology, if only to not waste more time. Worry not Tsukuyomi, I shan't mention this little incident to anyone."

"… Thanks for understanding, Raiko-sama," She said, coldly and sharp, "The same for you, Masahide-san. Do forgive the inconvenience, and thank you kindly for understanding."

"There is no need, it is alright. Please, take him to his room. He surely wants to rest," He smiled back, and I waved back as Maya-nee took me away from the garden.

"And do make sure he doesn't inconvenience anyone for the night," Raiko-san added, to Masahide-san's anger.

However, Maya-nee bowed down to her and forced me to do the same before we took our leave. Raiko-san sighed hard and looked away, again trying to get Masahide-san to go with her, and they seemed to start arguing again as we left. Maya-nee pulled me harder, so I couldn't hear or see what was going on. Her steps got faster as we went into the house, and even more when she saw that nobody was nearby, yet her vice grip on my hand didn't ease up.

Storming away towards my room, the moonlight peers through the windows into the hallway. She wasn't even looking at me. Only our footsteps could be heard, and yet she didn't slow down, even when I almost tripped.

"… I'm sorry."

"I told you to stay in your room tonight, didn't I?" Sharp and dry, still not looking back.

Looking down, a few tears fall down and crash on the floor. It feels as if spikes were sticking to my feet with every step I take.

"… Are you mad?"

She then stops walking, and gives me a look, "Why did you not do as I told you?"

"I… I just wanted to go see the stars…"

"You were told you could not leave your room today. Why did you do that?"

"I just… Sorry."

"Sigh… Takeru, you cannot keep acting to your leisure. Do you even know how much trouble would have your argument with Raiko-sama caused us?"

"… But she started it. She got angry first…"

"That matters not, you kept arguing instead of apologizing," Frowning really hard, she sighs again, "You were lucky that she didn't wish to push for answers, however, you better not repeat this ever again. Are we clear?"

"… Am I… such a bother?"

"… When you don't listen, yes, you are."

"… Eh?… Really?"

She nods, her serious gaze peering into me, "You were told to not leave your room, and yet you did. It was obvious nothing good would have happened had someone found you. You still do not have a role, which is why other Royal Guards cannot learn of your situation. I've told you this many times already, haven't I?"

"But Yohime-san said I was a fellow…"

"Sigh… That might be in theory, but until you're given a role, the rest cannot interact with you. And Raiko-sama speaks the truth, even if she was unnecessarily harsh to you. If your manners do not improve,

you won't become a Royal Guard. I've been telling you that since the start, right?"

"… But you said… *Sniff…* we would be like family…"

"Sigh… Please Takeru, do not start," Dragging me again, she stormed off towards my room, "I've would have been put in quite a precarious position should Raiko-sama have chosen to speak with her lord father. Surely you can start to do as you're told, can you not?" Sounding tired, she scolded me, her grip tight and her steps super fast, making me almost trip.

"… I'm sorry."

"If you're truly sorry, then do not ever do anything like this again. By the Holy Emperor… during such a crucial meeting as well…"

She kept grumbling, sighing, and groaning on the way, not even looking back, not even slowing down. We quickly arrived at my room, she opened the door in a flash and got me in there as she watched left and right to see if anyone was around. As if… I were some sort of unwanted guest…

"Well, I shall be returning to my duties. Do not leave this room again, are we clear?" Again giving me a firm, scary gaze, I could only nod.

"Um… Can't you stay for a while? I wanted to ask you something about-"

"I cannot. I told you I am busy already," Rubbing her forehead, she shook her head as another heavy sigh left her lips, "This meeting is not yet over, and I already lost enough time as it is. Stay put and do not give me more problems, Takeru."

"… Okay. But, um, about my dinne-"

Not even hearing me, she stepped outside and prepared to close the door, "I shall come for you at morning as always. Rest well so that

you can perform up to par tomorrow, you have to make up for your prior results after all. And do not dwell on Raiko-sama's words, you will be given a role regardless of this month's endeavors. Sleep well, good night," And without waiting for my reply, without looking at me, she closed the door with a loud noise. Then, I could hear her storming off in a hurry.

…

And again, I'm all alone in my room.

Alone with the moonlight in these four walls.

I don't see any plate with food, so my dinner isn't here. If the other samurai had come, he would have noticed I was gone. So I'm gonna get my dinner later… right?

Sniff… Why was she so mad? Raiko-san started it… But… Maya-nee said… I give her problems… She's gonna tell Yohime-san… But more importantly…

"… She didn't even call me Shirogane in front of them… She didn't defend me… And just now… she said I would be given any role… So that m-means… Sniff… that she doesn't… believe in me…"

Burden. Trouble. Eyesore. Bother.

I get under my sheets, hugging my sides as a cold shiver cloaks over me.

Can't get good grades, can't speak well, can't give anything to whatever the fellowship is.

Tears fall down again, my chest hurts as if something was piking at my lungs.

And in the end… not even Maya-nee believes in me. She's going back to how she was when we first met… because the samurais are her real family. Raiko-san said I was a bother to Masahide-san, so

my advice… was bad then. Since Maya-nee was so polite, does she agree with what Raiko-san said?

A mediocre baseborn… Is that what I am? Then… Why was Dad a samurai? Wait… Masahide-san said… he was treated badly… Is this how they were with him? Then… Then… Why were they nice until today?

Because… Dad paid them… because he hired Maya-nee to look after me… but being a fellow isn't the same… if I'm not good enough…

They're gonna make me go away, or send me to a distant role or something.

Rubbing my arms to counter the frozen feeling, as those mean words repeated over and over in my ears, I cried in silence as I waited for my dinner.

But it never came.

Maya-nee also didn't come with it, either.

Eventually, even the moonlight left the room.

And as I cried, I realized… that I was really left alone.

Dad and Mom are gone… Uncle Koetsu already said his goodbyes… First Kazora-san, and now even Maya-nee say I'm a bother…

"Ugh… Uuh…" The cold drills itself into my sides, my socks could be made out of ice and I wouldn't feel a difference.

No matter how much I hug my sheets, it doesn't go away.

No matter how much I try, those mean words keep repeating over and over.

I try to cry, but my throat hurts, feels dry and hoarse, and not a single sound comes out.

So I dug my face into my pillow and cried. Remembering Mom's dishes, her smile, her scoldings. Remembering Dad's tales of his work, the times when he read a lot of books with me, when we could get to play during the weekends.

… Remembering I'll never see them again, that I'm not a fellow here, that I'll be sent away any time, I cried myself to sleep, enduring the cold within the dark room.

# Shirogane (I)

### Chapter 56: Shirogane - Starting Point

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*June 4th. 06:13 AM.*

*(Koubuin House. Near Takeru's Room.)*

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The sun peered into the massive building with gusto, birds chirped to life, and a docile wind accompanied today's dawnbreak. Such weather was welcomed by those who had already risen and were preparing for their coming duties.

As the Koubuin House bustled to life for another day, the young lady of the Tsukuyomi tapped her glasses as she strode in long, fast steps towards little Takeru's room.

" *It truly was a stroke of luck for Masahide-san to have been the one to find him,"* she mused, picking up her pace, *"Had it been anyone else, the event wouldn't have gone unnoticed."*

Maya had taken the time to survey what had both Amato siblings done after returning to the hall, yet not a word was spoken about the small incident on the gardens. However, even if that was a relief, her other incessant duties kept piling up, and even when she was dismissed from watching over the Main Hall new orders arrived for her.

As she recalled, a small frown made its way to her face, *"Honestly, by the Holy Emperor, what a foolhardy way of being,"* Repining much, her steps grew stronger.

As it were, the guard that was tasked with delivering dinner to Takeru had, quite conveniently, forgotten about it. The man said he was overburdened during the meeting, despite the fact that he was

reminded in advance of this task. I suppose that to say the man would suffer most horrendous nightmares from now on about Maya's barely restrained outburst would be a severe understatement.

Her stride dulling as she approached his room, admiring the ground through almost closed eyelids upon recalling how undeservedly harsh she had been to him, Maya took a moment to shake her head, take in a sharp breath, and refocus on the moment.

Shortly after, she arrived at his room. And upon opening the sliding door, Maya was greeted with a sight she had never seen before, not on the two years she had already been looking after him.

Takeru was sitting on the floor, already dressed for the day. His futon tidied up, his bag also ready by his side. Maya blinked for a moment, befuddlement setting in, as he returned her gaze.

Looking away, nervous at her silence, he gave her a bow as he stood up, "… G-Good morning, Maya-nee."

"Good morning, Takeru. Did you… wake up on your own?"

"… Yes," Still looking down, he slowly, hesitantly, and dragging his feet, went to Maya's side, bag on his arm, "So… Um… Let's go?" He asked upon her silence.

Which elicited both a cough and a nod afterwards, "Yes, let us go."

Maya closed the door once both left the room, and as had become routine for her she reached out for his hand.

But he moved away, walking close to a wall, hands on his pockets. Without waiting for her, Takeru started walking, still looking down, remaining quiet, oddly so.

Quickly reaching his side, she looked straight at him as she offered her hand, "Takeru?"

"What?"

"Come, breakfast should already be on… the way…" Blinking in quick succession once again, only empty air returned her grasp, only his hair did to her gaze, "What is it? Are you feeling unwell?"

"No."

"Then, did you not get enough sleep, perhaps?"

"… I'm fine," Puffing a cheek, he picked up his pace.

One of her brows twitched, sensing something odd in his tone, "Are you upset at my scolding yesterday?" His silence made her sigh, "Please Takeru, you were at fault. We would have been placed in a very precarious position should Raiko-sama had inquired into your situation."

Nothing was said, he still kept his distance from her. Maya had a light meal, a mere snack, after she had woken up, yet her stomach turned and ached at the rift between their hands.

"Takeru, lift your face. Do not let yesterday's miss hamper your efforts today. You cannot show such an expression at the table," She slowly said, again getting closer, again trying to reach for his hand.

And again, he avoided her.

"I know that," Shrugging his lips, Takeru stalwartly refused to return her gaze.

"Come on, now. Use this as a learning experience instead of getting angry. Now stop pouting, we're close to the dining room," Taking another step, she swiftly reached for his hand, grasping it this time.

Only for Takeru to, quite violently, and unexpectedly for Maya, shake her off, returning a very sharp frown. The very first show of anger, of true ire, that he had ever done to her.

"Don't touch me!"

Momentarily stunned, hand frozen in mid-air, what toxins were brewing on her stomach flared up to life.

"What is wrong with you today?! After what happened, this is how you behave?" Returning the frown, she found herself at a loss when he didn't recede.

This wasn't a temper tantrum. Tight lips, accusing glare, and the mindful step back when she approached. Only then she realized, Takeru was truly angry at her.

So, cooling down her tone while tapping her glasses, she softly spoke up, "Takeru, cease this foolishness at once. You cannot act in such way at the table, and such anger won't aid you in your classes. Come on, leave that frown behind, else your food will grow cold."

"… I hate you."

She blinked once, then twice.

All that was clogging her insides suddenly vanished, except for the dart that had been thrown at her heart.

"… What did you just say?"

"I hate you. Don't talk to me," Without wait, he then turned around and kept walking, gaze on the floor.

Again stunned for a second, Maya chased after the boy, that still was making his way to the dining room, placing perhaps too much force on his shoulder once she got to his side.

"Takeru, what's going on with you?" He remained silent with his eyes on the ground, she sighed heavily at that, "I was merely trying to protect you yesterday. You should know that if other samurais learn of your position here as of now, they would-"

"You lied."

"Huh?" She looked at him, only to find, as he would say, an expansive wildfire staring back.

"You lied," Then, releasing his anger, hands shaking and eyes watering, Takeru's voice quivered slightly as it rose in intensity, "You didn't defend me, you think I'm a stranger, you don't even believe I can become a samurai. You think I'm a bother like Kazora-san and Raiko-san do, don't you? I hate you!"

"W-Wha… Do not speak nonsense! In no way do I see you as-"

"You said I was a bother yesterday."

"That's only when you do not listen, like you're doing right now. I do believe in you, all I did was make sure Raiko-sama didn't-"

"Lies! You treated me horribly, and I didn't do anything bad. She was the one being mean."

"Sigh… Enough. You should not have been there, and should not have incited a fight. That's why I scolded you, because you didn't listen to what I told you to do."

"But you didn't defend me, not even when she said mean things about me… *Sniff*…"

"I… I had to make sure she didn't ask any questions about you, that is all. The meeting was still underway, I didn't have any time to lose."

"… You wouldn't have done the same if she had said those things about the Pickles," She flinched at his doubtful stare, it only invigorated his suspicions, "… See? I thought… *Sniff*… we were like family…"

Void of air for a moment, her hand couldn't reach for his head, "T-Takeru, I was merely… You should know I do care about you. All I did was to protect you from her inquiries, that's all."

"… You're lying."

Looking into his eyes, she couldn't help but to frown as his glare clashed into her as well, "Sigh… Come on, apologize for shouting to your sister now and we shall leave this behind."

"… No. You just see me as a stranger too."

"Takeru… Do not start. How can you cast doubts on me after all these years?" Taking a step closer, feeling as if she were walking atop iron spikes, Maya placed a hand on his shoulder.

"… Then, where was my dinner yesterday?"

"Eh?"

"I tried to tell you and you didn't listen. Why did no one bring me dinner yesterday if I'm not a bother?" He inquired, almost stuttering, lips quivering as he looked up.

When she didn't answer, when her hand left his shoulder, he took it as a confirmation of his fears. And so, again he looked down, the ground acting as a magnet to a few tears.

Maya, on her end, was at a loss. The realization hit her with another wave of emptiness, to see that she had, after all, neglected to give him dinner after confirming the guard appointed to do so had 'forgotten' about the task. Prey to stress and exhaustion, she simply chose to return to her chamber after reporting the matter and reprimanding the man.

Pierced by a scorching feeling against which even the finest blade does bend, Maya tried to explain, to reach out to him. However, upon seeing his watering eyes, filled with distrust, she couldn't bring forth any meaningful words. Guilt made nest within, her throat suddenly shutting down, hampering any attempts at communication for she had never seen him angry in this manner.

"… You should know that… I was tired… I… made a miss, I accept it. Forgive me," He looked away, she found herself having to take a

deep breath, "However, no one sees you as a bother. Let's… leave this behind us. You must be truly hungry, and you cannot perform at your best if you have to rush your first meal. Come on Takeru, let's-" However, he started walking on his own, and all she could do was follow.

Perhaps the physical distance wasn't grand at all, but from Maya's perspective the gesture, the reluctance, the doubt in itself was just as harsh as her training in the Daizaburou Dojo had been. As cold and solitary as she was under the waterfall by dusk, seeing this as a large a rift as how she once saw herself failing when thinking to have been kicked out of the Royal Guard, that is how she saw the distance that had been placed between her and Takeru.

And while on the outside she kept a poker face as they walked, the dart had undergone a metamorphosis, turning into a rusted, jagged lump of iron that lurched forward every time she took a glance at him, at his refusal to come closer, to speak up, to forgive her carelessness.

Nothing else was said on the way to the dining room.

Knocking the door to notify their presence once they arrived, Yohime spoke to allow them entry. Both bowed down to her once inside, saying their greetings.

"Rise, you two. Good morning, Maya, Takeru," She so says as they rose back, smiling as per usual, "Do sit down, breakfast shall be arriving shortly."

"Yes, Yohime-sama," Maya promptly answered, then went to take her seat besides her father, who nodded in salutation once she did.

Takeru slowly went to his usual seat, in between the young Yuuhi and Shion, as the three little girls greeted him in the usual cheer. He merely nodded at them, avoiding their eyes, saying nothing.

Kazora was giving Yohime an overview of her schedule, alongside informing Maya of some early developments for her own duties, but was forced to stop short once he noticed his Lady was no longer focused on him. Yohime was instead staring, rather worriedly, at Takeru.

"Takeru, what is it?" She inquired, a hand going to her chin.

He ever so slightly trembled when he realized she was staring, "Nothing, Yohime-san."

Replying fast, the small frame was as tense, as worried as if he were bracing for further scolding. Thinking that, perhaps, Yohime would admonish him as Maya had done before. Perhaps, even send him away on the spot.

For but a second a brow arched in concern, quickly dispelled into her charming smile, "I see… Do let me tell you we shall be having mackerel today."

Nodding once in glee, for she knew the boy favored that particular fish above all, she was certain this would raise his spirits. Yohime assumed correctly that he was afflicted after his encounter with Raiko, so she had ensured today's breakfast would be fitting to the boy's palate.

However, contrary to her expectations, Takeru merely nodded back. Eyes fixated, bolted to the table, lips clamped, forged shut, afraid of making another mistake, afraid of confirming his fears. Said disposition of his only made Yohime's smile wane in a flash, she sent a most adusted, narrowed gaze towards the eldest Tsukuyomis, who stiffened up at it.

Noticing Maya's complexion to be odd and Kazora to also be surprised by the boy's reaction, only doubt and worry festered within Yohime as her daughter and both cousins tried to no avail to integrate the boy into their idle chat.

"Say Takeru, you won't guess how boring was yesterday's meeting," Shion said, leaning closer.

"Really?" With an almost inaudible answer, he stole a glance at her before looking down once more.

"Indeed it was," Mion agreed with a nod, "We had to spend much time talking with other heirs, or simply sitting as the adults talked," She then lets out a small sigh.

"I see…" He replies, eyes unmoving from the table as Maya's from him.

"Most merely boasted of their academic performance, and all seem to be reading the same novels as of late," Yuuhi commented, a bit sourly at that, trying to look into Takeru's eyes, "It is rather tiring, to always reiterate such vain topics."

"Yes, I don't understand why everybody reads the same book or try to constantly edge the rest with their boons," Shion complained, truly bothered by the constant 'My House is bigger than yours' arguments that ensue whenever scores and feats are brought up by anyone during either school breaks or meetings.

"I believe it is precisely to talk of it with the rest," Maya repines, tapping her glasses and sharing her sister's feelings on the matter, "It is crucial to have a topic of conversation to chat with your fellows, is it not? And what better topic than one's House's achievements of late?" The girls nod, agreeing to some degree, Takeru remains simply looking down, not wishing to speak up. An edge of Maya's lips twisted inwards at his silence, seeing not even the cousins could have him leave the stiffness behind.

"I can agree with that," Yuuhi sighed, all too aware as of late of such endeavors, all too exhausted of the unavoidable socialization topics, "So Takeru, how was your evening yesterday?" She inquired with such a bright smile, eager to *finally* have some time to speak with him after being denied of it yesterday, edging a bit closer to the boy.

"… It was fine, thanks for asking."

"I see…" Her brows arched for a moment at his curt reply, as did her mother's, "By the way, it is already Thursday. Have you thought on what you would like to read on the weekend?"

"No, not really."

Her lips now became a small circle, "Then… Is there anything you would be preferring to read, Takeru?" Again trying to look into his gaze, she anxiously awaited his reply. Yohime was firmly watching their exchange as well, a hand on her chin.

Takeru shook his head, his gaze darting away from hers, "No, there isn't. Don't mind me, Yuuhi… -san."

Maya's and Yohime's mouth remained gaping for a moment, Shion and Mion both also were beyond shock at hearing such words.

"… Eh?" Yuuhi's eyes slowly widened, she remained as such staring at him.

For him to use an honorific, for Takeru that equals speaking to an adult, someone he should respect. All those present knew that very well.

Maya now openly bit her lips, *"Why is he putting such distance between… He isn't comfortable here any longer, perhaps? After what happened, and how he was this morning… It's clear he's forcing himself. Perhaps…"* Unable to bear the thought that sprouted forth, she looked down, tightening both hands, *"… Perhaps Father was right. Perhaps he would be happier… back in Hiiragi…"*

Kazora himself was merely limiting himself to watch, a perfect stoic expression in his face. While he was rather worried for the boy after hearing from Maya what Raiko had said to him, the man saw this as what would show the rest that he was indeed right. That Takeru would live a more bountiful life as a peasant.

" *After all Shirogane did for our fellowship, to have his son endure such unjust words on a daily basis… would be a dishonor to me as both his superior and a retainer handpicked by Takahisa-sama,"* He concluded within, deciding to let things play out.

Before Yohime could speak up her worry, the doors opened with the Chamberlain bringing the food into the room alongside the attendants. As it was normal by now, they served Takeru last and in slightly lesser quantity. Both the Chamberlain and the attendants didn't waste a gaze on him, keeping a firm poker face when they had to serve his breakfast.

*After all, it is such a dishonor for those of higher station to have to lower themselves to serve a mere peasant, isn't it?*

Unable to rein in her worsening mood, Yohime squinted her eyes at the attendants, who then hastened their pace when they left. The Chamberlain sat to the left of the manor's lady by Kazora's side, awaiting for Yohime to begin to eat as it was customary.

Those sharpened amethyst eyes laid onto the old woman, deciding to remain silent for the moment, before starting the morning's meal. This time, unlike every other breakfast since little Takeru had arrived, there was no idle chatter coming from the kids.

Maya slowly poked her food, unable to bring more than a small bite at a time, as both cousins did as well. The young Yuuhi, however, was plucking her lips without even touching her plate, stealing glances at Takeru who was slowly eating his share despite the insistence from his stomach to just gobble up both food and plate in one gulp.

"Yuuhi-sama, is the food not to your liking?" The Chamberlain asks, worry placed on her words.

"Of course not, it looks as delicious as always," She smiled briefly, before returning to a more neutral expression as she began to eat.

"Then, what is the cause of such restlessness?"

"Chamberlain, Yuuhi is merely exhausted after yesterday's meeting," Yohime dryly and promptly answered, sending a gaze to her left.

"Oh, is that so?" She then looks at little Yuuhi, a concerned tint in her face as she brought a hand to her cheek.

Yuuhi nodded, lifting another grin, "Yes, I am merely…" Her eyes took a brief rest towards Takeru, "… tired," Thus, the tone she now made would truly make anyone think so.

The woman's brows narrow, "… I see," Then her eyes do the same towards little Takeru, who lowered his gaze further when he noticed, "Yohime-sama, I suggest you to remove the peasant from the table. It is clear his presence is detrimental to Yuuhi-sama."

Maya's throat suddenly felt sore, making her drop the piece of mackerel she had just picked. Kazora said nothing, remaining as stoic as usual. While the cousins were openly angry, Takeru had stopped eating, his eyes now were barely open.

"Why do you say such a thing?!" Shion frowned, her tone very much filled to the brim with frost.

"Shion, you shall not raise your voice at your elders!" Kazora admonished, yet Shion didn't recoil.

"Kazora-sama, why would she want to have Takeru leave the table?" Mion inquired in a calm tone, yet also endowed with ailing ice.

"You are to stay quiet on the table," He gave them a firm gaze, slightly raising his voice, and they both trembled upon the scolding.

"Kazora-san, there is no need for such actions," Yohime dryly repined, shaking her head, "Chamberlain, this is not the time nor the place to speak of such matters. Please do not disturb our breakfast."

"… As you wish, milady," She gave a small bow in apology, returning to eat.

Thus, nothing else was said.

Yohime also slowly returned to her plate, opting to remain silent to rein in her mood. Shion and Mion were also looking down as Takeru was, he hadn't resumed eating. Now, a slight shaking could be seen on his hands if you looked at them carefully.

And while Maya understood Yohime did not wish to spark a fight in front of Takeru, after what he had said earlier she could only try to restrain the stinger, the thoughts that assured her the boy would take the silence as a confirmation of his earlier doubts of being a bother, a stranger for the rest.

" *Yet… I cannot speak up. If I do, I would be going against Yohime-sama's words. She ordered to let the matter rest for now. But…"* A look towards him only made her food feel all the more heavy, *"He isn't even eating, his plate isn't even half-empty. Takeru doesn't deserve this. Perhaps… it would be for the best if he…"*

And as Maya was about to simply admit defeat, as no other sound could be heard in the dining room other than those of chopsticks fulfilling their purpose, as all gazes were focused on their own plates…

"… Take those words back, please."

Everyone on the table stopped eating upon hearing the adusted, most combusting, yet still soft voice.

Yuuhi was, oh so intensely, frowning. Wrinkles tainting her forehead, a stalwart blaze in her gaze which sent everyone recoiling back. The contrast with her more frequent sweet demeanor was so strong that Yohime dropped her chopsticks.

After a second to register what had happened, she asked, "… Yuuhi, dear, what did you just say?"

"I asked the Chamberlain to take her words back. Kindly retract your words, or else," She intensified her glare, now a scowl surging forth as if a geyser it were.

Which made the old woman freeze up, void of answers for a second, "… Yuuhi-sama, why would you-"

"Take your words back, please," She fired off unrelenting, her blazing complexion unchanged.

Yohime leaned forward, towards the young girl, a soothing tone to mitigate the fire, "Yuuhi, dear, this is no way to-"

"She insulted Takeru," Yuuhi hissed back, despite now being looking at her mother, "He's one of us, so I shan't forgive anyone who speaks ill of him," She so said, placing a hand above one of his. Which made him look up, shocked at her unwavering words.

The Chamberlain, however, was perplexed, confused at the young lady's demand, "Yuuhi-sama, I said no insult. I merely believe that the peasant has no place by your si-"

"Takeru's station matters not," The blaze scowled back, "You are using it as an insult to indicate that, for some reason, you believe he should not be here," Her words spoken rapidly, her stare unchanged in its wrathful stance.

"Um… You shouldn't get so upset at an adult, Yuuhi… -san," Speaking up only gained Takeru a stare from her.

However, she immediately dulled her frown, now more of a sour gaze instead, "Why do you add an honorific to my name, Takeru?"

"Eh… W-Well, it's… rude. I can't call you like that."

"Why?"

"I mean… I'm… I shouldn't… be rude. I have to behave well and all that… Right?"

"Takeru," She gradually leaned closer and closer, looking at him squarely in the eye, "You're living with us now. So, stop using an honorific. I am Yuuhi to you," Now her tone was clearly a complain as her brows arched downwards, groaning softly as a kitty would when awaiting its meal.

"B-But…" He looked away, her own gaze crumbled down as well as the edges of her lips did.

"Takeru, why won't you call me by my name?"

"Yuuhi-sama, you should not ask such from a peasant!" The Chamberlain couldn't endure the sight anymore, for the coming Regent to mingle with a baseborn in such way.

"… You will not insult Takeru again," Thus, Yuuhi once more forwarded a fiery frown her way.

Yohime coughed loudly, leveling a stare at her daughter, "Yuuhi, dear, please. This is no way to conduct yourself on the table."

"And badmouthing a fellow is, Mother?"

It would be an understatement as large as an XG to say the rest were flabbergasted or befuddled, for Yuuhi never retorts when her mother speaks. This was, to their knowledge, the first time it happened. When in truth was the second, and it's what made Yohime not admonish her further, instead sending a hand to her hair, her breathing calming down, pondering what to do.

"Um… Please don't fight," Takeru spoke up, still looking down. Blaming himself for the argument, certain that blames would be placed on him like last night,"I-If… If I'm being a bother, I can leave," He slowly stood up, not lifting his gaze from the floor as he went his way.

A vile taste filled Maya's mouth, who then breathed in through clenched teeth. Seeing the cousins stare at her pleadingly, she tried to stood up only for Kazora to firmly hold her wrist in place, preventing any further movements. As the three younger Tsukuyomis frowned at the oldest, he then pointed with his jaw towards the edge of the table.

A second later, the rough sound of a chair being thrust back resonated as it almost fell towards the floor. In one fluid and swift motion, Yuuhi had stood up and got to Takeru's side.

"You will sit down, Takeru," She declared, promptly grabbing his hand, dragging him to the table, and making the stunned Takeru sit down again, startling both him and the rest equally.

"Um… Yuuhi-san, I'm-"

"Takeru, my name is Yuuhi," She pouted at him when she sat down, almost puffing a cheek, "And you shall remain here, by my side."

Wasting not a second, she then linked her arm around his, locking Takeru closer to herself to prevent him from leaving. She didn't even flinch at his stuttering, instead choosing to enforce her hold. Much like a hunter who cornered prey or an intellectual gripping onto sudden inspiration for a thesis, so was Yuuhi's lock onto little Takeru's arm, to his and the rest's utter shock.

"Yuuhi-sama, that is unproper for a lady!" The Chamberlain was almost shrieking in horror, one could say she had seen a BETA by the expression she was making.

Yuuhi, however, returned another frown, "I wish Takeru to remain by my side, therefore I see no issue with this. I believe I had asked you to take your words back?"

For a moment no one said anything.

Yuuhi held the Chamberlain's gaze as tightly and firmly as she was holding onto Takeru's arm.

Both the cousins and Maya could only stare at her, and at Takeru as he nervously stole glances at both Yuuhi and Yohime, the latter who was wearing a poker face while grasping her chin as she observed the situation.

Kazora was the only one who, somehow, was calm enough to continue eating. Deciding that, if Yuuhi wished for the boy to stay, and he was in agreement, all he could do was to support both of them as he had done with their fathers.

"… My apologies, Yuuhi-sama," She finally said, relenting a bow.

"I believe you are apologizing to the wrong person, however," She furrowed her brows, looking at the one she held tightly onto.

Takeru's lips were quivering like butterfly's wings, unable to hold the gaze of the Chamberlain, almost repulsed as if smelling the stench of bodily decay.

"Would you have me apologize to a peas-" Yuuhi frowned once more, she drowned her complains.

"Y-Yuuhi-san… You don't have to fight. It's fine, it's always like this," His voice crumbling, Takeru was sure he was going to get scolded for making trouble once more.

The rusted iron then decided to thrust through Maya's lungs, ruining her breathing. The cousins also seem to share the feeling, while Mion's face fell further down in concern Shion was still glaring at the Chamberlain.

However, Yuuhi's brows twitched much at his words, and, as he would say, blue fire was flooding, "No, it isn't fine at all, Takeru. You are one of us and are deserving of respect. Also…" She tightened

her grasp, bringing her face closer to his, their noses almost touching, "I am Yuuhi, no honorifics."

"I-I get it… Sorry."

"Don't apologize, you are most certainly not at fault," She beamed at him, returning to her usual demeanor. However, it lasted but a moment as she again faced the Chamberlain, "I believe you were apologizing."

The woman closed her eyes and took a deep breath, a hand near her chest. Part of her lips receded inwards for a moment, but then looked at Takeru and gave him a minuscule nod.

"My apologies, Shirogane," Short and dry, perhaps also deceptive.

"… No, it's fine," He looked down again.

"Ahem… Shall we resume eating?" Yohime ordered, sternly gazing at the Chamberlain.

No one protested, no one said a word.

Yet, Yuuhi didn't let go of Takeru's arm. She then began to quietly speak with him and the cousins about the meeting. Takeru remained quiet at first, but Yuuhi insisted much in hearing his opinion, getting too close and personal perhaps.

A bit overwhelmed, he then looked away, and his eyes met Maya's. His gaze fleeting and hesitant as a dragonfly looking for a source of water amidst a heatwave, fearful of seeing the same anger as during the prior dusk, he only found a small smile and a nod, and then he seemed to relax. Maya did as well once she saw the four little ones begin to speak as they always used to do, sighing the rusted metal sensation out of her system.

For the remainder of the breakfast, the children spoke between themselves as they usually did even if Takeru's voice was lower in

intensity and open glee.

Once the meal was finished, everyone prepared to depart for their duties. However, Yohime called both Yuuhi and Takeru to her side, telling the rest to leave. While Maya was hesitant at first, all she could do was accompany Mion and Shion to prepare to leave for school and return posthaste to take Takeru to his classes.

And so, once the Tsukuyomis and the Chamberlain left, the other three remained alone in the dining room, Yuuhi still holding Takeru's hand.

"Um… Sorry for making trouble, Yohime-san," He gives her a bow, but then a hand was delicately placed on top of his head, softly ruffling his hair.

As he looked up, he saw a most concerned expression permeating Yohime's face, "No… I am the one that has to apologize. Forgive me, Takeru."

"Huh? Why? I was the one who made them fight…" Again, he looked down, *"If I hadn't been here, nothing would have happened. Just like yesterday, Masahide-san wouldn't have fought with Raiko-san if I hadn't been there,"* Once more, a cold blanket threatened to envelop his back.

If not for the tightening grip on his arm, "Takeru, you are most assuredly not at fault," Yuuhi thus insisted, again getting closer.

"But-"

"You. Were not. At fault," She repeated, puffing a cheek, shrugging her lips, "Isn't that right, Mother?"

Yohime could barely restrain the giggling she was wishing to do, seeing his shock at her daughter's forwardness, "Sigh… That is true, if blames must be placed I am the one at fault."

"That's not true, Yohime-san! Why would this be your fault?" He asked, not understanding, not wishing to blame her.

Which only made her inner affliction all the worse, seeing his honest concern, "As the acting Regent I am, I should have been clearer with the rest as I was with Kazora-san regarding your situation."

She then sighed once more, he thought she was about to cry, whereas Yuuhi was also at a loss for she had never seen Yohime displaying such clear sadness.

However, she smiled their way again, "Takeru, Yuuhi, come here," She patted the chairs by her side, both slowly sat down. Yohime then started ruffling his hair softly, never losing sight of his eyes, "Takeru, you are no stranger and I do not wish you to go away. I promised your father that I would look after you, and you should know that the samurai never go back on their word."

"But… aren't I being a bother?" He hesitantly asked, feeling heavy all of a sudden.

"You are nothing of the sort, as Yuuhi said," Her eyes sharpened, tone sobering as well, "You shall be one of us from now on, even if it takes time for you to become acquainted to your new life. Please, worry no longer," She smiled, as sweetly as usual, "As for you Yuuhi, please be mindful of when and how you tackle this kind of discussions. You cannot clash so frontally with others from now on."

"… I understand, Mother. My sincerest apologies," She bowed down, yet didn't dull the pout when she rose back, "However, defending a fellow is an obligation for me, as the next heir. Remaining silent was something we could not allow ourselves to do," Firmly holding her ground, she stated.

"Um… Don't fight, please," Pulling the hand Yuuhi was still holding, her glare receded slightly upon his worry.

"I do admit you have a point, dear," Yohime nodded, which made her daughter dispel the tension of her complexion, "However, you should have considered how Takeru would have seen said argument. In the end, this was an issue I allowed to occur, so I shan't admonish you further, but do keep this in mind for any future altercations," She firmly looked into the blazes, which were subdued then after a nod, "In any case, Takeru, please do forgive my carelessness. I should have known the Chamberlain would have reacted in this way at some point."

"… So I did give you trouble," He barely whispered out, slumping down.

She then caressed his hair once more, dropping her fingers to lift his chin, "Nothing of the sort. I said you were one of us just now. This was an oversight on my end, nothing more."

"But, why is everyone so mean? I'm… doing what I can to be good," Shrugging his lips again, he sourly said.

Yohime sighed, imitating his prior whisper, "Sometimes, people will simply not favor you. That's how it is, even for us adults."

"So, uh…" Hesitating a bit, finally managing to ask the question as Yuuhi tightened her grip, "… I can stay here?" Yohime then nods, again ruffling his hair as another smile brightly flourished forth.

"I was not thinking on sending you away. So, do not worry about this anymore and, more importantly, do not try to leave the table again. Your seat is right there, by Yuuhi's side." Her voice sounding slightly upset but at the same time sweet, she slowly placed a hand on his cheek.

Shivering a bit, barely biting back the tears, Takeru nodded twice in quick succession, a smile finally appearing on him.

"Now, might I ask why you used an honorific with Yuuhi?" She lowered her brows, tilting her head.

"… Yes, why did you do such a thing, Takeru?" The young Yuuhi grew closer, he twitched. Yohime couldn't help it and chuckled at their expressions.

He looks upwards, scratching the back of his head, "I mean… Masahide-san told me I should try to speak like you all do, and everyone is really polite with you… so I thought that I had to do that too," *To not be a stranger,* he finished within.

"I see… You were merely trying to appease us, then?" Yohime asked, he nodded.

"I just wanted to not make trouble, to try to be better. Maya-nee is always telling me to be more respectful, and everyone is like that with Yuuhi… So I thought I should use a -san with her."

"You do not need to do such," She insisted, resting her frame on his arm, "You're my friend, Takeru. No more honorifics between us."

"O-Okay, I get it already…" He gave in, rather fearful of the embers that still lurked within her eyes.

Chuckling once more at the exchange, Yohime petted both kids' heads, "It is good to see you try, but please don't treat Yuuhi or the cousins in a different manner. They like you for who you are, Takeru."

"So… You won't get mad because I'm rude with them?" He braved the fear of hearing a yes.

And was welcomed by the shaking of her head and another smile, "They welcome your usual way of being, so there is no reason for me to be upset at you. It is different when it comes to others, then you should be polite," She admitted, then she looked up, "I know you must be disheartened after your last tests' results, however no one shall send you away for such a thing. I have been busy these last few days, and sadly I haven't been in the right mind to speak with you. But it was not because I was upset, I was merely tired."

"Are you in trouble, Yohime-san?" He got a bit closer, worried about how her eyes dropped now. Even Yuuhi was now concerned yet again at the display.

"I am fine… However… Sigh…"

"See? You and Maya-nee are sighing a lot these days. Are you sick?" He rubs Yohime's arm in circles, she giggles.

"I am fine, thank you. It's merely that…" She again looks away, her smile vanishing. Taking a moment to gaze at Yuuhi, leaving a hand atop the girl's head, she once more sighed, "… There are those who simply refuse to let the night come to this House, and that is not letting me sleep well."

"… Mother, what does that mean?" She inquired, displeased with the wordplay.

"You can't sleep at night? Are you staying awake doing work?" Takeru, however, took that literally as he always did.

Slowly patting the heads of both of them, slower this time, Yohime's eyes almost closed, lost in what ailed within. Like a boat drifting away into the sea without a compass, right into storm clouds.

"Yes… You could say so. However, it is because of said setbacks that I…" She stops, takes a breath, and then a serious, stoic expression surges forth, "That I will make sure you remain well under my care," Making a point to look into Yuuhi's eyes, the young girl's worries evaporated away.

"Why? Do I have something to do with that work?" He asked, still worried about Yohime.

"No… I merely wish to… fulfill the promises I made some time ago," Voice creaking, gaze crumbling, all of it made both little ones all the more concerned, "Taking care of you is one of such promises. There

is nothing you should worry about, for your situation shall resolve itself in a month's time."

"I see… So… So I can… I can become a samurai, right?"

"Of course, provided that you attain satisfactory scores on your efforts."

"And I'm not giving you trouble?"

She then smiled as she patted his head once more before Yuuhi could repine at him, "On the contrary, knowing you are here to keep Yuuhi company now that I am busy is a great reassurance to me. Therefore, there is no reason for you to be scared, Takeru. I have been made aware that… a mean lady was undeservedly harsh to you yesterday, however you are certainly not to blame for said discussion. Your only miss was to leave your room. Are we clear?" He nods, she smiles again, "Furthermore, I shall strive to ensure you are not placed in such a precarious situation ever again," She looks into his eyes for a moment, he nods back, "Then, can I trust you'll remain being friendly with Yuuhi?"

"Yeah… Yes, I will. Don't worry, I won't use a -san with her anymore."

"However, when there are other adults nearby, please do be mindful of your manners," Yohime reminded, he nodded, and Yuuhi slightly pouted.

"… Takeru may call me by name if he so wishes," So she then complained much, another small blaze in her gaze.

"Hehehe… Please do take into account his situation, Yuuhi, dear," The young girl's groaning only made Yohime chuckle once more, "Takeru, allow me to tell you I have never seen Yuuhi as upset as I did today," She brings a hand to her cheek, smiling from ear to ear.

"Huh?! Really?"

"… That is not true," She once more repined with shrugged lips, moderately flaring back up.

"I suppose, you do become far more adusted whenever strawberry cream is involved," Yohime teased back, to her increasingly puffing cheeks and groans, "You will continue to call her by her name, will you Takeru?" She asked as she caressed her hair.

"Yeah… She looks really scary right now," He admitted as the grip on his hand was reinforced.

"I am not scary. Furthermore, I was only defending you," Still pouting, she once more drew closer to him.

"I-I know! Come on, don't be so angry…"

"Hehehe… Indeed, you should remain composed, Yuuhi," Yohime triumphantly smiled, seeing her misdirection had managed to make both of them relax, even if only a little.

"So… Um…" Takeru then took one deep breath, hesitating to continue, to look at Yohime for a moment, "I… I promise I'll try to be more polite, and I'll get better in my studies. And one day… one day I'll be good enough to make you and Yuuhi smile. So, um, p-please be patient until I get better," And then, he gave her a bow.

"I see… I shall be looking forward to that day," Nodding as he rose back, she leaned back onto her seat, finally relaxing, "However, please do remember to smile yourself. Takeru, if anyone says anything harmful, you shall tell me of it as soon as you can."

"And you can come to me as well," Yuuhi said, a bit too strongly.

"Y-Yes, I get it," Thus, he stood upright, a bit fearful at being the targeted by both of their stares.

Yohime couldn't help but to smile and giggle once more, "Hehe… Worry not, you simply need to exercise caution from today onwards,"

He nodded back, a smile of true delight decorating his face, which only further bolstered Yohime's one, "Now, there is something that I need to warn you about. Takeru, you shouldn't go wandering off by yourself anymore."

"I know… I was just…"

"I am not scolding you, I am only saying you should be careful."

"Yeah, I have to follow the rules, right?" She nods slowly, placing one hand on top of the other.

"Precisely. As your guardian, I should have warned you of this before. Forgive me," Giving him a small bow, the tint of sadness, of regret permeated her voice once more.

"No, don't apologize Yohime-san. I'll try to not give you more problems," He insisted, not liking her expression one bit, "Um… What's a guardian?" He then asked, almost certain that she wasn't talking about the knights with shields from the mangas he sometimes read.

Yuuhi then pulled his arm, gaining his attention, "Takeru, every child needs to be taken care of by an adult until they are old enough. What Mother said means that she is now the adult responsible for your safety."

"Huh… I don't get it," He admitted, not seeing the difference between this and how Maya was taking care of him before.

Yohime then ran a few fingers over her hair, taking a moment to ponder how to explain this to him, "Basically… Even if the papers will have to be presented in a certain way, I shall be your legal tutor as the current leader of this house. To put it simply, I am your adoptive mother."

Takeru slowly tilted his head, the words not sinking in entirely.

" *Huh… So Yohime-san is… my mom now?* ***… EH?! WHAT?!*** *"* The ensuing shock left him speechless, slack-jawed for a moment.

"Takeru, are you… displeased?" Yuuhi hesitantly asked, unsure on what to make of his reaction.

"I… I mean…" He looks down, tapping some fingers together while wondering how to ask his newfound fear, "You're a samurai family, and I'm not… I mean, people might get mad with you if… I join your family." And that was one thing he did not want to happen.

"However…" Yuuhi wished to press forward, yet a gaze from her mother told her to desist.

"Takeru?" Yohime asked, he looked up.

"Yes?"

She then leaned forward, slowly patting his head as her face filled his entire view, "It doesn't matter that you're not a samurai yet, because you will become a Royal Guard. Isn't that right?" Such a sweet whisper, yet carrying the strong force, the much needed water of relief he was in dire need of. Hope and encouragement.

Yet, once more, his gaze sinks, "B-But… I don't know if…"

Thus, she lifted his chin with a finger, smiling once more, "Are you still wishing to become one?" He nods, she again pets his head, "Then, said problem will be no more once you reach your goal. Could it be that you are… inconvenienced by becoming one of us?" She asked the sole doubt that still laid within, that the boy himself was wishing to return to his old lifestyle after these days he had spent here.

"No, that's not it!" Yet, he denied the possibility, even if once more doubt took his gaze captive to the depths the floor, "But… well…"

Then, he remained silent, mulling over what to do or say now, *"Most people don't like me here. If Yohime-san becomes my… m-my mom then people will be mean to her too, and to Yuuhi as well,"* For as elated as he was to be told such a thing, equal was the concern that now festered within at the thought of anyone treating either of them as Raiko had been to him last night.

However, Yohime then poked one of his cheeks, startling Takeru a bit, "You said you wished to make me and Yuuhi smile, did you not?"

"… Yeah."

"So, since we also wish for you to remain smiling, isn't that enough for you to welcome being one of us?" She proposed, Yuuhi giving her agreement as she once more grasped his arm.

And despite his uneasiness, he managed to whisper out, "I… I do want to stay here… But… Won't people get mad at you again if you… if you tell them you're my… m-mom?"

"… While it is true that we won't be able to say it openly, that does not mean your position in the house will change," Yohime simply answered.

"Indeed," Yuuhi agreed, "Even if you do not have a role as of now, you're still a fellow. This is exactly the same, albeit we can't tell others about it."

"… So I have to keep it a secret?" He didn't understand the motive behind this, but then again, there were so many things he did not understand about the way they operated.

Yohime nodded, "Well, something of the sort. You will keep your surname after all, but you are one of us from now on regardless. Unless… you would prefer to be with someone else?" She looked away, playing with her hair. Yuuhi stared at him, awaiting his reply, grasping his arm a bit tighter with every passing second.

…

He looked down, pursing his lips, a tickling sensation on his sides.

Breathing in, he started remembering all the times he visited before. Now, the tickling surfaced on his neck.

Scratching his head, thinking on how she had been these last days, he swayed a bit, letting some air out.

After a moment of silence, his eyes braved their way to hers, "… Yohime-san?"

"Yes?"

"You will… really be my family? What about that thing of the Tsukuyomi family?"

"Well… In this way, you shall be family to me, Yuuhi, Maya and the rest. That is, if you so desire. You can remain solely with the Tsukuyomi House, if you still are wishing to stay here that is," She stated, reminding him of all the options, giving him the freedom to choose despite Yuuhi's glare.

Takeru, however, kept stammering, hesitating, stealing glances at her, "But… But you don't mind me… being… w-well…"

"… My son?" She inquires softly, almost in a whisper.

He nods, unable to look up now. Thousands of ants could have been marching on his back, or perhaps he could have been under a harsh downpour amidst winter, for his knees shivered, trembled non-stop.

"Takeru?" When he looked back up, Yohime had her arms open, "Come here."

"… Huh?"

"What is it? Come Takeru, give me a hug."

"… Can I?"

She nods and slowly, hesitantly he got closer, only for her to pull him in, wrapping an arm around his back.

Despite his usual way of being, Takeru had never given Yohime a hug until today. As she rubbed his back and shoulders, her perfume filled his world. Its lavender fragrance eased his worries in mere seconds, clearing any and all ill feelings he was harboring.

Running her free hand on his hair, she thus whispered on his ear, "I know you won't be able to adapt in the short term, however please be aware that I earnestly desire for you to stay living with us, if you desire so as well," Finally wrapping both of his hands around her neck, he barely managed not to cry, giving her a nod, "So please rest assured, you are no burden, and I shan't sent you away. To me you're someone important, Takeru."

"Um… Why am I important, Yohime-san?"

"Well… Thanks to you, Yuuhi has found a truly good friend, isn't that right dear?" She asked Yuuhi, who was sulking a bit.

"But of course, Mother," She then drew closer, also joining in the hug, "Takeru is an invaluable friend to me."

Yohime kept rubbing his back as he shivered again, this time in relief, seeing his fears were unfounded, "And let's not forget that you also have helped both Mion and Shion. I believe my house needs honest, kindhearted people like you and your father. And…" She stopped all of a sudden, enforcing her embrace momentarily, "And I must thank you as well."

"Why? Did I do something good?" She once more massaged his hair as she pulls him back, allowing Yuuhi to again latch onto his arm, allowing him to see the weariness setting in those amethysts.

"Yes… Remember what I said about the night?" Both of them nod, Yuuhi sobering up, "Well… That was also, in part, thanks to you and our father. You've done much for me and my House, so I shall take good care of you."

"Which means you're part of our family from now on," Yuuhi happily declared, beaming at him.

"R-Really? You're… my family now?" Not believing his ears, especially after how Maya had been yesterday, he gave both of them a good look. Only bright smiles did he find in them.

"As I said before, you should keep this a secret so that no one gets upset. Do you promise me you'll keep it a secret, Takeru?" Yohime asked.

"Y-Yes! I won't tell anyone," She giggles at the immediateness of his reply.

"That is good to hear. Hehe… I didn't expect to be bestowed a boy in this manner."

"Hm? What do you mean?" He asks, then looks at Yuuhi.

"Mother, did you wish for me to have a brother?" She inquires, as she had always been rather curious about the fact that she had no siblings whatsoever while all other Houses would always have at the least two children.

Yohime sighs, keeping her smile bolted in place, recalling the ordeals that ensued when the news of that she would give birth to both Yuuhi and Meiya traveled to the wrong ears in the fellowship…. And the impossibility that was placed onto her afterwards.

Thus, she merely patted their heads, "Well, it matters not. Takeru, from now on please keep your high spirits. I shall make an effort to save some time for you and Yuuhi after dinner. And Yuuhi, do remember to keep your poise should someone hurl unpleasantries at

him," Both of them nodded, he barely restraining a smile, she with the onset of another pout looming in.

"Okay… S-So… From now on I'm your…" He hesitated, wanting to hear it from her.

So, she obliged, "My son, yes."

Again, he shivered as he heard her words, tightening his hands to not cry.

"And my brother," Yuuhi said as she again linked her arm with his, still beaming as brightly as a Laser upon artillery suppression.

" *Sniff*… Thanks… Really, I'll do my best from now on… So-" His worried spiel was cut short as Yohime once more poked his cheek.

"I know this might come as a shock for you as of now, however I believe it is for the best that you know that we are here for you not as acquaintances as before," He nods quickly, she and Yuuhi giggle once more, "So, please rest assured. I shall be taking good care of you as your guar-"

"M-Mom," He barely whispered it out, biting his tongue in the process.

"… Huh?" Both Yohime and Yuuhi remained silent, awaiting his next words.

Taking one sharp breath, rubbing his arms, Takeru finally looked at her in the eye, "C-Can I call you… mom when we're alone, please?"

She closes her eyes, resting her hands on her lap, "Do you want me to… be your Mother, Takeru?" She returned his stare, he gulped hard and nodded. Then, slowly placing her hands on his shoulders, once more she drew him in towards her, planting a kiss on his cheek before wrapping him in an embrace again, "Then, we're in agreement that we are family from now on, Takeru."

"R-Really?"

"Indeed. I'm sure you are also in agreement, Yuuhi?"

She hadn't finished the query that Yuuhi was already hugging him as well, "Of course. I'm truly elated to welcome Takeru as my brother," She affirmed, truly happy that she now had complete confirmation that he would stay, to now have a certainty that he would always be there.

Since, due to the pressure now on her shoulders to take on the mantle of the Koubuin House's regency, to become the Head they required before her relatives outside of the succession branch grew… inpatient, let's call it, more and more duties have been placed on her so small shoulders when she should have been grieving Takahisa's death.

And unlike Takeru, Yuuhi did not allow herself to so easily shed tears. The dam of her emotions was, most certainly, threatening with overflowing or spawning cracks. Which is why for her, being herself around the young boy was the only outlet that she had, the only moment in her routine where she wouldn't be reminded of either her duties or her father's passing. A much needed fresh gale of respite for a wounded bird that was made to trudge on in the muddy soil.

Which is why, seeing her earnest joy for the first time since the news of her lord husband's passing had arrived, Yohime could do nothing but embrace both of them tightly, as she perhaps had never done to her daughter before.

"It seems we are all in agreement, then. Could you… call me like that again, Takeru?" She asked, now being the one wishing to hear it from his lips.

Thus, he more than happily obliged, "… Mom."

Then his arms enforced their hold over her neck, the fragrance of her perfume lulling him to relaxation, which caused her to giggled for a

moment, then beginning to hum a melody as she played with his hair.

"… Don't worry. This is your home from now on," She whispered on his ear again.

"Yes… Yes! I'll be good from now on, I promise. I'll do my best to make you and Yuuhi smile… M-Mom," He declared with a smile, and as they broke the hug, he thought, *"I know I had my own mom. But… Yohime-san has always been so nice. It isn't wrong, right? I still love my own mom, but… I can like Yohime-san as my mom too, right?"* His doubts were quickly dispelled as Yuuhi and Yohime kept smiling, the former still intent on remaining close to him.

"Hehe… That is truly good to hear. So, I suppose this makes Yuuhi your older sister now as well?"

"Huh? Why is she the older one?"

She giggles as she caresses his hair, "Well, she is around three hours older than you."

"Mmgh… I don't mind then."

"Hehe, worry not, Takeru," Yuuhi said with a confident puff of her chest, "I shall be a good older sister for you, so do not hesitate to come to me for anything you might require."

"So… I'm really…"

"Part of our family," Yohime thus said, erasing any and all lingering doubts he could have left, "From now on, even if you shall keep your surname as far as the rest are concerned, I want you to consider yourself as Takeru Koubuin, dear. I shall ensure nobody will treat you unfairly again, so do remain doing your best efforts."

"T-Thank you… Um…" He drew closer to her once more, Yohime leaned in and, to her surprise, Takeru grasped her face and gave her

a strong kiss on her cheek, then hugged her again, this time far tighter than before, "I love you, Mom. I'll do my best from now on to make you smile," Feeling as if he were sinking in warm water, relaxing as her perfume again enveloped him, Yohime also returned the hug, kissing the top of his head once she recovered from the surprise, since no one other than Takahisa had ever laid such a kiss on her person.

"… I love you too, dear. Also, don't forget to thank your sister as well," She ended the hug, turning him to face a, now slightly sulking, Yuuhi.

"Ah, yes. Thanks a lot, Yuuhi. I'll do my best to be a good brother here," He gave her a brightest smile, which would normally spur one in her as well, however…

She took a singular step closer, arching her brows, "So, there isn't a hug for me?" She demanded, lips plucked.

Blinking for a second, Takeru was so happy that he didn't even register why she was mad nor made any effort to think about it. Thus, pulling her into the tightest hug he had ever given her thus far, quite happily he then proceeded to give a strong smooch to one of her cheeks before rubbing one of his against it.

"Thanks a lot, Yuuhi. I love you a lot, too," He earnestly said, unable to hide his joy.

Which froze the young Yuuhi for a moment, since she was *decidedly not* expecting a kiss nor such an intense show of affection from Takeru. However, what inner worries plagued her mind vanishing away, her arms ducked under his as she returned the hug, the pressure on his cheek with hers.

"No thanks are required… I lo… I love you too, Takeru."

Yohime merely basked into the sheer sunshine they exuded as if she were a sunflower, then deciding to stop them after a while.

Reminding Takeru that he had to keep this as a secret, she only could giggle as he once more answered instantly that he would *never* tell anyone of it.

Thus, making sure both of them were tidied up and ready to leave, and that this discussion was settled, she then called for Maya to enter once more.

Takeru knew that he couldn't hug her again, so he simply got a bit closer to whisper a *"Have a good day, Mom,"* to Yohime, which she answered with another radiant smile as she patted his head one last time. The same with Yuuhi, though she did not care for formalities in front of Maya and hugged him anyways, to his and Yohime's shock.

All three of them with their spirits invigorated, they then parted ways to their respective duties. Yuuhi to her limo to attend her institute, since they would have to hustle to arrive on time after the talk, Yohime to oversee the House as a whole, and Takeru to his classes.

Silently walking along Maya to his classroom, neither said a word though he remained smiling.

Unable to endure further silence, she drew closer to him, "Takeru?"

"… What?" He replied, still a bit upset at her.

"Forgive me. I shouldn't have reacted so harshly towards you yesterday after we left the gardens… I did not meant to neglect your dinner, and I assuredly do not think the same as the Chamberlain in the least," She insisted, highlighting the last words, awaiting a nod, a smile, or his usual cheer towards her.

"… I see," But he just looked away, unsure of how to answer on his end, since he wasn't in a foul mood now. And despite everything she said the prior night, he still wanted to believe in Maya.

However, she could very well have swallowed a gallon of ice, "Uh, Takeru… I… Ahem, we should make haste," She decided to not

push further, instead to try to reach out for his hand.

He still was looking away, yet he didn't pull away. Neither a tight hold nor the usual steadfast lock, just a soft link between their fingertips.

Enough to tell him she was truly sorry. Enough to tell her she had been forgiven.

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*Same day. Near 8 PM.*

*(Inside the dojo.)*

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The day went by uneventfully, classes being tackled, reports being made, the outcome of the prior meeting the center of whispers and debates within the corridors.

However, unlike every other day, both Yohime and Yuuhi had made some time to watch Takeru's training on the dojo. On the latter's case, to see for herself Kazora wasn't being unnecessarily harsh to little Takeru, on the former, because she wanted to cheer him on as he always had done for her thus far.

" *Yohime-san might be my mom and Yuuhi my sister now, but until I get good results… I'm going to be a stranger for the rest here,"* He pondered as he put his arm guards in place, *"So, I have to do my bestest best of an effort today. Just like Masahide-san said, I gotta slash the mountain in half without harming the fish,"* Nodding strongly, determined to do well today, Takeru froze up when seeing both Yohime and Yuuhi awaiting his exit.

Waving at them as the echoing sounds of the cousins' duel began to reverberate more and more, Takeru made his way to Kazora's side.

The old Tsukuyomi was truly in shock at the morning's event, far more to see little Takeru still firmly standing in front of him now, far more stoic and driven than he had ever seemed to be up until now.

However, he could ascertain the depths of his determination, to see whether the boy's vigor would diminish or not after the expected failings of his first week in the house.

"Well Shirogane, let us begin." He somberly says, getting into his pose.

"Yes!" Takeru also began taking his pose as well.

Tightening his grip on his blade, he observed Kazora's stance while thinking on what he could do.

" *If I want to not give my new family trouble and one day be able to help them, I have to find my own way to become a samurai in this month. The Muramasa or the Masamune… Which one should I be now, Masahide-san?"*

Choosing to fight first on the defensive, Takeru allowed Kazora to start the duel. Planting his heels hard on the ground, he kept firmly parrying the swings yet still found himself going backwards. Mere moments had passed, yet his heartbeat was already present on his neck, sweat trickling down his face and back.

He then prepares a feint, that the boy couldn't see through, and once more he breaks Takeru's defense. Landing a quick and decisive attack upon his chest, the ground once more meets up with the little rear end.

" *He's too fast! That's cheating!"* He complained within as he stood up, ready for another duel.

Kazora walks back to his prior position, taking the same pose as before, "Ready, Shirogane?"

"Yes!"

This time, however, Takeru employed an offensive approach, in an attempt to 'slash the mountain really, really hard', as he put it himself.

Yet, Kazora kept effortlessly parrying the attacks, while he failed to react fast enough to properly block his slashes.

His feet alert to not slip, yet the patterns he followed were not yielding results. Yohime was pleasantly surprised at his skill, she had never seen him fight and assumed Takeru was far rougher. Yuuhi on the other hand was clutching her hands, tightly suppressing her breath within.

Takeru himself was growing anxious at his reiterated failed attacks, "No matter whether I attack or defend… I always lose in the end. What can I do? Could I… do both at the same time? Being the Masamune and the Muramasa at the same time… Slashing the mountain without harming the fish… Moving fast like in Iaido but while also doing Kendo…"

As Kazora gave him a short breathing room, Yuuhi and Yohime appeared on the corner of his sight, watching him fight. It reminded him of the scarce times his father had done the same. Repeating his vow to be better, sighing as his grip on his wooden blade shifted, Takeru then took a different pose, which shook all those watching.

The blade above his shoulder, the edge facing outwards, his knees bent barely behind the tail-end of his feet. Without losing a second, he began pushing forward once more.

" *Keep the feet on the ground, take firmer steps forward. If I don't, I'll lose my balance,"* He kept reminding himself, to not fall prey to any more feints.

The session drone on, Takeru began gasping for air during the duels, feeling emptiness setting on his stomach. Shoulders and legs growing stiff, nevertheless he kept pushing.

"… *What can I do? How do I attack? Remember the advice… There has to be something I can do…"* He worriedly thought, doing his best to return the parry.

Stagnating into another lock, Takeru realized Kazora was pressuring his middle exclusively, to take a step back if he were to attempt a sideways counter.

Recalling his parents, one of his feet moved forward, the parry deflected, never breaking down under the avalanche of slashes.

" *I don't know what I can do, but I wanna make them proud."*

Reading the step back, he prepared a sideways slash as a feint. Changing his swing with one firm step, he deflected the attack without losing his blade as always, surprising Kazora as he had to now switch to defense under Takeru's offensive momentum.

" *Yohime-san and Yuuhi were so kind, I wanna return their love. I'm gonna give their futures a smile, no matter what!"*

Enduring the following slashes, parrying them off, Kazora was bound to take a step back soon.

And when he finally did, Takeru lurched forward. Feeling a tingly shiver on his head, a twinge of pain under his ears, focused only on wanting to make his new family proud, on how to break Kazora's defense…

" *Wait, wasn't there… something Maya-nee said about fighting? Yeah… about the waterfall… "*

Breathing in, seeing an opening, he swung his sword with eyes blazing while repeating the advice that surged within.

" *Like a petal that dances upon the winds, your attacks must be.*

*Graceful, precise, but deadly as well.*

*Unpredictable as the changing form of a cloud…*

*With the serenity of a leaf moving along a river…*

*And the violence of the rapids as they charge downstream…*

*Swiftly. Firmly. Fiercely. Calmly.*

*Let your strikes flow upon your enemy, like an unending waterfall!"*

Managing to force Kazora to a hurried slash, deflecting it in a swift parry, Takeru kept his breath within, pushing forward hard with his heels, and went for one final slash, *"Like a petal… move in the river… and attack like a waterfall!"*

**SWISH!**

**SLASH!**

…

**BAM!**

"U-Ugh…" The boy now found himself laid on the floor, everything in sight spinning.

Yohime and Maya sprung forward, ready to admonish Kazora for retaliating seriously, yet the man's gaze remained shocked, firmly planted on the boy.

" *H-How did he even counter at that distance… That's cheating… Everything is spinning… I feel as if I were floating,"* Yet, he didn't even have the strength to get up or groan.

"Takeru!" He hear someone calling out his name as his head was lifted up, "Takeru, are you alright?"

Blinking a few times, his vision comes back to normal, Maya was right above him with a dead serious, worry-stricken gaze.

"Ugh… Yeah."

"Are you feeling well, Takeru?" Mion asked from somewhere, he groaned a bit.

"Does anything hurt?" Yuuhi asked, worriedly scanning him top to bottom.

"Y-Yeah… I'm okay."

"… Kazora-san, could you kindly explain what compelled you to do such a thing?" Yohime inquired, barely restraining her ire.

"… I merely was caught off guard," He said with a sigh.

"You certainly do not expect such an answer to appease me, do you?" Her glare intensified onto him, he shook his head.

"No, yet there is something that will explain it," He said, walking towards the wobbly shape that was trying to stand back up, "Shirogane."

"W-What?"

"… Congratulations."

"For what?"

"You managed to strike my hands with your last slash," He says as he folds his arms, placing his sword under one, "I was not expecting such speed from you, I reacted instinctively and countered seriously after you did. Forgive me."

"So… So… So I…" He stutters, staring at him.

Kazora then nods, "Yes, you've passed my preliminary test. However, there is something I wish to ask you regarding your sta-"

" **HELL YEAH! I DID IT!** " Taking a high jump, the boy proceeded to swing his blade up and down unhinged, *"I hit him! I did it! Take that, you mean old people! I did it!* ***WRYYYYYYYYYY!*** *"*

"Takeru, calm down," Maya puts a hand on his shoulder, halting his reckless celebration. But then she smiles, patting his head, "Congratulations. I certainly did not expect you to reach such a performance today."

Smiling much, he nods towards both Koubuins, "Well… I had to try harder for Mo… for Yohime-san."

Maya curves a brow for a second, but then merely nods back.

"Hehe, you truly did fight spectacularly," Yohime then also nodded his way, making his chest swell with warmth.

"Congratulations, Takeru!" Mion comes closer, both of them beam back at the other.

"But, are you really fine?" Shion asks, plucking her lips, "Your back doesn't hurt, right?"

"No, I'm fine," He says, barely managing to not do a small jump.

"I see… So, you're feeling well?" She insisted.

"Yeah… Why?"

"Well, after this morning…" Mion scratches one of her cheeks with a lone finger, "We were worried about how you would perform in the dojo. You truly surprised us with these duels, Takeru."

"Hehe, are you sure you didn't cheat?" Shion rises a finger at him, smirking while letting her teeth be seen.

"What?! You dumb pickle… I didn't cheat! I fought fair and square!" So then he folds his arms, pouting. She and Yuuhi giggle at him while Mion gives both a nasty stare along him.

"And you should be proud of this, Takeru," Maya says, nodding his way. Which makes him look down in embarrassment, that only

makes Shion chuckle and he pouts at her again, "However, Father, I believe your retaliation was too severe."

"I will have to agree," Yohime said, leveling a stare towards the man, "Merely being hit does not warrant such aggression."

"Yohime-sama, did you see how he was moving?" He says, a hand on his chin as he looks at Takeru, who stares back without a clue.

"Was there anything unusual with his footwork?" She inquires, lost upon his query.

"What of you, Maya?" He then asked.

And she shook her head, "Well, no, I was focusing on the cousins' bout."

"I see… Mion, Shion, return to your positions. I have to ask something to Maya."

The cousins furrow their brows, but then nod. They again smile at Takeru before going to their end of the dojo, starting another duel.

Noticing Kazora's seriousness, Yohime patted her daughter's shoulder, "Yuuhi, dear, please go watch the cousins' bout."

While she was wishing to retort, Yohime's firm stare made Yuuhi relent. Again smiling at Takeru, she slowly moved closer to the cousins despite her eyes never leaving his back.

"Shirogane, come here," Kazora asked and he approached, Maya and Yohime doing the same. Coughing once, he began, "So Shirogane, did you do anything differently this time?"

"Yeah, I tried to slash the mountain in half without harming the fish," He honestly replied, to their surprise.

"… Excuse me?" Kazora tilts his head, narrowing his brows. Maya does the same, whereas Yohime had to cover her mouth to drown a

chuckle.

She then thus asked, "Takeru, what do you mean by that?"

"Masahide-san told me about it. So, it's like…"

He then tells them of the tale he was told yesterday, of how he tried to take one step more whenever he couldn't counter fast enough, of how he tried to imitate Maya's style.

"I see… So you were trying to apply my advice," She says as she taps her glasses.

"It is surprising to see you adapt so fast to the methodology Maya employs, most prefer to remain in the traditional Kendo stance," Kazora admits with a nod, rubbing his beard.

"However, I assume this performance was far better than any of the prior days?" Yohime asks, and as Kazora nods she could only smile, "Impressive. Well done, Takeru. Quite an interesting approach, to draw inspiration from folk tales," She was aware he favored them, yet such a development was unexpected considering how technical Takahisa was whenever he spoke to her about kendo.

"I just tried my best," *To not give you trouble, and make you smile instead,* he finished within. Suddenly embarrassed, he looks up while scratching his head, "I had to attack without losing my defense, like that petal that's on a river towards the unending waterfall."

Yet, those words shook both Tsukuyomis all over again, what but a sudden thunderbolt in the middle of the night.

"W-What…" Maya twitched, unsure of what to ask first, "Takeru… Where did you hear those words?"

But he just tilts his head, raises a brow in puzzlement, "Where? Didn't you tell me about that once?"

"… Maya, I believed you were not teaching him anything beyond the basics?" Kazora narrowed his eyes at her.

"Kazora-san, whatever is the matter?" Yohime asks.

"Those are the words of Maya's own spin on the Mugen Kidou. So if he was told of them beforehand, I'm sure you know what problems that would entail," He solemnly answered.

Yohime nodded, gaze sharpening towards the young woman, "Maya, what do you have to say for yourself?"

"I did not teach him my poem, milady. I swear it on my honor," Her honesty made both recede, now staring at the worried, little shape nearby, "Takeru, when did you learn of those words?"

"Um… Why are you angry? I… did something bad?" He asked, scared of having made more trouble for Yohime.

"… No, nothing of the sort," She then patted his head, easing his worries, "We are merely wishing to know when did you hear Maya's poem, for it is important for our samurai."

"Well… Isn't that weird poem what she tells to Shion sometimes?"

"… I see, so you overhead me giving her advice," Maya heavily sighs, running a hand over her forehead, "Such blunder on my part… My apologies, Yohime-sama."

She waves a hand, also sighing, "No, there is no need. Now then, Takeru, did you felt comfortable following the poem?"

He nods, arms folded, "Yeah, but it's kinda hard to do what it says. My feet hurt after stepping so hard," Shrugging his lips, Yohime allowed herself to giggle.

"Well… I suppose you would get used to it the more you practice," Maya affirmed, tapping her glasses, "Yohime-sama, Father, would you… allow Takeru to be trained under my style?"

Kazora looks at Yohime, who nods after a moment of pondering. Thus, arms folded, he nods, "If this is how he reached a decent level of aptitude, so be it. However, Shirogane you will have to redouble your efforts if you wish to be trained under the Tsukuyomi House itself instead of just joining the Royal Guard. Are you certain you-"

"Yes! I wanna train with Maya-nee!" His fervent, instant reply caught Kazora and Maya off guard again, while Yohime simply chuckled once more.

"I-I see… Then, I'll allow it," Twirling his beard, he firmly stared back, "Remember to never stop training, Shirogane. Your real training begins from now on."

"Yay! Thanks a lot, Kazora-san!" Dropping his sword, Takeru leapt forward to hug him.

"W-What are you doing? Shirogane, release me this instant."

"Why? Don't you like hugs?"

"I… I need no such gestures," He frowns, closes his eyes, and looks away, "If you wish to thank me, then show me today's performance wasn't a coincidence and keep improving your skill until it becomes normal for you."

"… I got it," Takeru pulls away, puffing a cheek, "But thanks a lot for letting me train with all of you, Kazora-san!"

"… It is good to see you're thankful, despite what occurred this morning. Now, do you feel well enough to spar with the cousins?"

"Yeah, I'll do my best!" He immediately answered.

"I see. Maya, if you would," So Kazora prepared to continue.

"Yes, Father," Maya then walks towards the cousins, her father following behind.

However, Takeru took a moment before going with them, tenderly grasping Yohime's sleeve.

"So, did you think I did well, Yohime-san?"

"Indeed. Not many can fight as Maya does as far as I've heard."

"You're not mad about the poem, right?" He hesitantly asked.

Yet she shook her head, patting his, "Of course not, dear. If this is how you can improve, keep training as such."

"Okay. So, um," He took a step closer, whispering now, "Please look well, Mom. I'll do my best now against the Pickles."

She smiled widely, caressing his cheek for a short second, whispering back what she knew would aid him the most, "So I shall. Best of luck, dear son."

His spirit reinvigorated, as well as his smile, Takeru went his way towards the cousins, completely forgetting about what darkest thoughts had made nest within at morning.

Thus, from then on, little Takeru had chosen to follow the path of the samurai, driven by the affection he was bequeathed with when he himself was thinking on giving up. Unaware of what trials awaited, of the deepest recesses he would find himself in, never did he waver again on his decision to remain in the Koubuin House. And so… such was the dawn of his new beginning, the first major alteration.

… *However, perhaps what truly started today was a more subtle, more important change on Takeru's end.*

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A/N: So with this chapter this flashback arc has been finished.

On the last days I came to the realization that it's been more or less a year since the fic had started to dwindle, since my first idea to

integrate the past directly instead of just mentioning it. As one reviewer aptly put it, it's been a year since I've been 'spinning my wheels' with the past events. So I understand the frustration some may have, I never intended to tilt for a whole year.

How did this flashback arc felt? If past memories were to be present, would you rather it be in a long chapter like this one, as a small segment or a smaller chapter, or you're just about done with the flashbacks?

That's all for now. No idea when the next chapter will come out, still juggling on how to redo the following arc to not have it overflowing with angst as it did before, what will all the paranoia. Anyways, thanks for reading. Stay safe.

Zuoriel

# My Beloved Brother

*A majestic King without kingdom steps on the flower offerings on the royal road as he weeps*

*The sky that we still doubt it's real is filled with fire*

*The fire of suspicion is… the fire is…*

*Embracing each other, having endured the darkest hours side by side, the crowd sang praises in honor to the brave hero*

*The kingdom that we still doubt it's real is filled with fire*

*The fire of misery is… the fire is…*

*Come on, come on, now… Don't take your eyes off this show… This show!*

*Oh, fire! Why would my people be running, rushing?*

*Oh, fire! I cannot recall the reason why…*

*Oh, fire! Why would my people be burning, broiling?*

*Oh, fire! I cannot recall the reason why…*

*The ashen gray fittingly rains down on me*

*Why would these flowers still be blooming?*

*The field that we still doubt it's real is filled with fire*

*The fire of torment is… the fire is…*

*Come on, come on, now… Don't take your eyes off this show… This show!*

*Oh, fire! Why would my people be suffocating, asphyxiating?*

*Oh, fire! I cannot recall the reason why…*

*Oh, fire! Why would my people be rotting, decaying?*

*Oh, fire! I cannot recall the reason why…*

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Royal Road Paradise, by Susumu Hirasawa.

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**4th Arc: Paranoia**

**Chapter 57: My Beloved Brother**

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*1999. On a stormy night of January.*

*(Tokyo. Imperial Palace. Audience Room.)*

**[Yuuhi]**

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Incessant rain comes down harshly onto our windows, which waver and quiver, rattle and shiver. From beyond their frames, lighting dances under the hailing skies, its bright rebellion seeping into the large room through the curtains, through the drenched glass.

When so happens, the shadows of the pillars enlarge, the farther end of this place becomes visible for a speck of a second, before all falls into the quiet lukewarm yellow lights that illuminate this audience room, surrounded by a soft veil of incense.

As one such thunder reverberated outside, as I had to restrain an urge to shiver or betray my posture as the temperature decidedly began to descend, the guest that had come to my presence shook

his head, looking towards me and Mana, who stood nearby in protection as always.

"I am loath to admit, yet you are asking the impossible out of us, Your Highness," 2nd Lt. Sukerokuro Makabe thus tells, kneeling on the floor as a coiled fist rests on it as well, keeping a most cool tone in contrast to the weather, "We certainly cannot share any further supplies with the MDF, and to subtract any more troops from our front would place the defense lines in jeopardy. Please, I beg you to reconsider," Then, he bows down deeply.

"Is that so… Be as it may, the 24th Regiment is in dire need of reinforcements," Enduring the dryness in my throat, mustering an amicable tone, a small smile is all I can spare for him, "Is there truly no way in which Ikaruga-dono could relinquish at least an artillery battalion?"

"My apologies, Your Highness," He shakes his head, gaze unmoving from the ground, "As I said, we cannot spare any more troops. On the contrary, I would suggest you to reinforce our Horn battalion. Were the BETA begin to push forward from Yokohama-"

"Silence!" Mana so shouts, far more adusted than she should be, "The measures taken by Her Highness are crafted by Great General Daizaburou himself. What manner of complains would you raise against them, Makabe?"

Lifting his face, a somber, most inquisitive grin greets us, "Do I have to remind you I am speaking in the name of the Head of the Ikaruga House, Takatsugu-sama himself? Furthermore, Maya has also signed her agreement to any and all petitions I forward, as the document I gave you a moment ago tells, Mana," Still smiling upon her groans, he once more gazes my way, a subtle bow afterwards, "I was under the impression our Houses had agreed to work in unison since a few months back, however, I apologize if my words were inappropriate to your ears Your Highness, milady."

Mana's face contorted, crackled as the windows under the night's gale upon hearing his last word, a gaze from me subdued her impulse on time. Taking a step back, she limits herself to listen for the moment.

"I have not taken offense. I relinquished authority in the field to Ikaruga-dono after all, due to his exploits in Kyoto's last moments. And it is because of such reasons that I desire his aid to reinforce our defense lines."

Never losing the smile, he again looks up my way, "However, were we to relocate our men as you command, more supply routes would need to be procured, devised, and defended. If you allowed Takatsugu-sama to manage the food distribution in our area of operations, as well as partial command over the 24th regiment, I could try to make a convincing enough appeal to grant your wishes."

"What insolence!" Mana once more steps forward, this time truly angered, "Her Highness has already given ample freedom to all other Regent Houses, yet you dare demand further dominion over the chain of command?!"

Yet, he then brandished a solemn expression, glaring at Mana, "Would you rather have the Empire's resources be managed by the feeble Diet government? Those who continue to parley with the UN after how they abandoned Yokohama? As a fellow Shinpan, I was under the impression you also favored Her Highness taking command of her rightful forces, as Maya does too."

"Allow me to remind you, Her Highness has given her blessing to Sakaki's cabinet. You'd be well served in remembering that while in her presence," Their stares clash in imitation of today's tempest, yet again my throat dries up as Mana refuses to ease her stance, "So, what you're getting at is, your faction refuses to comply with the directives issued by Her Highness?"

His brows narrow, quietly replying, "Nonsense. I am merely forwarding an alternative to the plan that has been given to us. Her

Highness has the final say in the matter after all, regardless of who crafts the documents she is presented with. You certainly wouldn't be saying that the dim ink on such frail papers holds more weight than the word of our Lady Shogun?"

"Speak no further balderdash, Makabe!" Mana takes yet another step forward, further animosity welling up, "Her Highness has already expressed her wishes, to collaborate with both the UN and the Diet on this darkest hour that befell us. Therefore, your answer to our request…"

"… I already expressed it. Your Highness, could you kindly consider bestowing us full control over the food distribution?"

"How dare-"

"Mana," A glance her way elicited a bow, she once more returned to my side. Taking a second, I look back at him, forcing a tender tone, "2nd Lt. Makabe, while I would be willing to negotiate such terms with the Regency Council, I believe that having you forward the proposal on your own is rather precarious. For the sake of conversation, if I were to give my agreement, what would be of the civilian camps under your care?"

"If you'd allow us, we propose to halve their current supplies," He so says, immutable over what he just uttered.

Momentarily licking my lips, I slowly shake my head, "That is unacceptable. Our people cannot shoulder the burden of this war any further."

"Yet, to force our warriors to endure the strain of the war overlong while receiving mild C Rank rations shan't allow us to maintain our performance," Again bowing his head, his tone never is compromised in its stillness, "I was made aware there are certain… negotiations with the authorities of the prior Hakuryo Base going on behind curtains. In which case, it is imperative we bolster the supplies of the Royal Guard for the day when the… ahem…

proposition to strike back arrives to your presence. Please, I beg you to reconsider my proposal, Your Highness, milady."

Feeling my neck stiffening further, the smallest movement spawning a searing pain from my middle back and rising to my nape, while closing my eyes for a moment I ponder his suggestion. And yet, our civilians are already enduring undeserved living conditions as it is. The thought of halving their supplies… Yet, were the defense lines to crumble, nothing would stand between them and the BETA. Were we to lose any further terrain, our negotiations with both the US and the UN will assuredly grow ever arduous. Without even considering the risk of Tokyo falling as well, that is.

I could use my acceptance towards this proposal of Makabe as a pathway to parley with Ikaruga-dono in exchange for his support, as this feeble voice is all I have now. As the Shogun, as the beacon I must be… I cannot sow further unrest. I must be a guiding light… I must remain attentive. Such is my duty… my own morals notwithstanding, I must act to safeguard my people's future, especially after all the blood that has been spilled. Then… Then I should-

" *Heh… I wonder, what happened to the delivery that was made by the 20th Squadron to your forces a few days ago?"* A forceful inquiry, mired by static, reverberates all over the room. *His* voice, coming through some distortion device.

Makabe turns around hastily, readiness in his posture. Yet, his eyes are met with emptiness. Shock widening, his sight slowly scanning the surrounding area, nothing appears out of sorts as another thunder illuminates the room, as the echoes of hail threaten to blast the windows open. Mana also begins to scan the room, softly biting her lips as she presses the comms she has on her neck to alert him, to order him to stop.

Shaking my head, sighing and seeing my breath, I also cannot ascertain where he might be. I told you to remain quiet during this meeting… Whatever are you trying to accomplish?

" *Well, Makabe? Your answer is?"* He thus demanded, from beyond the veil.

I look around, from the outstretched shadows of the pillars, to the tempestuous storm that's hitting the windows to the balcony, to the further depths of this audience room where no light reaches. From the furniture, to the tapestry, and our immediate surroundings. His voice doesn't come from any of such places, and yet, it feels as if it did at the same time.

Briefly glancing upwards, towards the lone chandelier, I also cannot distinguish anything odd in the ceiling's shadows. Makabe seems to be holding his breath while looking for the source of the voice, the composure he was showing moments ago wavering upon the void shadows.

"… Makabe, what of this delivery?" I ask, eyeing my surroundings with an obvious gesture, hoping he'll desist from intruding any further.

"Ah… Ahem… There is nothing to report, Your Highness. It arrived as it should have, and we are more than thankful for your support," He bows down, yet his eyes remain open and alert, a hand rested on his blade.

"I see… Then, are those supplies not sufficient to delay this talk of restructuring the food distribution for even just a month?" I ask, smiling his way in hopes of gaining an affirmation.

"Well… However, the delivery was mostly for the maintenance of our machinery. The food within was of low quality, and not as plentiful as we had hoped, which is why I-"

" *An entire Type-89 Cargo Vehicle worth of synth food, courtesy of the Amato House,"* He interrupts again, forcing me to not display any signs in my face as my fingers ingrain into my palms, making Makabe's gaze again scour the room pointlessly.

… I wonder, just how does he remain hidden at times like this. Mana and Maya do the same from time to time, yet I can tell where they are. Was it because they allowed me to notice, then? I should never have allowed Tsuhi to train you to conceal your presence…

"Your Highness… If I may, what in blazes is going on here?" Makabe asks, quite understandably alarmed as his eyes failed to locate anything amidst the pillars and furniture further in, not even when a faint lightning shed some light into the room.

"Sigh… One retainer of mine simply does not like to appear in front of others as of late. No offense is meant, Makabe," Giving him a small smile, his tension seems to ease slightly.

" *So, regarding the cargo…"* He once more demands, this time endowing a more toxic tone.

"Ahem…" Makabe eyes the surrounding area again, his gaze squinting ever more as he was unable to track Takeru's whereabouts, "As I was saying, the delivery was not sufficient for our battalion and its adjacent infantry and artillery regiments. Which is why I am presenting this alternative to you, Your Highness."

As I was about to reply, Mana took a step forward, slowly, delayed, and oddly composed without raising her voice, a hand planted on the edge of her dress' neck, "Tell me, Makabe. The delivery of this cargo did reach your battalion?"

"… Yes, of course."

"You had said that… you were left fending with C Rank synth food, if I recall. However, double checking my PDA, the report here says-"

" *The food delivered to the Horn battalion was of A Rank,"* Once more adusted, just as a bolting blasted the skies outside and violently vandalized the shadows of the pillars, the frames of the windows, he thus insisted, making Mana groan at the interruption,

*"Care to explain what this means, 2nd Lieutenant, sir?"* Mockingly so, he finishes.

Frowning much, Makabe stands up, surveying the seemingly empty darkened area once more, "First, what we were given were C Rank supplies. Secondly, what manner of Imperial Guard are you? Show yourself!"

"Makabe, remain kneeling!" Mana demanded, "You are in the presence of Her Highness the Shogun!"

"Do not mock me, Mana. It is one thing to conceal one's presence, I could understand such reticence from a guardian of our Lady Shogun. However, to raise such accusations towards my House?" Smiling once more, looking my way, he bowed down, a hand on his chest, "I am certain Your Highness is also most aggravated by this buffoon's conduct."

Sigh… This is why I told you to not speak up during this meeting… If I press forward, our bilateral collaborations with House Ikaruga might crumble. Yet, Takeru wouldn't lie just to gain pointless animosity, much less while knowing I stand much to lose… Mana also confirmed the delivery had other contents, going by her gaze she is certain of it. And despite our disagreements of late, Raiko-san is truly loyal to me. She wouldn't send anything short of the best if I expressly requested her direct involvement.

However, where I to delve more, Makabe might blame the MDF or the inductees for this error in the delivery. After all, such tasks are left to the fresh members inducted after Kyoto fell and we had quite more defectors and traitors in our ranks than I'd like to have known since the Capital fell, even more after both hives were made.

People just looking to smuggle food for their families and friends, to steal pieces of technology and drugs to sell on the black market… With the state of our surveillance systems after the continuous attacks we suffered, there are many black spots in our security that we are still trying to mend.

Softly sighing, seeing once more my breath, my ruminating accompanied by the echoes of falling rain, my shoulders sink and sink as if I myself were under the weather's relentless downpour.

Be as it may, this state of affairs is only further proof of my failings to provide adequate shelters and supplies for our people in their time of need. As the Head I am, even if I hadn't endowed the mantle of the Shogun, I cannot truly condemn my people for being forced to fend for themselves to provide for their beloved ones due to my lacking foresight, my inadequate response to this threat.

… And as much as I abhor to consider the possibility, I am aware Ikaruga-dono might have already used this state of affairs for his convenience. However, to claim such without proof, or even with it, would be political suicide as it is. Without his support, and the Takatsukasa House that is seemingly under his wing as well, there is little the IRG will be able to do on the frontlines. To say he is lauded as a hero within our ranks and by the people is an understatement. If I take him away from the frontlines, many will raise their voices against such a decision.

… If only you had stayed quiet. What are you even trying to accomplish, Takeru?

Inhaling slowly into the smell of the incense, joining my hands, I level a stare at the one in front of me, "No one is raising accusations, Makabe. I suppose, my retainer is merely concerned at the news of these missing supplies. Can you confirm that you did not receive the A Rank synth food I had commanded to be sent towards Ikaruga-dono's forces?"

Yet, he immediately shakes his head, kneeling once more, "But of course not, Your Highness. Had that delivery arrived, we would have no issues with your current directives. But as things stand now…" Smiling once more, gazing up, "Perhaps, if it would please you, we could investigate this matter and punish the inductees that were involved in this ploy to astray your helping hand from your loyal soldiers."

Mana sighs, folding her arms, "If you were unable to detect an entire cargo having its contents swapped, how could you possibly take responsibility for this issue?"

Yet, he returns another somber smile at her, "First, it is unjust to blame the Ikaruga House for the dastardly deeds of the defectors. Our forces are as hard pressed as yours, and isn't that why our Regents are working shoulder by shoulder each day, as Maya does alongside me?"

Mana groans, perhaps not due to her own reservations towards Maya's conduct as of late… but more out of concern towards Takeru's reaction to such words. I still cannot sense anything, the shadows further in remain quiet, the quiver of the windows along the rain being the only source of sound for the moment.

Makabe continues unabated, still grinning, "Furthermore, now that I have been made aware that we were unable to detect this missing cargo, I must once more insist on the countermeasure I proposed a moment before," Once more bowing, neither this sudden questioning nor the thunders could breach his facade, it seems, "Grant my lord command over all inductees and commoners entering our area of operations, allow our trusted men to be the ones who deliver the supplies, and no such incidents will occur again. In these times, we cannot rely on commoners without a history of devoted service to the Shogunate. We of the nobility must stand united, only we truly know the horror the Empire is being made to carry after the defection of both the US and the UN."

Unable to rein myself in, before Mana could, admonishment came forth from my lips, "2nd Lt Makabe, please do mind your words. The US troops had no choice but to comply with their Congress' orders, despite the desire many harbored to remain behind. And the UN has not abandoned our nation. I believe I made my wishes quite clear to Ikaruga-dono."

Yet, he is still smiling, "Yes, milady. However, look at what sorrowful state of affairs we are in, due to believing their support to be

unconditional. I am merely wishing for the IRG to be able to fulfill your every command, and is why I am insisting on these propositions. All the more now that this matter of the cargo has been brought to light," Undaunted and calm, never losing the smile.

… In the end, I have no leads to push further. It was foolish to think Makabe would slip up, and all this discussion managed to accomplish was to have him request further concessions from me.

… I suppose, I should learn to delegate what I have to. I cannot lose their support, even if I harbor doubts towards them. For the moment, keeping up appearances is of utmost importance, until an exhaustive investigation can be made and-

" *By the by, 2nd Lieutenant…"* Slow tone, almost as if drowning a chuckle. A shadow flickered further into the room, *"My sources have told me Cpt. Shinohara was the man who received the delivery of the cargo we speak of."*

One of his brows twitched, he again looked around. Upon finding nothing, his very face distressed further, "Yes, I can confirm that. As the leader of the second squadron of the battalion, he does take care of matters on the field for our Lord. What of it?"

"… *Well, are you aware then that he was seen near what we've heard is a black market location as of yesterday noon?"* Barely restraining a cackle, he so asked.

Along such words, a firm footstep echoed about within the stretched shadows, drowning the incessant downpour on purpose. Forceful lightning illuminates the storm, the room. Its white spectrum contrasting with the mild yellow of our inner lamps, with the placid shadows further in, another footstep echoed once more over the rain. However, his figure remains unseen by all three of us.

And yet, his voice feels closer, edging closer, *"Considering the importance of the man in your ranks… Is there any intel you could share with us on this matter?"*

Makabe remained looking about, before turning around and bowing to me once more, "I am afraid I know not of what this person speaks, Your Highness. I can only apologize in my lord's stead, if this intel is factually correct."

"Then, do you harbor suspicions towards this Captain as well?" I inquire, sensing a crack.

Makabe releases some air, then smiles once more, "I'd be foolish to dismiss such words coming from one of your retainers. At the very least, as the one who received the delivery, I concur he should be questioned now that the matter came to light. Please, allow us to mend our own mistakes, Your Highness," Swiftly bowing again, he remains in position.

Unbreakable defenses. Nothing we say will work, I suppose. Even if I ask Maya to be present in the questioning, nothing might turn out of it… In any case, it is foolish to press more without evidence. We should-

" *Seijurou,"* He uttered, far closer than before.

And this time, I could barely make out the edges of his hair right behind one of the pillars as he moved through the shadows.

Makabe's eyes widened far, far beyond what should be possible. Prey to the shadows his grin vanished momentarily, as sudden as a thunder the shaking of his frame. For Makabe to waver so… What is this about, Takeru?

" *We heard the young boy was seen loitering near our supply depots here, along other young heirs,"* He insisted, his voice drowning even how another thunder echoed in the distance, how the windows wept in supplication for the tempest to stop.

One of Makabe's hands clenched, his facade holding firmly despite the now obvious wish to turn around into a frown, to look for the source of the voice.

Mana was pressing her dress' neck, triggering her comms, to tell him to back down. Another footstep echoed, her fingers seemed to be pressing the button repeatedly in quick succession.

And yet, I know. He won't let this rest. Is it… because he noticed I was about to concede on Makabe's proposition? Do you truly have evidence, or are just letting your prejudices blind you now?

" *And that is not all,"* Another shift in tone, turning as aggressive, as fast and oppressive as the incessant hail, more than willing to eradicate our gardens, or in his case, Makabe's facade, *"The current caretaker of your youngest brother, Touko Suzumi, seems to be… working directly under Shinohara's orders as of late."*

"Your Highness, could you kindly ask your retainer to show him or herself before us?" Makabe requested, barely keeping the bindings of his ire still.

"Sadly, such cannot happen," Mana countered, "For Her Highness' own security, some of us in her service must remain unseen. However… 1st Lt.! Make it short, and concise. Do remember that 2nd Lt. Makabe is our guest, and that we all are in Her Highness' presence!" She so declared, more as an act for Makabe to see.

Takeru doesn't truly care, after all. We might be in the presence of the Regency Council or the UN's HC, and he would do the same. It makes predicting his actions easier, only if his temper didn't flare up as much. Whereas I would have admonished him to desist in his pressure…

… I truly would rather not bring his silence upon my person ever again.

" *Very well. My apologies if I offended you, Makabe,"* A neutral tone, amicable yet fake.

However, Makabe nodded to the ground, knowing better than to argue with my retainers. At the least, what soft power I hold still

binds his moves were he wishing to actually scour the room for Takeru, as pointless as that would be.

Makabe's eyes close, breathing deeply, "Apology accepted. I can confirm the woman is appointed as the caretaker of my youngest brother. What of it?"

" *I also was informed you were the one who appointed her to the position."*

One of his brows twitches once more, "Yes, that is true. She was recommended by a good fellow, after all."

" *Well then… Were you aware that… it seems she has ties to Kannagi, the former XO of the now defunct Mogami Base?"*

…

"… 2nd Lt. Makabe, is this true?" Unable to rein in a searing frown, I lean forward along my inquiry.

Frozen, petrified in place, it would seem Makabe was truly flabbergasted at the words. For a moment, nothing was said. The thunders roared every now and then, giving further lightning to the room, shining upon his darkening expression which now seemed to be synchronized with our wailing windows.

"… No, I was… I was not aware… the woman was in any way tied to that base," Sober, no longer grinning, he then lowered his head further and further.

"I suppose, you have been notified of the reasons behind the… cease of operations of said base?" Caressing my hair, stroking and choking strands, it does not assuage my ire.

Makabe's silence also doesn't do me any favors, the tip of my tongue pressed in between my teeth. Never lifting my eyes off him, Makabe,

very hesitantly when compared to his prior demeanor, raised his face to give a nod in affirmation.

"Yes, I was told the bare minimum. I… truly did not know Suzumi had such ties with the suspect, yet, what does this have to-"

And once more, fire over the rain, *"Surely you can make an educated guess on what this entails. The woman was seen near the depots when the cargo vehicles were departing, supposedly because she allowed the trainees in her care to, oh so conveniently, volunteer to aid in the duty of loading the supplies,"* He then allowed the rain to resonate in the room, silence as a few footsteps echoed every so and so.

As he spoke it felt as if he were breathing down my nape, I might as well be one of our windows at the moment. And yet, I can only share his voice's hailing anger, barely restraining a frown as I continue to stare at Makabe's composed countenance.

As our guest chose to remain silent for too many seconds, another forceful footstep echoed, *"I suppose I do not need to say where my suspicions are headed, do I now 2nd Lt. Makabe, sir?"*

Mana once more stepped forward, displeased much, "1st Lieutenant, mind your conduct! Your actions reflect the will of Her Highness, after all."

" *Then, would you rather have me not warn our fellow Makabe? Surely, he must not have been aware of such events, and it is why he remains silent. I'd be shocked myself to learn such things,"* Then, as he tends to do as of late, a soft, almost drowned cackling echoed for a few seconds, *"It would be truly a disaster if anything were to happen to his youngest brother, for the young boy to meet an end similar to the one that sorrowfully befell Seiichiro-sama. Isn't that right, 2nd Lieutenant, sir?"*

Makabe's expression darkens further, despite the shine from a thunderbolt seeping into his complexion. Jaws tightening as if under

fire, a slight and almost imperceptible shivering on his hands, all traces of his rather cheery demeanor crumbled to ashes.

Sigh… Vindictive and inflexible as Takeru's been as of late, nothing we might say would assuage his anger at this point. If the woman looking after Makabe's youngest brother could be connected in any way or form to the affairs that took place in Mogami, even if she is free of guilt, few are the words that could dissuade him from chasing after her.

Considering all I know, it is best to fold this discussion for the day. Otherwise, if he dislikes Makabe's response… I'd wish to be as naive to think Takeru wouldn't be as foolish as to also chase after them, yet, he is being most inflexible regarding who he believes was behind Seiichiro-dono's passing.

Thus, breathing a slow sigh, shivering slightly, into the shadows around us I peer, "1st Lt., do recall that speaking of such personal affairs is certain to elicit a negative reaction from our guest," He doesn't say anything, even if I wait for a small moment. Sigh… "2nd Lt. Makabe, while the wording might have not been as amicable as I would have desired, my retainer brought up quite some fair points," He looks at me, regaining his prior composure, "If these matters are indeed connected, then a thorough investigation is in order. Both to determine what happened to the missing supplies as well as safeguarding your brother. Could I ask of you to stay the night in the palace, so that you can accompany some of my fellows to meet this woman tomorrow?"

"… While I would wish to lend a hand, my orders are to return posthaste to my lord's side," He bows down, a frozen neutrality hewn into his voice.

" *With the raging storm as it is? Please 2nd Lieutenant, you'd be well served in accepting our hospitality,"* Sigh… Yet again, faking amicability which only makes Makabe's complexion tighten further, *"Then, you could join our fellows at dawn to investigate this matter, before you depart."*

"I also must insist, Makabe," I smile towards him, countering Takeru's obstinate aggression, "Your presence would be of paramount importance to dispel our suspicions on this caretaker."

Waiting a moment in silence, he then bows down, "If you so require, so I shall do. So… I suppose we should leave the matter of the arrangement of supplies for… another date," I nod, forging my lips shut to prevent a smile, "Then, will this retainer of yours accompany me to pay a visit to my brother?" He inquires, again looking at the rows of pillars, at the outstretched shadows.

Mana shakes her head, stepping forward, "Sadly, both of us are required to remain by Her Highness at all times. I propose that we should continue this talk tomorrow after breakfast, however. We shall ready a detailed report on these leads, that I'd welcome your eyes go through tomorrow," She asks, or rather demands, as Makabe nods with another somber smile, their stares once more clashing as the hail and thunders do outside.

"… Very well, I agree to those plans," Looking my way once more, he stood up and bowed deeply, again smiling, "I thank you for your hospitality, Your Highness. As well as for the consideration you had to allow me to learn of these developments."

"No, it is nothing. Let us hope this is nothing more than an unfortunate coincidence. It is quite late, so please do retire to one of our spare rooms. Mana, if you would."

He nods one last time, giving me another short bow, before following behind Mana as both leave the room. As expected, no one enters afterwards, signaling an end to the meetings of this day.

Sighing, looking at the clock whose sounds are drowned by the downpour, midnight is almost upon us. As if I had endowed an armor, my arms cannot stretch, my neck cannot fully rotate. Once the tension leaves me, my back cannot returns itself upright. Pressuring pain comes surging from its middle.

Ugh… I should have heeded Mana's advice, I truly needed a small rest.

Standing up in slow motion, dragging my feet to the closed doors that lead to the balcony, the coldness seeping in makes me shiver, my breath becomes visible. Resting a hand against the glass, peering into the storm, into the swirling and most dark clouds, perhaps this reflection of mine face is resembling our defenseless gardens below.

Bringing a hand to my neck, the minute touch once more sends a shiver of pain down my back. Merely moving my neck is enough for my muscles to ache, to freeze in position, to send a jolt of tension all over my back and shoulders.

But then, footsteps echoed closer, "Your Highness, you should retire to your chamber for the night," He said, finally coming out of hiding, standing near a pillar a few steps away from me.

However… I couldn't help but to frown as I looked back at him, who was dressed in the black dress for some reason, "Takeru, could you kindly explain why would you choose to confront Makabe as you did?"

"… You could not accept his terms, not considering the intel we received," Immutable as the dark clouds, frosting as the glass to the touch.

"Why did you not notify me of it, then?"

"Because you had to be in the dark, so that you could shine brighter."

"… Whatever does that mean?"

"You needed to be honestly surprised, you could not show any signs of hostility during the talk about supplies, for you to act as the beacon you are required to be," A minute frown surges on him when

I narrowed my eyes, he then looks away, "Having you display such unawareness and sudden wrath was what we needed to sail the talk to our port."

"Sigh… You could at least have told Mana of these matters. Furthermore, you are my shinobi. I cannot say I welcome such manner of plotting from you," Leaving the window, getting closer to him, mine own complexion and tone growing scolding.

Yet, he merely raises a brow, "If you must know, this was Raiko-san's idea. I simply thought it was better than to frontally clash with the dog of Ikaruga, as you expressly told me to stop doing."

"… You shall not refer to 2nd Lt. Makabe in such way."

"… Should I rather call him 'puppet', then?"

"Takeru, cease this foolishness at once!" Despite my shout, his expression doesn't change. Sigh… "Regardless, I cannot have you clashing against our allies any longer. Should you not correct your manners, I shan't allow you to be present in any further meetings," I frown his way.

And he takes a step closer.

And another. And another.

Until we're face to face, almost no distance between us.

In image of how a thunder once more illuminated the night, that searing wrath once more scorched his prior composure, "Should I take such words as you saying you are removing me from your side?"

"… I said no such thing. If you do not obey my commands, I shall-"

"So you would rather have relinquished further powers to the Ikarugas, Your Highness?"

"You *will not* interrupt me again. We must be mindful of our steps, you should know that well enough already."

"And yet, had I told you of this beforehand, I assume you would have said it was not enough to demand answers. Without clear evidence, you wouldn't have driven Makabe into a corned as I did just now. You would assuredly never have used his brother to incite an agreement."

"… And that came at the expense of him growing suspicious of you, of revealing to the Ikaruga House I possess a retainer who is in hiding," And quite possibly, this also quite certainly will erode our rather peaceful cooperation efforts of late.

Yet, he smirks, "And that's for the better, in my opinion. So that they know that, if they keep trying to take advantage of your bountiful generosity, there will be consequences. You surely don't believe the Head of the Ikaruga House to be a brave, selfless hero as the rumors say?" Thus now, blazes make way to his gaze, as he would say happens to me from time to time.

"Sigh… While I shan't deny I am harboring some doubts towards his person, we cannot act without clear leads. Are you certain this affair will be beneficial to us? Do you have evidence the woman is both connected to the missing supplies and to… Mogami?" A minute quiver of my lips, his nod only made it clearly visible.

"Indeed. We have visuals on the caretaker acting rather suspiciously at late hours when meeting with a cloaked figure near her resting place. Furthermore, we have ample proof that the place Shinohara was sighted at is indeed one filled with illegal businesses. Raiko-san is *very* displeased at this turn of events, so she has personally lead this investigation. The intel's veracity has been thoroughly verified, Your Highness," Then, he gives a small bow my way.

"So… What is your opinion on her investigations' result? Do you support it?"

"Well, I…" He finally eases up, looking down, "I do not know whether the woman is an accomplice or another victim, however, we have both visual and audio recordings on her escapades of some weeks ago, which coincide with the date when the cargo was swapped."

"… So, considering you spoke of it in the meeting, will the Swordbreakers leave this matter in Mana's hands?" Inquiring into his eyes, he nods quickly.

"Unless you expressly order us to, I believe it's for the best to keep Raiko-san away from this case. Regardless of her own issues with this particular affair, her presence could forward questions towards her current activities from Makabe," He tells, rather wearily, then nods my way, "Were you wishing for us to take matters into our own hands?"

"No… You all may remain investigating this for the time being, I do not require you to take to the field for the moment. Is a report ready for Mana?" He immediately nods, "Good enough. So… You truly believe the caretaker has ties to…" My throat constricts on itself, little could I do but to close my eyes.

"… Our findings are detailed in the report 1st Lt. Mana shall receive shortly. Do not burden yourself anymore for tonight."

"No, I must know. This is a grave issue, and you should know that well."

"… It is quite late, and there is little you can do at the moment with the intel."

"However, depending on what you all have discovered, my commands might be required to- Mm-Mmghh!"

Before I could finish, Takeru breached my personal space, lunging for my face. My voice muffled as he covered my mouth, his face grew closer, darker, sharper. By his grip my chin was lifted, leaving

almost no distance between our eyes as I pointlessly brought a hand to his arm, groaning against his glove.

"I said, you will not overburden yourself anymore tonight, Your Highness," Unblinking, he stares into me, "Did you understand?"

Heartbeats clashing on my neck, air barely filtering through my nose, I could not release myself from his eyes, much less from his hand. A cold shiver enveloped my whole body, yet not because of my closeness to the windows.

But because a thunder once more surged in the skies, casting such a vile shadow onto his face. Leaving only his eyes visible for a moment, a moment where I forgot to breathe.

After that second of pause, I barely manage to nod. His hand releases me, then carefully begins coupling a cheek now as I gasp for air.

"You did more than enough today, retire to your room for the night."

"… I'm still not done with the questioning, and do not be thinking on deflecting what you just did," Grabbing his hand, he remains still as I remove it from my face, "Takeru, I cannot have you clashing against every person you believe is against us. If you do not promise me to conduct yourself appropriately-"

"I will do what's in Yuuhi's best interests, as always," Squinting his eyes, he so whispers.

Mine own gaze imitates his, aware of the implication, "Then, do not try to instigate another argument as you did. And… you should know there is no need to lay your hands on me in such way. You are my protector, whatever were you trying to accomplish threatening me in such fashion?"

Slowly shaking his head, he sighs, "I was merely keeping you safe from your own impulses. It is already late, and you should be retiring

to bed. Learning of the reports shan't let you enjoy a good night's rest. And since I know you will not heed anyone's words when you grow incisive," Bowing down shortly, releasing his hand from my grasp as forcefully as when he drowned my voice, then he remains in position, "I took the liberty of forcing you to desist, for your own sake."

As I was about to admonish him, as my lips moved, no sounds came from my throat. Because, in my deepest reaches, I know he tells the truth. I wouldn't have desisted until he told me about the report, and that would certainly not do me any good at this late hour.

"Sigh… If you were concerned, all you had to do was remind me of the hour," I would have welcomed your prior warmth towards me, a hand atop my head in kindness, compared to this forceful approach. However… Perhaps, I merely am reaping what I myself sowed into your heart… "Fine, I shan't insist on that matter. However, do you believe Makabe's brother to be in any danger?" Caressing my head, I inquire.

He shakes his head, back to a neutral, cold expression as he comes back up, "He isn't, for now. As I said before, we are not certain whether the caretaker is truly part of these machinations or is merely being forced to cooperate," Frowning much, he sighs, "Don't worry, we've got them under watch. If anything happens, our Reaction Team will handle it."

"I see… Then, the supplies… Where are they? Were they athwarted on the way to Ikaruga-dono's battalion?"

Yet, he suddenly begins scouring the ceiling, scratching his head, "You truly should rest for the night."

"… What happened to the supplies?"

"It is late. I must again insist that you retire to your chamber."

"Takeru, as my shinobi and brother, I order you to speak," Taking a step towards him, I thus demand while squinting my eyes.

Returning the expression, he nods while never letting my sight leave his, "The missing supplies are not related to the caretaker, she is merely siphoning out meds from our depots."

"… Huh? Then…" My lips sink, the sound of the rain becomes distant as I focus on him, "You wouldn't be saying Ikaruga-dono tried to deceive us, giving C Rank rations to his men while keeping the A Rank ones we sent hidden?"

"… And if I did, what would you say? That it's preposterous for a self-proclaimed hero to do such a thing?" He raises a brow, a scowl, I couldn't help but to groan, "Do recall that Raiko-san arranged the delivery herself. The transporters wouldn't have betrayed us, and they returned safely from the trip as well. The rations arrived safely to Ikaruga's hands, of that we have confirmation, our inductees did not betray us. So, if they claim said supplies never arrived…" Halting his speech suddenly, he slowly shakes his head while going back to his cold and calm demeanor, "Well, anything else would be mere speculation on my part, and you certainly do not need to hear it this late into the night. Raiko-san's report should contain all you need to be aware of, so please do read it thoroughly tomorrow."

… I'd like to know why is it that you so blindly believe in her words. I certainly do not recall you two to ever have been in such synchrony. Yet, he is absolutely correct. If our fellows had betrayed us, Takeru would have already crushed their fangs after all.

"Sigh… Then, you merely used this intel you received to threaten Makabe into silence?"

Finally smiling, he nods, "Indeed. Considering what we learned of the woman, if I had to pressure Makabe to ascertain his position on this matter while also halting his preposterous claims to have you lose more power, I do not see why you'd oppose my actions, since

they gave you a most positive outcome," Just as viciously as the hail falls onto our gardens, such are his glare and tone now.

"… Fine, I shall accept you have a point," And once more, his gaze recedes into his usual composed, and oddly cold, gaze of late, "However, do try to avoid such confrontations if at all possible, they might backfire at one point. And do notify Mana ahead of time if such a pressing matter reaches your ears ever again."

"As you will, Your Highness," Such firm formality forces a frown from me as he swiftly bows down. As another thunder echoed about, he offered me a hand once he returned himself upright, "So, will you retire to your chamber for the day?"

"… I suppose, there are no other matters to tend to. Sigh…" Accepting his hand, his pull spurs my feet to action towards the doors, "However, I'd still be wishing to have a talk with you in my chamber," Tightening my hold on his hand, he gives a nod.

Once I release it, once I blinked as we reached the doors towards the hallways, Takeru was once more out of sight.

"… I shall be awaiting your call, Your Highness," He thus whispers from beyond the shadows, "Please do relax in your chamber for a moment."

"… I know. You also should take some minutes for yourself," I look back, pointlessly trying to find him.

Sighing at his lack of an answer, I thus depart from the audience room. The guards posted outside of it once more act as my guide to my private chamber, due to Mana's absence.

However, as we traversed the long, narrow hallways, no more sounds of rain seeping into my ears, an ever present and subtle echo followed me. Turning on the corners, not drowned by the soft velvet carpet on the inner corridors nor the stairs, his footsteps accompanied me until he ascertained I had been led to my chamber.

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*Around an hour later.*

*(Shogun's Private Chamber.)*

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"Phew…" Slowly rotating my neck, still with some soreness within, I exit the bathroom, steam still rising through my robe and limbs.

Running a hand over my softened, dampened hair strands, allowing it to fall freely unto my back, only the overall shapes of the furniture is visible now through what little light peers through the windows, a sudden thunder aiding me as I took slow steps in. Pressing the switch of a lamp resting on a small cabinet, its soft yellow light illuminates my resting place.

The window is thankfully not quivering under the downpour, yet I could hear the rain even under the caress of the shower. As I sit on my bed, sinking into the most pleasantly cushioning sheets, the ravaging storm remains raging outside, thunders echoing every now and then.

… At least the palace is well guarded against such tempests, yet I cannot help but to wonder, to worry, how are the shelters faring? It is also rather precarious to refer to them as shelters, when in reality they're merely repurposed schools and other facilities whose operations have been halted due to the war.

Certainly, there will be zones in the cities where the streets will end up submerged. As if our daily lives were not arduous enough already, even Mother Nature seems intent on opposing us. It is just as that damned typhoon, striking our coastal forces in the middle of the BETA advance to the Capital, denying us the option to employ naval bombardments. As if that wasn't enough, the Treaty was about to come undone.

"Sigh… Such ruminating will do me no good…" Stroking my shoulders over my robe, my fingertips dwelling in them with

unrequired force, nothing but send a prayer over the storm I can do as of now.

Allowing my hands to then sink into my bed, drawing circles on it, while my gaze wanders to the swirling gray visage outside the window, I merely admire the rain, lost in the sounds it makes, in the lightning that comes into view for merely a second before it melts away.

…

I truly hope this storm doesn't last any longer… It is quite late into the night, after all. Surely when morning comes, it will have subsided.

… Which reminds me, I require to do something before allowing myself to wallow in the comfort of the sheets.

Glancing about my dimly lit privacy, only the spectrum of shadows of the furniture, the outstretched frame of the windows reflected on the floor upon a blooming bolt, I am loath to admit I cannot determine whether he is nearby or not.

Thus, I call upon the veil, "Takeru, come to me."

…

Breathing in, hearing only the rain, veiling my sight momentarily, once I looked upon my room once again, he was nowhere to be found and no other sounds can be heard as of now.

How peculiar… He always answers my calls, perhaps he already retired for the night? No… He said he'd be waiting, and I didn't take much in the shower. Then, should I wait for a moment? He wouldn't have deceived me to have me retire to my room for the day, would he? However, all things considered, I cannot deny that-

"Were you calling, Yuuhi?"

"Eh?!" The sudden intrusion, feeling far closer than expected, elicited a flinch from me. Yet, as I looked around, he still wasn't in sight, "Takeru, where are you?"

"Outside the room."

"… And why would you not be coming to my presence as I requested?"

"I wouldn't mind to comply with your order, however, I believe you should place some modesty on your person first, Yuuhi," He so declared.

Which made my look down at myself, realizing I was still in my bath robe, which indeed did a rather poor job at granting much cover to my shape. Suddenly feeling my heartbeat on my neck, barely managing to stutter an order for him to wait outside, I approach my wardrobe and blast it open with a single hand, swiftly reaching in to procure one of my night attires from it.

Allowing the robe to fall to the floor, donning my sleeping clothes as I shivered under the unexpected coldness upon me in the meantime, after placing the robe where my attendants would take care of it tomorrow, my legs once more softly sink into my bed. Double checking my appearance, I finally sigh and dull the quiver on my sides.

Thus, while caressing my hair slowly, I call out to him, "You may enter now," And as I blinked, without even hearing the door opening or any footsteps, Takeru was already standing in attention before me, still dressed in the black dress, "Ahem… Thank you kindly for your sensitivity, Takeru. I hadn't… realized I was still in such simple clothing."

"It is nothing," He simply says, expression sober as he gives me a short bow, "Now then, what did you require of me?"

"… First, how are the shelters? With the storm raging for over two days now, I imagine the situation on the street is not improving at all."

"Don't worry. While there are some streets that are flooded, the shelters and food distribution centers have remained in good care," He affirms, placing both hands behind his back, "Our fellows have confirmed everything is still under control, and there is no risks of further floods occurring. The relief forces are also at the ready should a landslide occur."

"Is that truly so? What about those on the outskirts of the city?"

"… While the deliveries to those shelters will take some more time, our insistence to relocate the people to the shelters as opposed to leaving them in the parks will assuredly ensure they remain in good health during this storm," Once more giving me a nod in confirmation, my hands relax further unto the bed.

"I see… That is a relief. Have we heard word on the situation of the other Regents?"

Almost closing his eyes, Takeru slowly shakes his head, barely restraining a frown, "No. At the least, we believe both the Kujo and Takatsukasa Houses have followed your suggestion to house our common fellows in proper buildings instead of leaving them in the parks, however, as you know, the Ikaruga House decided to repurpose most free buildings for the war efforts, so the peasants under their care are either still in the parks, or in the smallest, oldest buildings available."

"… Did our negotiations truly broke down with their representatives?"

"It isn't as if they broke down entirely," Sighing too adustedly, as if a bull he were, his sight veers to the windows, "Some of our fellows have been convinced of his stance's effectiveness, how using the available infrastructure to bolster the IRG's capabilities is the better option we possess."

… However, even if we triumph over the BETA, what will be of our people? I am well aware we are being driven against the wall, that perhaps all we can do is offer some respite to our peasants while demanding they endure such atrocious living conditions, yet… yet for us to deny them a rooftop under this raging storm?

"If Her Highness allowed it, we could take to the field and-"

"You shall not," I frown, he remains as calm as he was, "Leave the negotiations to me, clashing with the Guard is not what we should be doing as of now."

"… Understood," Eyes closed, his voice but a whisper almost drowned by the rain, he bows down.

Biting my lips softly upon his formal answer, entwining my fingers I lean forward slightly, "In any case… I assume everything we could do was already done?"

"Or the measures are ready to be applied shortly," Still calm and cold, he returns himself upright.

"I see… Have we heard from the plans the government in Sendai is preparing?"

"… The reports are being arranged for tomorrow. All I was told is they requested Her Highness to make a public appearance once the storm passes, to survey the city's state to give some relief to the people," He informs.

Which brings a smile to my face, despite my image being used as a tool to placate the people. I truly welcome this opportunity to see how they are faring with my own eyes. While I had forwarded such a request before, most advisors recommended me to remain doing press conferences or radio broadcasts. I should thank Kurechika-dono for this, I am sure he was the one who insisted for this chance to come my way, for me to see the truth myself instead of through the advisors' reports.

"Which is why," Takeru continues, narrowing his eyes ever so slightly upon my figure, "you should rest for the night, Yuuhi."

"I know, remaining awake all night again was not in my plans," He nods, his shoulders easing up, his chest lowering slightly, as if he had released quite some stagnant air in him just now, "So, is the castle in proper form as of now?"

"Save for the gardens, yes."

"Then, that is good. Did Makabe forward any further inquiries in the end?"

He shakes his head, "All he did was converse with 1st Lt. Mana about the caretaker, and how his youngest brother was always quite insistent on aiding anyone whenever he could."

"Sigh… That is good to hear. I only hope your intrusion doesn't cause us any inconveniences," And again, he narrows his eyes slightly, "Now, that reminds me… Takeru, why would you be wearing the black dress?"

"Because it is easier for me to conceal my presence by wearing black clothing, of course," Nodding once, folding his arms, "Furthermore, this is the color I should wear."

"What… That is not true," Grasping the sheets, I frown at him, "You are a legitimate member of the Koubuin House, and have been given the blessing of the Tsukuyomi House as well," In addition to the Amato House's, twice at that, "Therefore, you have earned the right to endow the crimson attire befitting of the honors you've accomplished."

Closing his eyes, he says nothing. Neither the dim yellow nor the sparking white can seep into his facade. Once he opens his eyes once more, he sighs with furrowed brows.

And thus, he whispers, "While all of that was true once, it all has been void of meaning when you removed your emblem from my person," Lips quivering, my hands cannot help but to clutch the sheets in fear of his next words, calm words, "I am merely Takeru Shirogane, and a commoner must wear black in the Imperial Guard."

"Utter no further balderdash. You are my brother. Even if we… had a disagreement, I restored your rightful title to you."

Yet, he again shakes his head, "You cannot possibly have a brother who doesn't exist, Yuuhi. You erased me so that I could be your shadow, there is no point in clinging to what once was," Such a calm voice, as if merely stating my schedule. Such a calm expression, as if uncaring towards what he had affirmed.

Gritting my teeth, gripping my sheets, by pressing my ankles together I managed not to spur my feet to action as I desired to, "How many times must I tell you this arrangement does not undo your prior achievements? While the rest may need to remain in the dark, your position by my side hasn't-"

"And that is the meaning of me having this, isn't it?" He taps his blade, still oddly composed, "This is all I need to prove the status you've bequeathed me with. Also, it is easier for me to move around in the black dress," He then raises a finger upwards, nodding once, "No one would pay much mind to an inductee with such a low rank, yet if I walked around in the red dress, I'd be showered in millions of gazes without even doing anything suspicious. Frankly, it always got on my nerves," And for the first time in months, a speck of sulking on his cheeks.

"Mmgh… I know you speak the truth, however…" Releasing the sheets, I remain quiet, pondering what to say next. I doubt I could convince him to cease this foolishness… "Sigh… While I agree your mission takes priority, do remember I still see you as part of my family, Takeru."

He says nothing, closing his eyes once more. Thus, I stand up, walking over to the window, again gazing at the storm. At least knowing my directives were enforced on time is enough to assuage some of my concerns. However, there is one last matter I must inquire into.

Looking back, seeing he had accompanied my short stride as always, while staring into his eyes I ask, "Takeru, has anything else of importance come to your ears through these investigations of late?"

One of his brows twitches, "… You should be preparing to rest, Yuuhi."

"However, if any other pressing matters such as the situation with Makabe's brother would have been discovered, I must know of them."

"You shouldn't be mulling over such matters this late into the night."

"I must know ahead of time. While I concede your plan for this meeting was successful, I cannot remain in the dark for such vital developments."

"… 1st Lt. Mana's fellows are already on the move, and ours as well. Furthermore, a report is already prepared for your eyes to go over tomorrow."

"Takeru, cease this obstinacy at once."

"However, you will have to be awoken at 400 hours," He states, furrowing his brows, "I must insist that you desist in this inquiry, and that you at least consider resting until 500 hours instead. Do not overburden yourself."

I take a step forward, peering into his eyes, "1st Lt. Takeru Koubuin, as your Shogun, Regent, and older sister, I demand you relinquish any and all intel you may possess. Let me remind you, I have the

final say, the last sign of authorization in the IRG. My voice is what gives legitimacy to my vassals' actions, they require my agreement to proceed through more forceful methods should they encounter unexpected setbacks. Therefore, I must learn of what is transpiring behind curtains."

Closing his eyes, breathing in deeply for a moment, his gaze sharpens upon me, "Your Highness, I must ask you to kindly allow Yuuhi to rest. Your duties are over for the night, and you cannot hope to lead us if you become sleep deprived," Faking a short bow, never breaking the connection between our eyes, his voice also grew sharp, hoarse, "You should rest for today, you need to sleep."

"… This is my duty. My responsibility. This is…"

This voice is all I have now… I cannot clash against the other Regents, I instead must request my retainers and vassals do that in my stead. My agreement is all that veils them from the constant tensions in the IRG as of late. Many doubt my capabilities, being so young, being a woman, my fellowship having failed to halt the BETA from decimating the Capital. I cannot remain idle… I must, and I will, do all I can for those who remain loyal to me.

"Some meager exhaustion is nothing compared to what our fellows are going through as of now. Therefore, I order you to speak of-"

In a matter of seconds, my back was pressed against the window's cold glass. Alongside it, his hands firmly planted themselves around my neck. Not pressuring nor wishing to let go, merely covering my throat, forcing me to look into his eyes.

"Takeru, release me at once!" Yet, he didn't even waver as I began to pull at his wrists, his grip also didn't become any stronger.

A thunder echoes about, again his face is covered by the light. Allowing me to see how his right eye remained twitching non-stop.

"Your Highness… I told you to rest for the day, didn't I?" Softly delving his fingers onto the base of my neck, his thumb lodged into the triangle below, his face then comes closer.

"Stop this… Takeru…" Suddenly out of wording, I cannot continue to speak as he grew closer.

Letting me see his gritting teeth, pressing me further against the frosting window, his hands move up and down, as if tenderly molding the sides of my chin. Heartbeats pressed against my chest, completely aware of my breathing, yet I cannot take his hands off me, yet he still isn't even pressuring my neck.

"I told you to rest, didn't I?" He asks, his fingertips sinking with a bit of force onto my nape in circles.

"Yes… However, I must- Guh!" What knot remained on my nape coming undone under his fingers, a jolt ran down my spine.

Tenderly stroking up to my chin, relocating the pressure to his fingertips as they mold my sides, ending on a firm yet soft hold over the base of my neck. Up and down, my breathing accustomed on its own to his soft stroking, Takeru kept me in place, never allowing my eyes any respite from his, never compromising my breathing in the slightest.

"Your Highness, Yuuhi needs to rest. You've done an outstanding job today as well, you also deserve a break," Despite his whisper, he still did not let me go.

Firm and steadfast, yet never hurting, only halting my voice and keeping my in place as he stared into me. His rhythm eased up, again merely grasping me, merely resting his palms on my skin.

"Takeru, I have to… protect our fellows…"

"Leave that for tomorrow."

"I must at least give them my approval…"

"I said, leave that for tomorrow. You need to rest."

"However, they require- Ugh! G-Guh… S-Stop it…"

This time, up and down, his fingers dove into my still stiff sides. A bit of pressure from his palms, circular patters as if kneading me, ending on singular sinking points with two fingers at once. The rainfall echoed about, the cold kept seeping into my back, as he slowly moved me, force me to move, rotating my neck, hearing it crack, the jolts shocking and covering me the more he massaged my neck.

Soft, yet firm. Slow, yet precise. Locking, yet not oppressive. One or two deep breaths, my eyelids almost close, simply basking into the evaporating tension of my upper body. Yet… I cannot… I cannot merely allow Takeru's massage to lull me to sleep…

As I again tried to repel his hands from me, he grew closer. And closer. Slowly, eerily so, his sight became odd-eyed. My fingers stopped thrashing against his wrists, yet his grip never bound my neck tightly. Growing ever closer, he rested his forehead against mine, leaving me with no escape from his wrathful stare.

And then, silence. Save for the eventual thunders, save for the incessant rain, save for our breathing.

He said nothing, I couldn't utter anything despite his hold not restricting me.

His head shivering, eyes still crossed, he held my gaze with his blaze.

And I could do nothing but wait.

"… Your Highness?"

"Y-Yes?" Upon my rather meek answer, his hold eases up further, now just barely resting on my skin, barely holding me in place.

"Yuuhi needs to rest, she is exhausted from the constant setbacks we're suffering. Both physically and mentally," He states through gritted teeth.

"I… I know… I am-"

"So, if you keep interfering with her lone moment of respite… Your Highness, I will have to ensure you do not ever do such a thing again."

"W-What… are you…"

"I am merely asking you to uphold our pact, nothing else," Finally, his eyes return to normal, his hands begin to slowly, meticulously stroke my neck, "Yuuhi needs to sleep, and your shift has ended for the day."

"However… if there are matters I can aid with-" A finger shuts my lips, he shakes his head.

"After all you sacrificed to get here, you cannot fall for such a simple thing, for a moment of shuteye."

"I… It is my duty-"

"To protect the Empire, and your fellowship. To ensure all that was sacrificed isn't in vain by the end. And to do that…" He leaned back, his hands now clasped my shoulders, "Yuuhi needs to rest."

"However… However, it is because of my own ineptitude that-"

"Then, don't try to bite more than you can chew. I am sure I was a *very good* example of what you shouldn't do," Frowning, again odd-eyed.

"That is…" My lips shake, "However, my duty as a Regent…" Then, it is my knees, "I have an obligation to my people-"

His grip on my shoulders tightened, eliciting a groan, sending my eyes to his, "Your Highness, the pact we established was clear. Me and my fellows shall ensure your wishes are upheld, or attain enough time for you to meditate on a solution should you so require. Please, trust in my words. You can rest for the day, everything is fine for now."

"… Is it really? You are not deceiving me?" Holding my breath, I stare into his eyes.

Which narrow a bit, yet return back to normal, "I cannot do that. As we agreed before, my soul belongs to you. And on that oath, I guarantee you have more than enough time to rest as of now."

"Wouldn't it be for the better if I tackled these matters now? I cannot take to the field anymore, this is all I…" My head sinks, enveloped by the coldness seeping into my back.

A finger placed on my chin, he lifts me back into his eyes, "You cannot shoulder everything on your own. Furthermore, even if you could, our pact had another condition," His eyes narrow, his forehead again comes into contact with mine.

"T-That's…" Lips quivering, and not because of the cold, I became aware of my breathing as I gulped, as his hands began to slightly move back and forth on my shoulders, his fingertips pressing and sinking just every so slightly with each repetition.

"Surely you remember, do you not?"

As my legs quiver, as my hands again reached for his, what but a warm reminder enveloped me, drowning the rain and the cold, drowned by his sight and his oath. All tension in me evaporated, relaxing onto his hold, seeing into his serious stare, requesting me to voice our pact.

And thus, I obliged upon his demand, "I… gave you my soul in return. In exchange for erasing your existence, for you to relinquish your individuality to the service of the Shogun… My soul became yours."

"Yes, that's right," What I feared was another binding hold became soft, as if massaging me instead, "Your soul belongs to me, Yuuhi. Just like how I belong to you, right?"

I merely nod along, slowly his fingers pull me away from the window, slowly keep massaging.

"So, just as you look out for me, I must look after you," I nod again, "Therefore, I cannot have Her Highness treat you unfairly. After all, your soul belongs to me."

"That's wrong…"

"Hm? How so?"

I lean onto him, my arms ducking under his, basking into his perfume, releasing my breath onto his neck, "Not just my soul… my body… my heart… The entirety of me is yours, Takeru," Yet, even when I'm tightly embracing him, he does not return it. Instead, he merely keeps massaging my shoulders.

"Then Yuuhi, what are you going to do now?"

"… Go to sleep."

"Good. Then, let's go," Grabbing one of my hands, he slowly pulls me towards my bed, and I slowly follow.

Sitting down, sinking down, shutting down, Takeru takes a moment to take out my music box from one of my drawers. The last present… he had given me as his sister.

As the melody starts, those days return to me. Our games, our arguments, our joys. Appeased by the music, I do not resist his

tender grasp at all. His hands weave my hair, his fingers rest on the back of my head. They then draw circles, infinities, and ovals, before lowering to my shoulders and restarting the process.

There are no more words between us, no reason to utter further sounds, no tensions nor duties, no expectations nor formalities. But the melody keeps playing. I can merely close my eyes, rest my stomach onto the sheets when he so demanded, and leave my mouth open to breathe away, gasp in, and exhale when needed. Basking into this moment of calm, willingly admitting defeat to the charm of this homemade balm.

Up and down, first with his fingers then his palms. From the center to my sides, then gradually going down, only to then return to my shoulders. The downpour became a tender noise, soon it simply faded.

At some point, in between my blinking, the lamp was also turned off. But the melody keeps playing, so I don't mind it much.

His hands do not stop, not for a second. From my neck to my rear, pressuring just under my arms, the middle of my back, eroding the binds, eroding my mind.

Soon afterwards, I found my mouth stretching to yawn. So I ducked a hand under my chin, rubbed my cheeks against my pillow, as he kept going for a while longer. Closing my eyes, rubbing my feet together, this relaxation would leave the pleasant shower feeling paling in comparison.

At some point, however, his hands stopped. Shortly after, something else covered me whole. Something soft and warm, that my hands identified as my sheets.

Then, a hand caressed my head, "Are you feeling better now?"

"Yes… Thanks…"

"I see…" At that point, something pressed itself against my cheek. Something moist and warm, which remained there for a moment. As the sensation left, his voice then felt closer, "Sweet dreams, Yuuhi."

Stirring under the sheets, something or the other left my lips.

The soft hand remained on my head for a moment, or a long while maybe… It feels good… Grazing my hair, then caressing my cheek oh so softly, oh so slowly…

Yet, it also left me after a moment, and I simply remained hugging the sheets to replace his warmth.

… But the melody was still playing, the melody he gifted to me.

---

…

What hour is it? For how much longer will I be made to remain sitting in this room?

As if my vision were growing narrow, I cannot distinguish my surroundings. The audience room is eerily quiet, silent, absent of any and all sounds. Barely no light is peeking in, no lamps are turned on for some reason… Yet, I cannot seem to find the strength to move…

… I'm exhausted of sitting here for hours on end. Perhaps, I should-

" *Your Highness must remain in the palace,"* The silhouettes all around me said in unison.

"What? I am the Shogun, I am free to see the state of the castle grounds with mine own eyes."

" *Your Highness must remain in the palace,"* They repeat, immutable.

"Nonsense. There is much I am able to do besides sitting here…" Counter to my expectations, a great effort costs me to rise up.

However, I did not manage to even take a step for the audience room to… begin to distort.

Its walls towered over me, stretching further up until they pierced the firmament. Left trapped under the towering shadows, those voices kept repeating the same over and over again.

Feeling as if my feet were bound to each other, almost stumbling I reached the door. Yet, no matter how much I pull, how much I thrash, it does not budge.

" *Your Highness, you should become the beacon the people require…"* One of the voices thus said, a twinge of pain surged forth on my left arm.

Looking at it… a string had splurged from it, as if connected to my very veins. And then, it began to pull me away.

"Mmgh… Stop this…" The more I struggled, the more it hurt. Soon after, I could no longer feel my arm.

" *Your Highness, allow me to shoulder the pen. Relinquish it to me, it is in your best interests,"* Another voice whispered, as if doing so from right behind me.

Immediately afterwards, another string surged from my right arm, making me gasp in pain. Both arms no longer obeying me, they pulled me back to my prior position.

"No… I… I can do much more… I am not an icon, I was trained to lead…"

Firmly planting my feet on the wood, holding my ground, a slight shiver reached my legs. And once more, those voices echoed about.

" *Your Highness, your image will be spared by giving us complete liberties. Please, think of the populace. You must remain as an*

*untarnished symbol for them,"* Those three voices repeated in unison, the unbearable tearing of my legs drowned by them.

No longer able to resist, brought down to the ground, slowly, slowly, as the room returns to normal, I'm dragged back to the same sitting position I was in before.

My back hurting at the forced posture, strings coming down from somewhere and keeping my eyes open, tearing into my eyelids, forcing me to keep smiling, I can only quiver as those echoes repeat themselves over and over, as my resistance seems futile against these bindings.

" *Your Highness…"*

"Oh… Maya, Mana… Please, tear these accursed bindings from me… I don't know what's happening here…"

" *That we cannot do,"* Both say in unison, *"Your Highness, such is your duty as the Shogun."*

"What… What are you…"

And then, they too… *"Your Highness, you must remain in the palace."*

The strings come down, as if searching for my heart. I try to scream, to rebel, yet their hold keeps me in place.

" *Your Highness, you must remain in the palace."*

My vision grows more and more narrow, my body is going numb… Or am I being crushed by the walls? I cannot tell anymore…

Unable to utter any sounds… my voice unheard, my will disregarded, prey to the whims of the strings the room remains the same, yet I'm not allowed to move or rest. All of these voices… all without exception… see the Shogun before anything… as I myself do…

…

Remembering something, something old and dear, I look back. And there, he was there.

Standing right behind me, there was Takeru. As he always had been.

"Takeru… Takeru, come cut these wires off me."

" *I can't."*

"Huh? What… Why?!"

He then took a step closer, becoming fully visible despite the tunnel my sight seemed to be trapped in. And in doing so, he allowed me to see…

… that part of his chest was missing. As if he had a beam of steel encrusted on him, the middle of his torso was simply gone, there was a gaping hole tearing his dress, flesh, and bones. A most riveting sight, tearing my own insides asunder, not even a scream or a tear could I spare for him.

" *I'm no longer there, I can't help you anymore,"* He wailed, dropping his face.

"N-No… What are you-" I couldn't even finish that Takeru was slowly engulfed by a darkened, cold flare.

As if it were a shadow manifested, as if it truly was erasing him, it didn't even leave ashes behind.

Gritting my teeth, my feet spur to action, enduring the tearing of the wires. Extending my hands towards him, they go right through the blaze, the shadow.

And I fall, and fall. Met with emptiness, nothing to cling onto, nothing that clings onto me. Absolute absence… is all that's left in this room…

" *Your Highness must remain in the palace."*

Something drags me back to my prior position, bolts me in place, molds me into the frame.

My ankles begin to hurt, bent after sitting for so long.

I cannot even muster enough strength to properly speak…

The strings begin to delve further, the voices resonate louder, making my ears begin to ring much.

It hurts… Let me go… Release me… This isn't how… it should have been…

Ugh… If only… I could have been heard… but no one… one other than him… If only he hadn't…

…

However… Didn't he…

Yes… Maya had… said he was… and Mana also insisted much about…

… Huh?

…

Blinking for a moment, light seeps into my eyes. Shivering slightly as I rise up, a strand of hair falling into my chest, my private chamber greets me like every morning.

With the sole difference being the sheets drenched in sweat, and this mossy, heavy sensation left on my back.

"… A nightmare, huh?" For a moment, I rest on my bed once more, merely looking upwards.

Running a hand over my shoulders, yawning as I then stretch my arms, my sight growing distorted for but a moment, I slowly leave my bed.

After taking a moment of privacy in the bathroom, I return inside and sway the curtains away. Shimmering sunshine showers upon my silhouette, signaling the start of a new day. Looking at the calendar, it already the second day of December. Just when did this year pass by?

"And yet, these last few days… have been far more eventful than all the others in this year," Looking at the sunrise, growing closer to the windows, the early morning's warmth showers over me.

And yet, it does little compared to what I recalled amidst my dreams. Just one of many nights, I do not recall the specifics, yet it was one where he had once more taken initiative to keep me safe from my own instincts. And now… seeing my reflection, recalling what I had just dreamed about…

"Am I… fearful, perhaps?" Of what he'd think of me now? Of what he'd do to aid me return to my prior powers? Of… receiving confirmation he is truly gone forever?

… Frustrating as it might be, I must mind my moves. Losing the favor of the other Regents would spell certain doom for me. And yet, if he does return, he won't be pleased in the slightest with my current standing. Perhaps, would he chose… to refuse my call as he did back then, when he remained with the Chains?… Would he choose to remain in the UN?

… Or demand for the Swordbreakers to be reinstated?

"… It is unfair."

Choking a strand of hair, shrugging my lips, I rest my forehead against the glass, the cold glass, left staring at my own reflection.

… I want him back. Yet, I cannot clash against Kouzuki. A hand sinks into my neck, the glass becomes blurred as my breath blows out. However, if he returns, he will certainly insist on me regaining my entitlements. I cannot force such a discussion now of all times.

… And yet, running a hand over my stomach's side, for every pledge I made, for every duty in my shoulders, for all I stand for… there is a reason within that eclipses them all.

"… I miss you, Takeru…"

Sigh…

Then, all of a sudden, an echo intrudes on my privacy. The sound of doors opening, the following footsteps. As I turn around, the door to my privacy was opened and in stormed Maya, at the ready to awake me as habitually, only to halt all movement in surprise as she seems I am already up.

However, it lasts but a second, as she proceeds to bow down, "Good morning, Your Highness."

"Good morning to you as well, Maya. Is breakfast ready?"

"No, I assumed you'd still be resting. Would you wish to change into your clothes now?" She inquires, returning upwards.

"… I'd like to take a moment, if it's possible," Thus, I look out the window once more.

"As you will. Then, about today's schedule, there are a few short meetings throughout the afternoon once the meeting to authorize the transfer of the Type-1C to… Your Highness?"

"Hm? Yes?"

"… Is there anything worrying you?" She takes a step closer, a brow lowering in concern.

"Sigh… Was I being too obvious?"

"Well, you rarely, if ever, remain staring out the window in such fashion, as if dismissing my presence."

"I was not doing such. There's something… I should have asked of you before."

"And that would be?"

I then look back at her, right into her eyes, sending a hand to my still loose hair, "When is Takeru coming back?"

…

"Huh?"

"I said, when is Takeru coming back? It has been quite some time since the CCSE, and you all have been quite insistent on how he… truly is…" Filling myself with air, I look out the window, "… alive. Thus, when is he returning?"

Maya was left bereft of any and all words for but a second, "Your Highness, we still haven't ascertained the state of his-"

"So are you now affirming the man is not Takeru?"

"No, I am merely saying it will take more time to-"

"How much longer?" I take a step towards her, eyes narrowing.

Which makes her bow down, "We do not yet know. After all, we haven't had a conversation with the man regarding his memories."

"And, when will you gain such an opportunity?"

Closing her eyes for a moment, she then taps her glasses, "Mana reported yesterday night that they'd be allowed to speak with the

man during today's afternoon, they have Kouzuki's word on it. We shall gain their confirmation before dusk falls."

"Is that so?" Drowning a sigh, forcing the air to leave through my nose, my countenance does not soften, "Then, I suppose waiting is all we can do for the moment."

Soon, soon enough this disquiet will vanish. And when his answers reach me…

"Maya, how do you suppose we could bring him back?"

"If you'd wish for him to remain as your shadow, some cover will need to be procured since many are those who have grown interested in his exploits after the CCSE," She stops, breathing deeply, lips shivering for an instant, "However, if yoi desired to reinstate him as who he was before, well, many explanations and concessions will be expected of us."

"Huh, is that so? Do the other Regents believe they can threaten me so?"

"Your Highness?"

"Pah, how boorish. Maya, please do prepare the required documentation to ensure Takeru's return is resolved swiftly."

However, she seems to hesitate for a moment, "Your Highness, forgive my rudeness, yet you cannot clash with-"

"The pacts with Kouzuki, and Alt. IV's success more importantly, shall grant us ample influence. I shall use said tailwind to have Takeru return to my side. Perhaps, are you having some reservations towards my wishes?" Tilting my head, choking a strand of hair, I peer into her eyes.

That widen slightly, before shaking her head hastily, "Of course not, milady! I am merely suggesting to exercise caution."

"Then, let's have breakfast. Please do tackle these required arrangements posthaste," I order, she nods.

"By your will. However, why the sudden irritable impatienve, Yuuhi-sama?"

Sighing, I finally relinquish the imposing mask, "I merely wish to resolve this matter quickly. I… want a resolution. And…" I want him back, to finally follow through with our pact to its ultimate consequence. If Takeru yet lives, then he belongs to me, "Certainly, he would have scolded me much from indulging in such passivity. Furthermore, I shan't allow other Regents to delve into my House's affairs. Thus, please do ensure those documents are prepared for when Mana reports back today."

She nods, opening her mouth yet saying nothing for a moment, eyes darting down, "Then… You will… welcome him back into our fellowship, as himself and not a shadow?"

"… Did I stutter, perchance?"

"No, milady!" Standing in attention, she gives a salute, clamping down her lips to not smile. Oh, Maya… "Well then, let me assist you in getting dressed."

Relenting both a nod and a smile, I allow her to begin our usual procedure while I got lost in thought.

…

… Just a few more hours.

Please Takeru… tell me it's truly you, that such a miracle truly occurred. Tell me you haven't forgotten… tell me you didn't forget about me… about us.

# Shadows of the Silver Blossom

*A/N: Latter half of this chapter has been revised.*

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**Chapter 58: Shadows of the Silver Blossom**

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*December 2nd, 2001. Near 2 PM.*

*(Imperial Palace, Tokyo. Meeting Room.)*

[ **Yuuhi** ]

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An overhead chandelier illuminates the narrow space of this meeting room where we five Regents have once more gathered. And as all times before, the regal, opulent ornaments and furniture reflecting a halo of radiant light, the fragrance of relaxing incense, and the sublime delicacies that were laid atop the table, covered by a tender lily mantle that has my House's emblem on it, none of such things could sow any measure of fellowship into this room or our gazes.

"… Regarding your decision to bequeath Yokohama Base with ten Takemikazuchi Type-C units," Takatsukasa-dono inquires, a scythe roving within his lips, "What compelled such hastiness, Your Highness? Why would you not consult with the Regency Council for such a vital negotiation?"

"… Those units were mine to command. As the acting Regent I am, I decided to seize the opportunity presented to me," Meeting his cerulean eyes without hostility yet freezing my tone, I thus continued, "All other Type-00 units available to the Guard are required elsewhere, and had I involved the Regency Council in the transfer, the possibility that some of our more fervent fellows would decry our decision was too large to ignore. Which is why the Koubuin House

shouldered this deal on its own, so that if blames must be placed at a latter date, the Shogunate doesn't find itself suffering from an erroneous decision I made."

The young and newly appointed Head of the Saionji House coughed, halting the displeased stride of Takatsukasa-dono, "However, even if each Regent House can act independently, as the current Shogun, you should heed the interests of the Empire first, Your Highness. The Takemikazuchi does not belong solely to the Koubuin House, an ill-spirited fellow could claim you're abusing the powers of the mantle of the Shogun," He declared, much pride permeating his tone, "Having you carry out such selfish, individualistic actions will quite certainly not be welcomed by-"

"With all due respect, Saionji-dono," Ailing blazes surging forth, I make no attempt at dulling my animosity, "the Empire and the IRG both will gain much from the deal I secured, more than if the Regency Council had been involved. Are you implying you do not believe the Type-C to be a tempting offer for our allies?"

All three of them silenced for a moment, I could practically hear Maya groaning in disagreement right behind me while Kujo-sama gave a silent nod in agreement and support to my words. Despite how later he sent me a subtle gaze, concern and surprise in equal measure within his expression. I cannot blame either Maya or Kujo-sama for their reactions, after all it has been a long time since I ever retorted with such impulse hewn into my complexion.

… Since you haven't guarded my back from the shadows, pierced my nape with your glare, I haven't found the bravery to push aside the concerns about safeguarding our current fleeting peace out of my mind. Yet… I believe you'd have agreed with this course of action to guard the peace of tomorrow instead, Takeru.

"Ahem…" The young man's light orange eyes shuffled through wonderment, shock, and finally a tense nervousness in mere moments, shifting in his seat uncomfortably as he slowly traced his equally orange hair in an attempt to regain his poise, "That is not the

issue at hand, Your Highness. While I admit that perhaps your decision was indeed correct, we cannot hand over the Takemikazuchi to foreigners no matter the reason. It is, after all, the fruit of arduous years of research. The pinnacle of Imperial technology, a symbol of our military might."

"Then, pray tell, if you stalwartly refuse to sell any of our technological advancements, how are you proposing that we acquire the necessary funds this Empire requires to finally begin to thrive once again, Saionji-dono? I'm certain that none of us Regents is wishing to request more tribute from our common fellows, after all," Narrowing my eyes, not relenting the pressure on this occasion, the young Head can only groan as an answer.

Of course, no one of their faction would admit that they wish to yet again raise the taxes or yet again lower the allotted budgets if it meant keeping all the spoils of our R&D sector for themselves. At the same time, they would be the firsts to push for a contract if they had been forwarded such a proposition or saw the chance for their House alone to gain profit from the deal. Just as Ikaruga-dono did with the Shiranui-1C units under his command, now on their way to the Fuji Corps.

Kujo-sama coughs, his dark, long hair moving minutely as our gazes cross for a second, while he leans on the table for a moment, "In that regard, I believe Her Highness only attempted to build more bridges to safeguard our current peace. And such endeavors should be supported by the Regency Council and the Guard, more so in light of… the status of the Project," He states, voice low. All of us nod, the younger Head slower than the rest. Kujo-sama then smiles faintly, "After all, Her Highness' initiative to search for a market for the Takemikazuchi Type-C is equal to that of Ikaruga-dono's efforts to find one such market for the Shiranui-1C and the XFJ Project," Ikaruga-dono and his retainer seemed to flinch for a moment, the Regent quickly returning to his frozen complexion, "And I must admit, I am in agreement with such propositions."

Before anyone else could interject, I rested my hands on the table as I spoke up, "So as you can see, three members of the Council are in agreement to these affairs. Are you perhaps saying you're opposing our decisions, Takatsukasa-dono, Saionji-dono?"

Both of them shift unpleasantly under my glare, the older folding his arms and drawing his breath in, the younger unwilling to sheathe the embers of his mood, much to his young retainer's dismay.

"… Please, Your Highness," Ikaruga-dono smiles once more as he softly speaks, waving a hand on the air as calmly as his tone echoes, "There is no need for such hostilities. Also… while it is comforting to know my actions have received your blessing, handing over the Takemikazuchi without consulting the Council is not a wise move."

"Yet, time is a luxury we do not enjoy. If we ask our people to compromise their daily lives, we of the Regent Houses must lead by example and find a solution to our current woes. If we who stand above them in leadership wane and waver when having to employ our own assets, how could we ask our people to keep enduring such harsh living conditions?" I ask and glare, releasing the bindings of my inner, most truthful concerns.

After all, if my hunch is correct on who directed Takamura to Yokohama and meddled with the Minister of Defense, I cannot simply remain idly by. Tying your, quite sudden might I say, proposal to send those Shiranui 1C units to the Fuji Corps with my own plans will force your hand into agreement, Ikaruga-dono. And if that were to fail, citing our duty as rulers is certain to bring forth my desired outcome.

Of course, such a forward approach has inherent risks to it… Yet, I force myself to remain still as an obelisk. Gulping forcefully once more, knees shivering and my nape growing stiff, cold sweat slowly trickled, descended down my back. Resisting the impulse to back down from the other Regent's gazes, to further release the bindings of my inner mood, or the urge, the craving to look back at who I

know is not there, my fingers again clasp each other tightly, all of my breathing held hostage in my stomach.

"Hmm… I do agree that us five must take the lead and be a beacon for our people," Ikaruga-dono finally nods, a hand on his chin, "Yet, the Takemikazuchi is the sole armament of our research for procuring domestic weaponry for all of our forces that was safely completed during the invasion. It is our pride and soul, the phoenix's light that shone above our old Capital's ashes, and what gives us of the Imperial Guard a most needed tailwind to negotiate with the UN for any future missions they might require our presence in."

Kujo-sama slowly leans into the table, voice once again low, "The same could be said of the Shiranui-1C, as the standard our MDF should have adopted, and all here present know that you were the one who proposed to hand it over to the UN for the XFJ Project."

… And that's saying nothing on all the setbacks the 1C received from his House in particular when it should have become the standard of the IJA, citing the adaption time to the new OS as a deterrent. Merely thinking about it, recalling all those arguments is enough to incite a slow scorching on my throat, my interlocked fingers to clasp each other tighter. Freeing my breath, I lean back in an attempt to assuage my currents of thought, limiting myself to watch the exchange for the moment.

A slow gesture towards Makabe as the retainer was about to move, Ikaruga-dono's stare clashes with Kujo-sama's unblinking, frosting over his tone, "Indeed I did, yet you cannot compare the worth of the unstable nature of the 1C to that of the Takemikazuchi, a machine that saved our Kyoto's first perilous night of battle on its very first sortie as an untested craft."

My fingers tighten further, air seeping slowly through my nose, an acidic taste raising through my throat. Kujo-sama leans back onto his seat, yet his expressions shows the desire to do the opposite. The other two Heads hastily nod in agreement, allowing a smile to rise to the surface.

Ikaruga-dono continues, unabated yet still calm, "Also, I did request for approval of the Council and the daughter of the past leader of the 1C's development when forwarding the creation of the XFJ Project. And had that incident not occurred, the Shiranui Second would be a reality by now, alongside the EML-Railgun," A small sigh afterwards, an avalanche of honest dejection for a second coming to his face, he leans back and smiles once more, "Furthermore, I did not say I am opposed to the arrangement procured by Her Highness. I am only inquiring on what compelled the decision to happen now of all times, and in such a hasty manner."

Takatsukasa-dono raises a brow in puzzlement, as much as me and Kujo-sama do as well, "Ikaruga-dono, are you truly in agreement with this loan?" He inquires.

Resting a hand on his cheek, the ever present court smile never wanes, "I am not opposed to the export of the Type-C, no. Also, Her Highness and Kujo-dono have raised a valid point. We are obligated to lead, to stand above the Heavens as a guiding light for our people, and we cannot remain idling in these trying times we're facing," Straightening his posture, his stare towers onto those who had smiled moments before, "And had the Shogunate been the one to forward the proposition instead of the Koubuin House on its own, I believe we can all agree that Kouzuki would not have received the proposal in good faith," He chuckles, the others seem to nod, resigned, "In any case, bequeathing the Type-C units to Yokohama was indeed a fine move, if only a bit rushed."

Saionji-dono winced momentarily, "However… our domestic industries' trade secrets would…"

"I would not worry so, Saionji-dono," I say, forcing a smile, "While it is true there is an inherent risk with this affair, there are also many boons we could all earn. After all, why would the UN try to replicate our own domestic advancements when it would be far more convenient for them to outsource the manufacturing of any specific parts to our industries?"

Shocked for a moment, the young man wavers, "Yet… there is no guarantee that such a thing would occur. And the Guard is in dire need of any and all Takemikazuchi units we manage to produce. We possess no luxury to hand over any Type-00 units when some of us are still using Zuikakus."

"Please, Saionji-dono," Ikaruga-dono follows, again waving a hand, "Her Highness speaks the truth. While in the short term our procurement rate of Type-00 units would fall, the funds such sales would earn the Empire could allow us to finally begin the plans of restoration we had arranged after Lucifer."

Takatsukasa-dono nods, sighing, "It has been a long time already, it's true. If the situation does not improve quickly, we could be risking incurring a riot sometime next year. And seeing our domestic industries have not managed to thrive just yet, I suppose compromising the Type-C variant to the UN is the preferred alternative," He states, and all of us nod in agreement.

Despite the boons it would present us, despite the promised aftercare, no one in this Empire desires for the Treaty to be reinstated. And if such a thing were to happen… I sincerely doubt you'd ever forgive me.

Gulping suddenly, his hold over my neck, his cold gaze squarely on me returned for a speck of a second. Choosing to release what air I still held through my nose, my fingers searched for my cup of tea as Saionji-dono was assuaged by the others.

"And as I am certain we all are in agreement…" Looking up once more, I saw a clear smirk rising into Ikaruga-dono's complexion, "it is in the Empire's best interests to support the Alternative Program, come what may. And there is no greater show of power, of support to a scientist of the Imperial Research Institute than to bless her with our very best blade. Having Alternative IV's vanguard triumph by using our Takemikazuchi would truly be the most appropriate way to convey its might to the international community, while also safeguarding the Empire's future. Thus, the Ikaruga House is in

agreement with Her Highness' plan, and as its Head I give my blessings to this arrangement."

I nod, lowering the cup slowly, regaining an amicable complexion, "And I do towards your petition to send those 1Cs units to the Fuji Corps, as well," He smiles, I thus look towards the other Regents, banished are my smile and warmth the more I lean forward, "Thus, Takatsukasa-dono, Saionji-dono, your position on this regarding my proposal is…"

Rather hastily, both nod after momentary and unexpected shock. A small touch on my shoulder, Maya's face was mired by concern as our eyes met. Not understanding for her worry, as I looked back into the table I caught my reflection on what little tea was left within the coup. Once more, fire was pouring as you used to say. Sighing softly, inhaling sharply, I try to return a smile to my face. I was merely trying to sound resolute, yet it seems today's dreams have caused me more distress than I previously thought, for me to fail so in restraining my emotions.

"… Now then, are there any other matters that require discussion?" I ask as I finish my tea, hoping it'll help me calm down again.

Saionji-dono straightens his posture, "Ahem… My fellows have received word from the Diet, just before we arrived to the Castle. It seems a request for a press conference will be arriving shortly, due to what they believe is an increase in volcanic activity near the Niigata frontline."

All of us paled, sobering up and vanquishing the reticence, the intrigue between our gazes at the threat this supposed.

Kujo-sama leaned forward again, "Are they certain of these news? What of our outposts?"

"At the very least, the men from the Diet affirmed the claim. My fellows have not noticed anything as of yet. However, I am of the opinion that we should preemptively act on this warning, regardless

of the veracity of the intel," Saionji-sama states, "Considering the few reports we've received, one cannot deny that an eruption would eventually occur. I suggest that we order a compulsory evacuation, before such a natural disaster happens," He firmly says, Kujo-sama nodding in agreement.

Takatsukasa-dono shakes his head, a hand sinking into his cascading hair, "Yet, those who still remain beyond the second defense line do so on their own wishes. I do not think it wise to forcefully remove them from their homes. The impact such a course of action would have on the media, the IJA's chain of command, and the shelters is certainly a threat to our stability."

"Yet… we cannot simply turn a blind eye to this threat. And that is without considering the possibility of the eruption occurring during a BETA incursion," I sigh as the others grimace and look down, all present knowing there is no easy solution.

We do not even have the required hands to send on an evacuation mission, not when the BETA continue to relentlessly assault our shores at least once every two weeks. Neither the MDF nor the IRG possess the manpower to spare for covering such a wide area, if they must scour all the small settlements near the mountains with potential volcanic activity, when they're already hustling daily to confirm that dreadful report that Chief Yoroi and Hikami-san confirmed a few days ago, that horrible incident after the last defense operation in Niigata.

"While all of the points raised are true…" Ikaruga-dono yet again smiles, "If I may be so bold, why not request aid to the UN for these relief efforts?"

"Huh?! To request UN aid? T-That would be a show of weakness on our part, I believe," Saionji-dono declares, face paling by the second, "To leave the duty of guarding our peasants to them would-"

"Yet, we do not possess the hands required to order such an expansive evacuation," I state, leveling a stare at the young Head,

"And I believe we could ask for support in the operation, not for them to perform it in our stead."

"Certainly, that would be a fine solution," Kujo-sama says with a nod, "After all, we have given them ample shows of goodwill with both the railgun and the Type-C sent to Yokohama. Perhaps, we could ask the crew of Yokota to aid our scouts in their search for those stragglers?"

"Indeed, that would be a wise move," Takatsukasa-dono relents, sighing once more, "If only, to truly test the UN's position after these arrangements of late. Your Highness, would you be in agreement to this course of action?"

"… I suppose there is little choice," Even more considering the request that came from Undersecretary Tamase for a meeting with Kouzuki herself. Furthermore… in this way, I have attained an excuse for Maya to contact Hikami-san, "My own fellows shall contact Yokota Base if the proposal is accepted. Takatsukasa-dono, may I leave the talks with the UN's HC Council in your hands?"

He quickly bows down, voice firm and resolute, "But of course, Your Highness! I shall attain an answer as soon as possible."

"On that note…" Ikaruga-dono again speaks up, "I believe the press conference should be arranged shortly. Both to assuage the peasantry's opposition to the evacuation as well as quell the… disquiet within the MDF."

"Worry not, I shall endeavor to find an appropriate time for it," I affirm, perhaps colder than intended, when returning his gaze, "So then, was there anything else?"

"Ahem…" Takatsukasa-dono interlocks his fingers, delaying his inquiry for a second, "There is one last matter I wished to ask. I suppose a maintenance crew was sent alongside the Type-C units to Yokohama. Which members were chosen for this task?" His gaze growing piercing when leaning forward, Saionji-dono mimicking the

gesture while Ikaruga-dono merely gazed at me, with a neutral and cold expression this time.

A single step forward, Maya bowed down before answering as diligently and cold as habitually, machine-like almost, "Her Highness chose the second maintenance crew belonging to our fellowship, commanded by Master Sergeant Kazama. They have yet to send a formal report, but they contacted us with news that the first mock battle of the A-01 STF with their new units was soon to happen. I believe it won't be long before they grace us with a report," Standing in attention, she then steps back behind me.

"I do not know if that was a wise move…" Ikaruga-dono counters, toxic displeasure cradling his face and stiffening posture, "Your fellowship's units in protection of this Castle are already short-staffed, to say nothing of those in Camp Kitanomaru. Perhaps calling for another team that's stationed further in the back would be in order?" He inquires, sounding closer to a firm statement. Saionji-dono quickly nods to the notion.

"I… am not certain that is necessary," Takatsukasa-dono relents, "There are few of our fellows as skilled as the Mst Sergeant, I must admit. I am in agreement with the arrangement," He states with a nod my way, Kujo-sama doing the same.

"Well, I suppose that is three to two. Would you be wishing to further debate on this matter, Ikaruga-dono?" Tilting my head, resting my hands near my cup, I try to smile.

Veiling his sight for a moment, he eventually relents a sigh, "No… Let us not waste time on this. So, I suppose we shall be meeting back for the requested audience with Professor Kouzuki?" He inquires, all four of us nod, "Very well, I've no further inquiries to raise," Thus, he leans back into his seat.

I gazed at the other Regents, who remained silent as they finished their tea. Gazing back at Maya, she also shook her head. Then, one of the other retainers stepped forward.

"Would… you kindly allow a question, Your Highness?" The fudai behind Saionji-dono inquired, tone creaking as her quivering shape when deeply bowing down.

"Yes. What would you be wishing to ask?" Smiling earnestly, I nod at her to raise back.

Joining both hands by her waist, she stood as still as an obelisk, her voice barely enough to traverse into my ears, "Erm… I have heard 1st Lt. Takamura was sent to Yokohama as the representative of the XFJ Project. Thus, considering how little personnel said project must have, I… was wishing to know if there were plans to bolster it with some of our fellows."

"Hmm… While that would be in our best interests, I do not believe it wise. It could both give a wrong impression to some of our fellows as well as the UN," Also, I sincerely doubt Kouzuki would allow such a proposal. It would only serve to damage the still cordial relation we share with the scientist.

Kujo-sama and Takatsukasa-dono silently nod in agreement, disdain and regret stream forth within Saionji-dono's eyes as he grew ever stiff, subtly glaring back at his retainer.

The fudai woman looked most positively dejected, her already minute voice crumbling further along her gaze, "H-However… to yet again leave her as the sole representative of the IRG…"

"I suppose we could inquire on the matter during the coming audience, Your Highness?" Ikaruga-dono suggests, giving the retainer a sympathetic nod.

"… If the opportunity arises, and the situation would welcome it. However, Saionji-dono, did you have anyone in mind to send to 1st Lt. Takamura's aid?"

Clearly startled, his sight craved the ceiling for a moment, "No… Ahem… This is more of a personal request coming from my retainer,

as a past fellow of the Lieutenant. If the agreement is given, I shall shoulder the responsibility of this request and send 2nd Lt. Amamiya herself to Yokohama," Giving me a short bow, he states.

… I suppose, that to suggest to send his own retainer for this matter, he is both trying to shield himself from the unexpected proposal of the woman and clearing a way to get rid of her. Saionji-dono wouldn't simply let one of his retainers leave to the UN if he valued their services, considering his attitude. Either that, or he's testing the woman's loyalty.

Takamura is a member of the Takatsukasa fellowship after all, and someone who possesses Regent blood in her veins as well. Despite the good relation my House has with Lt. Col. Iwaya, I also harbored doubts towards the young woman, cousin of those in the succession branch of her own fellowship, at one point even if I now believe her worthy of the praise her 'Uncle' sang in her name.

"… Very well. Then, are there any other inquiries?" This time no one spoke up, thus I stood from my seat, "Well, this shall mark an end to this meeting. As always, it has been a pleasure. Let us hope the coming audience can find us in such an amicable atmosphere once more," All present now in agreement, the Regents also standing up, "Now, if you'd excuse me," Giving a nod to them which they return, I turn around and exit the room followed by Maya.

Slow steps, long steps into the hallways towards my audience room, where perhaps more meetings await for the remainder of the day. A small break for lunch is all I'll have to spend some time on myself, to try and rein in these embers that have refused to be doused since I've awoken today.

… Still, to have a busy timetable is of great aid today. Had I not be required for anything, left to my own devices… the wait for Mana's report would have been insufferable. I wonder, are they already talking with him? What answers will Takeru give them now?

Feeling my feet start to slow down and drag themselves on the floor, as if sinking on wet mud, I sigh and shake my head, looking up and outside from myself once more.

"Is anything the matter, Your Highness?" Maya asks, coming to my side.

"No, it is nothing."

"Please, you've not been your usual self all day long," Growing closer, inching closer, she whispered, "Do not be so distraught, the report shall come in due time."

"Sigh… Was it that obvious?"

"Yuuhi-sama, there are few other matters that could send your ire unfettered in such fashion," She ascertains with a nod.

"I suppose…" Unable to hold another sigh in, my stride again slows down. I am loath to admit she is most right, and that I've not yet tamed the remnants today's dreams reignited in me, "What other duties require my attention after lunch?"

"Meetings regarding the Castle guard's schedules and the arrangement for the meeting with Vice Commander Kouzuki. Gekka-sama and other fellows should be arriving in an hour, approximately, with the formal request from the Undersecretary as well as what little Yokohama revealed on this meeting's contents," She states, tapping her glasses.

"I see. Let us rest for a spell during lunch, then."

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*Same Day. Around half an hour ago.*

*(In a meeting room, Yokohama Base.)*

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A clock's tickling shaves the seconds away, the fluorescent cold white light showering from above atop the lone, long rectangular marble blue table and the standard issue charcoal black chairs to the sides. And with a slow gesture, 1st Lt Tsukuyomi locked her gaze onto the clock nearby.

"… *It has been already ten minutes since the agreed time for the start of this meeting passed,"* By a soft sigh she hanged her head, *" To think we arrived five minutes earlier than the appointed time to now be left in wait like this… I could understand a few minutes of tardiness, but ten minutes and counting? How much longer are they planning to make us wait?"* She repined while resting both hands on the cold surface of the table.

Her gaze veering left towards the windows, the filtering rays of sunshine amidst the clouds covering the skies, the cold breeze seeping through the small opening, all of such did little to assuage the rising displeasure the retainer felt within.

General Daizaburou groaned to himself as he shivered slightly upon the cold wind, readjusting his position on the chair by the 1st Lt's side. Expression also growing slightly bothered by the wait, he began rechecking the few documents the guards had prepared for the umpteenth time, while sending a few gazes to the item that laid hidden under the table.

Yet, as the clock kept tickling, as the papers were rustled and rechecked, as the breeze swirled in and out of the meeting room, no one came to their presence.

1st Lt Tsukuyomi began stretching her legs momentarily, hitting a chair in the process, to dispel the stiffness in her posture. And she once more gazed at the doorway, pondering whether or not to call for the trio that stood guard outside. Yet the door then parts open, allowing the Vice Commander and… him to swiftly enter the meeting room followed by a small complain from the aforementioned trio. Kamiyo tried to follow into the room, frown intensifying, in her quest

to demand punctuality, yet was sent recoiling away from the room by Tsukuyomi's siege of a glare.

Straightening her posture, the retainer breathed in as the UN's duo sat down, the General rearranging the papers into a straight formation. Despite their attempt at retaining a neutral facade, the edge of their lips, the forefront of their fingers, and part of their insides gradually began to be piked by small thorns.

Professor Kouzuki remained immutable, cold and imposing as an ice wall just like every time the guards had been face to face with her. Small but sharp steps towards a chair, a relaxed yet firm complexion she reflected when sitting in front of Daizaburou.

On the other hand… the cadet's eyes hadn't even graced the guards with a fleeting gaze. Tight expression hewn into his face, feet unwilling to lift from the floor as he strode towards the seat in front of Tsukuyomi, delayed gestures as he eventually sat with his gaze lost on the table. Resigned as a cloth left to the wind's whims and far more apathetic than the scientist on her worst days, such a grim expression forebode ill matters and retold a story both Tsukuyomi and Daizaburou would wish had already reached its final act.

Almost like a mirror into the past, back two years in time. You'd understand if they immediately grew dejected at seeing such an attitude in Takeru's face.

Sharing a look with the General, Tsukuyomi tried to assuage her own disquiet but only found Daizaburou merely shaking his head subtly in dejection. So alone she was with those thoughts, what crawled, clawed from within when recalling the time when such an expression was commonplace in his daily attitude. When she had to deal with the piling pressure of the daredevil that always lurked in the Shogun's shadow.

The XO coughed, interlocking her fingers as she looked right ahead into the guard, "Forgive the wait. I had some urgent matters to attend. Now then, let us begin. I believe you had some inquiries for

my protegee regarding the… katana he brought with him from America?" Undaunted and firm, Yuuko leaned on the table. Takeru still hadn't even looked up.

General Daizaburou nods, gazing the cadet's way as he reached for the item they had brought, "Indeed. Let us dispense with the intrigue, since you've given word that this room is free of bugs. As the General of the Imperial Guard and an advisor of Her Highness the Shogun, I am wishing to know how did you came into possession of this Minaru Kamui during your stay in Yukon Base, Cadet Shirogane," Resting the clothed blade atop the table, both guards stared straight into his face, as the scientist also did.

Leaving the entire room in silence for a moment while he took a deep breath, as slowly as his arms were laid on the table Takeru's eyes grew narrow, reigniting the cold embrace of an old glare in Tsukuyomi's nape.

"I think I've already told you all I could," Even his voice was now as ailing as winter's coldest night. The small pause that followed as his hands shifted in their lock and the aversion in his stiff posture only served to further distress both guards, you'd understand, "… Someone who was close to me before I came here, someone who's already dead, was the one who gave me the blade," He finished, even confiscating the neutral coldness from before when recalling those days.

"That much you've told us, yes," Tsukuyomi softly nodded while trying to look into his eyes, "However, we'd be wishing to learn the name of the person who had the Minaru Kamui then," She slowly affirmed.

Yet was met with a frontal, furrowed gaze from Takeru, "… What for? That person is dead, and if the blades are as important as Cadet Mitsurugi made them out to be, the Shogunate should have a database of who has them. It wouldn't be too hard for you to cross out from where I got this one."

"… Perhaps there is an oddity in our records," Daizaburou notes, low and composed, "And since we've confirmed this Minaru Kamui to be a genuine one, I must learn how it fell in your hands. Vice Commander, have you found anything regarding this?"

She shakes her head, a few fingers slowly brushing her chin, "No, at all. The data banks of Yukon have all been wiped after the incident, even to this day they're counting casualties and soldiers that went MIA the more they investigate, it seems. In that regard, I'd suggest you look into the Imperial officers stationed there… Yet, I suppose you'd have already done such."

The retainer nods, gulping slowly as the cadet does not change his expression at all, "Indeed. Which is why we are wishing to know who gave Cadet Shirogane the Minaru Kamui, to investigate said fellow."

"It's pointless," He shoots out, as if aiming for BETA.

"… Excuse me?" Unable not to frown, emptiness craved Tsukuyomi's insides under his harsh stare.

"Cadet Shirogane, please do mind your wording," Yuuko admonishes quickly yet calmly, and they stare at each other for a moment. Neither relenting in their position, as if two opposite currents collided against each other in open waters into a twister.

"… My apologies, Vice Commander," Giving a short, brief and small nod, releasing air from his nose as a bull, Takeru then looked away to which Yuuko shook her head.

The exchange had left the Imperial Guards perplexed, confused. As the scientist detailed how it was that she came to know of the Minaru Kamui's presence in her base, from that small altercation Takeru had with Mitsurugi after the Defense of Niigata, and how most of her probing for intel had met in dead ends, Yuuko ascertained to General Daizaburou that she could not find anyone willing to disclose any intel regarding the affairs of these blue blades.

And the minute displeasure within her voice, the pointed frustration in her eyes convinced both guards that she was, in fact, telling the truth. Which indeed she was, Yuuko was beyond herself in annoyance that she had found no one willing to speak on the little sword's secret on this Empire.

However, Tsukuyomi couldn't help but to wonder, seeing the small rift between the scientist and her supposed 'protegee', the subtle gazes she sent towards his still apathetic shape when speaking of the blade's affairs*, " … I had believed they were in good terms, however… it seems I was mistaken. Well… Takeru was never too fond of the UN, or the Vice Commander."*

As the scientist was finishing her side of the story with what Takeru had told her of the blade on his report after the argument with Mitsurugi, as Daizaburou wrote down it all on a paper, as Tsukuyomi corroborated the facts Yuuko stated, the retainer's eyes were again drifting towards Takeru, who had remained oddly, eerily silent thus far.

" *He would seem to be calm at the moment, yet Takeru' s complexion is far, far rougher, rugged than when we spoke in the track field as of now,"* She noted, tracing some hair as she swiftly switched her sight between him and the XO, *"At the time, a small shine, a lingering cheer was still in him. Now on the other hand… no remnant of the bright flowers, of that kind glow of his younger self … yet, the clear fire is also not in Takeru's eyes or gestures… They're not as sharp and averse as when he came back from Mogami, and he's keeping quiet instead of bombarding us with words. Is this Kouzuki's doing? Perhaps, did he… recall anything about those days?"* Not a second after the thought festered, worry began to tint, swirl and mix within her.

"That was a much welcomed report, XO," Daizaburou rests an elbow on the table, rubbing his temple as he nods towards Yuuko. A second to replenish his breathing, the General looks towards Takeru, "Then, now that this has been clarified, what did your prior words

mean, Cadet? Why would it be pointless to ask for who gave you the Minaru Kamui?"

"Sigh… The one who gave me my blade… isn't from here," He slowly, dejectedly says, lips twisting in as he stole a gaze towards the sword.

And again, shadows screamed beyond the mirror's reflection. And again, both guards felt their breath caught in the base of their throat.

*"That the same hollowness in his eyes… hunching over as slowly if an entire monument had been placed atop his shoulders… as when we spoke on the hill nearby… the day we left Hakuryo Base, and Yuuhi-sama left to become the Shogun. When she removed the Koubuin emblem from his person,"* Tsukuyomi notes as her hands subtly, minimally shake.

" *Much akin to that expression he endowed after his return from Mogami, when he decried we had forced his hand into turning into that ruthless soldier,"* Daizaburou pondered, inhaling slowly until he couldn't do so anymore, " *Yet, that adusted wrath is nowhere to be found as of now. As opposed to those days, Takeru… this cadet appears to not yet have endowed such emotions."*

Both guards share a gaze in concern, in silence. Daizaburou noting Tsukuyomi did recognize the gestures, which meant the Takeru they had known had gone through such a stage at one point, and the retainer finding no comfort in the equally distressed tension in the General's posture.

Releasing a sigh, Tsukuyomi's heartbeats slow down. Yet, something starts banging, blasting the back of her head, by that heaviness her gaze cascades downwards. Retreating both feet closer to the seat, entangling them together, the retainer licked the inner side of her teeth. To clean the pungency of her own words back then, and the putrid, rotting wound Takeru's ones had left in her ears.

*" I've nothing to apologize for. You and your holier-than-thou act of superiority can go fuck themselves for all I care! Go and leave if you want, I'll cleave a path forward by myself if I have to!"*

Tsukuyomi gulped down just as she was about to inhale, then dryly coughing to hide reaction, the reminiscence, the last words they shared before their Takeru became that shadow of his former self. When those same hollow eyes were left on the young guard as Tsukuyomi turned her back, leaving him alone at the hilltop.

Inhaling slowly again, she tried to look and hold his sight, "Cadet, does that mean the person who gave you the Minaru Kamui was not Japanese?"

"They're not from here," He repeats, eyes closing. Yuuko shakes her head subtly at his unchanged demeanor while Tsukuyomi again, quite futilely in my opinion, hid her disquiet behind a stoic and imposing mask.

Daizaburou slowly nods while noting the response down, his fingers stopping cold before also writing about his rejecting attitude thus far, "Then, might we ask the motives behind said person bestowing upon you the blade?"

"I already told 1st Lt Tsukuyomi of it. It was a memento, to remember that someone after… they perished," Arms compacted on his sides, sitting uptight and stiff, Takeru still refused to hold their gazes for more than a brief moment.

"So, that person perished during the Yukon Incident?" Tsukuyomi asks, leaning forward.

"Yes."

"So, somebody else gave you the Minaru Kamui in their stead, I presume? Who was the one who did so? And, did they tell you anything regarding the katana's connection to the nobility?"

"… I wasn't told anything about the Minaru Kamui's royal purpose."

"Then, who handed the blade to you?"

"I'd appreciate that you stopped on this line of questioning," Yuuko requested, demanded in all honesty, with a brief yet intense glare. She then continued as calm as before, fingers on her chin, "I believe it is obvious whoever gave the blade to Shirogane either did not know of its royal symbolism or kept it secret to prevent the blade from being taken by the authorities. Looking for whoever that was would only serve to gain Yukon's new authorities' interest on this affair."

Licking her lips, placing a leg over the other, Tsukuyomi returned the stare head on, "Then, does that mean you do know who said person is, XO?"

And was met with an impregnable wall of dry ice, "No, I do not. Shirogane refuses to speak of them, saying he won't place them in danger. And I believe he's making the right call, please do think on why they said nothing about the blade to him despite, certainly, being aware of its connection to the royalty," Her interlocked fingers tighten, her glare cascades onto both guards unabated, "So… in the name of my research… I'd appreciate you let this matter rest. Both me and my protegee have told you all we can," She requested, threatened in a slow tone.

Which then sent both guards into a moment of pondering, whispering to each other.

"Mana, I am of the opinion that, in a certain way, the XO speaks the truth," Daizaburou relented, "I do not believe the traditions of our swords are an absolute secret anymore. Had someone taken notice a Minaru Kamui was left vulnerable in Yukon, I believe they'd had paid good money to acquire it."

Tsukuyomi nods, "I suppose. Certain American factions have gone far for lesser gold, so an item that would bestow them a title of

nobility or an audience with Her Highness should not have gone unnoticed for over two years."

"Thus, perhaps it would be wise to let this trail end here," He stated, yet awaited the retainer's agreement.

Which came shortly after, a dejected sigh alongside it, *" I suppose, the fox is right. Inquiring on those who gave Takeru his Minaru Kamui back would only serve to repay their consideration with unwanted attention from the wrong people,"* She pondered within, *"Perhaps, they were those who found him, those who somehow saved his life and took him to Alaska. If so, I could understand why foreigners would protect the Minaru Kamui in such way. Maybe… he and the Swordbreakers had saved them or their comrades during Lucifer, before those accursed bombs fell."*

Yet, the cadet had not moved an inch from his initial position of subdued aversion, rejection. Not even as Yuuko was now mentioning something to him, which only caused Takeru to slightly frown and shake his head, to then make the scientist sigh once more. From Tsukuyomi's eyes neither were being hostile to the other, which she found most curious considering what she knew of the XO, of Takeru's own character when upset.

So a small breath in was required as she ran a hand into her hair, then over her nose and lips, *"However… I cannot deny it is distressing to see he refuses to even mention the gender of said people, for it means he does not trust us in the slightest. Yet, Takeru rarely remains so silent when growing upset . That barely restrained ire in his posture… is equal to that of his erupting blast in his stride whenever he had to defend a fellow before, even when he was little. J ust that he's keeping calm now for whatever reason."*

Sighing, part of the tension, the knot tying, tearing her throat leaves. Tsukuyomi finally readjusts her posture on the seat, nodding in clear agreement to the General's proposal.

Daizaburou nods, taking a deep breath and loosening his overall posture while writing down some final words onto the papers, "Fair enough. Cadet, if you ever have the chance, do thank whoever allowed the blade to return to us," His voice still remained as loud as ever, however. Takeru returns the nod, crossing his arms as he sighs. The General rests both hands on the table, joining them as he coughs once, "Now, allow me to delve into the… core reason behind this meeting. You see, due to the… unfortunate events that transpired during the CCSE, we had to look into your profiles, Cadet Shirogane."

Rolling his eyes, Takeru dismissively shakes his head, "Lemme guess, you're gonna start insisting about how I should fix them somehow again?" Dry and rough, desolate as the wasteland that remains after the BETA dominate an area.

"Cadet Shirogane, mind your manners," So Yuuko again admonished him, hitting the table softly with a folder, "My apologies, General."

"… No, it is fine. However, I suppose this would mean that you both are aware of the lacking state of his profile. I propose that you travel to the Capital, to try and mend this vacuum in the data banks," He stated, firm.

Short of relenting, Takeru glared back into the guard's gaze, "Why? I already presented all papers I had on me. And as I said, I don't recall much about my life in the Empire."

Coughing, slowing down her tone and the acid that his reaction, rejection spurred within, Tsukuyomi held the cadet's gaze calmly, or tried to at least, "It is a simple matter. Due to the error found in the database, it is possible someone might claim you're stealing someone else's identity," Yuuko grew stiff, holding her breath. Takeru sighed, hanging his head, shutting his sight away, "Of course, we are not claiming that to be the truth. We're advising you to try and find some time to properly sort whatever has-"

"Why should I?"

"Pardon?"

Slowly, his eyes opened. Entwining his fingers, resting his elbows on the table, once more, as he himself would say, fire came out pouring abundantly, "If the errors occurred in my absence, then the fault lies with the Empire. What can I do to fix the data, if people will immediately assume I'm stealing someone else's name?"

"Cadet, calm down. They are not accusing you of anything, I'm sure," Yuuko leveled a stare his way, Takeru leaned back and looked up, once more closing his eyes, "In that regard, as Shirogane's tutor, I'd like to know what compels such an inquiry. Surely you'd understand one could confuse it with a threat," She forewarned.

"There is no threat," Daizaburou says with a shake of his head, "Yet, one cannot deny that it is suspicious and odd, this state of affairs. As public servants, and more so for me as an advisor of Her Highness, we cannot ignore such an irregularity in our databases. Thus, if you presented what documentation you possess regarding Shirogane's circumstances to the right authorities, any inquiries and suspicions regarding his identity would be cleared. And it would be of much aid for us as well, to pinpoint what caused such an error in our servers."

The woman hummed, a hand on her chin, leaving silence in the air as the ice wall held off their gazes, "And I assume, the outcome of this visit has not been decided already?"

Inhaling slowly to bind a frown, Tsukuyomi slowly leans onto the table, "There is no need for such provocations. We're merely giving you a forewarning due to the Cadet's honesty regarding the situation with the blade. This hole in the databases should be mended, otherwise I can guarantee that this could be used against the cadet at some point."

Yuuko's eyes narrowed, tone lowering, "Huh, is that so? Yet, I am sure you cannot turn a blind eye to how our Empire acts on these

matters. If anyone pressed charges against Shirogane, he'll have to stay near a month in prison until we prove his innocence. And I hold no intention to recommend my protegee to yield under the pressure and plead guilty to hasten the process. Another stain on his records would certainly ruin his chances to become commissioned."

Gulping hard, all Tsukuyomi can do is tighten both hands, *"I know she speaks the truth, if Takeru is detained the officers won't stop pressuring him until he admits his 'guilt'. There are enough leads to make a case for identity theft, that much is true, and if that comes to pass whoever it is that leads the case won't stop until they convict Takeru, lest they suffer the disgrace of having pressed charges on an innocent suspect."*

Extending her legs, a mere sliver of air squeezing its way into her, just thinking of that outcome was plentiful enough to make the retainer sick to her stomach, it would seem.

*"For if that happens, not even our fellows will be able to shield him without others noticing the moves. On that note, the fox's concerns are understandable, and I share them to some degree."*

And looking at Takeru, at how he's still hunched over, crushed over without even lifting his gaze while still remaining as stiff as before, a cold sweat begins to cover Tsukuyomi's back, to crave an answer as her lips wished to part and interject.

*"… Yet, s he would not be putting up with such a dangerous asset if it didn't bring her much benefits. And that certainty is something we cannot ignore ,"* Suspicion then began piking at the stoic mask. As you'd understand, the guards had their fair reservations towards the scientist. And after spending near a year in Yokohama Base, Tsukuyomi's concerns took root deep for she knew Yuuko had rarely, if ever, refused an inquiry from the IRG so directly nor taken the time to shield someone, anyone, herself.

The scientist brushed some hair, readjusting her posture on her seat, "Furthermore, I cannot say I'd place my trust in the system as of

now. If the databases have lost Shirogane's data, then, how could we prove his innocence? Without anyone left alive who knew him, who could possibly vouch for our claim? Surely you know that, being a Japanese that lived abroad and is now serving the UN, those in charge of the interrogation won't take kindly to him," She stated firmly.

Which made the roots stir to life, Tsukuyomi now displeased with the words, *"She should possess a clear lead to aid him, the papers on his induction into the UN. If Takeru was rescued and taken to Alaska, there must be records left of that, of how he was found and taken away from us . Furthermore… if she isn't willing to use her influence to solve this matter… Could this mean that the man is a faker? Or… Is she planning to keep Takeru away from returning? Just what compels her moves? "*

A hand rested on the retainer's arm as she was about to speak up, flare up, and Daizaburou shook his head, drilled an order to desist into her eyes. Biting the inner side of her lips as she inhaled sharply, Tsukuyomi leaned back onto her chair.

Coughing once, Daizaburou slowly inquired, serene as the clear skies, "Vice Commander, Cadet Shirogane, while your concerns are valid, there is one matter that could easily dispel any claims against you. If you presented the papers on Shirogane's stay in Alaska, if you could explain how he left the Empire then-"

"Sadly, that option is not available to us," Yuuko swiftly rejects, toxins enveloping every word, "Because that intel has been presented once before to the Empire, before Shirogane arrived at this base, and it was rejected."

"W-What did you say!?" Tsukuyomi glared, *"Rejected, she says? The intel on his departure, the report of Takeru's survival… was once sent to the Empire?"* Unable to rein in both the curiosity and the indignation, she grew closer to the table, "XO, are you telling the truth?"

"Are you casting doubts on my words, 1st Lt?" She gives a side glance.

Thus, the retainer's glare further raises in animosity, "I am asking you to confirm the statement. You claim that… the report on Shirogane's departure from the Empire was rejected, somehow? If so then, why does the Cadet not know of those circumstances?" Stealing a glance towards him, Takeru had just sighed and remained staring at the table.

"Because, as his legal tutor, I have not deemed it correct to press the matter. And Shirogane does know of the results of the inquiries, no one could find any relatives of his left alive, after all," Yuuko ascertains, slowly interlocking her fingers, merely stating the words calmly. Takeru's own gaze crumbles down further, his entire complexion ashen and about to fall prey to the winds.

Which sent a dart straight into Tsukuyomi's heart, "Yet, why did you not notify the authorities of this when-"

"Mana, let it go," Daizaburou orders, voice lowering. Lips quivering for a moment, the retainer bows in apology, "XO, if your words are indeed true, then I advise you try to present said report once more."

"However, the answer won't change. There isn't even a single person alive related to Shirogane, and I won't allow my protegee to be accused of something he is not guilty of," She once more threatens, every words as acid as a Fort's stinger, "Unless, of course, you were to possess intel on who Shirogane was before he left the Empire and lost his memories, and said reason is what's fueling this questioning."

Knowing they could not disclose such details, Tsukuyomi chose to remain silent as Daizaburou continues to parley with Yuuko, insisting that it's also in her best interests to resolve this situation, yet the scientist counters that it also could be used against her if the Empire decides to convict her protegee under charges of identity theft.

The composed wording of the XO only caused more doubts to fester within Tsukuyomi, *"Perhaps that's the only reason she cares, to prevent her standing be compromised by a claim of identity theft,"* Stealing a glance towards Takeru, she couldn't help but to allow her gaze to lower as his was, *"Yet… we also cannot allow the Alt. Project to be jeopardized by any such claims. However, as much as I wish to simply reach out for those tightened hands of his, there is no clear, definitive proof just yet of his identity. While everything would point in that direction… it is all based on an emotional outlook, and while I'd like to deny it, I cannot say that I am not being deceived by a faker. The ESPer might have drawn intel on him from us somehow, for whatever reason Kouzuki has to do this. To force Her Highness to support her research, perhaps?"*

Shifting in her seat, stealing glances at the cadet, licking her lips over and over, not even a faint trail of assurance was left in Tsukuyomi's pondering mind. As if covered by fog, she could not settle for what the best road forward would be.

*"We cannot give an opening for anyone to strike at Alt. IV. There is no way in which we could truly allow the cadet, faker or not, to be taken to court. Takeru's identity must remain a secret. Yet, we cannot press further or we risk revealing Takeru's relation with Yuuhi-sama and why we're delving into his affairs."*

The discussion between the General and the scientist seemed to have reached a stalemate, not even as Daizaburou raised concerns on the motives behind the lock on Takeru's UN profile did Yuuko's stalwart facade wane.

Thus, Tsukuyomi interlocked her hands, slowly breathing in, *"However, the fox has the report in her hands… the intel on how he was taken to Alaska, at the least. If those papers were presented before, it is possible someone dismissed the call after Yuuhi-sama erased his profile after his 'death'. On the other hand, we're now alert and at the ready to intercept said intel. If only we could convince the woman or him to try to mend the profiles… if only we could get our*

*hands on that report, we could ascertain whether he truly is or not our Takeru…"*

Kouzuki shakes her head, sighing, and her voice raises in now clear aggression, "As I've been saying, I will not authorize Shirogane to be interrogated. Do not forget that this base and its perimeter are international soil, therefore Shirogane is safe from any claims so long as he is here, under my care," One of Tsukuyomi's hands began to shake, it felt as if something were slowly burning Daizaburou's sides, "If you do not possess any intel on who my protegee was, then I'll have to ask you to let this matter rest. I shall handle this situation as I deem fit."

Unable to rein it in any longer, Tsukuyomi leans forward once again, "Yet, you possess the intel on his departure. That could be enough to assuage any claims against the cadet."

"Or do the complete opposite," She states, returning the crossfire in between their gazes, "If I may, I find it quite peculiar that you'd be this interested in the personal affairs of the cadet. I understand the concern on both finding an error in the databases and over his possession of that katana, and how the affair of the blade could end up entangled with the issues of Shirogane's profiles, yet I cannot deny it is odd you'd try to delve so thoroughly."

"What would you be implying?" Tsukuyomi asked, low.

Yuuko merely brushed her hair, as if bored, "Nothing. I'm just stating the obvious. Simply put, if this is distressing the IRG's General to such extent… I am willing to deport the cadet back to America ASAP."

"… Excuse me, what?" Tsukuyomi blinked many times in quick succession, mouth slightly gaping.

Yet, Yuuko returned a small smile, "Just as I said. We cannot risk the error in the databases be used to either hamper my research or reveal the presence of this blade. If the concerns over Shirogane's

past are dire enough to warrant such insistence from the General of the IRG, then I believe the best solution available to all present is to send Shirogane back where he came from, since as I've been saying I won't let him be pressured into pleading a conviction," She finished with another glare, vanishing the smile, as quiet as the slithering of a snake her threatening tone.

Daizaburou's eyes widened momentarily, hastily leaning forward, his entire posture compacting as if bracing within a cockpit, "Wait a moment, XO. There is no need for such drastic measures. We are not claiming to desire to exile the cadet."

She then gave the General a side glance, "Yet, all you've said points to that outcome. The very head of the IRG delving into the affairs of a cadet wouldn't be taken this lightly by the UN. If I weren't his tutor, Shirogane would be already on his way to the gallows," Yuuko firmly states, frowning as she looks away.

Air slowly seeping in, Tsukuyomi gulps before speaking up, unable to calm the prickling and peeling, the agitation surging forth within her throat, "While that might be true, if you present the papers about his departure, I believe a case can be made. Cadet Shirogane, certainly, you'd rather remain in the Empire as a Japanese instead of being an outsider?" She once again stared at him, hearing the groans of disapproval from the scientist.

Barely lifting his sight, not meeting Tsukuyomi's, Takeru sighs, "I don't really care…"

"Cadet, please take this seriously," The retainer couldn't help but to raise her voice in scolding, trying to break into his sight, "This is not the time to be refusing such aid. We could lend your claim credibility if we can confirm your identity, you may not have another chance to reclaim your prior standing," Folding his arms, he remains silent. Which spurs more pressure on her chest. *Please… Takeru, don't close your eyes…* "Surely you do not wish to remain as a burden to the XO, do you? As it is, your mere presence in this place could incite a chain reaction that would quite certainly put her in a

compromising position. If nothing is done, you truly might lose your place here and end up exiled as was stated before, cadet," She stated, despite knowing it could be taken as a threat.

And seeing the tightening, the minute shaking on the hand she hid under the table, the unmoving, unblinking intensity of her stare towards Takeru, it is clear why she chose such an approach, in my opinion.

As his expression tightened, both his gaze and what light remained within crashing further down, Yuuko shook her head, "1st Lt, could you stop pressuring my protegee? He has been under much stress as of late, and I'd welcome you cease on this insistence," Firmly, she returned the threatening.

Daizaburou nodded, running a hand from his face into the hair on the side of his head, voice low and dejected, "Mana, I believe we perhaps could take a step back on our inquiries. The cadet might have remem-"

"With all due respect General, this is something the cadet himself should decide," She refused, *"To simply leave him in Kouzuki's hands? To not ascertain his identity when he's right in front of me? We won't have another chance such as this,"* Tsukuyomi then tapped her chin, pointing to the blade under the table, "Otherwise, the wishes of the one who gave him the Minaru Kamui will end up being pointless when he's branded as a traitor if they remain in such obstinacy. Wouldn't you agree, Cadet Shirogane?"

Yuuko again slowly shook her head, inhaling as she reshuffled her wording. Daizaburou's lips twisted and turned, as did his breathing as shifting as the skies during a thunderstorm. Tsukuyomi's stare and overall stance did not thaw, thus Yuuko slowly leaned forward, meeting the retainer's gaze in frozen displeasure. Returning the pleasantry, Tsukuyomi entwined her fingers and took a deep breath as she pondered from which angle to approach the situation.

Yet, the table was hit by a tight fist.

And a twister of air was released through clenched teeth.

And quickly dispelling the anguish of the wince, once more… the rugged tone of the soldier left Takeru's lips, along with a frontal glare towards the guards, "Why don't you shut the fuck up about shit you know nothing about?"

… And then, silence.

Understandably, Tsukuyomi's mouth gaped upon his frown, upon those embers resurfacing in his eyes.

General Daizaburou was in equal shock, and even Yuuko was bereft of all words and reactions, even her hand froze up in midair. After all, she had not seen such open anger in the cadet, she had never seen the soldier.

The open displeasure was quite different to that which Takeru displayed during their argument when she had put him under her gun's barrel. As opposed to the hurtful screams that reproached her for not understanding, now clear indignation overflowed his complexion.

Inhaling sharply, never releasing the guards from his glare, Takeru's tone slowed down, mowing down the fuse of his temper, "That I'm a burden? That her death was pointless? Don't fuck with me… That's rich coming from the sister of someone who tried to gut me during the CCSE."

"E-Excuse me? What has that to-"

"Everything. Don't talk as if you knew everything about my life. Me merely existing is a crime, but you Guards trying to murder a cadet while on a loan to the UN is just an afterthought? With what authority are you demanding answers from me when your databases are what's screwed?" He retaliated, frowning.

Yuuko then tapped his arm with the folder again, yet her expression tightened, far more fierce than she had been thus far, "Shirogane, calm down. Do not insult the Lieutenant," She warned, reminded him so that he did not stray from the plan they had for the meeting, "Let's keep this civil and-"

"Shut it, Sensei," Glaring back, he demanded.

Staring at each other, both frowning, the scientist gulped at his sudden outburst. Unaware of what compelled such a reaction, Yuuko held Takeru's gaze in an attempt to rein in the sudden emotional spark. However, she found herself at a loss when he did not recede nor did he try to continue arguing. I believe, she then understood Takeru was trying to play his role in his own way.

However, the silence left as they stared into each other only foisted further doubts into Tsukuyomi, *" … Did he refer to the fox as 'Sensei'? Yet, she doesn't seem particularly angered with the wording or his opposition,"* However, she could not help but to once more feel as if glancing into a mirror, *"But that ashen gaze, the embers in his voice, the stiff posture, defensive as if cornered… It's just… like back then…"*

Daizaburou's hands were subtly shaking, he leaned back and inhaled slowly to erase the fissures that tried to spawn in his face. Looking at Mana, she nodded in confirmation of the unspoken query.

Which caused her to sigh, *"The doubting gaze of that moment by the hill, the dismissive and oddly calm way of carrying himself of the days after Mogami…"*

The sight of his current expression, that shiver down her spine at the reminiscence of the shadow, and the sorrow of that talk by the hill, it all left a void in Tsukuyomi's breathing when contrasting it to the small cheer Takeru had shown towards her in their last talk on the track field, when he had graced the retainer with a 'See you later' despite the circumstances.

As she looked back up, the soldier's glare was squarely on the retainer. And it forced Tsukuyomi to gulp down both acid and ashes in a rush, "Cadet Shirogane… I apologize if my choice of words was inappropriate. I meant no-"

"Don't think you can backpedal now," Quietly, he leashed out, "I'm not some useless thing, and those who supported me before… I won't let their wishes become pointless. So what you're getting at now is, I'll have no place here once you Guards raise claims after my identity? That's clearly a threat where I come from."

"I never said that-"

"If there was an error in the databases, it's on the Empire. So if anyone should be raising claims, that's me."

"… What are you trying to say?" She recoiled under the assault, *"What spawned the fire back in him so suddenly? Was it something I said? Or, was Kouzuki trying to rein Takeru in by taking charge of the negotiations?"*

Upon Tsukuyomi's observation, Yuuko herself looked distressed to no end, eyes sharpened and squarely on Takeru, not even sparing a second for the guards, a grim expression hewn in her face.

"Shirogane, apologize this instant," She coldly advised, fearful of him getting carried away, recalling his prior warning of how he could grow emotional under pressure, "What are you even doing, picking a fight with the Guard?"

"… Sensei, could you please stay quiet?" Holding her gaze, his lips shook for a moment. Both seemed to ease up for a moment, Yuuko then rolled her eyes and shrugged, giving a nod. As Takeru turned to face the guards, once more he grew stiff and defensive, "1st Lt, you said there's little to be done if I don't prove my innocence to the Empire, correct?"

Tracing some strands of hair, she shook her head, "Innocence is taking it too far. No one is accusing you of anything, cadet."

He narrows his eyes, "Yet."

More needles and darts tear into her heart, more of those memories clawed at the back of her head, *"Ugh… Why must you once more be like this? Or, is this all an act?"* Resting one hand atop another, Tsukuyomi tried to mold the calm mask in place, "… Regardless, if nothing is done, many might reach a wrong assumption. And considering the lacking data of your profile, coupled with the sorrowful incidents of the CCSE, it'd be foolish not to warn you. And as a public servant, it is my duty to at the least try to resolve this irregularity."

"So, someone out there wants to come at me, saying I'm not who I say I am?"

"… That might be so, yes," She admits with a nod, *"I doubt Yuuhi-sama will remain quiet for much longer, even less after we notify her of this meeting."*

"Is that how it is, then? So, tell me… What happens if I'm the one who sues you?" And then, Takeru tapped his brows as he frowned, staring straight into Tsukuyomi's core.

"… Huh?" Mouth gaping, neither the retainer nor the General were able to find words for a moment.

Blinking fast, even Yuuko stalls a reaction, "Shirogane, you're taking this too-"

"No, I'm not. Because we have proof of who I am."

"W-Wait a moment, cadet," Daizaburou interjects, shocked much, "If you had such proof, why did you remain quiet until now?"

Grimacing, he looked down, "It ain't a nice thing to remember, that's why. And I didn't want to force an argument right off the bat, wanted to see if we could solve this peacefully," Sighing in clear dejection, Yuuko seems to share the feeling, allowing him to take the lead with a nod, seeing Takeru was indeed following the plan, on his own terms as you'd understand, "So, let me cut to the chase. Do either of you know who Kageyuki Shirogane was?" He inquired, once more observing the guards' reaction closely.

Tsukuyomi felt a shiver down and up her spine, her inner bindings scattering like a row of ants after being on the receiving end of a bucket of boiling water. Some of them coming undone, others simply running away in confusion, not only did the retainer visibly twitch but also allowed part of the stoic mask to fall down.

*"But that's… if he remembered Kageyuki-san then…"* And the small boy's smile came back, his aid towards her younger sister and cousin, the struggles to adapt to his new life… and all that he had done for both her and the fellowship, by virtue of simply being an overworrying and caring person despite the oblivious density he sometimes portrayed.

And as it was clear she was about to ask something she should not, Daizaburou hit her feet with enough strength to emit noise, narrowing his eyes in silence for a moment. Tsukuyomi nodded and tightened her hands, wishing to but restraining her eyes from seeking Takeru's, palpitations beating on the base of her neck.

Exhaling and regaining some poise, the General inquired while returning the soldier's stare, "Who might that person be?"

"My father," Takeru says, hunching over again, "What of a woman named Miho Shirogane?"

Gulping yet again, Tsukuyomi runs a hand on my hair for a moment, stealing a glance at him, "I suppose that might be your mother?"

Takeru nods and sighs, dulling, dousing the aggression, "Yes, that's the case. You see, on these last few days, I've been recalling bits and pieces of my time with them when I was little," His hands lose their oppressive tension, coming together as if he were holding an injured pigeon in between them, "It wasn't all nice stuff, mind you. It was still… better than not knowing anything. But, wanna hear something crazy?" He then chuckles dryly.

Puzzled by how the use of those eccentric words and speech mannerisms again in his wording, both Tsukuyomi and Daizaburou can't help but to raise a brow at the mixed signs in his complexion.

Softly sighing, licking her lips afterwards, the retainer brings herself closer to the table, "What would that be?"

"Apparently, going by the databases… my parents never got married."

With those simple words, both guards could understand, or at least so they thought, what compelled Takeru's suspicions and aggression.

Tsukuyomi looked down, clamping her lips as she once more reached for her hair, *"That's… true. By erasing all intel regarding him when becoming Yuuhi-sama's shadow… his parents' profiles were bereft of all traces of their relation, so that no link could be traced back to the Koubuin House should the shadow ever be captured,* " Acids and toxins crawled up her throat once more, all she could do was swallow them down.

Frowning once more, Takeru's voice again grew low and cold, "Ain't that odd. If it were just my profile, it's just an error. It can happen, more so after the supposed digitalization of all archives during the invasion."

"H-However, a similar error might have-" His frontal glare shuts down Tsukuyomi's attempt at a diversion.

"For real? My intel being missing from my parent's profiles is just another error? For them to not even be marked as having married, too? For Mom to be registered under her own family's surname? Are you fucking kidding me now?!" Unable to hold it, Takeru force palmed the table. Yuuko again hits his arm with the folder, drilling a warning into his sight. Sighing once, the soldier nods and leans back onto his chair, and with a deep breath the embers are sheathed, "I think you'd understand our reluctance to trust in your words, your obstinacy to have me visit the Capital. It's clear *somebody* didn't want to leave any trace I ever existed, to truly… make me go away."

As if a knife were twisted straight into her heart, Tsukuyomi couldn't help but to lurch forward, raise her voice, "D-Do not be ridiculous, cadet. Such a thing cannot-"

"But it did happen," Coughing, Yuuko states while ruffling her hair, "This odd gap in the profiles was quite the surprise to find, when Shirogane recalled who his parents were a few days ago. So, please forgive the reticence. We're merely being overly cautious due to these findings. And before anything, allow me to clarify that we are not blaming you or your fellowship for this unfortunate turn of events," Slow yet not cold, honest and frontal, she stated with a nod.

Daizaburou places a hand on the retainer's shoulder, she noticed to the touch that it was shaking. Thus, she sighed and relented a nod.

"I may, though," Takeru said, gaining a stare in disapproval from the XO, thrusting yet another knife into both guards.

"Anyways…" The scientist continues, resting an arm on the table, gesturing towards her soldier, "As you can see, my protegee's situation is more complicated than expected. A mere report on his departure won't solve this matter, nor the claims over his identity, if his parent's profiles have no records left of him anymore. His words will be dismissed as another lie. Thus, now that we've clarified this point, I'll have to ask you stop delving into the cadet's affairs," Yuuko then remained staring, not aggressively in the slightest, merely holding their gazes with a poker face amidst the silence.

Takeru, on the other hand, had again lost his gaze in a downwards spiral. Gloom blooming and setting root in his face, one could clearly notice the same bitter anxiety of those days after the power plant exploded palpable on the minute shifting of his fingers in that tender hold. Yet, as you'd have guessed, both guards saw something else in that reaction, in the reflection of the mirror that his expression was.

Taking a deep breath, sharing a look with Daizaburou, Tsukuyomi rested her back onto the chair, allowing the General to take charge, *"Because if it were up to me, I'd be taking him back home this instant. But to force his return in this state won't truly be beneficial to him. No… we have not yet… Yes, we don't have… undeniable proof… The fox might have found some leftover data in his parents' profiles, some missing hint that allowed her to… "* Lost in her inner justifications, petrified when looking at his now crumbling expression, she tightly folded her arms as she sorted out herself out.

"Before anything," Daizaburou began slowly, a hand on his chin, "might I inquire into what you recalled of your parents, Cadet Shirogane?"

"… Why?" Once more defensive, he glared.

"To see if there's anything that might prove who you are through your memories. If you can remember things only you would know, then that should be enough to ascertain your identity."

Yuuko shakes her head, frustration evident in those entwined fingers, "If there's no one alive who knew either of his parents personally, it's all moot. The officers will claim we're lying, and I doubt this large error in the databases would be acknowledged, either," She states, venom pouring forth.

Resting both hands atop the table, the retainer stole a glance at him, "True that might be, yet someone who knew the cadet may yet live. And if he can recall information not present in the public databases, that would grant credibility to his words."

"And while that's true, I'm not sure I wanna share that with a member of the Guard," Takeru harshly admits, glaring at the guards again.

Grimacing, Daizaburou inquires, "May I ask why, cadet?"

"Because you see… My dad was a Royal Guard, actually," He says, never breaking eye contact, to their utter surprise.

Tsukuyomi's mouth dries at the words yet her heart shrinks as his disposition remains unchanged, the hope of Takeru recalling crushed. Daizaburou himself felt again something burning, peeling the skin off his sides and back, at the aversion Takeru openly displayed, at what it reminded him of.

And again tapping his brows, eyes widening and almost becoming odd-eyed, Takeru breathed raw fire, "And he didn't seem too happy about it on the memories I've seen in my dreams. I also don't think… many nobles saw a *baseborn* like me with good eyes," The wording made Tsukuyomi twitch, while the General harshly grimaced, "And going by how I've been treated by all members of the Guard and the nobility I met since my return, I think I don't wanna place my trust in the people who might be behind my 'disappearance' from the databases."

Yuuko hit his shoulder with the folder, again glaring at Takeru, "My apologies, he's merely speaking on emotion. Shirogane, remain quiet." She threatened, he returned her glare with a subdued, almost pained, stare.

*"As if his heart were slit open, as he was right after Yuuhi-sama removed the emblem from him in an outrage,"* Tsukuyomi couldn't stop herself from making the comparison. And for some reason, she could not release herself from the ashes within his eyes, "Wait a moment… We hold no ill will towards you, cadet. If your father was truly a fellow, then we have a way to grant credibility to your claims. Should you share what you've recalled of your past with us, then-"

"I'm afraid I'll have to stop you," Yuuko states, raising a hand while her eyes narrow, her tone frosts over.

"Why would you?" Daizaburou inquires, the calm facade dropping as he frowns for the first time in honest displeasure, "1st Lt Tsukuyomi speaks the truth. If Shirogane's father was part of our ranks, confirming his profile in our data banks would be of much help for the cadet's struggles. And doubly so to you, XO," He affirms, gesturing towards her with a nod.

Yet, she looks away as she fiddles with her hair, "Because, despite the fair points you raise, I agree with Shirogane in his stance to not divulge further intel. Not because I harbor any reservations towards your organization, but to avoid any possible entanglements. The IRG is not the government, and to have any of you meddling in this matter would only serve to instigate further tensions with the other powers. I've received bountiful favors from Her Highness already, I do not wish this to be misunderstood."

Daizaburou nods, lips twisting in, a slight hesitation. Tsukuyomi's hands tighten, clasp, fold onto her palms until it begins to hurt, as she couldn't look, didn't dare to look at Takeru, whose his own gaze again cascades away.

Leaning back, the scientist allows herself to sighs, "We've told you all we can, to prove Shirogane is not a dangerous element. I've allowed this meeting so that you could see for yourselves that Mitsurugi is not near a threat, yet I will not let those not related to Shirogane delve into his affairs any more than this. If you wish to share any intel with us, it'll be on your own accord. There's also the fact that, as much as you'd have to forgive my words, it is entirely possible Shirogane's concerns are valid. It is dubious this missing data was caused by an error, and someone might have wished to remove him from the Empire. Furthermore, my protegee does not wish to rely on the those of the IRG, so I shall not object his wishes," She admits, a slight frown in her tone as she looked at him for confirmation. Takeru merely grimaced and looked away.

Again, emptiness filled the retainer's stomach. Once more, agitation and hoarseness crawled up her throat, as if a stream of ants they were, and she barely managed to keep her tone composed, "However… Cadet Shirogane, with our aid you could reclaim your past with much ease. If only as a show of gratitude for… your actions towards Meiya-sama during the CCSE, would you not consider welcoming our help in this affair? XO, if he agrees, you'd welcome our support?"

Yuuko nods, returning their gazes clearly and frontally, "If he agrees, I do welcome the support. I'd like to be sure Shirogane won't be detained every time he leaves the base's perimeter for a mission in the future," She repines, eyeing Takeru sideways.

Daizaburou coughs, then clasps his hands together, "Then cadet, would you consider accepting our aid? It wouldn't take more than a day to locate your father's profile, I believe."

Slowly, he opened his eyes.

His right eye twitched for a moment.

His lips cascading downwards into a sorrowful expression.

Again, his fingers came together, oh, so slowly.

Taking a sharp breath, he gradually lifted his face to return our gazes.

And once he did, the wrathful fire was about to resurface in that tightened expression.

"I have… one question I'd like you to answer," Quietly, as calm as when he was a shadow.

"What would it be?" Daizaburou-sama nods, focusing.

"… You see, when I was… ten, I believe, my father died."

Such words appalled both guards, but more so Tsukuyomi. Knowing they had met by then, a small glimmer of hope rose to the surface.

Only to be scorched by the quiver, the crack on Takeru's voice as it struggled to squeeze out of his lips, "And my mom was dead by that point, I think. I didn't have… any relatives left at that point. I was all alone."

"Cadet… W-What do you…" Tsukuyomi also struggled to find words as the pained wince of his filled her sight, "There might have been someone close to you, someone who took care of you at the time."

"… And that's the problem," He took a pause, fingers piercing his palms. Yuuko closed her eyes and sighed, looking away, "Apparently, I wasn't sent to an orphanage. Otherwise, I'd have been forced to enlist into the IJA during the invasion, and there are no records left of that happening."

Daizaburou nodded, voice slow, "I see… I suppose you double checked such records, XO?" Yuuko nods, arms folded. Both guards understood the concern, as it was the obvious outcome for all those who had lost their families and were of proper age to be sent to fight, "Then, would you wish to ask for our help to find who had taken you in?"

And looking straight into their eyes, Takeru frowned and let them both see his gritting teeth. Frozen was their breathing, halted were their thoughts. And while his voice remained low and composed, ever quivering in its struggle not to falter, the intent in his eyes was the same as before for them, as that anger he displayed when a shadow he was.

"… Not quite. What I'd like to know is, how likely is it that a noble was involved in my erasure?"

As if drowning on cold water, neither could not respond. Pierced by hooks, both couldn't move away from his eyes. Assaulted by

memories against which they had no defense, their heartbeats slowly began to delay themselves.

Coughing, Daizaburou tries to subdue the shock Tsukuyomi still couldn't, "Why would you… ask such a question? There was no 'erasure', cadet. The databases merely suffered an error."

"Are you sure about that?" The soldier presses, entwining his fingers and leaning forward, lunging forward.

"Would you enlighten me on what compels such… aggression towards us, Cadet Shirogane?" Tsukuyomi asked, voice low to mask her disquiet once again.

"Well, it's easy. I remembered where it was that I lived with my parents, a house near this base," He tells, proceeding to describe the place in utmost detail, even mentioning the jet poster he had on his room, the orange sheets her mother favored, her favorite room deodorizer, and other small tidbits about the place.

And such words, the non-existent hesitation in the stride, and the honest grief Takeru expressed when talking of his home, when recalling those last days in his world, tore a deep wound in both guards. The ants overflowed their throats, the palpitations returned in full force along a quake in their knees.

For this was proof, undeniable proof that the man was, in fact, not a faker.

Halting their realization, Yuuko coughed and leveled a stare at them, voice still calm, eyes sharp and ready to slay, "And when Shirogane told me of it, I pulled some strings and looked into his house's situation. It would seem the ownership of that lot hadn't changed during the following years, remaining under the Shirogane's name until the…" She gulps, the hold of her hands shift momentarily, "evacuation of this area. And even to this day, it is registered as such for the eventual relocation."

Folding his arms, Takeru forwards a fiery frown their way, "So I'm sure you can guess where I'm going, right? Had I been adopted, the ownership of my house would have changed. And it wasn't sold nor rented in all the following years. Hell, despite the ruined state of the city, my room still has part of the jet poster in it, and those dumb orange sheets Mom loved so much are still in their room…" He hangs his head, taking a pause, long pause, only to sigh heavily, "But that couldn't be. If I wasn't adopted, if I wasn't sent to an orphanage… then, what the hell happened to me?" Voice and hands, knees and back quivering, he looked straight into the distressed gazes of the guards, "What little remains of my profile in the databases has me registered as 'Takeru Shirogane', which means that I wasn't adopted since my surname didn't change."

"That could be due to the error that occurred," Tsukuyomi countered.

"Yet, that can't be the case," Yuuko parried, "If only his profile was affected, then that should be the end of it. Perhaps, one could make a case that his entire family's profiles suffered an error as they were uploaded one after the other. But that doesn't apply for the rest of his life," Voice lowering, a few fingers played on her chin as she closed her eyes, "His education, his medical records, his place of residence, and above all, who was the adult responsible of Shirogane after his parents' passing, all of that is missing. And while I did not delve too deeply into the public data banks, it is odd that there were no records or mentions to be found about my protegee's school life anywhere, since those papers should be in their respective databases."

"For so much intel to be missing, from so many different sources, it really looks like I was erased, for some reason," He winced, biting his lips, "Almost as if my existence was a bother, an unwanted burden on whoever had to take care of me," Takeru again sighed, *"After all, Maya-san's dad had no qualms in wanting to dispose of little me when Dad died… so once they saw he had nothing to offer to the fellowship…"*

A cold embrace fell on the soldier's back, he choked on air.

" *Burden. Trouble. Eyesore. Bother,"* His little counterpart's crushed inner voice echoes deeply.

Rubbing his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose, the soldier inhales sharply through clenched teeth.

*" Can't get good grades, can't speak well, can't give anything to whatever the fellowship is,"* The echo continued, further spawning a vast emptiness on Takeru's stomach.

Wincing as if the freezing sensation peeled off his skin, leaving raw flesh vulnerable to further assault, he couldn't help but to glare at the table, at his coiled hands, *"They threw him away, they send him away like the stranger he was. That's the root of the sadness I've been feeling… it has to be. That's why there's no intel, too much of a bother to cover up a failure. What did I even expect of the nobility, more so in this world?"*

Wanting to spit out the poison, recalling bits and pieces of his struggles to reach the Yuuko that had failed, of the coming troubles the soldier faced on the world where he convinced the scientist to leave Sendai and accept his pass for the migrant fleet. Takeru knew how cold and uncaring those with noble blood could be towards the 'lesser people', the 'baseborns' after his countless arguments with the members of the Guard that kept watch over the scientist of his first loops on the world where he had tried to support her. Yet, all he could do now was bite his lips and wring his hands as the echoes of that little boy returned to his ears, as the conclusion he reached had to be spoken.

"… And the only way so much intel could be gone, from so many sources, is if someone with much power ordered it," He then glared at the paling complexion of the guards, the anger in it betraying the shaking of his knees, the sorrow rotting his heart and ears,"… like whoever it was that wanted to have me executed for what I did on the CCSE."

"That… could be the case, perhaps," Daizaburou relented, if only to not clash frontally, "Yet, this is nothing but a suspicion."

Takeru shakes his head slowly, deciding not to hold it in, to let go of the venom, "It isn't, actually. I think… that whoever took me in ended up regretting it, that they wanted to make me go way as the stranger I was, and that's why they erased everything about me." He finished, feeling as if swallowing thickening gunk. *" After all, they did say he would keep his surname, that he'd be sent to some distant role fitting for a commoner… His mere presence was a risk for the House, and they only took him in due to some agreement they had with Dad in this world. They… never cared, he was just a jester for Yuuhi to fool around with…"*

"W-What… That's preposterous!" Tsukuyomi could not rein in herself anymore, seeing the clear anguish now festering in his expression, and hastily hit the table, frowning in indignation, pained deeply at the words he uttered, "Not only such a thing could not feasibly happen but, what reason would compel anyone of high station to act on such a way towards a child?!"

"… Then, why is every little detail on my identity gone?" Takeru presses, stare unchanged.

"We do not know why this-"

"Why is my house still on my dad's name? Why did my surname not change when I lost my parents?"

"As we said, we… we do not know why. Yet, I can guarantee that your suspicions are unfunded."

"May I ask why are you so certain, 1st Lieutenant?" Yuuko inquires, not lifting her gaze from Tsukuyomi, "My protegee raises valid points. I was also shocked when I found the lacking state of his profile, and at how few pieces of data yet remain of him. I was…" Closing her eyes, she takes a short breath, "quite alarmed when learning of this.

So, while I am not accusing you of anything, the way in which you pry and delve into his affairs is most curious."

"… What are you implying, XO?" Daizaburou asks, displeased with the way the talks were going.

"… Well, it's simple to explain. There is no feasible way in which the lacking data was caused by an error, considering the facts that lay before us. Thus, I again ask you what Shirogane did moments ago. What are the chances someone requested Shirogane's intel to be thoroughly erased?"

"And what compels such an accusation?" The General flared up, leaning forward.

"No one is accusing you, however," Yuuko said, a small grin on her, "Considering how much you pry and delve into my protegee's affairs, how much you're insisting on having him go to the Capital or have him rely on your aid, one could begin to suspect you have some ulterior motives. I believe your fellows could tackle the 'error' with what intel we've disclosed so far. Yet, you keep pressing," Entwining her fingers, the huntress leans forward, "Why would the General of the IRG, advisor and right hand of Her Highness the Shogun, be this concerned about the life of a meager cadet of the UN? If this were noticed, many inquiries would fall on your person. And while I comprehend you may have felt insulted by my protegee's emotional outburst, his concerns are valid. Either when he was a toddler or near the time when he left the Empire, someone erased Shirogane's data. And I don't know which one would be the better option here."

Seething over the rim, not relenting as Daizaburou again hit her feet, Tsukuyomi reignited the blazes of menace required of her duties, "Your words can, and will, be taken as an insult to our faction. We're merely showing gratitude towards someone who, as you should be aware, shielded Meiya-sama from the chaser's assault. I highly doubt his intel was erased, much less when he was but a child."

"… Is that so?" Yuuko eyed her sideways, only bolstering the fire, "Yet, that's the board we're facing. No data points to Shirogane being officially adopted, and we have no idea what befell him afterwards. If he was taken in by someone who did so out of a false sense of responsibility, it is probable that caused the erasure of his intel. That's all we know as of now on our end. Thus, considering the risks of the same people that erased him wanting to raise claims of identity theft, I do not believe it wise to rely on your aid. Both in case said someone is from the Guard, and to prevent your faction to be involved in this mess. I've received much gestures of goodwill from Her Highness, and I shall not place her fellowship in a compromising position considering what I know as of now."

Tsukuyomi saw red, everything other than the face of the scientist blurring for a second, "However, even if you're his legal tutor as of now, the cadet should have the final say on-"

"I was the one who requested her not to ask for help," Takeru states, and the floor might as well have given up and opened an abyss under the retainer.

"… What? H-However, we could-"

"No," He frowned, "You clearly denied the possibility of anyone erasing me, despite everything pointing to that. And until we're one thousand percent sure we have a solid defense, I won't be going to the Capital."

Coughing, trying to mend the splattering carnage that the impact of cannon ball-like words did on him, Daizaburou looked at him, both voice and gaze lowering, "And what if someone raises a claim against you, cadet? Are you certain you do not wish our aid?"

"No, because that'll only backfire on us."

"How do you mean?" The General rose a brow, puzzled by the negative, as a knot choked his throat, eyes strained as if walking against the wind.

Takeru leaned back, raising a finger to again tap his brows, "Simple. If you bring us the data, people can claim I'm merely faking what I know, that I'm repeating what the data you gave us says. But if I can recall stuff on my own and then have someone check the databases, that'll be proof enough," He nodded, Yuuko smiled.

"Indeed. Just as my protegee says, it is better for him to be allowed to recall his memories at his own pace. And it works in your favor, to not be entangled in this any further," Giving them a nod, voice composed now, she affirmed.

Yet, both guards could only swallow more acid, seeing Takeru did not trust them in the slightest.

"Furthermore, I cannot allow you to shoulder the burden of this task. I am Shirogane's tutor, and as such, I shall be the one taking care of this affair. We both thank your honesty and support, but all things considered, we have deemed it unwise to rely on your aid, if no clear data on my protegee's life turns up."

"I see… That's understandable. Forgive the pressure, XO, cadet," Daizaburou relents, sighing the acid out, deciding it was time to stop. Time to notify Yuuhi of the developments.

"Daizaburou-sama, this is no pressure," Unlike Tsukuyomi, who did not wish to lose the chance, "Merely sharing Shirogane's father profile with them would not bring about any such outcomes."

"Yet, it is their decision," He quietly tells, shaking his head, "We shall accept their wishes, and only delve into this again if we manage to discover anything while investigating the error," Tsukuyomi coils her hands, as Takeru and Yuuko narrow their eyes at the insistence of calling the situation an 'error'.

"However… If I may, cadet?" The retainer stared, almost pleading inside, at the soldier, "I can understand your fears, however, what has you this convinced someone powerful is against you? Why would someone who welcomed you into their family do something as

cruel as erasing you? Is this related in any way to the report on his departure, XO?"

"… I won't disclose that data," Yuuko dryly said.

"Is that so," Tsukuyomi held her gaze for a moment, looking at Takeru one more time, "Then cadet, why do you suspect such a thing?"

"… And why do you care so much?" Looking away, barely audible, he asked.

"I believe you had told me that you were hoping this situation to be salvageable. And I am merely repaying your actions towards Meiya-sama," She then remains staring at him unblinking, as Daizaburou also did. Yuuko held her breath, switching glances from the guards to the soldier.

Looking up, Takeru yet again sighs. His brows almost coming together, stomach growing upset,"For some reason, you see…" Veiling his sight as if walking against the wind, that same defensive aura in his posture, "I've been having some odd nightmares lately," The mention made Tsukuyomi flinch, "It's nothing clear, but there's this…" He grimaces, "sadness, this dejection I feel. And when I try to remember what was of me after Dad died…" Voice quivering again, hands again tenderly coming together, the injured pigeon's echoes again resonating in his ears, Takeru felt a cold blanket fall upon his whole being, "I can't stop thinking that I ended up all alone, that even if someone had taken me in they ended up seeing me as a bother, an eyesore, an unwanted burden. That they ended up wanting to make the stranger go away, for good," And then, the glare full of disdain. The silent judgment, the disappointment, and the distrust that mired his eyes was as intense as the metal clouds that fall over the battlefield.

Out of air as if she was hurrying to the water's surface only to then be harshly pushed down, Tsukuyomi couldn't release herself from his eyes, "However, that is merely a suspicion. While… everything won't

be cleared solely with your father's profile, there might be a hint in the papers. I can… comprehend your fears, I truly do, yet reaching out to the authorities in the Capital with all the knowledge you now possess would facilitate a thorough search. And… well, I cannot ascertain it, yet it is highly possible someone that knew you still lives."

"… Then, what happened to my profiles?"

"… I do not know. But coupled with the report of your departure, you could already have a way to mend your data. You won't need to fear any charges falling on you."

"Don't worry, I'll be fine. And if anyone tries to screw me over and ruin all the efforts I've done so far, I'll just crush their fangs and be done with it," Sighing, closing his eyes and looking away, Takeru ruffled his hair and tried to stop the echoes, before his eyes began watering again as they did after the recovery session.

Yet due to this, he missed the moment when Tsukuyomi's face twitched in absolute shock, teeth gritting each other as she herself relieved echoes of the days before, their talk by the hill, their discussions on the following months, and their dissidence when he was a shadow. But more than anything, what stirred the bindings into release…

*"Those words… those damned words that woman taught him… Why now, of all times? What accursed timing… No, there must be something I can do to convince him. Even if there are lakes in his memories, if Takeru allows us to aid him then-"*

"I suppose we should end this here," Yuuko hastily said, wary of Tsukuyomi's expression, standing up as the retainer was recoiling from Takeru's last words.

"A moment, Vice Commander," Daizaburou asks, softly standing up as well, "I understand the cadet's distrust, yet-"

"Shirogane was clear enough, and I won't risk him growing emotional again," She then, quickly and harshly, hit his shoulder with the back of her hand, "I ask you to understand his position, otherwise we'd be going in circles if you keep insisting. This affair will be handled by me, personally, so please desist. While he might not have been as polite as he should have throughout the meeting, we truly did not meant any offense. Shirogane?" She asks, demands, as she looks into him when he stands up.

"Sigh… Whatever," Shaking his head a bit, he grimaces. Then, Takeru gives both guards a slow, deep bow while avoiding their eyes, "… My apologies."

Throat still sore, Tsukuyomi can only nod back, "No… It is nothing."

Yuuko nods, crossing her arms, "I know his situation is quite suspicious, yet I guarantee Shirogane is no threat to Mitsurugi. And do not misunderstand his words, he's still conflicted after seeing what was of his parents' profiles, you'd understand."

"Yes, we assumed as much," The General relents, gulping down an iceberg when exchanging a fleeting gaze with the soldier, "Yet, regarding his father-"

"If you wish to aid us, do keep in mind how it could be taken if this ends up in court," Yuuko reminds, Takeru had already turned away and was going towards the door, "That shall be all on this matter. I shan't keep you any longer, I believe you should be checking up on your Gekishins for the coming mock battle," She then gives them a nod, briskly turning around, opening the door and walking out of the room.

For a moment, a void sensation struck at Tsukuyomi's stomach.

Again short of breath, she could only watch as Takeru walked to the door.

And inhaling sharply, she took some steps towards him.

"Cadet Shirogane," She calls out just as he was about to leave, only for no further sounds to follow afterwards from her lips.

"… What?" Barely a whisper, none of the prior wrath is left in him.

"… Best of luck in tomorrow's battle. I hope… we can bring some light into your situation before misguided charges are pressed," Licking her lips in an effort to cleanse them from the poison, she barely managed to brave the last words out, "See you later, during the mock battle."

Without even turning back, without even nodding, "Goodbye, 1st Lieutenant, General," Then, he hastily leaves the room.

And the retainer and General both hanged their heads, she biting her lips while he sighed heavily as a hand ran over his face.

By the pressure of the ensuing grip, Tsukuyomi felt her gloves twisting and tearing. The retainer then chose to release the tension, the frustration as she delivered a strong punch to the table.

"Those damned words… If he hadn't recalled that-"

"Mana, not now," Daizaburou taps her shoulder, shaking his head in dejection as deep as hers, "We have a report to give."

"Yes, sir. However… Now that we confirmed he truly is Takeru… And for him to ask such a thing…"

"We shall follow the Sun's guidance, as always," He declares, sighing deeply and finally hunching over. After a deep breath, he returns himself upwards, ready to leave, "Let us be on our way, your underlings must be anxious in wait outside."

"Indeed… Let's just go… Sigh…"

Walking out of the room, refusing to answer the inquiries of the trio, they then began walking towards Tsukuyomi's personal room in the base. Yet, as you'd expect, the retainer wasn't even paying attention

to her surroundings. While a stoic expression remained outside, while strong and firm her steps were, the feelings she had endured throughout the meeting did not give her any reprieve.

*"I can understand the fear, if he recalled his mother's passing, and the early struggles of Kageyuki-san in the Guard."*

Slowly, she began to bite her lips. Again feeling her nape pierced by a cold knife, shaving away the skin, the retainer had to make a conscious effort not to display anything.

*" I can comprehend the reluctance, to rely on the organization that took his father away from him, that might have had a hand in this 'error' in the profiles. And it is certain that, under the current circumstances, Kouzuki's concern s over a claim of identity theft are perfectly justified."*

However, it all came crumbling down as she went over those words, the last honest words he said. When Takeru was clearly pained to speak of these nightmares and whatever it was that he recalled.

*" Why, Takeru? What has made you think you were left alone? Why are you mixing the pain of the war with the joy we shared on the days before it? Why can't you recall what Yohime-sama and Yuuhi-sama, what Mion and Shion, what me, Maya, and all your other fellows meant for you?"*

She couldn't help but to sigh, faking a cough to rub her nose. To later dispel the dampness that covered the rim of her eyes.

*"… And why did you… why did you instead recall those accursed word… Why, Takeru?"*

She pondered, worried, and mulled over the matter, a pressure left ingrained on the base of her throat, on her hands and neck.

And of course, she couldn't know of it. For her cousin was the one who looked after the boy back then, and no one had ever told the

retainer of the altercation little Takeru had with Raiko or about the discussion that occurred on the following breakfast.

And even if the 1st Lieutenant knew of part of it… as you'd know, there was no way for her to understand the root of Takeru's animosity, of the lingering distrust he once harbored as the soldier who shielded the scientist before everything was over, before light's out.

*… And this is really ironic in a way, since the soldier himself does not yet recall the origin of it all. For he does not yet remember clearly what befell him after his very first survival from Iceberg, after the dance of carnage, after light's out.*

# Burdens of the Setting Sun

## Chapter 59: Burdens of the Setting Sun

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*December 2nd, a few minutes off 3 PM.*

*(Audience Chamber, Imperial Palace.)*

**[Yuuhi]**

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Tapping her glasses, Maya leans to whisper on my ear, "The following discussion shall focus on the procurement of new recruits."

Nodding subtly, I thank her attentiveness before refocusing once again on the advisors, who now were finished with what papers they wished to present next.

"Regarding the induction of new members, I'm loath to notify you that the amount of registered candidates is again lower than the available quota," Kisaragi-san softly states, unable to mask the disappointment, the distress in his expression, "The Director of Kyoritsu University has expressed his deep concern about the situation, as the available spots for next year's training course have not been taken. Despite the delivery of the simulator units you requested of my House, the Director envisages that the majority will remain unused due to a shortage of commoner recruits."

"Has the selection process been revised as I requested?" I inquire, giving him my full attention.

He nods yet breaks eye contact, lips folding in, the report pressuring his hand as it lowered, as it bent outwards as if holding bare metal instead of papers, "Partially, at least. The other Regent Houses refused the proposal to train both male and female cadet trainees together, which caused the Director much distress. Also, those of

common descent or the Tozamas who have not yet inherited their birthright are to remain in different, less extensive regimes," Taking a moment to, very slowly, turn a page, a faint yet firm luster returns to his eyes, "However, despite these setbacks, all cadets are to share simulation runs as you requested and mock battles shall be arranged between the male and female courses."

Envying his conformism, to find solace with such a meager change, I hold my breath, joining my hands. It is obvious Kyoritsu's authorities will raise their fair concerns, despite the imposition for they to remain training solely female cadets and students they shall possess empty seats in their courses. In an effort to bestow more knowledge to our cadets I suggested to breach this unspoken rule, yet our scarce male students, both pilots and for other careers, will have to remain separated from their female fellows. Such displeasure is bountiful enough to force a frown into my face, I cannot even find the energy to move my neck, to shake my head as if I was molded within a pillar.

Kisaragi-san coughs and continues, stealing glances at me, what little there is of wind pressure under the incoming breeze enough to almost drown his words, "The expected numbers have us fielding more recruits than our losses thus far in this year, and we've heard from the Makabe House that the delivery of refurbished Zuikakus will arrive before the end of the year, a whole month earlier than expected," However, growing still as a pillar, my Shinpan advisor hesitates, doubts on whether to meet my gaze as he rummages through the pages, "… If I may, however, could we gain your approval to once more request our trainees to begin using the Type-97 instead, Your Highness?" He then bows, deeply.

"Hmm… While phasing out the Zuikaku is something we'll have to do eventually, I do not believe it is yet time," Entwining my fingers, I thus stare into his eyes, commanding, "However, that being said, do ensure you remain in contact with the MDF and the UN, so that we can negotiate for their own data on the Fubuki when the time is right. For the moment, let the others assume we've relented on this trail."

"As you will, Your Highness!" He affirms, a step back later he once more bows down for a moment. And despite such, the pressure that keeps the papers firmly stuck onto his red dress, how his brown eyes did not meet my gaze, these signs are ample proof that Kisaragi-san is, understandably, dejected at my answer.

Sigh… Believe me, I'd support the adoption of the Fubuki as the sole training craft for all of our forces if I had the power to enforce such an order. However, doing so would go counter to the Makabe House's own businesses in their duties to lead the refurbishment of the Type-82. And of course, that would also require many negotiations with our industries, since the Zuikaku is not exported to simply cease its production would leave them with quite the amount of worthless parts and components. Yet, if the Fubuki were to become our sole training craft as of now, that would also spawn further divisions with the IJA. The IRG would ask, or rather demand, priority to the available units of Type-97, which would certainly make those who do not favor the nobility grow far more adusted at the situation. It would be yet another confirmation of the privileged status we enjoy to their eyes.

For now, such a segregation in our training crafts is required, the Zuikaku for the Guard and the Fubuki for the IJA. Slowly, the Type-82 will be phased out or left as aggressor units to teach our recruits not to underestimate older models, to showcase how one's overconfidence can lead to an early grave. After all, perhaps Kouzuki's developments could bestow upon the Zuikaku quite a few more moons of reliable usage. That should grant me enough time to negotiate a gradual adoption of the Fubuki for the Guard, without gaining the animosity of the Makabe House and our industries nor festering unwanted disdain in the IJA. So please Kisaragi-san, do remain strong for the time being.

Easing my breathing, taking a brief glance towards the balcony, the skies bright yet cloudy, a smile I raise as my tone returns to normal, "Now, if our supply of Zuikakus is in fine order and this year's cadets

are ready to be formally appointed as Imperial Guards, what other concerns were raised?"

With a step forward and a bow, his long amber hair falling from his shoulders, Hifukai-san proceeds to report, "There are also concerns raising on the state of our defenses. Some of the crew from those stationed at Kitanomaru have been rather insistent on their petitions to further bolster the patrols and allotted members to standby sentry duties."

Tapping her glasses, she takes a step forward, "I had believed the respective orders had already been issued, however."

"Indeed, 1st Lt Tsukuyomi. General Guren's designs have already been delivered to all outposts nearby," He affirms with a nod, his fair features growing rough, "Yet, after the recent Defense of Niigata as well as… the report that has not yet been confirmed, some are wishing to leave enough units at the ready should the situation require an immediate deployment."

"Sorrowfully, few are the members we could spare for such patrols," I relent a sigh, shaking my head, "And I do not think it wise to further extend the usage of our TSFs and infantry armors. The units of the IRG standing guard herein this palace and its adjacent delegations are obliged to one duty, to safeguard both this palace and Her Holy Majesty's residence. Furthermore, to bolster our presence might create friction with the MDF's Capital Protection unit," Stating the fact, I allow a moment to veil my sight, to slowly release air from my nose.

Not only such an arrangement would waste precious fuel and energy by leaving more TSFs in sentry duty, yet it could also cause debates over the deployment of said units. Some of the MDF's men would take to the field with pride and haste, yet one cannot ignore that many would welcome the IRG joining the efforts by their side. To flaunt, to deploy further units knowing they shall remain as the last to be sent to battle… I do not believe it wise, much less considering the arduous times we're navigating.

Hifukai-san coughs, sharply veiling his sight, "I understand and agree with your wishes, Your Highness. And so does Kujo-sama, as well as all those of us from the Kujo fellowship that are here at your service," A moment of pause extends, as does the ashen outline over the neutral and composed facade my advisor must endow, "Yet, many are those who echo this wish, to appoint most of the fresh recruits to Kitanomaru or this castle's guards, within the hallways and eateries. Some of my fellows have even heard such statements from groups within the students and cadets of the nearby academies," Brows furrowing along the further slowing of his tone, he cites the numbers and meetings the recruits themselves asked out of the Director, reading the page-long report in which the cadets that'll soon become full fledged Imperial Guards requested of their Instructors a chance for their top performing members to be appointed to this area's defense.

Folding a sigh, my mouth becoming dry and desolate, I merely shake my head again, "… I can sympathize with their desires, yet, such an arrangement is unrequired at the moment. Maya, has Ikaruga-dono displayed any interest in granting this wish?"

She shakes her head immediately, yet her expression does not thaw, "I have heard nothing of the sort, this is news to me, Your Highness. However, if you'd forgive my opinion, perhaps there is some merit to leaving more units in standby. After all, well…" Tapping her glasses, looking down, the others present in the room also seem to find themselves unable to return my gaze, "… you have left your Reaction Squadron grounded for quite some time at Hibiya."

Breathing in, suddenly feeling my heartbeats along a tickling, prickling, peeling on my nape's skin, due to such a sensation my eyes narrow and I thus speak from my stomach, "My orders towards the Chain squadron are a business of the Koubuin House. The defense of this area is related to crucial matters of the Shogunate, and the image we portray to the rest of the forces stationed in the Capital. Do think of how such a strengthening of our defenses would

be taken," They all bow down hastily, I cannot help but to sigh heavily.

If the new recruits are all stationed here and tasked to guard the area of Chidorigafuchi and Hanzomon Gate until Hibiya Camp, be it in their machines or as constant patrols, then perhaps it could be misunderstood as an act of defense and distrust towards the Diet. Kurechika-dono does seem to be facing toilsome days indeed when negotiating with our fellows as of late. To instead place them near the rails of the outer gardens would have the recruits facing the international forum, where the UN's High Council is currently located. I am certain that will backfire, quickly. The rest of the surrounding areas of the palace are already covered by the forces of Ikaruga-dono in Camp Kitanomaru, the Imperial Guards who watch over His Holy Majesty, Raiko-san's unit in the small outpost in Hibiya, or this palace's own patrols.

Either way, no matter where we deploy the recruits, consequences will soon follow. Either sow more distrust towards the Diet and the MDF, risk an altercation with patrolling UN soldiers or their bureaucrats as they descend from the trains, bolster Ikaruga-dono's forces or over-commit units to my palace. When in reality the fresh recruits should be taking to the field to aid our people…

However, if the pressure is rising at this particular moment…

"Hifukai-san, would there be any connection between the petitions to bolster our stationed units and the request of the Undersecretary?" A hand caressing my chin, to support my face so that it does not wane under the intimate, burdening weight of the golden crown, I inquire.

He takes a deep breath, petrification permeating his entire posture clad in yellow, "There are no leads that would point towards such a case, no."

"Yet, do you believe that might be the case?"

"… I cannot deny it, Your Highness," Thus finally, dark ashes spread well beyond his expression.

Upon his somber answer Gekka-san coughs while taking a step forward. She then bows before speaking, as loudly as Daizaburou-san tends to do, "Many in Tokyo were perplexed, to say the least, with the sudden visit the Undersecretary paid Yokohama. By such concerns some believe this situation might devolve into…" Voice lowering, a speck of worry causing her lips to narrow, the papers she held now subjected to a vice grip, "Ahem… another treason from Tamase, and thus firmly think bolstering our defenses is justified."

"Sigh… However, from your report, all points to Kouzuki being ready to present precious intel to us," She wouldn't have requested an urgent meeting with the UN's HC and all Regents otherwise, "And forgive me if I'm mistaken, yet isn't it odd for Kouzuki herself to request a meeting of this magnitude? The woman does not strike me as someone who would bluff in such a way."

Gekka-san nods, the oval shape of her dark brown hair immutable unlike the quiver in her voice, "Indeed, Your Highness. The past meeting at Yokohama was but a small show, a quiet time for the Professor to share her reports and findings," She retells with much aplomb, and I nod in agreement.

That meeting, where many expected Alt. IV's start of operations to be announced, served only to disclose some minimal intel about Yokohama's own might. A show of the Imperial UN branch to their backers, to justify the funds spent on the base's construction. According to Gekka-san's prior reports, Undersecretary Tamase and one of the HC's Secretaries, Mooroka was his name I believe, affirmed certain Alt. IV supporters from America had contacted the Professor back then. A warning of what few allies this nation has in the west, of the soon to come pressure for the Treaty to be reinstated and the risk, the threat that supposed for Alt. IV. Chief Yoroi did not delve deeply into this, yet I believe time is running short for the Fourth Project.

Yet, the vital reports all awaited, the results everyone expected Kouzuki to deliver… were nowhere to be found back then, unlike now.

Leaning forward, treading and swirling my hair as I ponder for a moment, as my hand descends to my nape, a small jolt runs through me. Feeling as if static had enveloped my arms, as if my hair were standing in attention, that ensuing grip towered, covered my whole neck again. In slow motion I gulp, even slower I breath in.

Yet, what towers atop my head sinks deeply into me, forcing my chin to fold inwards. The pressure of gold undaunted by the skin and instead piercing the tender below it, tearing into where once he bequeathed kindness upon me. And it begins to hurt, the crown's weight. And it ails further, the reminder of what once was where pain lays now. It is odd, this amalgamation of swirling feelings in me. The same weight atop my head, the same intrusive reminder of my duties that compels such aplomb within is also what wakes whispers by which mine own tempest is cleared, cleansed. Allowing me to breath in calmly, rein in the toilsome pondering, hearing only those whispers of days long gone.

Usually, I'd have remained quiet on this doubt, I'd have taken a more peaceful approach. However… "I suppose that… said concerns do not surge from the Regents themselves?" I am not feeling particularly keen on the peaceful approaches for this occasion.

Gekka-san seemed to twitch, eyes parting open as skies after a storm, and she then hastily shakes her head, "Of course not, Your Highness. In all honesty, those who not know of either the Project or the meeting Kouzuki requested are growing anxious. Yokohama's silence as of late, their secrecy regarding the STF's deployments, and Tamase's sudden visit are making the echoes of those who hold… unpleasant views of the UN louder. Both within our walls and Ichigaya's hallways, it would seem," Eyes squinting as if amidst a heatwave, the habitual vigorous stride of her voice fades and gives way to nothing but a quiet wind to filter from her lips.

Seeing such apprehension, Hifukai-san coughs and looks towards me, with that equal petrification, that same apprehension as if the floor were about to give away upon a wrong step, "There is also the continuous insistence from the US to reinstate the Treaty to take into account, even if said attempts have been diminished since the Yukon Incident. While we cannot confirm any rumors, the UN's image has been steadily falling both in the IJA's camps and in the public opinion, many are those who still link the organization to the American forces," And once again, his expression falls down deep alongside his voice, "And… I also cannot deny some of our fellows are rather displeased with their showings of late, the lackluster support they've given our forces on the latest BETA incursions."

"That is something I can confirm," Kisaragi-san reluctantly affirms, barely raising his voice, "During the exchange of favors to repair and re-purpose the simulator units, quite many mechanics repined about how many units are gathering dust in the UN's bases, both sims and TSFs. I believe this animosity is one of many reasons why a press conference was requested out of you by the Prime Minister, Your Highness."

"… I assumed as much, truth be told," Once more feeling my shoulders grow heavy, desiring to bend down, this confirmation only brings further repining and pressure to the back of my head, from its top to my nape.

"So…" Gekka-san stares hesitantly, petrified in place, the hand she belatedly runs over her burgundy dress as if trying to grasp a flower with thorns, "… would you be wishing to parley with the Regents to quell this animosity, Your Highness?" She inquires and causes all others to also become statues, statues soon to turn to dust as those eyes, those hesitant and resigned eyes look my way.

Sigh…

Perhaps this is why the proposition to bolster our defenses is coming now of all times. Thinking twice, Yoroi has been silent for quite some time already. My actions to defend these deals with the UN have

already forced me to debate with the other Houses, and quite adamantly to boot. The IJA is understandably growing anxious as the battles continue with no end in sight, not a single hopeful light arriving to our ears. If another assault were to occur and the BETA threaten with piercing the final defense line once more… If that report Yoroi gave us is confirmed either by the UN, our scouts, or Hikami-san's squadron, then… It is possible my people will choose violence to further their goals. No, any small incident might be plentiful enough to spark up the blazes of conflict which lay buried within the ashes.

Usually, I would relent. Prioritizing our people's and fellows' safety is an obligation I must hold dear. In no feasible way am I wishing to continue clashing with the other Regents frontally. To fold my hand when my agreement to their demands might aid in placating the righteous fury seething within the IJA would be a severe mistake. Even if I'd have to ask my subordinates to bend the knee, our actions should be moved by our obligation to safeguard our people's peace and safety.

Yet, as I breath in while reiterating that determined spiel, I don't answer. I cannot answer. Licking my lips, closing my eyes, I ponder the words, the board and what may lie beyond it. And again palpitations rise up, crawl up my throat, as the crown grows crushing.

" *Are those impositions truly so dear to you? Is that what you should be protecting now?"* His voice echoes, the query he forwarded after finally returning to my presence after our dissidence.

Usually, I would have ordered my fellows to parley, to find a peaceful solution to this conundrum. My voice as the Shogun is the only tool I truly possess to even the scales of this Empire. I cannot support those who would wish to see the Shogun's entire entitlements be restored lest those powers are either misused by the Royal Guard, who would then stand above the IJA in dominance, or taken as a threat by the UN and the rest of the Asian nations.

I also must support Kurechika-dono come what may as well as the Alt. Project, for both to remain independent as they are now is key so that we manage to maintain this amicable relation we have with the international community. Any signs of the Empire desiring to gain further powers, of the IRG wishing to acquire full control of this nation, of the Shogunate considering to once more rule by royal decrees as I had to during the invasion's darkest days… Even if said fears are unfounded, if the scenery paints such a picture the measures taken to prevent it might spiral into a forceful reinstatement of the Treaty, or worse… the abolition of the Shogunate. And such a threat, such an enticing desire is certain to drive the rest of the Guard into, perhaps, agreeing with those in the IJA who wish to bring about a paradigm shift to this nation. It is understandable that those in the MDF could be considering extreme alternatives to have their voices be heard after all the hardships our peasants are enduring. Kurechika-dono cannot solve what issues plague our people with words alone, and our reality in no way can measure up to the ideals we are sworn to uphold. That is why we remain serving in silence, all we can do as rulers is bow down in apology and keep pushing forward through these dark hours.

… So the obvious option is for me to relinquish further powers, to allow them to use my voice to quell the people and soldiers. It is the quickest and easiest path to stability, for me to simply remain playing the role of a bright Shogun. A mere tool to keep the tethering peace steady, to prevent a greater damage be inflicted onto our people. Appease the IJA, who possesses the numbers to act as a deterrent towards any insurgent desires the extremists within the IRG might harbor. Yet I must parley with the Regents so that they do not cause a power vacuum while I also have to continue to support the Diet despite the liberties some take with their powers, and the reaction that could cause within the more fervent soldiers of the IJA.

I can only sing and pray my voice is heard, and continue to slowly walk forward on this lone rope I have without ever looking back, ever looking down into the abyss that would befell my people were I to falter in protecting this frail balance. No matter how much my feet

wail, how sore and numb they become… Such is my duty… to endure this knowledge in solitude, to shoulder this responsibility on my own… for the sake of maintaining this peace we enjoy…

… Then, what is this cold shiver that runs on my back? By which reason is my tongue regressing further and further into my throat? How can my arms feel so tense, as if showered by static?

" *If you cannot ever hesitate, how can you be certain you're not making a mistake?"* Feeling the glare on my nape, such pressure forces me to gag on emptiness, *"If you can't prevent blood from being spilled… then, it's up to you to ensure the minimal amount of it ends up on the soil. You're the one who dictates, the one who forges the path forward as the Shogun."*

Usually, I would have negotiated. Requested support for Kurechika-dono, a ceasefire in the intrigue towards the Diet from the nobility, or immediate aid for the settlements and shelters were a BETA incursion to occur again. I'd have accepted the critiques from the nobles for supporting both Kouzuki and Kurechika-dono as I've been doing, I'd have accepted Kurechika-dono's own doubts towards my capabilities as a leader of the IRG who is unable to rein in the nobles under her rule, to be the one who they admire and pledge their lives to. I'd have requested the soldiers of the IJA to merely remain steadfast in their resolve, to look away from my struggles and focus on safeguarding the people, to ensure no more blood is spilled pointlessly.

After all, all of them, those in the Diet, the IJA and the Guard, all of them solely wish for our Empire to once more be able to stand strong and proud by its own might. All that diverges is the methods they'd rather employ, and the colors with which they wish to paint the canvas of our future. Someone who does not take to the field cannot earn their reverence, that much I know. Someone who can only parley with time… is not truly fitting to be a Shogun as the traditions demand. From their eyes, I might as well be another bureaucrat instead of the divine embodiment of a warrior I should represent as His Holy Majesty's appointed Commander-in-Chief. Someone who

must remain neutral, colorless, to not upset the spectrum among all factions cannot possibly convince them to reach a compromise.

I've known this since many moons ago, and all throughout these years without you I've managed to remain calm under the setbacks we've encountered, under the daily reminder of this crown which takes root into my head and does not wish to let go… Yet…

" *So long as you promise to do what must be done for our future, even against the frail peace of today, I shall abide by any and all orders you issue, Yuuhi. And those who found me worth their trust shall make all those who are not in agreement bend the knee, by force if necessary. So in exchange…"* Inhaling sharply, barely opening my eyes does not release me from that frown, that adusted, narrowed, accusing and imposing frown, *"I want you to never back down from this oath. If you'll dedicate your life to serve the Empire as the Shogun, then make sure you're truly doing what's best for our future, to guide us towards a peaceful end to all this madness. So if there's any part of you that still would dare to hope for a peaceful world without wars… My soul and fealty are yours to command."*

I slowly gulp, hands shifting and closing as the silence extends overlong. The rest continue to stare, still as pillars and afflicted much. There is no hold, yet my nape grows ever stiff. There is no gale, yet the lower part of my ears wail in displeasure and middling pain. There is nothing within my lips, yet my tongue twists and turns and the urge to cleanse it overflows.

You wouldn't have agreed with this course of action, would you Takeru? If I cannot hesitate, if blood will be on my hands no matter the choice… Then, it is my duty to reduce it to its absolute minimum. To make of this Empire a power known not for its military might but instead for its peaceful and honorable values, to reach the peaceful ending we dreamed of together. True peace cannot come to pass while such reservations, such grudges, such belligerent pride remains in our hearts. To continue down this road, compromising my standing to merely gain a temporary ceasefire…

That is not a solution. That's merely patchwork, a temporary deterrent, an eventual impediment. Regardless of whether… that cadet is him or not… if I truly wish for these arguments to stop… I must make myself be heard, otherwise these concessions will know no end. And if I truly have a listener no longer… that confirmation is plentiful for me to devise a path forward. After all, that which I have been regarding as impossibilities are nothing but the safe limits my overly fearful mind built for my ego.

Thus, exhaling softly, what embers of his still remain tried to lightly endow my voice. And I made no effort to suppress them, "… Sadly, I must refuse those petitions," Opening their eyes in dismay, truly flabbergasted they all remain as they find themselves at an utter lack of words, "As I stated moments before, I desire to find an end to these struggles. Furthermore, there are other bases and locations that deserve the Imperial Guard's attention. The troops stationed to guard both castles are plentiful enough, thus I ask that you notify the other advisors that I wish these discussions to be no more. The recruits will not be stationed in this palace nor in any of its surrounding outposts."

"H-However, if I may…" Gekka-san insists, voice again rising along clear concern grafted, imprinted into her eyes, "Your Highness, after the favors you unilaterally gave to Yokohama, you cannot push any further. The coming meeting might not grant us any boons, your standing and image would-"

"I rather see myself losing influence while following my own plans than to be swayed by outside influence," Again unable to repel, to resist the embers the dreams spurred in me, I take some seconds to stare into their eyes, one at a time, before grandly commanding, "All of us present are in agreement, I'm certain, that these squabbles must cease so that we can then prosper. These divisions once brought us to our knees during our darkest hour, and it is my obligation to ensure such a scenario does not repeat itself. Thus, my decision is final."

Thus, tapping her glasses and keeping a low tone, my retainer steps forward, "Your Highness, I comprehend your wishes, however this course of action could incite-"

"No, Maya. I believe such concerns are unwarranted. Kouzuki would not be requesting a meeting herself if she did not possess crucial reports to give. I know that, until the propositions become official, certain matters must remain unspoken, however…" Looking at both Gekka-san and Hifukai-san, the rim of my eyelids squints ever slightly, perhaps as you used to say fire would be coming out, "How likely is it that the Vice Commander requested authorization to assault Sadogashima?"

"Wh- Y-Your Highness!" Maya shrieks, appalled and paling, "How can you ascertain-"

"Maya, please. Considering the need to show results under such a narrow time frame, I do not doubt the XO is wishing to prove the Project's worth in a crucial mission," Between the railgun and the TSF developments she has shown, I do believe the possibility is quite high. Of course… whether she gains UN approval depends on the completion and prowess of the machine she has revealed almost nothing about, the one Kouzuki herself affirmed would be the peak result of her research, "Thus, what have you to say, 1st Lt Hifukai, 1st Lt Guren?" I inquire, once again staring into their souls.

He sighs, slowly running a hand into his long hair while dispelling the abundant tension, "I wouldn't go as far as to confirm such a notion. However… I do believe an important matter will be disclosed, for I have rarely seen Tamase hold his position with such resolve."

Gekka-san quickly nods, a hand on her ear as she slowly places, presses her folder onto her person, "I'd have to agree, Your Highness. I know not of what negotiations have occurred between you and Yokohama, yet it is clear this particular occasion comes with far more weight than any prior meetings. Whether that equals the results you'd be wishing, I cannot confirm."

"I see…" Sigh… That's a relief, at the least Kouzuki is finally delivering results, I'm certain, "Then Maya, may I entrust you with the duty of convincing Ikaruga-dono to douse his insistence over the matter of the recruits?"

"… I shall try my utmost effort," She relents with a bow, lacking all of her habitual confidence.

"That is all I ask," Smiling her way, I am able to finally sheathe the embers, "Well… I suppose this marks the end of these reports?" All of them nod, standing in attention, "Good enough, I shan't hold you any longer. Please do feel free to have lunch here if you yet haven't, and I hope this coming meeting brings us auspicious news."

All of three of my visitors bow down in unison, thanking me for my time, and in perfectly coordinated steps they thus leave my presence. Closing my eyes, away from the brightness of the audience chamber, I enjoy the soft breeze that intrudes from the balcony.

"Sigh… Truly, what a busy day today has been thus far…" And it is yet too early to retire to my chamber as well… What wouldn't I give for a few minutes in bed.

"Your Highness?" Maya asks, I look her way, "What has compelled such a stance from you? Are you still…" Lips twisting, she cannot finish.

Thus, I merely nod, "Indeed, it is as you fear. Yet, I believe this was truly a blessing. We cannot risk an incident to occur should Kouzuki truly ask for a mission to Sadogashima."

"Indeed, right you are. However…" Tapping her glasses, her stone-cold scolding gaze meets mine own unfaltering, "Might I advise you to retain your poise from now on? I do not believe it wise, for you to clash in such manner with the guard as you've done throughout today."

"… Yet, merely standing still is something I cannot allow myself to do. If compromises will be made regardless… then, why merely delay the inevitable, why waste time with patchworks? Shouldn't we be taking measures to truly heal this wound instead?"

"… I share your feelings, yet I am uncertain whether this approach is the most proper one."

"You could always employ a royal decree instead," An intrusive voice thus says behind Maya, making me twitch.

"Indeed, a decree would-" My retainer then stops short, opening her eyes wide as she turns around, allowing me to see Tsuhi's composed face as she stands in attention, "2nd Lt Yasomaga! Why have you not notified your presence?!" Maya berates, igniting her anger.

Eyelids descending slowly, Tsuhi remains calm despite the minute furrowing of her brows, "What good is a shinobi that announces its presence? Would you have me announce myself when I'm sent on recon missions, Maya-sama?"

"This and that are completely different matters, also you should not talk back to your superiors!"

"Maya, peace," Swaying my hand slowly as I sigh, Maya also does as she takes a step back which allows Tsuhi to walk closer to myself, bowing once she stops, "Tsuhi, whatever is the matter? Has something… occurred within the castle?"

"No, nothing of the sort, milady. However, Raiko-sama has announced herself at the gate. She is wishing to speak with you, Yuuhi-sama," Then, she looked up, unblinking.

"Is that so?" So she chose this day, when the advisors of the other Regent Houses are present, to come request such of me. Perhaps she's once more testing my character? Hmm… going by how Tsuhi

referred to me just now… "Did she speak of the motives behind this visit?"

Tsuhi nods, still as composed as usual, "Raiko-sama desires to platicate with you regarding the food plant's situation, as well as the lack of orders her unit has received."

Maya comes closer, whispering as she taps her glasses, "Your Highness, I'd advise against this meeting. To merely accept to see her without having made an appointment beforehand would perhaps diminish your image."

"That might be, it is true. Yet… the food plant is one, if the only, project my fellowship can use to negotiate from an advantageous position. Perhaps I should simply allow this and resolve the meeting now," Before Mana calls with their meeting's results, or time erodes Raiko-san's patience towards my person, "Also, you have to be going back to Kitanomaru, don't you Maya?"

"Well, indeed. I can remain here for a moment, in case Raiko-sama were to step out of line," She ascertains, readiness in her eyes.

"Well, what would your orders be, Yuuhi-sama?" Tsuhi inquires, hurries as her sight never lifted from my person.

"… Allow her entrance, I shall meet with her immediately. By the by, have we received any calls during the meeting, Tsuhi?"

She returns herself upright, a hand tracing some hair, "No, were you expecting a call, Yuuhi-sama?" Inquiring as she again stares, tone and expression as loose and neutral as the grayness of her dress, "It wouldn't be something related to my leader, would it?"

"Yes, that is the case," Her inquiring stare eases up upon my honest answer, relaxing into her usual calm demeanor, "Mana might contact us for a report on the situation, is all. Please do inform Maya as soon as the call arrives, she will handle it," I order, holding her stare.

Tsuhi nods, despite how her brows again furrowed momentarily, the curiosity to delve further. After a deep bow, she then turns around and gracefully marches out of the room, with long and slow steps.

"… I swear, I still cannot locate her presence at all," Maya repines, rubbing her eyes under her glasses.

"So, you also cannot detect Tsuhi when she approaches?" I ask in genuine curiosity.

"I wish I could," She sighs, shaking her head, "Me, Mana and our sisters were only trained in the standard arts of the shinobi. I suppose Tsuhi has instead chosen to further polish her skill with her… family's methods," Just as a cloud covered the audience room with a faint shadow, Maya's expression so darkened.

"Is that so? Haven't you spoken with her to share such methods with you and the rest?"

"… I did try, and she refused," Maya sighs again, tapping her glasses as she frowns slightly, a foreign speck of complain in her voice, "She said back then that there was only one person she would ever teach her family's techniques to… And we know how that affair ended up," Her lips twist again, her glare cascades into the floor and I cannot help but to run a hand over my neck, "… However, that aside, Your Highness, are you certain you wish to speak with Raiko-sama as of now? What if Mana were to call amidst the meeting?"

Shaking my head, I finally lean back comfortably for a moment, "I doubt the situation warrants such concern, Maya. I can finish the meeting then or they can wait until we're done. Furthermore, I believe I do not have any impending duties for the remainder of the afternoon?"

"No, our fellows shall be crafting a speech for the press conference yet I doubt they'd have it for today."

"Sigh… I suppose I'll have to stand in wait all day long now…" Hopefully Mana can bestow me a pleasant report, to finally dispel these echoes I cannot rein in as of now.

Some moments pass, Maya made some tea for me and left the kettle and another cup at the ready for the eventual arrival of our guest. As a gentle breeze rustled its way into the audience room, as I breathed in this freshness, as the herbs replenished my good spirits, a rhythm knocked onto the door.

"Yuuhi-sama, may we enter?" Tsuhi requested.

"You may enter," Maya replies, and thus, the doors once more part open.

And behind Tsuhi… two figures walked towards me. A tall, slender but well-defined shape garbed in the burgundy attire befitting of a High Shinpan, readiness and resolve as in Maya's own stance. The short lily hair, with a trio of sharp spikes flowing backwards above her ears on each side as if three steel feathers they were, the strong, darker purple of her eyes locked onto mine own, her fair and smooth features betrayed the imposing aura, the brief displeasure that surged forth as she and Maya crossed glares. Stopping short, a slow and graceful bow she gives me, and her soft yet firm voice follows suit.

"Thank you kindly for receiving me, Yuuhi-sama. I hope this day finds you faring well, milady."

"… Thank you, Raiko-san. You may rise, it is… good to finally meet you again," She raises back, nodding to my words with a neutral expression. As she did, I could not help but to let my eyes wander to the one who stood by her side, tightly holding her hand, "Hello, I believe we have not met in person?"

The small boy hid behind Raiko-san, timidly peeking with a single eye at me. The short, light brown hair, the equally strong purple of Raiko-san's own eyes, the child was wearing a most elegant western

set of clothing for the occasion, in cerulean and aquamarine with some small shades of thistle along its upper half.

"Come, introduce yourself," Raiko-san whispered to him, a small smile on her face as she gently pulled him by the hand, the child now standing before me.

Giving me a bow then quickly returning to her side, his eyes remained on me, "Good morning. I am Fujikagi Amato. It's a…" He looks up at Raiko-san, who gives a small nod, and his stare hesitates its way back to mine, "… It's a pleasure, Your Highness-sama."

"Fujikagi, you do not need to add a -sama when referring to Her Highness," She corrects softly.

"Truly?" He asks, eyes wide as he looks back at me.

Smiling and chuckling, I nod his way, "Indeed. There is no need for further honorifics," He then bows down, thanking me as he again hides behind Raiko-san's back. I remain staring at him for a moment, something or the other crawling down my throat, before I shake my head, "I suppose we should have him rest somewhere else. Tsuhi?"

"As you will," She immediately nods and walks up to the boy, who doesn't seem startled by her presence.

"Fujikagi, I need to resolve some work for the moment. Do behave well while under Tsuhi's care," She tells, patting his head.

The child nods with a smile, and bows down again my way before Tsuhi guides him by the hand out of the room. Raiko nods and thanks Tsuhi, who wordlessly salutes her as she goes her way towards the door along the child.

"… I see no reason why you'd bring the boy with you," Tapping her glasses, glacial gale greets its way forward. Sigh… Not again, "To

have him ascend to this floor just to then have him rest elsewhere, I believe you should have left him resting in the nearby hotel."

"Why, I cannot merely leave him unattended. I expected more from someone who once watched over young children, but perhaps even than is beneath you today, *Tsukuyomi,"* Thus, she immediately retaliates ready to rend Maya asunder.

My retainer frowns, scowls as she takes a step forward, "… Well, it is understandable. Yet, it is audacious of you, to request a meeting on this particular day without a prior appointment."

"Oh, I did request an appointment, you see. I wonder why my petitions have all fallen on deaf ears…" Raiko-san returns the pleasantry, grinning faintly, "It is almost as if *someone* were interfering with the communication attempts."

"Raiko-san, peace," I speak up, before Maya loses her temper, "I have not been in proper form to give you the time and attention you deserve. Please, do forgive my lack of tact towards your person."

Placing both hands behind her back, she hastily bows down, "No, there is no blame on your shoulders, Yuuhi-sama. Such are the circumstances you have been made to endure."

"That is good to hear… So then, do sit down. Tell me, how have you been faring as of late?" Trying to smile her way, she relents a nod and knees on the floor.

Shaking her head as Maya had offered a cup of tea, Raiko-san swayed her hair backwards in one fell swing then locked her eyes onto me, "As my reports have notified, I believe we have a working prototype for the main unit of the food plant. The smaller unit managed to deliver a satisfactory result, thus it is now time to proceed to the next stage and devise the core in its required size to be of use for the synth food plant's outlined output. Should the approval and funds be bequeathed to us, I estimate that we can begin work on the final phase in a month's time," She then told me of

the work and proceedings she's been overseeing, going into fine detail when I so asked her to, "… At the very least, the filter to separate the flagellates from the seawater and any other substances is completed as of now. As I said, my main concern at the moment is the development of the main unit and its support systems. With proper funding, I estimate that it would take us two years to deliver the first off-shore food production plant."

"Is that so? That is truly a blessing…" Finally, a good advancement that is not tied to the war. Of course, it will also aid the war efforts greatly with its food supply, but such a development will certainly become a key piece for negotiations with the UN in the years to come, "I am certain that the Kujo House will undoubtedly support this endeavor, and I suppose the Takatsukasa House might also do so. Maya?"

She steps forward, giving a prompt nod, "It would seem that way, yes. The young Head of the Saionji is, well, more swayed by the militaristic approaches, yet I am of the opinion that Ikaruga-sama would try and negotiate for some of his fellows to be involved in the development process before giving his agreement."

"So we could have four of us in unison, huh. Raiko-san, I know I might be imposing, however is there any-"

"I must refuse," She quietly warns, frowning towards Maya, "The food plant is the fruit of the Koubuin House's endeavors. As the current Head of the Amato House, I shan't agree to relinquish our secrets or autonomy to the Ikaruga House."

My retainer steps forward as I was sighing, "You would dare to refuse a petition of Her Highness herself? The gall…"

Raiko-san once more ignites her wrath, clashing, crashing her sight into Maya's with unmasked contempt, "No, I am refusing *your* suggestion. We cannot show such weakness in our negotiations, to simply reveal our cards so easily won't do us any favors."

"However, further clashing will only place Her Highness in a compromising position," She ascertains, firmly, "I believe that, as her servants, it is us who should lower our heads to safeguards our Regent's wishes."

"Hmph… I wonder who you're referring to now," Very much toxic, she eyes Maya sideways.

Who does not relent upon my coughing, instead taking a step towards Raiko-san, "… So you think I serve another Regent, do you."

"Yes, for real," Frowning, she fires off. The wording catching me and Maya off guard, it brings cold nails into to nape, into my hands, "I certainly did not expect you to be wagging your tail so openly, dog of Ikaruga."

After a moment of bewilderment, wrath overflowed my retainer, "What… What was that?! I dare you to repeat that!"

"Maya!" Frowning, I warn. She grimaces, wringing her hands as she takes a step back, "Raiko-san, could you kindly cease these petty attempts to instigate an argument?"

Eyes narrowing, she eyes Maya sideways again, "I did nothing of the sort. I merely stated a fact, that *Tsukuyomi* herself suggested involving Ikaruga into our own business. And as the High Shinpan I am, I refuse to allow such a treason to escape unpunished."

"Treason, you say?" Maya whispers, her hands are shaking, "What has you casting such defamation upon my person, I wonder?"

Meeting her gaze, Raiko-san scowls, "… Under who are you stationed and what is your callsign as of now, *Tsukuyomi?"*

"Wh- That has nothing-"

"Could you kindly answer the question?" She presses, Maya groans in frustration, I sigh and shake my head. It is always the same between these two, I wonder why they never were amicable with one another.

Maya's gaze crumbles, fades to dust as she tightly veils her sight and whispers the answer to the query, "… IRG 16th Battalion, callsign Horn 3."

"Oh, is that so? If my memory isn't failing me, that unit is none other than the Ikaruga House's personal battalion, is it not?"

"Raiko-san, enough," I glare her way, voice low, "Maya has remained loyal to me, her position in said battalion is something I myself ordered many years ago. There is no need for such accusations to fall on her person."

"… Yet, one cannot deny the overbearing presence the Ikaruga House possesses in this palace, and the influence it holds over the other Houses. I cannot help but to think that… perhaps, your retainer should not be someone who has served another Regent for so long a time."

"… After not seeing us for so long, this is how you choose to conduct yourself?"

"Precisely because I do not know when we'll meet again I speak as such, Yuuhi-sama. Your retainer might be fulfilling her duties as of now, yet I implore you not to forget where her loyalty lies," She affirms, the link between our gazes never breaking, never waning.

"What are you even accusing me of?" Maya threatens, "I'd find you far more worthy of such suspicions, refusing to release the project if it isn't under the circumstances you desire, even in front one of Her Highness' direct requests."

"Well, if you insist I can refresh your memory, dog," She narrows her eyes once more, whatever thwarted the animosity giving in, "Who

was the one who opposed my directives during Shura's Dance, wasting crucial time on the mission?"

Maya recoils, a step back as her lips quiver, "That… I was merely-"

"Who was the one that surveyed my unit's efforts after the fall of Yokohama, interfering with our investigations on multiple occasions?"

"I… I was not aware of-"

"Raiko-san, please let this matter rest. Nothing will come out of-"

Clearly not hearing me, or not caring to stop, she swiftly points a finger straight at Maya's eyes, a dagger at her throat, as her own eyes came under a draconian spell, "You are not worth our trust after your *devoted service* to the Ikaruga House during the invasion. Such is the reason why Takeru-uesama refused your collaboration when the Swordbreakers were still in function. If he did not deem you worth our trust back then, I see no reason to give you the benefit of the doubt when you've done nothing to cleanse the image you portrayed during the '99."

The mention, the name emptied my insides once again as the hold covered my neck whole. Inhaling deeply, to halt the harsh brush of anger into my canvas, to resist the embers, the echoes of the dreams. Thus, I took a moment of pause, yet…

Restrain withered in Maya, she hastily stepped towards Raiko-san, "How dare you mention his name… after you misguided him into such violence, you dare speak his name?!"

Observing her well, Raiko-san's fair features did not even waver. She merely narrowed her eyes at Maya, uncaring and cold as he used to be, "Misguided? Me? I'd like to you to not talk about which you know nothing about, dog of Ikaruga."

"Do not utter such balderdash," Hands wring, rough outlines of clear anger taint her face, her rising voice, "Who else other than you could have influenced Takeru into following such a vengeful path?"

Now frowning, scorching ice breathed through her lips, "Such words prove you know nothing about him. Takeru-uesama chose his own path on his own volition, as you did back then."

"Most interesting, coming from the person who prevented me from meeting him at all," Maya retaliates.

"Which was only a precaution I had to take, after you harmed him so savagely," Quietly, she thus slays any remaining composure my retainer had left.

Combusting alive, those eyes narrowed, those hands tightened as they stared at each other, "… I did nothing of the sort, you merely deceived him into-"

"Takeru-uesama was who refused to see you, because he no longer believed you worth his trust. And considering the current state of affairs, I still believe his judgment to be correct," She states, relentless downpour of aggression.

"That was only because you twisted his-"

"Maya, stand down," I order, firm and loud. When she holds my gaze, I frown as I used to do, endowing the embers once more. Maya recoils, sharply bowing down and taking quite a few steps back. Not dispelling the tension in me, I silently stare at both of them, who seem to sheathe their arguing wishes upon my gaze, "… Cpt. Amato, it has been two years already. Maya has already proved she was merely lacking intel on your operations."

Despite the bow she gives, the animosity did not thaw, "Yet, she herself is the one who mentions, the one who proposes to involve the Ikaruga House in our House's matters."

"As the Shogun, I require my fellows to prioritize the Empire's wellbeing over our own interests. Do remember the words of the Mugen Kidou, as well as the honor code."

"… That extends to all Regent Houses, not solely the one whose Head is the Shogun. Would you then be wishing to order me to relinquish my project to the Ikaruga House?"

Maya sighs, tapping her glasses as her voice cools down back to normal, "If it gained us the fastest approval without further discussions falling upon Her Highness… perhaps that is the correct choice."

"… I see. It would seem I was guided to the wrong room," Frowning, my guest slowly stands up.

"Excuse me, what is the meaning of-" Halting my words with a glare, a glare that resembles his all too much, she proceeds to bow down.

"I had asked to speak with Yuuhi-sama, the Head of the Koubuin House, yet it would seem… all that's left within you is a docile Shogun. I shall be taking my leave," She thus promptly turns around.

"Wh… Halt where you stand," I order, she looks back, "Cpt. Amato, I am both the Shogun and the Head of our fellowship. Such provocations shall only bring you further setbacks."

"It does not look as such from my eyes," She squints them, briefly glaring at Maya, "For you to so easily accept to hand over our research to other Houses… shielding this blatant mingling by saying it is for the good of the Empire… If that is how you wish to proceed, I shall resign my position from the project."

"… Why are you showing your fangs so easily, Raiko-san? I had believed you also wished to lead us to the peaceful world he so desired."

Scowling, her voice descends, the cold blizzard looks straight into my eyes, "Because I have not forgotten. Do you believe Takeru-uesama would have favored such a course of action?"

"… We must deliver results with the food plant, then perhaps we can once more offer it to the rest of the world to gain us valuable funds. It is a vital piece to negotiate, it could allow us to parley with Ikaruga-dono quite easily."

"You're assuming he would relent on his pressure," Looking away, venom overflows her lips, "And to hand over our advancements? If you wish to continue chasing this naive ideal of a forced peace, then do so. If you wish to keep compromising your power, to keep sacrificing your influence, you're free to act as you deem fit. However…" Taking some steps towards me, accusing and aggressive, "I will have to request you relinquish the position of the Head of the House, you're clearly only going to bring us to our knees in your quest for martyrdom," She states, almost hatefully.

… Just as he did… when we argued at Hakuryo…

"… Do you see me as such, Raiko-san?"

She nods, unabated, "Indeed I do. It is one thing to search for a compromise, to try to reach a truce in the required negotiations you face. However, you're preemptively readying yourself to lose your power. If your very first card to play is to knee and offer your boons to the rest of the nobility, then you're free to act as you deem fir. However, those of us who have supported your wishes would rather you stand firm in rule."

"Yet, that won't grant me any favors now, would it? I require the support of the other Regents, and Ikaruga-dono could very well aid us in reaching said compromise with his influence," As much as it pains my lips to admit…

Once more, the scowl surges forth. Sudden, harsh strokes of crimson taint her eyes, and Raiko-san can no longer hold my gaze,

"Is that so? Then… If you've determined such martyrdom to be your sole path forward… Why do you not marry Ikaruga instead?"

"Wha… What did you just say?" Teeth gritting, a cold sensation covers my back.

"If you wish to gain Ikaruga's unconditional support, you could court either him or one of his Shinpan retainers," She states, and we glare at each other.

"… I would never surrender myself in such a way, my First Gentleman must be someone who adheres to the code of the Koubuin House, someone who can stand by me in support of my wishes," Both as a Regent and as a woman, and simply uttering, pondering such words… brings back the grasp, the grip to my neck, pushes the air out through my teeth as I lick my lips, as his voice echoes again, "Could you perhaps enlighten me on what spurs such an irreverent inquiry from you, Cpt. Amato?"

"It is simple, Yuuhi-sama. I wish you to would clarify your standing for all those of us who you have neglected in these years," She then glares at Maya, barely subduing the scorching within her eyes, "If you have chosen to surrender your powers to the complete service of the other Regents' demands, then I ask you to give your vassals the freedom to act as they deem fit. We serve the values of your House, and if you choose to not uphold them then-"

"Silence," A quiet warning, a straight gaze into her. Inhaling sharply, a void rising from my stomach into my throat. I again speak from my stomach, "I understand your concerns, and they do hold some truth to them. I admit I have been neglecting my duties as a Head, imposing onto you all the order to always bow down, to be the firsts to relent. My apologies," I thus give her a short but deep bow. Yet, it does not release me from the frown, the accusing and disappointed frown I know he would have endowed, for I know Takeru wouldn't… have supported this course of action.

"Y-Your Highness!" Maya steps towards me, paling, "You need not show such gestures, you are our ruler. We would follow you to hell itself if you so ordered!"

"Please keep your opinions to yourself, *Tsukuyomi,"* She retorts, pure toxic roused further, "Many of us wish to be able to uphold the values we hold dear, to protect our people instead of always have to bend the knee in front of the other Regents' and the UN's demands," Raiko-san fires off as aggressively as always, absolute anger anchored in her voice and tight posture.

Which causes my retainer to once again scowl in full force, "You dare to cast doubts on Her Highness' wishes? Have you no shame?!"

"Maya, stand back," I order, she flinches, "Raiko-san raises valid points, I have been too passive as of late."

It is true, all I've been doing is chasing the quickest solution. Never hesitating to obtain the result, no matter what was asked of me. All to safeguard our peace, so that no more innocent blood has to be spilled… Because one such as myself must not ever waver, for I am a guiding light that must forge the path towards future peace. Yet… by never questioning myself, by being hyper-fixated in my… yes, in my own selfish wish to never see blood be spilled again, I have allowed things to almost spiral out of control.

If the IJA had decided to try and root out Kurechika-dono in their frustration at our current situation, what would I have been able to do, realistically speaking? Try to parley with them or the government? Request UN support and leave the city to protect the people? And then… what cards would I have left? To see my people murder each other? To fail to keep them away from those shadows that almost engulfed us entirely during the invasion?

It is the same with these negotiations, at one point the only option I'll have left is… to entrust myself to fate. Perhaps, I could take action if I still had my Takemikazuchi if violence was chosen. If not then, I

could face either the IJA or the IRG in the issues they have… to try and shoulder the burden on my own once again… as I've been doing to not upset either side…

…

Yet, if violence is again used to solve our inner problems… someone could then take the same path Takeru once took. Again, my passivity, my constant agreement to the expectations I am obliged to answer to would spawn a heartless blade… and my words might not be enough to sheathe it this time…

Hunching over, the crown again drills into my hair and skin. Sighing heavily, the cold feeling covers my back whole. Thus, I shiver before looking up again, "I admit, I have only been trying to not tip the scales, the balance of this Empire of ours," Slowly entwining my fingers, I frontally meet her gaze, calming down my tone, "Yet, I also do not think it wise to endow such aggressiveness as you do, Raiko-san. I will endeavor to bring about favorable results for our House, while also maintaining the frail peace we have today until we can begin to restore our land. And I ask you to once more place your trust in me, I assure you the tailwind is soon to come," I nod her way, not faltering upon her inquiring gaze.

Some moments pass, as do some clouds which obstruct the illumination. After a pause, a long extension of silence, Raiko-san eases up her posture, loosens up her arms, and bows down in apology.

"My sincerest apologies, Yuuhi-sama," Sigh… So you *still* refuse to call me otherwise, "However, how can you ascertain the tailwind is soon to come? From my humble outpost the sky looks grim indeed, and what we've discussed and your own complexion would grant credence to such assumptions," Kneeling again, she stares in concern as she folds her arms. Maya sighs and starts taking a few steps back.

Brushing my hair, the embers away, I try to inhale calmly for a moment, "… There have been some developments that have given me hope we'll hear good news soon. Your concern is noted, yet, I must ask you to remain steadfast for the time being," Brows still arching in dejection, she relents a nod, "Now… Do you think the food plant project can be brought to fruition without the support of the Ikaruga House?"

"I rather negotiate with the Takatsukasa or the Saionji, or even delay the plans than to continue to relinquish power to the Ikaruga House. And if you desire to gain their support, allow me to inform you me and my fellows shall resign our positions from the project," She states, again firmly staring at me.

"Such warning is unnecessary. I… was only considering the suggestion, is all," If he does return… I wouldn't be able to look into his eyes were he to learn I surrendered such a vital project to another Regent, "I shall ask my advisors to once more negotiate with the Takatsukasa House after the current tasks are dealt with. I trust you shall be available when the time comes?" Finally smiling, she bows my way, "Well then… I suppose you would now be wishing to discuss the matters of your unit?"

Raiko-san nods, eyeing Maya sideways once more, "Yes, Yuuhi-sama. However… I would like to ask *Tsukuyomi to* give us some privacy. I am not comfortable speaking of this in the presence of someone who serves another Regent," She insists, and their stares clash once more.

"Sigh… Very well, I shall grant your wish," If only to not have you two keep fighting all day long.

"Your Highness, there is no need to give in to such demands," Maya states, understandably adusted, "I am your retainer, and I shall stand by you."

"However, you also must be returning to your duties in Kitanomaru," I admit, which causes her to flinch as Raiko-san narrows her glare

upon my retainer, "And there are other office duties you must see to before you depart, of course," Namely, the incoming report from Mana.

"Yet… Uh…" Maya's tone crumbles, she shivers for a second. Worriedly staring at me, she then looks at Raiko-san, and finally my retainer once more sighs, "I see… As you wish, Your Highness," She bows down deeply, as deeply as her voice fell, as her eyes lost all luster, "Now then, if you'd excuse me," Standing in attention she salutes me, then marches towards the door without sparing a gaze or any parting words for our guest.

Choosing to finish my now lukewarm tea, leaving the liquid in my mouth for a moment, tranquility envelops me. By that relaxation the cold is driven away, the echoes subside and my breathing eases up again.

"… You truly do dislike Maya, do you Raiko-san?"

"Dislike feels inappropriate. Despise fails to convey the feeling," She admits.

"Sigh… I know it might be pointless, yet I trust Maya with my life. She truly was merely in the dark regarding your operations. And… I won't claim to know in detail what transpired between you two during those months after Yokohama fell… yet I'm certain Maya would never have done anything to harm Takeru."

"… We will have to disagree on that front, Yuuhi-sama," She thus says, low, before shaking her head, "In any case, I do not desire to fuel any unnecessary altercations. If she keeps quiet, I shan't retaliate."

"Maya simply… has a strong view of you, as you do of her. I believe she might have thought you brought the child in an attempt to wrest for sympathy, perhaps."

"Hmph, as if I would subject Fujikagi to such uses… Please do not clarify her intents, it only darkens the already pale image I had of that dog," She fumes, understandably. It was my miss, I shan't deny it.

"If I may ask… Why did you bring the boy with you?" Let's try to divert the talks momentarily, so that we can reach the core matters under a more amicable atmosphere.

"As I said, I cannot simply him alone," She nods to herself, arms folded.

"Is there a problem in Hibiya I was not aware of?"

"No, nothing of the sort. It's that, while I'm nearby, Fujikagi stays put reading or playing, but as soon as he notices I'm gone my fellows have told me he starts wailing and complaining much, wanting to know of my whereabouts," She then sighs, "Such is the reason why I have not protested against your decision to have me do office work as I oversee Hibiya's outpost, for it means I can look after him without issues. However… these two years have been rough on me, to tend to him on my own…" Eyelids descend slowly, lips twist inwards, a sorrowful, wistful expression hewn into her face as she once more sighs, "Truly, I only brought him here due to that, and his curious questions about the Castles and what kind of person the Shogun was. I believe he was surprised to see you," Giving a small smile, slowly she treads her hair behind her ears.

"… I suppose he's in that age, where everything piques his interest," Slowly breathing in, a hand rests on the base of my neck, "Is everything well in Hibiya, then?"

"Yes, we have no complains, Yuuhi-sama," Back to her firm form, she nods, "However… There was something I wanted to notify you of."

"And what would that be?"

"You see, some days ago, we noticed a train arrived out of schedule at the station," She says, low. I gulp, nodding as I gesture her to continue, "It would seem one of the HC's Secretaries was the one in it, along some of his men. Our scouts said the UN's HC was in an uproar at the time, and my sources there did not wish to divulge what was the cause of such hectic behavior. However, they did tell me everything took a swift change after this Secretary arrived."

"… I see, so that happened…" She's talking of the report that came to lessen… the cadet's punishment. While Mana reported the situation to me, someone else did so to the HC. Which would mean… all of them now know of the name 'Takeru Shirogane'… If he ever returns…

"Yuuhi-sama, what is the matter?" She inquires, worriedly staring.

"Nothing… I was merely apprehensively pondering on what it could mean."

"Is that so? I had heard… Meiya-sama was harmed during her trial. Does such worry stem from that affair?" Her voice lowers, eyes sharpen, as whenever she proposed to… crush someone's fangs for me or Takeru.

"… Yes, it is related to that. However, that issue will be resolved soon. Worry not, Mana is handling it at the moment."

"Understood," Dejectedly, her readiness evaporates.

"In any case… I actually had a few requests to ask of you," Once more dulling my smile and speaking in a commanding tone, I stare into her eyes. She nods in silence, awaiting the orders, "First, I would need you to… take to the field once more. There is one matter that I require intel on."

"What does it entail?" She curiously inquires, unable not to smile. After all, it has been… a long time since I've sent Raiko-san to the

field. I believe, since Kyoko-dono perished and we lost the support of the Takatsukasa House.

"A certain report reached my hands, a most dreadful report truth be told. There are many teams scouring the field to check the veracity of the papers, yet we do not have enough hands as is," She nods, full focus on my figure. Seeing such honesty in her features, how we can share words so easily, it reminds me of days long gone, it reignites the shiver on my back, the craving to divert my gaze despite knowing he is not there, "Thus, I'd be wishing to request your squadron to scout certain areas near the Niigata frontline. You would have to spend time away from here for this mission, and I'd like to ask you to begin the preparations immediately if at all possible."

"Hmm… It would take a day, perhaps two. What does this scouting entails? Will there be other fellows aiding in this search?"

"Yes, as it were… I was thinking on contacting Hikami-san for this mission as well."

"Huh? Is… that so," She says, lips again twisting. I suppose, to field her along one of her past squadmates must… make her wish to sortie alongside her, yet Hikami-san is not serving the IRG as of now, sadly.

Shutting my sight for a moment, I again entwine my fingers to quell the minute quiver in them, to prevent the desire to scour my neck once more, "… Thus, would you be willing to accept this mission?"

"If you grant me time to prepare properly, it would be my pleasure. However, you have yet to disclose the details, Yuuhi-sama," She says, eyes narrowing.

"Sigh… I shall give you the report shortly, to hear your thoughts on the situation. In any case, regarding the second-"

A strong knocking halts my words, a knocking in a rhythm I recognize as Tsuhi's way of announcing herself on the few occasions

she does so. Why would she be coming to my presence herself once again? Well… Since Maya should still be here, it should be safe to allow her entrance.

"You may enter," I loudly say, so that she can hear me from the door.

Shortly after, Tsuhi enters the room by herself. As slowly as usual she approaches, taking a moment to stare, to gauge our complexions. Stopping some steps behind Raiko-san, she stands in attention.

"Yuuhi-sama, Mana has called."

"… Pardon?"

"I said Mana has called, and she says the report is urgent," She says, immutable.

"Excuse me?" Why are you mentioning that now? Tsuhi, what in the Heavens do you think you're doing? I… I had ordered-

"What is this about, if I may ask?" Understandably, Raiko-san firmly stares my way.

"Ahem… It is nothing. There are some negotiations underway with Yokohama, is all," I reply, barely managing to subdue the quiver in my neck. If Raiko-san were to learn of-

"Yuuhi-sama, I have the communicator with me," Tsuhi says, far closer than before, now standing merely a few feet from my position.

"Tsuhi, we were in the middle of dire business," Raiko-san wearily says, shaking her head, "Please, give us some moments. It shouldn't take too long, I presume."

"She speaks the truth," I affirm with a nod, "It won't be more than a few minutes. You may wait outside, Tsuhi," And cease whatever foolish attempt at a joke you're doing. I am in no mood for your taunts today, so *kindly* step outside.

"No, I believe you should inform Raiko-sama of this as well," She refuses, holding my gaze, "After all, going by their words, procuring a meeting might backfire as of now."

… Huh? Wait a moment, why did they tell her of the report? Did Maya have to leave for Kitanomaru instantly? No… What does she mean, a meeting might backfire? Did… something happen to-

"Yuuhi-sama, what is this about?" My guest inquired, clearly concerned as she switched her sight from me to Tsuhi.

"… It is nothing. I shall be overseeing this business myself."

Tsuhi shakes her head, brows narrowing, "I do not believe it wise, Yuuhi-sama," Still calm as a lake, she states, "By your lonesome this situation might not yield positive results."

… What?

That I'm not enough? That I'm insufficient? What is… she implying?

Fingers coil in, nails rake my palms. Inhaling slowly as I lead back, the shifting weight atop my head once more ignited the pressure on my nape. Choking a strand of hair does me no good, it cannot halt the shifting spectrum in my face as I can tell I am no frowning.

"My decision is final, 2nd Lt Yasomaga," I harshly order, Raiko-san seems puzzled and perplexed, "Take your leave, and await my call."

Yet… Instead of showing more signs of displeasure, Tsuhi smiled and began to chuckle, "Oh, is that so? Yet, considering what little Mana-sama has disclosed to this humble servant-"

"Silence! Such matters are-"

"… all this attitude of yours will achieve is to bring further harm into Takeru," She finished, both her words and my stride.

…

And for a moment, nothing could I hear or feel, even the intimate pressure of the crown, or the breeze coming in.

"… What do you mean?" That I'll harm… Wait, does that mean they have confirmed-

"Yuuhi-sama…" A low, hoarse voice releases me from my inner woes. Raiko-san was still as a mountain, her entire being subtly shaking, "… You wouldn't be testing my loyalty now, would you?"

"What… O-Of course I am not. I would never employ his name for such ploys."

"Then… What does this mean? Tsuhi, you did say 'Takeru', did you not? Are you saying…" Elbows compact, crash onto her sides, as if holding her breath underwater she remains stiff while glaring our way.

"Yuuhi-sama, may I?" Tsuhi asks, bowing.

"… In the first place, this is your miss. Why did you-"

"The report received so requires," She insists, now holding my gaze firmly, "As I told you before, you cannot remain idle."

"Sigh… However…" What does that mean? Why would my attitude harm him? He wouldn't…

"So, you're saying… he is…" Raiko-san again inquired, once more unable to finish.

Tsuhi again looks my way, I relent a nod as I sigh, "Raiko-sama, please remain composed. It would seem that, somehow, Takeru had survived the dropping of the G-Bombs during Operation Lucifer."

"… What?"

"I said, it would seem-"

"Not that!" Raiko-san berates her, loudly and out of breath, "How in the Heavens did… How did…"

"Ahem… The specifics can wait until later, however, around a month ago, Takeru returned to the Empire as a cadet in the UN. And after many trials and misunderstandings, Mana-sama and those in Yokohama have finally attained undeniable proof of his identity, in their own words," Taking a pause, Tsuhi smiles at the slack-jawed Raiko-san, "So, yes, for some odd miracle… Takeru is still alive, albeit with certain lakes in his memories. As of now, we are determining how to arrange his safe return."

"… As of now?" Her teeth gritting, biting her lower lip, it would seem the report had only served to ignite the hellish furnace of a wrath fierce enough to melt mountains, "You knew he was… all this time and… you said *nothing* for so long…"

"Cpt. Amato, please remain calm," I quickly order, "It hasn't been so long that…"

My voice drowned, unable to depart from my lips. All the apprehension, the stiff molding posture I had endowed in fear melted at once. Tsuhi herself also seemed surprised, mouth slightly open and also bereft of words.

"He's… alive? Are you being truthful?" She inquired firmly yet low, as if not daring to hope. All the while… her eyes were watering.

Not enough to release tears, not so little that one could dismiss it as a minor annoyance. Tightly holding her breath, never breaking eye contact, my nod served only to further enhance said posture as she embraced her arms, taking short breaths as she veiled her sight.

After a long moment of silence, she whispered, "Yuuhi-sama, since when… since when did you knew? Since when had he returned to the Empire?!" She demands, almost rising to her feet, embers lurking behind the dampness in her eyes.

"Peace, it hasn't been that long… Little more than a month ago."

"A month ago? Why did you wait so long to even try to confirm his safety?!"

"Sigh… I had not been made aware of this until the sorrowful incident of the CCSE. And since then… I've ordered the cadet to be observed closely, in case he were a faker."

"… And why did you not notify the Chains of this grave a matter? Had you sent us to Yokohama-"

"Cpt Amato, you know we cannot clash with the UN nor reveal Takeru's identity," I impose, she relents, "Furthermore, the risk of the man being a faker was decidedly high."

"Well… I can understand your apprehension," Caressing her hair, it does little to douse her mood, "So then, if he took part in that CCSE, was he placed alongside Meiya-sama? Does that mean Takeru-uesama is… stationed in Yokohama base?" A frown raises in concern, in disgust, "How is he as of now?" Raiko-san quickly inquires, edging closer, "Has he been treated fairly? What was of him during the CCSE?""

"Yes, he has remained in good spirits for the time being. Mana did notify me he had some altercations from time to time with certain people, but he has adapted well enough. As of now he's under a punishment due to what occurred during the CCSE, however. All points to… the cadet arriving on the twenty second of October to Yokohama."

"I see… So Takeru-uesama was who defended Meiya-sama from the chasers…" Nodding in realization, she relaxes for a moment. Yet, sharply opening her eyes, a finger tapping one of her brows, she begins to groan to herself, "The twenty second… The twenty second of October…" She repeats, every one lower and lower as if a tender bell it were.

"Raiko-san? Is something the matter?"

"… No, it is nothing," She takes a deep breath, folding her arms, "I was trying to… cross reference some odd occurrences with that date is all. So… Ahem, would you now possess veritable proof of this man's identity, Yuuhi-sama?"

"That is what this report should grant us," I nod, the confirmation sending a small jolt down my back, "Tsuhi, this proof you spoke of… Are Mana and Daizaburou-san absolutely certain of his identity then?"

She nods, "Indeed. The words he said during the meeting they held seemed plentiful. However, there are other concerns they raised."

"Uh, Yuuhi-sama? Could you perhaps enlighten me on the overall situation? Why was a meeting requested? And what of that fox? Does she know who Takeru-uesama is?" She inquires, again firmly staring.

"I suppose I could notify you of the situation later, if Yuuhi-sama so allows," Tsuhi diverts, and now I alone am under the dread-lock of Raiko-san's gaze.

"… Sigh. I suppose there is little to be done now. However… Raiko-san, you shan't take actions that might impair our efforts thus far. This situation is… delicate."

She narrows her eyes, obviously offended, "That was unnecessary. So… So is Takeru-uesama truly… alive?"

"It would… It would seem, yes. Even if some memories seem to be missing."

"However, how… how can you know it's truly him and not a faker?" All stoic remnants scattered, all that remained were hesitant, scarred fireflies in her eyes, a low tone in confusion.

"Well… all points to the man having possession of a Minaru Kamui," My guest recoils in shock, "Also, some of his words have… lent some credence to our doubts. Thus, Mana and Daizaburou-san would have a meeting with the man, under the guise of learning of where the blade came from and if he had any intel to mend the… well, empty data banks."

"I see… So… What will you do if you confirm your suspicions? Would you require my services to recover him from Yokohama?"

Unable to once more hunch over, I inhale sharply as I look into the wildfire within her eyes, "I know you… valued him much, yet hastiness will not work in our favor. I suppose I could… allow you to hear the report, if you give word you'll follow my directives to ensure his safe return to my side."

Immediately bowing down, she loudly and firmly speaks up, "As you command, Yuuhi-sama."

"… Even if I ask you to remain away from Yokohama?"

"I shall find ways to make myself useful to this cause without going against your wishes, milady," She affirms, all looseness, all quivers replaced by raw determination as if readying a slash, "If this is… if he truly is… alive…" Taking a moment for a deep breath, her gaze cascades down, "Then… Then, how could I do anything other than support you? Do you also not wish to see him once more, to see for yourself if this is true?"

… *Also* wish to see him, huh. No… I must focus, "Yes, I… I want a resolution to come soon."

"Truthfully, I cannot comprehend how have you managed to endure the uncertainty for so long," She sighs, dulling her readiness, eyelids almost closing as she runs a hand over her hair, "I… do not think I would have been able to… rein myself in had you not confirmed this… This truly is not some test, is it? Takeru-uesama truly is…" I

nod, her shoulders compact once more and she clutches her chest for dear life, taking short breaths.

Gulping slowly, also finding myself short of air, I entwine my fingers, trying to raise an imposing facade, "Thus, you give word you'll abide by my orders?"

"I always have done so, milady," She asserts, "What else could I desire other than to serve you in bringing Takeru-uesama back to your side? If such concerns are what has forced your hand as of late… then, as one of the four Shinpan that watches over the fellowship, the query itself is insulting. I shall do all in my power to bring him back."

Releasing the tension, I nod her way, "… Very well then, I shall allow you to know so long as you follow my orders."

A moment to regain her poise, Raiko-san quickly nods, "However, if you may allow… Would you wish for him to remain as he was, or-"

"We shall see how he's faring as of now," I state, she once again nods, "I assume… you would wish to again serve under him, as you did during the invasion?"

"Besides him, if you so allow, milady," She counters, holding my gaze.

A moment passes and she doesn't relent, so I allow a nod to not spur any altercations now, "We shall see to it once he returns, then. However, no words goes to his other fellows unless I so order," I order, she quickly bows, "Now, Tsuhi. Is Mana-"

She bends one knee, offering me the communicator, "The connection is secure, and I took the liberty to also trigger the speaker," She informs.

A moment of complaining at her attitude later, I grasp the comms. Air squeezing its way into my lungs, slowly I bring it closer to my lips. A

cold brushing against my nape, a moment of blankness, then I sigh and press the button.

"… Mana?"

"Yes, here we are, Yuuhi-sama," The static of the connection did not hide the weariness, the apprehension that had taken root in her tone, "Can you hear me well?"

"Yes. So… Tsuhi had said you had found proof of… the man's identity?"

"Yes, we did… However, well… Please remain calm, I shall detail what we learned in utmost detail," She affirms, and after coughing she thus begins to tell.

…

"… So he still refuses to mention who handed him the blade, huh," I sigh, coldness of dusk enveloping me.

"That is an ill omen," Raiko-san says, wincing, "For Takeru-uesama to refuse such inquiries so adamantly… it would equal he holds no trust towards them, not even giving them the benefit of the doubt," She looks down in concern, Tsuhi nods in agreement.

Mana, who had not heard them, continued her detailing, "… We believe that whoever that person was had owed Takeru-sama some form of favor, for they knew of the Minaru Kamui's royal purpose yet did not disclose it for over two years."

"That is true, it is odd the blade could make its way back to its owners hand unimpeded," I nod, tracing some hair, awaiting the intel I need to hear, "Thus, I suppose no other inquiries were forwarded regarding the blade?"

"No, we let that matter rest then," She affirms, the other two nodding to the words.

"Well enough. So, did the cadet… accept to visit the Capital at some point?"

"… No, he did not," Halting my breathing, my grasp on the comms tightened, "As a matter of fact, he was very defensive on that matter. However, this is when we acquired the proof we had been looking for, Yuuhi-sama."

"Is that so? What came of it? Did Takeru… recall anything?" Subduing the urge to press the speaker onto my ear, my heartbeats palpable on my neck, I awaited the orders.

The second it took Mana to order her words felt far longer, far tortuous than it should have, "It would seem he has recalled pieces of his earlier days, of his parents."

She then tells of how Takeru spoke of both of his parents on his own, detailing the looks of his house in Hiiragi, the position Kageyuki-san had as a Royal Guard, and even how his mother had died when he was young. Yet, the delay, the hesitation, the low tone Mana employed did not carry auspicious news.

"… Mana, what was it that went wrong? Did Kouzuki interfere somehow?"

"No, at all. The Vice Commander actually had tried to ease his temper, Yuuhi-sama," She relents voice prey to static and not because of the comms.

"His… Are you saying he grew adusted at you two?"

"Yes… It wasn't as back then, it was more subdued yet it was clear Takeru-sama was upset, pained at the situation. Kouzuki said he was still in shock after learning of his parents' passing and how they, well… lack any data in their profiles about ever having a son," She admits, low.

Oh… That's… Oh, by the Holy Emperor… What a miss…

I could have… rearranged the databases… I could have easily fixed their profiles without much issues. Obviously, Takeru would only grow more confused, all the more fearful when seeing he did not exist in his parents' profiles…

Holding my breath, I run a hand over my face, "Did… Did you manage to at least grant him some reassurance?" I lift my sight, trying to do so to my tone as well. Raiko-san had a wince engraved into her face, again tightly holding herself in check, while Tsuhi was standing still with a small frown in her face.

"We could not, I'm loath to admit," Maya dejectedly affirms, "A bad choice of words on my part caused him to flare up in anger, and since then the meeting spiraled out of control," Once again, my tongue seems to be retracting into my throat, my exhalation strong enough to reach the hand which held the comms, "H-However, he did not remain in such anger for long," Mana tries to comfort, "I also believe he might be confused, is all. Kouzuki did affirm she'd welcome our aid were we to bring some intel regarding his life. And this is, well, the core of this report," Coughing, she takes as second in silence. All three of us also shift in the pause, awaiting the words, "As it were, Takeru-sama seems to be afflicted over what became of him after Kageyuki-san's passing. He was convinced he was left alone, and that if he had been adopted it only brought him further suffering."

"… Pardon me?"

"Eh? Ah, uh, as I said, due to the confusion in his memories and the databases, how he's still registered as a 'Shirogane', Takeru-sama was very adamant in his position. Since everything points to him not being adopted and he has not yet recalled what was of him after Kageyuki-san perished, he-"

"Mana, by that point, we had already met. Are you saying Takeru does not… remember us?"

"… That is the case, milady."

…

Wh-What… B-But…

But you're… to me, you're an irreplaceable existence. My first and only truthful friend… my brother… and also… my trusted confidant, my right hand, the one who always stands behind me in protection… Takeru, you're…

Sheathing the emptiness, I force the inquiry outwards, "… Mana, what did you do under his queries?"

"We tried to assuage his concerns to no avail," Falling ashes would make noise enough to drown her voice, perhaps even be more bright than her expression as of now, "It would seem Takeru-sama is conflicted on that matter the most, on what was of him after his father's death. Kouzuki herself rose many fair reservations about him coming to the Capital, due to the… possibility of someone raising claims of identity theft."

"What? Who on Earth would even… No, a moment…" Someone who would wish to remove Takeru from that base… If not someone who held a grudge for who he was before his 'death', who Kouzuki could not know about, then it is someone who harbors ill will for his recent exploits. Someone who Kouzuki would be aware of…

…

Takeru did aid Meiya's squad so that they could pass the CCSE. And he thwarted the attempts of those chasers to harm them. So if anyone could wish him harm…

Looking up, Raiko-san had once more endowed a draconian glare, nodding my way as we made eye contact. So she suspects the same, someone from the UN's HC or one who influences them wishes to have Takeru gone. Someone who would rather keep Meiya and her squadmates sealed as cadets.

"I suppose… this would mean Kouzuki is looking after Takeru?" I ask, barely able to raise my voice, to rein in the embers.

"Yes, all points to that being the case," She quickly affirms, "However, she did gave us her agreement to delve into Takeru-sama's affairs on our own accord by granting her intel first. If we could bestow some clarity to the situation, perhaps that could aid his recovery?"

"I disagree," Raiko-san says, "I suggest we remove him from Yokohama post haste, it is too dangerous to leave him in that base."

"Excuse me?" Mana asks, puzzled, "Was that… Your Highness, forgive the inquiry, but-"

"Yes, Raiko-san is currently in my presence. I shall inform you of why later. So…" Gulping hard, I cannot rein it in any longer, "Mana, why did you not disclose what you knew of Kageyuki-san back then?"

"Huh? Well, I did not knew if you would favor-"

"You had confirmation of his identity, to inform Takeru that your inquiry was fueled by how you were a fellow to his father would have eased his confusion, I'm certain."

"Your Highness, I do not believe that would have been the case."

"… And why not?" Unable to not frown, I demand.

"Well… Takeru-sama had said himself how he did not trust in the nobility, even using the same words he… said when angered during his time as a shadow," She says, it brings me pause, another cold feeling on my back, "Also, I believe he might have suspected me of being lying without proof. However, when we offered to present Kageyuki-san's folder, Takeru-sama himself refused the offer, saying-
"

"What do you mean, he refused?!" Hitting the wooden floor, I can feel my hands shaking, something within tearing, opening an old wound.

Quietly, almost whispering, Mana proceeds to detail that moment of the talk, how they circled around queries, how he remained in denial. Yet, the words she notifies, the words he chose to use…

It truly is… It truly was him… So, he truly was alive all this time? It was no faker… Indeed, to detail his home with such precision, to make such gestures…

Takeru was… No… Takeru *is* alive…

The oppression I've been feeling melts away, opening the doors to a dance of emotions. That which I held within breaks loose, my vision grows distorted, tears fall slowly. My heartbeats clang faster and faster against my throat, trying to blast, to burst away from me as I hold my mouth tightly in a futile gesture, for I cannot stop weeping.

Like a lone leaf being swept around by the winds, I let myself wander to those days, those so distant nights, the days before the war came to our land. When he was still here, laughing by my side. When he did an utmost effort to adapt, to meet the required expectations of our ways of life. When he always was my tailwind, a smile ready to bring me back to my good spirits.

… It has been two years. No, a little more than that. Since we met battle for the very first time he had never smiled as he used to, he never gave me that delight of hearing his laughter once more.

A hollowness spawns on my chest, as I torment myself with the echoes our times together, both good and bad. Forcing me to remember when I wasn't enough, when he pushed me away. It tugs at my heart, it burns my insides. A gash so deep that no amount of time could heal, relieving his pain, remembering how powerless I was to console him.

For not all my memories with him are pleasant ones. How I was hurt by him here, in this same place. How he broke his vow, and left me all alone. How I failed him, when his heart was crumbling.

It all brings me pause, and makes me shiver inside. Because if this isn't a clone, a spy… if this is truly Takeru…

… It means I cannot remain idle, regardless of why he did not return to me after Lucifer. If he once again falls into anger… I cannot leave him alone, yet pushing him to return to the Capital will only worsen his disposition…

"Yuuhi-sama," Raiko-san calls, I look at her, "You must begin to take measures to bring Takeru-uesama back home."

"… No, not now. Pressuring him will do us no good, furthermore we need to delve into who might wish him harm."

"What are you saying?! Are you planning to leave him in the clutches of the UN, then?" She repines, eyes narrowed.

I don't know if she meant it, yet, the insinuation that I would abandon him again… is enough to break the bindings of my ire, thus I frown her way in honesty, "I am doing nothing of the sort, I'm merely being cautious. Also, there is a mock battle arranged for tomorrow. Mana and the rest can try to spur his memories back during it, and we need ample time to decide what intel we present to the UN. We cannot risk his identity being revealed," I remind as my gaze towers over her.

Yet, she frowns back, "You should be aware of how much Takeru-uesama despised the UN Farces and that vixen fox of a Vice Commander. Not only for his own mental health but for our relations with the UN as well, as much as I dislike the organization, we cannot risk him having an outburst!"

"He seems calm for the moment, we have enough time. Haste makes waste, and his safety is on the line. The safety of Takeru

*Koubuin*, let me remind you."

However, instead of the wrathful counter I expected, Raiko-san breathed in deeply, rubbing her forehead as she winced, duress breaking her composure.

"Yuuhi-sama?" Tsuhi interrupts, "I believe Raiko-sama is raising fair concerns. Surely you recall the pattern that follows whenever Takeru grew distressed?"

"… The pattern?"

"Yes," She nods, composed as always, voice clear and undaunted, "First he vents loudly, expressing his concerns openly to those who he trusts. Then, he grows distant, silent," The words again brought back those days, and I could do little but mimic Raiko-san's expression. Tsuhi did not relent, calmly continuing, "When the pressure is too much, he begins to weep yet then will try to convince himself to keep pushing forward. And when he can't take it anymore-
"

"Enough, Tsuhi!" Raiko-san yelled before I could, hitting the floor as well, "It's enough… You've made yourself heard. Mana, was he truly so distressed?" She asks, eyes cemented onto the wood.

"No, I do not think so," She quietly replies, "He was antagonistic yet not particularly aggressive, save for moments at a time. And while Takeru-sama was pained, I believe Kouzuki is handling the situation tactfully for the moment," A small pause, her tone grows firm through the static, "Even if it means she does find him useful, for whatever reason. However, Yuuhi-sama, I find myself agreeing with Raiko-sama's words. I know it might take time, but precisely because of that we should begin to take cards in the matter."

"Is that so? Do you think you could platicate with… with Takeru during the mock battle?"

Thus, all that stoicism crumbles into a quiver, "I do not know… He did not even return the 'See you later' I gave when he left the meeting…"

"I… see… Then…" Inhaling sharply, my voice flows from my stomach, from my deepest wishes once more, "Remain in standby, and be careful when trying to contact Takeru during the battle. I shall use my available free time to devise a fitting report for the Vice Commander and him, so do stay on your guard and keep him under watch."

"Yes, Your Highness!"

"Raiko-san… I suppose I count with your support?"

Smirking, she nods, "I'd be elated to be of use, milady. What did you wish to have me do?"

"Sigh… First, let's give you all the details. Mana, are you available at the moment?"

"Yes, I have been freed of my duties. Daizaburou-sama, Mion and Shion are currently overseeing both the preparations for the training battle and watching over Meiya-sama's activities."

"I see. Then…" I guess… I can be selfish, just this time. Even if this won't go unnoticed… "I suppose we should discuss how to progress. Raiko-san, I'll have you contact Hikami-san when you take to the field, to ensure no one of… our old enemies take notice of Takeru's presence in Yokohama," She quickly nods, "Tsuhi, gather the profiles and prepare a room for us. Also, make sure Fujikagi remains entertained until we're done," Slowly bowing, she then departs, "Sigh… So, Mana?"

"Yes?"

"… Are you… certain Takeru has not recalled anything about us?"

"… The only thing he did was that line of anger, how he would 'crush the fangs' of anyone who would stand in his way," She says, understandably dejected. Looking at her, Raiko-san folded her arms as her expression seemed to cloud over, still as a pillar.

"Is that so… Well… It is not yet too late. I'm certain that, with due care, Takeru will regain some memories of us. And… at the very least, we must clarify his circumstances now that we've ascertained he truly is him. Stay at the ready, I shall call you in a few moments," Saying my parting words to Mana, I try to stand up.

My ankles feeling sore and numb, the wood feeling as if sand it were, I almost fall on my face as I hurried. Hastily lending me her shoulder, Raiko-san aids me to my feet. Thanking her gesture, once I felt my feet had regained their senses, the numbness and coldness receding, I walk towards the doors with my guest following behind. Yet, as I grasped the cold steel of the large knobs, I hesitated.

"… Raiko-san?"

"Yes, Yuuhi-sama?"

"What would you suggest we do… were Takeru start to show hints he's returning to be that… cold shadow he used to be?"

…

"I do not think such a thing worthy of your worry."

"… Why do you think so?" Because you prefer him in that way? Because he'd… ask for the Swordbreaker to be reinstated? Staring at her, instead of a cold expression or a mocking smirk…

I found a small, almost tender smile, "Because you should know better than anyone that he wasn't truly as cold as he seemed to be. After all… Takeru-uesama still chose to return to you on his own volition back then, and he was who chose the path of the shadows to remain by you. If that same overworrying and protective feelings still

reside in him… then, it's all a matter of piercing through his thick and dense skin until he listens."

"Hehe… Ahaha… That much is true… However," A hand traces my neck, softly pressuring it, "What if he were to grow upset?"

"Hmm… If he's alone, then we should make haste. However, so long as he has someone he cares about, I doubt he'd lose himself. He did not do so during the invasion, I sincerely doubt he'd face something as soul-draining as those days now," She nods, then sighs.

"Well, I do agree with that. However, there is the risk of him isolating himself as well. I…" I wonder if I'll make it on time. I still don't know why Kouzuki wishes to keep him in Yokohama as well, nor who might wish to bring harm to him, or how he'll react to what we present to him, or… if he'll relieve all that happened during the invasion…

"Please, Yuuhi-sama," She pats my shoulder, a prideful and certain smile in her shining as noon, "Worry not. Regardless of our differing opinions on how fast should we proceed, there is no doubt that for the moment we have a period of grace to act. Let us focus on what we can do from now on, milady."

"I suppose… However, you're being far more accommodating than I thought you'd be, Raiko-san," I admit, staring into her eyes.

Yet, she purses her lips as she again folds her arms, "I have always been loyal to you and Takeru-uesama. The Amato House has remained at your service all this time."

"Then, what compelled your obstinacy until today?"

"… Blame those you've chosen as your retainers for said arguments."

"Sigh…" For how much you argue, you and Maya are truly similar to one another, "Very well… Let us make haste then. But… what did

you mean by 'period of grace'?"

"Oh, it's simple," She again smiles, "So long as he has someone he can confide in, I believe Takeru-uesama shall remain in good spirits even if he could grow dejected at the situation."

"However… I have not heard good tales of his situation in the base," And you shouldn't have either, "Who are you referring to?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

"… No, it isn't," I narrow my eyes at her, "Who are you speaking about?"

"Meiya-sama, of course."

# Lurking Threats

*A/N: This chapter contains descriptions of gore and body horror. Reader discretion is advised.*

*Also, if you'd allow a recommendation, listen to Bad Encounter by Myuu when reading the first PoV.*

*That's all, thanks for reading.*

*Zuoriel*

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**Chapter 60: Lurking Threats**

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*November 13th, 2001. 05:24 AM.*

*(A small settlement near Komoro Base.)*

**[Akira Isumi]**

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"Saber 9, reporting in. We found no leads here, sir," I report to the Captain as I boarded my Gekishin.

A small icon, the common channel's notification, pops in the corner of my vision as his cheery voice reaches me, "Saber 1, copy that. Nine, Ten, move to the next settlement to the west, it's one of the last," As he says so, a beeping icon appears in my radar, "If you find anything, report in immediately."

"Yes, Captain!" I say, my partner also doing so immediately. Leaning back onto the seat, I close the comms and let out a sigh, lightly hitting the armrests.

Who does he think I am? I'm a commissioned Surface Pilot! I'm not a cadet anymore. It's true that this is one of my first sorties, but still… It makes me so mad to be treated like a kid, even after getting commissioned and surpassing the Eight Minutes of Death.

"Nine, should we be going?" Ten calls out, her dull and uninterested face zooming into view.

"Yeah, let's get on to it," Tapping the buttons, readying the boosters, we take off shortly after.

Sigh… Neither of us is at full focus, being so early. When we got an emergency scramble, I was about to shit myself thinking another BETA herd had broke through Niigata, but instead they sent us to scout the sticks.

What's up with this mission too? Why were we asked to search this area? There's no one living here, I'm sure the alarm must have malfunctioned or something. After all… How could anyone endure living for so long being cut off from society? I guess… it is for the best that we aren't finding anyone. If we do, we'd be obliged to take them with us, but if someone is staying behind in these conditions… To send all of us, an entire squadron, so early in search of the source of this rescue signal… I wonder if this was done with the intent of apprehending anyone who remained in their towns. Maybe this was a request of the UN? Ugh, this is the worst!

Tightly holding my controls, feeling the emptiness of a non-existent breakfast beginning to stir inside, I enter one long boost to shave the distance from our last location, the remnants of some sort of rural town. I can't wait to go back to Komoro Base and get a nice breakfast and a shower.

And anyway, this is the citizens' fault. If they had decent equipment we could have pinpointed their location instantly. Or better yet, they could have followed the Shogun's orders and retreated to a shelter.

"Yet, as soon as we appear, I'm sure we'll get shouts and insults…" It's not like I don't understand their feelings… But really, they're being a burden on our shoulders. Everyone else accepted the order to leave their homes… Do we really have the back to endure this selfishness? If a BETA herd ever breaks through this area, they'll be defenseless… There's no way they'll be able to defend themselves…

"Nine, where do we land?" Ten asks, slow and low, almost drowsy. How does she finds the constant rocking of the cockpit pleasant, I will never know.

"… Hmm. Let's descend some space away from the town. I don't want anyone taking the TSFs as a threat or anything."

"Oh, yeah. Good call, let's do that," She nods, eyes opening wide, brows stretching as the focus returns to her.

We overcome one last elevation, closing in the place as the small buildings appear in the view. The rows of trees spared from the BETA, the grassy patches along the mountain roads, a scenery that's all too precious after the invasion.

I heard during the briefing that Hidekatsu Saionji-sama, may His Highness rest in peace, cast a royal decree to have the peasantry retreat towards the east after Kyoto fell. However, many were the ones who refused and remained behind in their hometowns and villages, even after all connection to the rest of the Empire was lost during the invasion.

… I can't even begin to imagine how people kept living in such places in the middle of the invasion. Without supply lines for food and water… with the risk of BETA appearing all of a sudden…

"No… Get it together," Inhaling sharply then sighing heavily, I lick my lips as I gyrate the jump units to soften the coming landing.

Both Gekishins slowly approach the ground, to avoid doing more surfacing, to save us the lecture from the mechanics, and

preemptively knee side by side. Opening the cockpit, squinting my eyes as a cold gust hits me right in the face, I trigger the pulley and go down, seeing Ten do the same by my side.

The wind again blows, greeting our arrival. The creaking, shaking branches of the trees ricochet off each other, a few leaves flying off. Brr… I should have put the helmet on, winter is almost here again. But… letting my face be seen might work in my favor if I find anyone. Sigh… I am so staying under the shower for a long while after we return.

Despite how they should have heard us landing here, no one comes out of their houses to see what the noise was about. As we approach the small town, I can see no windows were opened either. Dawn is still far away so it's still rather dark here, I turn my flashlight on as I move, Ten imitating me as she follows close by.

Cracked glass on the windows, tape desperately holding the cold air at bay. Paint fading away, the bare gray underneath exposed at places. Splintered wood, on the roofs, on the frames, had stronger colors, humid colors spreading in places where water fell regularly. As were the small marks of rust on the few doors of the newest-looking houses, small carvings littering the concrete around beaten road of dirt, the cover of dusk and the gust rustling the trees made the silence a bit unnerving.

"This is the IJA's 138th Squadron Saber, we are here to answer to a rescue alarm. Please come out of your homes," I speak to the wind as I approached the first houses.

Yet, silence.

Ten repeats the call as she gets by my side, we wait some more moments to see if anyone arrives but… Still, nothing.

"This place looks deserted, there is no sign of anyone being here, either," Ten says with a sigh, one eye closed, "Let's notify the Captain of it and go back."

"Well, that might be… Wait, what's…" My eyes wander to a pole to my left. There were some clothes hanging from it, "Hey, look. There's some clothes over there."

"Huh? Oh, you're right… You think they left them there all those years ago"? She asks, tilting her head.

"No… Look well, they don't look that old," Stepping towards that house, the clothing swayed by the breeze didn't look old or tarnished by the weather, "That means someone must have placed them here not so long ago, right?" Making a small fist, hitting the hair softly, I look back at Ten with a smile.

Who yawns wildly, her throat visible for a second, before shivering, rolling her shoulders up and down, and then getting her business face back on, "Finally found them, huh. Let's get this over with," She nods my way and we approach the house in question.

Knocking on the wooden door three times strongly, I repeat the call we're instructed to do. But, again, no answer.

After knocking and shouting some more, I simply opt to open the door. However, there is no one inside. The living room was made a mess, what little light filtered through the cracked windows painted the place in utter chaos. A kettle was on the floor along some books, even a chair was flat on its side.

"What the hell?" Ten whispers, peering behind me into the place, "Hey, shouldn't we, uh, contact the Captain, just in case?"

"Y-Yeah… Maybe, can you look into the house as I contact him?" She nods, entering the small rural house, repeating the call, as I tapped my chin mike's controls, establishing the connection, "Saber 9 to Saber 1. Captain, do you copy?"

"Saber 1, receiving you loud and clear. What is it?"

"Captain, we found some clothes hanging from a pole, they looked to have been put there recently. However, the house they were near is made a mess and there are no signs of people nearby. We will check further into the town, can someone come along just in case?"

I hear him snickering, "What is it? You scared, pup? It's the normal stuff, the winds do that sometimes. Windows open all of a sudden and send everything flying, it happens. There's also many abandoned houses, less than twenty people might be living in the place. Check everything thoroughly instead of freaking out, and call me back when you find someone. Saber 1, out."

Aargghhh! I hate him, why does he have to be like this all the time? What if this is something serious?! Hands shaking, I take a swing at empty air.

And almost hit Ten in the face as she came out of the house, "Uwah! Hey, what are you doing?!"

"Uh, sorry. It's just…" I tell her what the Captain told me, sighing at the end, "So we're on our own."

"Siiigh… Still, there's no one in this house. You'd think people would wake up after hearing a pair of TSFs land just a few meters away from here. But no one came to check us out, and… I don't hear anything either," Her flashlight's reveals a trail into the rest of the town, the faintly marked road in the ground with some grass on the side.

Yet, as she says, that's the sole illumination we have. The houses are pitch-dark inside and it's dead silent, too.

Ruffling my short hair for a second, I also aim my flashlight forward, "… Anyways, standing here won't get us anything. Let's check the rest of the town."

"Wanna split up to cover more terrain? Or, we stick together for safety?"

"I don't think there's any risks, we have our machineguns with us after all," Pointing a thumb to our Gekishins, she nods back. Going back to them and grabbing our guns, we then decide to check different ends of the place, "Leave your comms open just in case, alright?" Ten gives me a thumbs up with her back still turned to me, slowly going her way. Alright, time to get this done.

Checking on the other houses nearby first, all of them are in the same state of disarray. As if the people ran away in a hurry, tumbling stuff down as they made their escape. Maybe I'm overreacting since this is just my third sortie, but there is no way this is normal. Right?

As I walk towards the center of the town while surveying the area to the two of our landing position, Ten no longer in sight, there are more and more signs of nothingness around. No one answers my calls, only my steps echo along the breeze, the blanket of thick shadows giving away as the sun delays its wake. Yet, the more I walk into the heart of this place… the more I see houses that are almost falling down. Their walls have these giant holes on them, doors crushed and tumbled down. Weird thing is, as I point my flashlight at the buildings, the stuff inside doesn't seem that old. It's doesn't look like this place was abandoned for that long. Look, there's even some food on that table over there, and it isn't spoilt. And there's… there's barely no dust, either.

Tapping my chin again, I call out, "Ten, do you hear me?"

…

"… Saber Ten, do you copy?"

I gulp, waiting for her reply as the wind blows and tickles the back of my head.

Yet, silence.

Allowing a moment of wait, all that comes back is the wind again, the distant clashing of a tree's branches as my lips begin to quiver.

"Ten, you better answer me! If you're pulling my leg, I swear I'm-"

"Pipe down, now," She complains, sighing, "Hearing you loud and clear, I was just checking out some stuff."

"Oh, did you find damaged buildings, too?"

"… Yeah," Low, she admits, "Can't believe the damage, actually. You think… someone raided the town?"

"Can't leave any option out, but… Who would do this kind of thing? And, why?" Why attack defenseless people? What's to gain from such a thing?

Still slow but sharpening, she replies, "No idea, I'll keep checking stuff on this side of town. If you find anything, call me."

"Yeah, likewise. And at least answer when I call out, okay?"

"Yes, sorry. It's just…"

"What?"

"Nothing, all this silence is unnerving me. It feels as if a monster or something is gonna come out from the shadows, my neck's all stiff and itchy the more I walk in. I have this feeling that, if I turn around, there's gonna be something staring at me there, within the dark," She admits, before sighing.

Gulping, my neck also shivering at the words, hair standing in attention, couldn't help but to stop breathing. Really, always with the horror stuff. Why did I have to end up paired with you?

"Well, let's remain focused, okay?" I say, walking again.

"Yeah, yeah. Don't worry, I won't get my head chomped off by the shadows," She chuckles back at my groans.

"Thanks Ten, I did not need that mental image. Anyways, stay alert," She agrees, ending the connection for the moment.

As I got closer to the center, more and more houses were damaged badly. The holes in the walls, the gaping holes where the windows should have been, the shards of scattered glass with tape still stubbornly stuck to some, the wreckage of furniture inside the buildings didn't change.

Also, some weird marks are on the ground. Crouching, running a finger over them, can't exactly recognize them. What is this? Did a vehicle do this? No, not only these roads are too unstable for such small wheels but the soil… it's too hard for a car to leave such deeps marks. Unless it rained some time ago? But then, the marks shouldn't be engraved this well if they aren't recent.

"Anyways… They might be from some machine, I'm sure. Maybe someone else answered the rescue call before we got here?" Ugh, that better not be the case! This is one of the few times I get to prove my worth in the IJA.

Still, no one answers my calls. The town seems deserted and desolate, the only thing that's clear is that something happened here. The belongings inside the houses would indicate it wasn't that long from the incident, yet… I haven't found anyone yet. Ten also hasn't, she'd have contacted me if she had. Slowing down, observing the place well, and taking a moment to stare back as the silence was too much, I eventually reached the central square. A small patch of flowers with a few old wooden benches, which were left unharmed.

"At least the flowers are safe… But that being said, what's that smell?" The more I move, the more I sense this weird smell in the air. It's not that strong, but it definitely isn't nice. It dries my mouth, forces me to lick over the back of my teeth, "Hello? Is anybody here?"

The wind answers me, rumbling through the seemingly abandoned rural town. All this silence is making me more nervous than I should be, only the sound of my footsteps decorates this darkened scenery

where the sun does not yet reach, where only my flashlight reveals what's in the buildings. My pace slows down and I start to take glances all around me, thanks to Ten's stupid words. Back before the BETA came, hearing animals was such a normal thing I didn't give a second thought to. But now I often find myself trying to remember how it was to hear birds chirping on the mornings or bugs buzzing during summer. It's not like they're all gone, but there's very few of them in the mainland. And that background noise… it's all gone now from this place, like around the base. It's all… so empty…

Continuing to check the houses nearby, peeking through their windows, I keep finding nothing. As I stride through a road, the wind blows strongly. Shielding my face with an arm, I stop walking for a moment.

Yet, a jolt runs down my back.

A sudden noise, right behind me. Far too close.

In the corner of my vision, obstructed by my arm, a shadow seemed to move, to circle to my back.

Inhaling sharply, turning around into a combat pose, trigger finder at the ready, all I see is a door creaking, swayed by the winds.

"Sigh… Just the wind, huh. Well, let's check this place next, I guess."

I close in slowly, gulping for a moment, a shiver down my back. Shaking my head, hearing no other sounds, I repeat my call in case there was a civilian hiding inside the place. Yet, as usual, silence answers me. Peeking through the small opening the door gave, I see the common sight thus far. A table upside down, some broken cups on the floor, the chairs lying on their backs and… Hey, there's someone in there!

The inside of the house is very dark, since its wooden windows weren't open, so I couldn't see it well, but that right there is a person, no doubt! But why are they sleeping on the floor?

"Hey, are you alright? I'm a soldier from the IJA and-"

All it took was me taking a single step inside the house. That was all it took, for all air to leave me, for my heartbeats to stop cold. For an acidic fire to start tearing me from within.

It was dark. So I didn't notice.

I was so happy to have found someone. So I didn't notice.

I wanted some answers so badly. So I didn't notice.

But when I entered, opening the door widely, showering the dim light of my flashlight into the house, I saw it. And along the realization, my senses sprung into action. A stench assaulted, an acidic pain twisted my insides, a sharp whistle obstructed any and all other sounds, my vision slowly became hazy and unfocused as my knees threatened to buckle. But I couldn't look away.

A deep red carpet was etched onto the floor. Blood… It wasn't dry, it's still rather liquid. And my eyes follow along the pool of blood, the red carpet…

… and there I find the figure I had seen, the torn remains of someone.

A few tiny little cables were strewn all over near my feat, except they're not cables or stretched plastic… They're fingers.

Something distinctly pink… something was protruding from the upper body where the head should have been, yet the skin was peeled off forcefully near where the neck was supposed to be, sunk in at some points.

A mess of blood and torn flesh coming from a hole in the abdomen, slivers of entrails dangling from it. The lower part of the legs and the forearms were missing, cut off unnaturally as if a Destroyer had rammed into a freight train.

And the sound… the calm buzzing sound of flies filled the entire place… as much as my eyes were filled with the swarm, bursting as if someone had thrown a mint candy into soda, that covered the body. The sea of convulsing worms all over the… the…

"Ugh… Kh-Khgh…" All it took was a second, and I began hiccuping, my throat burning as bile rose from inside.

Holding my mouth tightly, the hiccuping doesn't stop. Hacking and coughing, accidentally swallowing back something which burned my throat, I stumble away from the place. Saliva and acids cover the ground as I stop fighting the impulse. A cold sweat covers me despite the suit beginning to vibrate, to calibrate itself to my body again.

But the hiccups don't stop, and I can't calm my breath, and the smell chases me outside. The putrid stench, a few flies leaving the room, the image of the worms, the tiny fingers in the floor drenched in blood, the guts torn away from the body, it all etched itself into my mind.

And coughing and hacking, out of air and suffocating, more and more bile I puke, hunched over in the ground on all fours.

" *Cough… Cough… wheeze…* Oh, by the Holy… W-Wha… What the hell… *Cough…* Ugh…" Taking a deep breath, crawling away from the house, I try to regain my breathing.

Hearing something, glancing around, aiming my gun all around me, it was the wind again. But now, the smallest creak, the tiniest hint at anything is enough to make me want to fire. I have… I have to…

"S-Saber 9 to Saber 1!"

"Hey, Nine. What's-"

"Captain! Answer me!" Bashing the chin's trigger, hands shaking, I scream as I get back on my feet.

A bit of static later, I hear a sigh, "What's up, Nine? Need someone to-"

"I-I found a corpse, sir! Or maybe it's two, I dunno. There's some torn limbs a-and… Urk… Ugh… *Cough…* " I try to close my throat, but something still made its way out and splashed my leg. A foul taste filling my mouth, my knees giving up on me, I end up crashing onto a wooden door, losing grasp of my gun.

"Saber 9! Are you alright?!" He asks, alert and on edge.

"Y-Yes, sir. I'm fine," My knees are shaking, can't get up, and I have trouble breathing. Oh, what the hell is going here?!

"We'll be going to your position shortly, stay put and wait for me. Or better yet, return to your Gekishin. But do so slowly and in silence."

"Y-Yes, sir," Then, he cuts his connection.

But another worried voice soon follows, "Nine, do you copy?"

"… Yes, I… hear you…"

"Where are you as of now? I'm hurrying over to you side."

"Uh… I was… near the central park, with the flower…" Sitting on the floor, I lean on a wall as I start taking some breaths.

"Alright, I'll be there in a sec. Stay alert, okay?" She firmly says, then cuts the connection.

Breathing in deeply, rubbing my forehead, my senses calm down gradually. Once I think I can stand, I start moving away to at least remain standing, to pick up my sole weapon. Because… someone, or something, might be lurking nearby. Ugh, I'm so pathetic. My knees are shaking… I'm sure Marika-chan and Michiru-chan could keep their act together in a situation like this.

As I move away from that house, I notice something in the walls of a nearby building. Bullet marks. Someone fought here, and that caused that… But who could have done such a thing?

The silence eats at me, and I can only gaze upwards, praying for the Captain to come while tightly holding my gun, shivering in place, looking from time to time at my surroundings.

Yet, silence.

I have fought against the BETA, I have heard what they do to us when we lose. But… But this kind of thing? To… To… I can't even finish the thought, the same awful taste filling my mouth, again showered onto the ground and my feet.

Leaning against a wall, enduring the silence, I begin to take short breaths. What kind of monster would do this to our fellows?

Breathing heavily, my legs give up on me. Sitting on the ground, dropping my gun, I run a hand over my face, cleaning my lips. As I did, feeling a bit dizzy, I heard a small noise. Distant but constant, and growing closer. Looking up, I saw a silhouette approaching me within the ruins.

"Hey, Nine!" My partner shouts, hurrying her pace as she seems me, "Hey, feeling well?"

"… No. Did you… find anything?"

One eye closed, she shakes her head, "Broken buildings, is all. If I didn't hear wrong…" Her tone lowers, "You say there's a corpse?"

I nod, a quivering hand pointing to the place. Ten gulped loudly enough I could hear it, the hand holding her gun shaking. Before she could move, the rumbling of jet engines reached our ears, the trail of Gekishins in the skies. Soon after, the Captain and another one of my partners came along.

"Nine, Ten, are you both uninjured?" He asks as he comes closer, scanning each of us from top to bottom.

"Y-Yes, sir. Nothing happened while I waited," I try to stand in attention, and fail at it, as I spoke. Ten informed she didn't find anything, and that she hurried to come to me after my report.

The Captain sighs, then nods back to a dead serious expression, "I see. Where is the…" I point to the house, I couldn't move very far away as if I were chained here. Nodding, he goes towards the half open door slowly, his partner following close as Ten did. I couldn't move an inch, afraid of having another puking attack, "Let's see, what is… W-What the fuck…" The Captain couldn't keep his shock and disgust at the abominable sight, forcefully taking a step back. His partner looked away hastily, covering his mouth and nose with a hand.

"Holy shit… What the hell happened here?" Ten couldn't hide her repulsion either, slowly walking away into a broken building to spit something out.

"You three, on me," One commands, taking a deep breath, "We'll investigate this town thoroughly. The rest are already on the way. Let's go."

Amidst the silent streets, we follow the Captain closely. On the northern part of the town we found more pools of blood, more corpses and torn bodies. Ten ended up finding one herself by accident, and we had to stop as she also had a puking fit. The rest of our squadmates are now securing the area on their TSFs on the Captain's orders, so us four have to traverse the territory and investigate… whatever the hell happened here.

"Who did this? Why would anyone…" Rubbing Ten's shoulders as she seems to regain her composure, I blankly stare at the surrounding ruins.

"This is too fucked up…" She whispers, subduing the coughing, "Who the hell would tear up people like this?"

"Come on, you two. Up and strong," Two ordered, despite the quiver in his own voice, the shaking in his knees, "Whoever did this must have left clues. So come on, we have work to do. Leave the questions for later, okay?" Offering Ten a hand, he lends her a shoulder until she regains her balance. Giving her a good pat on the shoulder, and a nod my way, we again walk towards the Captain, "Sir, we're ready to resume our… Captain?"

One was standing still, not even looking our way. And in an almost inaudible voice, he whispers, "All of you, stay calm and listen to me. This wasn't done by other humans. Look there, under those boulders. Can you see it?" The Captain points to his left, where some houses had collapsed.

The rubble was like the one in the rest of the town, arching entrances collapsing over tumbled walls. But under the remains, a small pool of blood could be seen…

… But the blood… wasn't red… and the flesh… was a pale, clear white…

"… Eh? Why is… N-No!" The remains of a Warrior-Class BETA could be seen under the rubble, despite part of it being under some rocks.

"Seems like the town was attacked by the BETA during the night, and that's when they sent the rescue signal. If they had sent someone immediately…" The Captain punches a nearby pillar, grimacing.

"The BETA?" Ten barely manages to say, eyes widening as she shakes, "But this isn't… We're so far from the First Defense Line, there are no Hives nearby!"

"That's right, Captain! This… This must be…" A mistake? A lie? Then, what's that I'm seeing? If that isn't a Warrior-Class then, what the fuck is it?! But… But there's no hives near, and this is too far away from Sadogashima to have been invaded…

"Saber Nine, Saber Ten, calm down!" Two yells, standing stiff as his own voice seemed about to come as undone as the ruins of the town, "If there are BETA nearby, we cannot lose focus."

"… What do you mean, if they're nearby?" You're telling me there's more of those fuckers close by?

"Isumi, Aihara," Voice lowering into his usual, One gives us both a good, firm look, "Let me tell you something, part of the BETA that surfaced during the Niigata Invasion broke from their formation. We lost sight of them for a time, and later they regrouped and attacked again and almost pierced through to the Third Defense Line. It's possible that… some infantry types remained hidden within the mountains or underground and avoided detection until now."

Eh? The BETA are… within the mainland?! This has got to be a joke! There's no way… The BETA don't use tactics!

"Anyways, let's keep searching. There might be some survivors around," He orders, readying his machinegun. Two also does the same, giving us a firm stare as we hesitated.

Sharing a look with Ten, nodding to each other, I gulp and slowly ready my gun, following closely behind the Captain.

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*Some time later.*

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In the end, we found no one left alive.

We found most of the people living there dead, torn apart by the BETA. We also found a few corpses of Soldier and Warrior-Class

scattered around what looked to be like a shelter. It seems the people put up a fight with what little guns they had on them. As the one who found them first I was tasked to deliver a report along the other three. And, aside from the sickening visage, I found something else to point out.

All the human corpses that we found were torn apart brutally. As in, their limbs were separated from their bodies. All of them.

However, none of the corpses had their heads, and we couldn't find a single one in the whole town. The mental image of the BETA tearing someone apart and then leaving while carrying their head… I couldn't put any food in me for the rest of the day.

This discovery was to remain as a Top Secret matter, and only me, Ten, Two and the Captain know about it. We were told the best men in the IJA would go scout the area for any possible threats, and that we also would be tasked to take part in these surveillance missions until we find more leads to find out how the BETA appeared in that settlement.

But that doesn't make me feel better. I needed answers and received nothing but cold stares and silence. Ten told me she got the same treatment as I, and the Captain told us to shut up and keep quiet about what we found. That we'd only inform the rest when we got the approval from the upper brass to join in these scouting missions.

The BETA are here in the mainland, they could be hiding anywhere in the mountains or even underground. Are they planning to build a Hive under our nose? What is the IJA and the Royal Guard gonna do about it?

A shiver colder than anything I ever felt before embraced me and refused to let go all day long, the image of the dismembered bodies kept ingraining itself in my mind. The BETA are here, they could be right about to attack. What if the next place is our base? What if when we return from one of these scouting missions the base is

destroyed and everybody's remains are left headless in an ocean of blood?

Maybe it's because I'm a rookie, maybe I'm too green and this has happened in the past with the other invasions that happen every week. But my stomach is still turning and turning…

… I don't think I'll be able to sleep well for a few weeks. I don't wanna take hypnotherapy either… The drugs will only make this worse on my head…

Ugh…

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*December 2nd. Some minutes off 12 AM.*

*(Diet Building. PM's Office.)*

**[Kurechika]**

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"And that's why I'm sending you to check on them. While I agreed to let the Fuji Corps be the sole users of the batch of Shiranui-1C, I do not doubt there was another reason to hand them all that set of units, besides their elite status," I affirm, fingers interlocked and resting atop my desk.

"Understood. Allow me to inform you that the 87th and 88th Squads are running into problems with the maintenance of their units, sir. We may not be able to repair them for much longer," Major Kawazoe says, his voice dry as a desert.

I may need to do another deal in the dark with them. Of course, I know those models are not exactly the same, yet they're a good enough cover. Unless you look under the hood, you won't be able to see the difference. Those 'gifts' are the only life line I have in case something goes wrong and I need to field soldiers against Imperial

forces, after all. I won't place my trust in Kouzuki any longer, after this 'visit' the Undersecretary paid her base without reporting of it.

Nodding towards the Major, I lean back onto my seat, "I'll try to get us some spare parts in the short term. Leave those units in the underground hangars, for when we really need them. How were their mock battles? Do they like their new units?"

Kawazoe grins, nodding with much vigor, "Nanase said that his squad is acclimating perfectly to them. Fujisawa's however is having some trouble with their newest members," He affirms.

Can't expect much from her, despite being our best Captain she isn't very good with people. Considering what she went through, it's a miracle she can even pilot.

"Not unexpected, but still bothersome. Get them priority in the sims, they should be exempt from patrol and sentry duty from now on. Also, you did uproot the spies from the base, right?" I inquire, narrowing my eyes, lowering my tone.

The Major tenses up, coughing as he places both hands behind his back while trying to maintain a sturdy facade, "Lt General Oohara said that he took care of that, but the risk is always there."

"Sigh… Fine, let's leave it at that. Anything else you want to report?"

"No, sir. However, regarding the matter of that settlement…" He tentatively asks, lowering his gaze.

"No updates whatsoever. We still haven't found anything about their whereabouts, despite having many scout teams on the move daily. There is nothing else I require of you at the moment, Major. Thanks for your services, you may leave," Nodding once to him, Kawazoe then salutes and excuses himself.

Sighing, I stand from my seat. Strolling to the coffee machine, I fill my mug. Leaving my lips caressing the rim, teasing myself with the

taste and the smell, I walk over to the windows. And as I'm showered in the light, as the glimpse of the Castles lies in the distance, I slowly drink up to counter the cold sensation which engraved itself onto my skin.

BETA on the mainland, attacking isolated settlements. If this ever makes it to the public eye, the Parliament and the MDF will lose much support from the population. Our image won't endure such a scandal, and rightfully so. This is a disaster, an unpredictable one. As if we didn't already have enough trouble brewing. There is not an ounce of doubt in me that if this reaches the light, those subversive bastards will use that unrest to stir up chaos.

Returning the reflection's frown, holding it for a moment, staring into my eyes despite the strain, I finish my coffee. Sitting back, resting my mug in a corner to not drop it for the tenth time, I check up my mail, looking for that important contact. Once I find it, opening and reading the report carefully, I feel the tension on my shoulders evaporate. My back grows intimate with the seat, cuddling it softly, as I allow myself to close my eyes in introspection for a second.

It's amazing the things money can do. If this were a formal proposal, it would take months before I could attain an answer. However, send a few envelopes to the right people, and suddenly everything is green lighted in less than a week.

An entire Company, with two squads completely made out of Raptors, will be at the ready to come to my aid should I ever need it in exchange for my services in their benefit. Kouzuki still hasn't sent any reports since more than a month ago, so I consider Alt. IV to be done for. Anyone would abandon a sinking ship. And it's not like I care about what will remain behind. Honestly, I believe it for the best to purge humanity and restart in another star, away from all the clogging prejudices of this world. And it's the only way I'll be able to keep my vow.

A small twinge of pain below my ears, my eyes squint as I ponder the board and its consequenses. Disturbances calling upon a frown,

I run a hand over my face, taking off my glasses for a moment. All the negotiations, all the support I've given them… to end up being the only one shouldering the burden in public. Kouzuki will always be safe under the UN, she is in no risk of receiving harm. Her Highness is also under no risk, she's too important for this nation for anything to befall her. But me? Heh… If I had an extra hair for every death threat, every call announcing that an explosive was in my residence, both as a Prime Minister and my personal house, I would look like Mike Jolton in his prime.

In the end… Alternative IV seems doomed to fail, Yuuhi-sama has remained completely still to not upset the IRG, and both the Guard and those fools at Ichigaya have been less and less reluctant to display the reservations they possess towards my person, towards the Diet's government. So if in the end I'll be made into a scapegoat… I don't care if I'm branded a traitor to the Empire, or to humanity, but I'll do everything in my power to make Alt. V a reality, especially now that Chizuru managed to pass her CCSE. Kouzuki broke our deal, and if she gets commissioned, she'll join the A-01 STF.

Like I'll let my daughter die in vain for this rotten piece of dirt. Even if she never leaves the base, she still is in danger. I don't know what the UN would do to keep this nation in check should Alt. IV fail, as it looks like it will. Some may call me a traitor, but safeguarding this Empire is our priority. And there's no safer way to do so than with America's support. If the rumors I've heard from Ichigaya are true, there's little to be done. You can't argue with a deranged idealist who doesn't even consider the repercussions a restoration to total Imperial rule would cause. Heh, I'm the one negotiating with COSEAN and the UN under Yuuhi-sama's petition, yet I'm the "enemy" who steals the power from Her Highness and they are "the only ones" who truly understand her wishes.

"Pah… How did such a narrow-minded fool ever became the Captain of the Capital's defense regiment?" Sadly, to remove them

would paint an innacurate image of me. It will lend credence to their suspicions, and soon their retribution would come after me.

And if it were only me, we could debate over our thoughts. Yet, I have a nation, a Shogun, and a daughter to safeguard. I cannot relinquish their futures to the folly of these young soldiers.

Sigh… If only that unit were still in function… Yet, Her Highness herself disbanded it, so I suppose I can expect no aid from the Imperial Guards.

Moving my neck in circles, my gaze wanders to the picture that is always to my left. Us three, visiting Osaka. Back when Chizuru still smiled, back when you were still here, Saeko. Back when I could share some words with my daughter, when Saeko had found another job as a teacher thanks to Suzumiya-san's support. Back when… we still had some hope left for this place… Sigh…

Ever since I became the Prime Minister, I've done everything in my power to get us to a brighter tomorrow. Even amidst the invasion, sleeping two to three hours a day, sometimes just not even having that luxury, then beginning to rely on that accursed white powder to keep myself afloat, I struggled with my men to keep the UN on our side. To not have them order a compulsive evacuation, another Gwangju. And during all those darkest days… Hands run deep into my hair, a sigh empties all air in me as I recall.

'We can't trust foreigners. We have to uphold our traditions, defend our land on our own. To die for our nation is the highest honor one could find. If the Emperor so decided, we shall hold our ground until our last breath'.

Like I'll let a hermit who spends his whole life within four walls, who pushes all his burdens onto the Shogun, have a say in my daughter's future. He's just another human, he isn't heavenly or anything. I've seen him, platicated for a moment, he may be smart but the Emperor is just another human. He isn't a God as many elders, and some young ones, still believe. And one without real life

experience, who has been thrust into the position by fate. And to simply hear the way in which he speaks of our people… as if it were all trivial, as if it were obvious the rest of us should sacrifice everything to uphold these ideals…

… Had he given his blessing to a minimal evacuation, the situation wouldn't have escalated as it did. We could have managed the shelters that we have still available far better than today, we could have found useful allies somewhere. Of course, I understand the reluctance to have our people seek refuge in America, yet that was not our only choice. Both Brasil and Argentina were welcoming us with open arms, both having already an established community of Japanese immigrants. But more importantly, merely hearing one of the Emperor's press conferences would be a blessing for all the soldiers and peasants. Her Highness has filled that role well, yet it isn't the same.

… And yet, he remains silent. Pleasantly living in the Castle, without even hearing our reports as of late, which are answered by the Guards who watch over his residence. And Yuuhi-sama has done the same, merely limiting herself to preserve the status quo instead of daring to search for another solution. After all, they will never be held accountable for the situation of today.

Sighing, shaking my head, I stare at the ceiling. I won't allow the same disaster that happened to Kyoto with Saionji to repeat itself, that's what I said during my public vow when I assumed my position, that's what I honestly believed from the bottom of my heart. But nothing could change the nobles' minds, no amount of public buildings, no amount of protection, no amount of decent supplies was enough. To think there are idiots in the MDF and IJA that want all the power to go to the Shogun, when they're nothing more than a meat shield to the nobles. We're one of the few countries that is dividing its military force in two, and unlike the others we're at the frontlines.

Overspending to build all the models of the Type-00, forcefully keeping the amounts of Type-94 low to avoid 'an uprising', always

demanding to keep their lifestyle as it once was, disregarding the amount of resources that takes. I thought Yuuhi-sama would try to reform the nobility from within, I truly had placed my last coin in her, but it seems the time I spent teaching her in the capital when she was young was a waste of time.

"Sometimes… I wonder if the bravado she exuded during the '99 was merely an illusion…"

Despite the troubles her ill mood brought me back then, I rather would spend time placating her stomping fury than to endure her deafening silence.

Well, humanity is doomed. That much is certain, if we remain employing the same approaches we've used thus far. That's why the Americans want to try to eradicate the BETA before they reach their continent. We can't rule out that another Hive Core could come from the moon, or Mars, at any time. If the Amazonas forest falls to the BETA, if the Antartida's ice is harvested by the aliens, we're done for. If America, the biggest TSF manufacturer in the world, falls to them we won't be able to keep up. If any point of the supply line that covers the Eurofront and Africa, passing through the Mediterranean Sea and all the way through Singapore, and linking back here and then to America, we will lose to the domino effect. We've been clinging to this feeble hope that is Alt. IV, but it was nothing but an illusion. And we have a certainty in our hands, the Migrant Fleet and the G-Bombs.

More than anything else, that's my motivation today. To buy a pair of seats on the fleet, for me and for the leaders of my party. And for you, Chizuru. Even if you hate me, I won't let the stupid traditions of this backwards nation take you from me. And only with ample aid will this nation rise once again, instead of having to compromise our budgets to the whims of the nobility.

Only then our orphans will again have three meals a day and a sturdy roof overhead, to once more return to a normal life that let's

them resume their growth, their studies. Instead of conscripting most of them, dooming our future to a drainage of intelect.

But of course, we only need nobles in the universities. Pah…

"And for that future to come to pass… There is much work to do," My ears still hurting, unable to dispel the frown I endowed, I resumed my work.

As I shuffle through the documents on my PC, I notice a few interesting things. First, ten Type-00C were sent to Yokohama some days ago, for export purposes apparently. That is a relief, at least she'll be a bit safer with those there. And if that deal is secured, perhaps I could use my new contacts to gain a steady supply of funds, as well as intel on the Takemikazuchi.

Ikaruga also sent me a document regarding the Isumi girl that found the BETA and the corpses, she was really unstable during the interrogation and has remained like that in these weeks. He also sent me his 'most heartfelt' thanks for my support during our last deal. Heh, as if we both didn't knew we are aiming for the same prize.

I know my faction is the smallest here, so I have to be careful about my moves. I do hope Kouzuki gets her act together and starts giving us something, because I received many reports that Yoroi was seen coming and going from Yokohama to the Capital some days ago. I wonder if she's on Ikaruga's side… Maybe Her Highness is already playing according to his plans, willingly or not.

Again leaning back on my seat, I close my eyes for a moment. Pondering on our last meetings, Yuuhi-sama did seem a bit… distressed, perhaps? I suppose, she might not find any motives to openly support me any more. Well, I obtained some nice toys to defend myself with. I do have Nanase pretty much on a leash, thanks to his sister being a Cadet on a IJA base that's on my side. I also have Kawazoe and his whole Company with me, and Fujisawa doesn't really have anywhere else to go, since she's a commoner,

she despises the UN and only wants to find a place to live, or die, in peace.

Entwining my fingers, feeling as if I were staring at the Yamata-no-Orochi, at all those vipers that stand in my way, I fill my stomach with air slowly. There are two large problems for my plans.

Ikaruga being the biggest one, since I doubt I can openly fight against the Royal Guards and keep the order in this country, even with the Americans' help. Well… I may need to use some… explosive methods to deal with them.

The second one, this Shirogane boy. I can't read him, who is he supposed to be? He killed part of Nanase's squad, yet received a very light punishment considering he was abroad. The UN is being very secretive about what he gave them in exchange for the lighter sentence. I don't know whether or not the Shogunate wants to give him a harsher punishment, or if he is with the Americans or not.

I doubt he's a small fry, anyone else in his position would have been executed. According to the report I received, he's obtaining very good numbers on his training course. With a prodigy like him on the squad, I don't doubt they'll get commissioned but I do not think I could send someone to harm him. And there is no data about his past, so I can't threaten him with nobody. This all goes back to Kouzuki. On whose side is she? Where are the reports?

… However, the lacking data could be used in my favor. To both rid myself of Shirogane and force Kouzuki's hand. She would never allow herself to be involved in a case of identity theft. Thus, by detaining this cadet, I can force out whatever intel he has on him, whatever Kouzuki would find him useful for, with the right drugs. Yet, if she tries to defend him, Kouzuki would need to procure more false intel. And lies are short lived, just like Alt. IV. In any case… if her project doesn't bestow us any spoils soon… I see little reason to support her when backing Alt. V would allow us to procure at least some G-Elements for ourselves, even if we have to remain as the US' vassals for some decades.

Well, I suppose this is all the time I'll get today to check up on everything by myself. I turn off the PC and grab my coat as I stand up. There are many meetings that I have to attend today, and in the following days. The press conference I asked of Her Highness being the main topic for the time being. Maybe I could have a little chat with Yuuhi-sama, to see if she's on Ikaruga's side or how she reacts to these deals she arranged with Kouzuki behind everyone's backs.

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*Same day, a few hours later.*

*(Camp Kitanomaru. Commander's Office.)*

**[Takatsugu Ikaruga]**

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Slowly, belatedly so, I circle a spoon within a cup. The most pleasant scent of the jasmine tea I brewed reaching me, the quietness around the office would suggest this moment to be auspicious for relaxation. Yet, my lips turn inwards in astounding astonishment.

I cannot express how upset I am with words. Well, upset is perhaps a strong word for this. Yuuhi, my dear Shogun, I cannot believe you rejected the proposal to send other mechanics to Yokohama. I thought it to be a simple matter, yet I cannot clean the sour taste in my mouth that was left after this defeat.

However, it was quite odd, this last meeting. Her Highness did seem troubled by something, despite the rather amicable atmosphere we enjoyed. It is remarkably odd for all five of us to be able to peacefully platicate for so long a time without arguing to ensue, so certain I was that you would be pleased the afternoon was a rather peaceful one. Yet, Her Highness did not relent in her stance, in any of her proposals. I was convinced you'd grace us with that lovely smile of yours at some point, yet your lips denied me of that pleasure, your gaze avoided showing its natural charms as it shone with that adusted wrath you very rarely endow

"Which would mean… a grave matter is upsetting her," I conclude, starting to drink my tea as I sit down.

For our sweet Yuuhi to be so openly upset, so confrontational, something is very wrong here. She isn't like me, her patience is one of her greatest virtues, her faith in people is deep, her love for peace is unconditional. Her Highness is not someone who would engage in such aggressive forms of negotiation, for I know she finds it truly aggravating. So, whatever caused her figure to be garbed in unnatural anger?

Resting my chin on a hand, taking a deep breath, supporting my weight on the desk I ponder on what had occured recently. I have not heard any particularly displeasing reports, truth be told. The Great General has been absent for some time, the two younger of the Tsukuyomi were also nowhere to be found according to my servants. I did hear Her Highness sent them to deliver those ten Type-00C and her own machine to the Mitsurugi girl, but why haven't they returned yet? Perhaps, is that what has distressed Yuuhi so? Something that lies in Yokohama… which isn't related to the deals since Her Highness defended them adamantly… Something that occured as of late…

… This couldn't have anything to do with that Shirogane, right? No, however, that mystery man is near the Mitsurugi girl.

Nothing appears on the databases about the supposed cadet's life. He's most definitely on the American's side, and he did kill two of my servants. Yet, the UN forgave him with a very light punishment, it seems. My scouts say the HC was in chaos at the news, yet for some reason, their more fervent desires were halted. And I had nothing to do with the alleviation of said wish. I wonder… Did you shield the cadet, Yuuhi? Was Shirogane who protected Mitsurugi, then?

Kurechika did not seem in league with the pawns sent to the CCSE, Kouzuki wouldn't want harm to befell the pigeons, and the cadet wouldn't have resorted to lethality lightly.

"Sigh… I suppose, those baseborns found themselves intoxicated by the thrill of violence," This is why we cannot trust in the peasants. The chasers should have been all Imperial Guards, then the plan wouldn't have failed.

Humming to myself, extending my legs as I glance upwards, a smile appears in me. I suppose I'm in your debt, Shirogane. Had he not shielded Mitsurugi and Kurechika's baby girl… What a mess that would have spawned, indeed. Still, your situation is quite the mystery. An unknown card in my opponents hand, a joker perhaps, a wildcard I don't know how to handle. This is why I despise card games…

Well, Shirogane is on Kouzuki's side, so in the end he's a friend of mine. And speaking of Kouzuki, I do hope I get to hear more news regarding Alt. IV in the requested meeting. After all, they're growing impatient. I'll have to let them do their mischievous act on the near future, and I really rather not ruin her project, even if I have to let them thrash the base.

"Ah, such is the recklessness of youth. However, I would need a small spark to ignite their passion," And I don't think I have time to spare, which would mean I have to use this volcanic activity in my favor.

However, I will not be able to take to the field then… Ah, such is the luck of the draw. I doubt Her Highness would allow a battle to occur in the city.

And to add insult to injury, I couldn't talk with Yuuhi in private as I was expecting. Perhaps a few cups of tea could have aided me in planting the seeds of agreement, alas she was as dry as the papers she presented, as cold as the weather is becoming. You're surprisingly hardheaded when upset, but you're lovely when displaying such firm resolve, so I can forgive the rudeness. If only she were as resolute in everything else… then, we would see eye to eye, I'm certain.

Sighing, finishing my tea, reading the reports, signing the papers that so requiered, the dull office work extended for a moment. To think we are wasting time on sending people to evacuate those mountain settlements… This is why peasants do not make fitting leaders. There is no honor to be gained from such a rescue, yet no one would impose the necessary order. And then, who are those who shoulder the responsibility of safeguarding their lives? Who are accused of abandonment by doing what must be done?

Sigh… We shouldn't have kept the Parliament running after the Battle of Kyoto. A simple decree of urgency was all it was needed to give full power to the Shogun once more. But we had to keep them safe, because of the international treaties.

Pah, we have enough capable men in the nobility to act as chancellors and ambassadors, we don't need commoners soiling our reputation. Kurechika is one of the few who actually has some sort of principles, and he also isn't afraid to be openly 'bad' to achieve his goals. Do I respect him because I see myself in him?

Considering all I've done, I can't help to sympathize with him a bit. I can't blame him for taking funds from the Restoration Project when I was the one who understaffed the final defense line and rigged our radars to ignore the infantry types. All to reignite our true soul, for the Takemikazuchi to fly in the open, for a hero to be born amidst Kyoto's ashes, so that our olden Capital's fall was not meaningless.

After all, Hidekatsu was a fool. He had to die. Sadly, he somehow survived that night. But he already had done enough damage. It's not like I completely disagree, but to create such an argument with the enemy breathing on your neck… It took Yuuhi and Kurechika almost a year of negotiating to convince the Americans to lend us a hand again. And I do not regret that, even if they betrayed our trust by dropping onto our troops those bombs. Japan would be no more if not for them.

However…

And if it weren't for those useless fools in the Parlianent, we would have the Second already in production. A mere comment of concern about the Yukon Incident is enlarged, enhanced to such lenghts that it caused almost lethal harm to our relations with the US. I can only hope little Yui is able to complete the railgun safely.

After all, I did call for her squad to be sent the frontlines when we were all retreating. Kyoko almost fainted when I told her that, and she had to yet again ask me for a favor to be allowed to deploy to save Yui. That little skirmish turned the little one into quite a fine Royal Guard, even after we lost Kyoko. Shame we have to lend her to the UN, indeed.

"Well, enough repining. Let us see if fate has arranged matters as I wish," I grab the folders Makabe left on my desk, scanning them well.

So they wish to send one Company to survey Yokohama Base, and will leave two Squads to surround the castle. I doubt they would open fire, so a small… incentive shall be arranged. Yet, Makabe reports that they're insisting on the capture.

"That… is concerning, seeing Her Highness' mood as of now," If she were to be out of options… Indeed, she would solve the issue herself. I suppose, this excuse to arrange the evacuation efforts with the UN will play in my favor.

If I manage to convince Kouzuki, then this little affair will be solved easily indeed. Chuckling, I lean onto my seat. For whatever threat may corrupt the currents my thoughts have devised, it shall be rendered null in front of the STF. After all, it is in the Professor's interest to athwart what is brewing in Ichigaya before her Project begins, as it seems she'll soon announce. Furthermore, her collaboration could grant her the XFJ Project and the Second. A tantalizing offer, if I say so myself.

"And even if she refuses, the rest of the UN won't remain idle."

If the Empire falls, and considering Kamchatka won't last for much longer without any international support, COSEAN would be left in a very precarious position, since the most direct route for supplies and spare parts crosses through the Sea of Japan. And if the mainland is filled with Heavy Lasers… America might feel the heat of becoming the frontline for the first time in… forever? They never had war on their soil against an outside threat, if my memory isn't betraying me. I'm certain that with all the weight of their media, things would spiral out of control in a matter of days.

And with COSEAN gone, we would lose another supply route for the Defense Line on the Suez Canal, they won't last long without the Americans' supplies after all. Like a domino, one falls and all the rest follow. And that's not taking into account what would happen if the BETA decide to start moving towards Oceania after we fall to them.

That's why they need me. To push dear, little Yuuhi in the right direction. To take hold of the steering wheel towards the right direction. Towards the horizon where my ambitions lay hidden.

Well, as much as I respect Her Highness, she isn't necessary for this plan. She does have a twin sister that can fulfill her role if she refuses to cooperate. And the same applies to Kouzuki, who has refused my direct patronage since she was allowed to enter the Imperial Research Institute despite her age at the time.

A momentary pause assails me, gaze drawn to the floor. In image of a blooming flower, revealing its core to the world, my own core reminds me of darkest deeds I've done, considered doing, during these last years.

"… But of course, the sapling that rose from the ashen, bloodied soil could never make peace with such naive ideals," For if the root of our resurgence lays within the war-ridden remains of our old Kyoto, why deny the path we must follow? Why not water that hope instead? Fate gave us an answer… and we are still parading with hesitation.

… Harming my servants, soiling the blood of another Regent House, making accords with foreigners. I should be ashamed of myself, but if this is the price that has to be paid to bring stability to the Empire, to turn us into a world power, then I'm willing to bear all the sins proudly.

It's not like I can turn back now, after all the innocent blood I spilled. I'm honor-bound to those who died to further my plans to succeed in my ambitions, no matter the cost.

A knock on my door snaps me from my documents, my inner clouds.

"Who is it?"

"Makabe, sir," He announces, composed as always.

"Come on in," He enters and gives me a salute. Smiling, readjusting my position on my seat, I nod his way, "What is it, Captain?"

"Sir, we've received word from the advisors. Her Highness won't allow the recruits to be fielded to this location," He informs, voice low, expression sober.

"That is… unexpected. Did our men not try to dissuade her?"

"No, it seems she met solely with her fellowship's advisors," Brows lowering, he tells, "Our men had to inform their opinions through said advisors first."

"Interesting… Interesting, indeed," Yuuhi has rarely erected such fortifications over her person. Has she found motives to suspect me? However… the lack of troops is distressing, yet there's no point in letting others handle this matter, "I shall speak with her myself. Let our men know. So, anything else?"

Quick to nod, his complexion does not relax, "On another matter, Ichimonji's squadron came back from his scouting. He found no clue or trace about the aliens. We have already covered an extensive

amount of ground, he said he doubts we'll find those stray BETA at this rate."

"That is truly worrying," This will also sour Yuuhi's mood. Perhaps this anger is her way of showing her displeasure without inciting an argument.

In any case, my thanks should reach Kurechika. Prideful might he be, yet he's honest. He immediately asked for my support in this matter, I could not allow these news to reach the media. I can't let the people turn against the UN, not until I've confirmed whether or not Alt. IV is still active.

"I suppose, that is yet another matter I must discuss with Her Highness," I conclude, resting my hands on the desk, "Any other news?"

"There is one last report I have for you sir." Makabe informed, voice lowering further, clear apprehension permeating him fully. How unusual, you're so relaxed and confident most of the time.

"What is it?"

"The UN notified us that the Cheorwon Hive seems to have reactivated," A sudden cold shock, I shift my posture on my seat. Gesturing at him to continue, he nods yet remains stiff, "According to them, they had to perform a culling operation along COSEAN and American troops stationed at the Far East Defense Line during early morning when a herd surfaced and seemed to be making its way towards us, they lost the equivalent of a TSF Battalion during it, many tanks and ships, and managed to destroy up to 90% of the herd. There were a total of 30000 BETA, with a 3% of Heavy Laser Class and Fort Class each. They requested us to reinforce our western defenses, in case another attack happens shortly."

… I cannot have such an accident now of all times. If the MDF redirects its troops to Kyushu, the numbers to hold Sagiri off… Closing my eyes, resting my chin on a hand, my lips twist, my eyes

squint, my feet entangle as the numbers I envision do not portray a favorable outcome. I must act, now.

"… Makabe, arrange a call with the Takatsukasa House. Seems like I'll have to use that favor they owe me. Also, do you have any news on the medicine?"

"No, they still haven't replied. They did accept the new terms after you agreed to send some Type-97 to them, but it seems they're still doubting how to send it."

"Nothing we can do for now," Standing up, I pace towards the door, "Did Maya arrive to relieve you of the office?"

"Yes, sir. Despite some delay, she answered our first call to her post near Her Highness," Smiling and nodding, he answers as he follows close.

"That is good to know. Perhaps, we could have a talk with her during the evening, to test her opinion on these recent developments."

"… If you so order," Makabe replies, clearly not amused with the idea.

"Haha, worry not, my retainer. My right is always reserved for you."

"Milord, please do not start joking," Frowning, he scolds, "Until Tsukuyomi proves her loyalty, I am of the opinion that we should have her at arm's lenght."

"So… Perhaps we could make a trial out of today's dinner…"

"Sigh… Takatsugu-sama, I implore you, please restrain yourself for the time being."

"Oh? Well, if so suggest. In any case, Maya should grant us quite the insight into Her Highness' mood," Willingly or otherwise, "So, do prepare a table for three tonight."

"As you will, milord."

"Then, let us focus on what's at hand for the moment," Hastening my pace, I so command.

Luckily, we obtained this intel with enough time. All that's left is devising a way to make everything fall into place. Yet, for the BETA to act up now of all times…

Sigh… What wouldn't I give to have a proper field commander in my fellowship. A warrior which everyone respects, a champion who strikes carnage upon the enemy. Yet, me and my retainers must remain here in vigilance, and the rest in the force… they do not resemble the image my dreams envisage.

Still… Little I can do, except to keep moving forward. That's all I can afford, as the Regent and Head I am.

# Downtime in the Masquerade

## Chapter 61: Downtime in the Masquerade

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*December 2nd, nearing 5 PM.*

*(Audience Room, Imperial Palace.)*

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"… Therefore, you shall be stationed near the Niigata frontline for a week, at the least," The Shogun retold to her guest, who nodded shortly after, "Once you contact Hikami-san, I shall do as much as I can from my position to gain Kouzuki's support towards these… scouting operations."

"Understood," Amato nodded once again, "Will we be stationed in the same base?" She inquires, delving into the Regent's eyes, unblinking.

Her Highness sighs, shaking her head, "I require you to expand the area of our patrols. And doubly so for Hikami-san. Also, do recall that she is not formally under the IRG at the moment," Quietly, she returned the firm stare.

Thus, Amato relented a nod as she fiddled with her spiky hair, sheathing the embers, the wish to debate any further, "As you will, Yuuhi-sama."

Neither pleased with the other's reaction, a moment of silence extended in the audience room. While Amato finished her cup of tea, repining within at her Regent's adoration for passivity, Her Highness chose to have her sight flee to the balcony. A deep breath relieving the hollow, parched heart, she fought the intrusive echoes, the heaviness, the damp and cold sweat on her back to regain her usual composure.

It took her a few seconds, hands slowly interlocking away from her neck, "… Well, and everything else has been detailed in the reports you've been informed on. Do ensure you are able to depart in less than three days, Cpt Amato."

Straightening her posture, she bowed down deeply, "It so shall be done, milady," Returning up, however, an inquisitive, frontal and unmoving stare she forwarded towards the Shogun, "However… regarding Takeru-uesama's affairs… I must insist that you devise a plan to bring him back in the short term. I do not believe a mere exchange in words during this coming mock battle could do much for our wishes, and I doubt that vixen fox would release him easily if she believes Takeru-uesama to be a valuable pawn."

"… I was clear enough. Due to the current unknown circumstances, we must tread carefully," Voice lowering, she leveled a stare towards Amato, "To suddenly rush our hands or to disclose much intel to Takeru, or to Kouzuki, could backfire greatly. Steady steps, Raiko-san. Mana's report of the mock battle shall be enough to steer towards the right path."

"… Would it be allowed for me to learn of Mana's report tomorrow?" Never letting Her Highness' eyes leave hers, subtly leaning closer, she asked.

Which made the Shogun close her eyes momentarily, before giving a brief nod, "Very well, you may be present. However, if you incite an argument-"

"I shall not," She affirmed, fuming slightly, "I am merely wishing to have you act sooner."

"Sigh… Believe me, I desire nothing more than to bring him here, to see him again. However… We know Takeru's presence couldn't have gone unnoticed and that Kouzuki has found some value in his services, and thus, we must endow caution. Not only to ascertain Takeru's return, but to prepare for what could occur should he ever grow adusted once more," She reminded, cold and stoic. While

inside, it teared and scorched, it ached oh so much, *"I truly… do not wish to see such an expression on you ever again. This time… I shan't fail you, Takeru,"* And once again, one of her hands ran over her neck, two fingers diving, digging into the skin as if a gold vein had she found.

Upon the silence, slight doubt festered within Amato. The Shinpan's posture tightened, lips folding inwards for a moment, and an inquisitive counter seemed to be imminent. However, again running her hands into her lily hair, eyes closing softly, inhaling into the vanilla scent of her perfume, holding it in dearly before allowing a sigh, she merely gave a nod in agreement.

Deciding to fold for this time, Amato bowed once again, "Understood. Did you require anything else, Yuuhi-sama?"

Back to reality, gulping to relocate her mood and breath, she shook her head slowly, "No, that shall be all. I'm certain you've many duties on your shoulders, both with the outpost and the child, so I shan't hold you any longer. I hope… we can once again debate in such a peaceful atmosphere as we did today, Raiko-san," Her Highness smiled earnestly, truly relieved at the day's meeting.

So Amato nodded quickly, also returning the gesture, "As do I, milady. Well then," Standing up swiftly, once more she bowed down, "I shall be taking my leave, Yuuhi-sama. I pray that you may remain strong in the face of the adversity we face."

"Thank you kindly. And… I also pray that your missions can be fruitful, both the food plant and these scouting tours," She admitted, darkened clouds covering the prior cheer, doubting, hesitating on whether or nor the Shinpan still placed reservations upon her shoulders, "Do remember to remain alert, I am certain many eyes shall fall upon you when you sortie."

Yet, Amato shook her head hastily, and as someone would say, fire blasted from her eyes and lips, "There is nothing you should concern

yourself with, milady. I *will* deliver auspicious news to you, come what may."

"That is reassuring to hear," *And slightly concerning, s* he finished within, "Still, do take care while in the field. The teams fielded shall belong to different fellowships, as well as the UN and the MDF, so exercise caution at all times," She reminded, ordered, "For if any disputes over the areas of operation or the chain of command while on the field were to occur-"

"Worry not, such trifling matters shan't hamper my mission. I won't allow anyone to spur an incident during the scouting," Eyes blazing, she held Her Highness' gaze, "No one will bring you further setbacks. I shall cleave a path forward by myself if I must to ensure your wishes are safeguarded."

"… And if such actions spawn dissidence with the other members of the IRG? What if such a stance causes further friction with the UN?" Her Highness asked, reminded Amato of the state of the board they could not risk upsetting.

Many trials awaited if they wished to regain their beloved and, as I'm certain you know, quite some hurdles were at the ready to obstruct their efforts. For much is what they don't know, what they assume as correct, which could then separate them from their goal, his safe return. Without mentioning all that was riding on keeping this frail peace safe from all the machinations that were brewing and boiling behind curtains, behind bolted doors.

And such pondering, such reservations again ignited a stillwater displeasure from Amato, "Hmph… My duty is to fulfill the orders you've given me, so maintaining appearances for the moment is a priority. You've already been clear, caution is our ally. However… That does not mean we must remain still. Please, do not worry so, Yuuhi-sama. I won't let my temper flare up and burn away our efforts," She insisted, ascertained, extending a torch, a faint ember to the Shogun.

"However… if a discussion were to happen… and if the threat of the BETA stragglers is confirmed…" Eyelids cascading gradually, apprehension emanating like just unearthed petrol, her breath stopped cold. For Her Highness knew that one small incident could spiral out of control, incite the wrong people into the wrong decision.

"Then, we shall pierce forward with all our might," Amato stated, louder and closer, beating a fist onto her stomach, still staring, or trying to, into her Regent's eyes, "Our inner clouds shall not obscure this mission. Trust in your vassals, Yuuhi-sama," She affirmed, holding the unfaltering dry ice wall that the Shogun's complexion had turned to, " *And please do look up," S* he then ailed inside as she clawed softly at her palms, *"That bright smile of yours, the knowledge that you were looking after the Empire was what always kept many enduring for one second longer. Even when it became but a distant memory for some…"*

Sighing yet again, still wearing the stoic mask, she gazed at her guest, "… Then, what would you do should an incident were to occur during the scouting?"

"Me and my fellows shall find a solution, do not forget that you are speaking about the remnants of your brother's former unit," She reminded, quiet but harsh, insulted to some degree.

Slightly, Her Highness corked an eyebrow, her lips shrank, curled onto themselves, "… Yet, you cannot act as you used to. No swords need to be broken, we cannot allow them to be broken. Cooperating with the other fellowships is a must at the moment."

"That does not mean we have to alter our methods, even if we must practice patience. Such fears are unfounded, Yuuhi-sama."

"… How can you affirm such a thing?" She asked, shifting between curiosity and confusion for Her Highness had rarely, if ever, seen Amato willing to sheathe the clashing stride of hers. That was one of the reasons why they had grown distant, as their visions did not align.

Yet, the guest smiled confidently, embers once more roving in her eyes, "Because I've no reason to hold onto such thoughts, I shall despair after I perish. Rather than isolate myself within my mind, I'll soak myself in the adversity and break through it all. For I must be the guiding light you require me to be as of now," Amato stated, sobering further, her heartbeats near the base of her neck and rising, blazing along her barely composed breathing, "If you are willing to use me, this blade is ready to serve. And if endowing in moderation could aid you in recovering Takeru-uesama…" A small chuckle leaving her lips, she looks towards the balcony, "I suppose I should finally learn how to slash the mountain without harming the fish that within the river swim."

"Pfft…" Unable to hold the quiet laughter, the reminiscence the words brought, Yuuhi allowed a chuckle to leave her lips. Easing up her posture, another sigh in between, the Shogun again managed to smile, seeing the resolve of Amato's veneer, hearing such a resolute oath, such nostalgic words, "… I see. I suppose, you have some plan on how to proceed?"

"An idea, that is. However, I swear upon my honor that we will not breach your commands, milady," Kneeling swiftly, she bowed once more.

Which dispelled the twister, the clogging air within Her Highness, "… Then, may the tailwind remain at your back, Cpt Amato. I pray that these fears and concerns are unwarranted, and that the scouting can be performed without issues."

"As I do, milady."

Smiling towards her guest as she rose back, Yuuhi gave one final nod, "Well, I shan't hold you further. I suppose you shall be visiting tomorrow near noon to hear the report?" Amato nodded, "Then, I'll leave word on that. Now then…" A momentary glance at the surrounding area, at the pillars and furniture, caused a slight cross in her brows as she once again could not detect anything, "… Tsuhi?" Yuuhi tentatively asked.

And a small step echoed right behind a second after, "Did you call, Yuuhi-sama?"

"Yes…" Blinking fast, she withheld her amazement and shock, "Please escort our guest towards Fujikagi. Cpt Amato shall be visiting tomorrow as well, so please do make a note for that."

"As you will, milady," She nodded slowly, sounding almost half-asleep, "Now then, should we?" She asks, Amato nods.

"It has been a pleasure, Yuuhi-sama. Thank you kindly for having received me. Until tomorrow, milady," One last bow, one last exchange of pleasantries, and thus Amato turned around and went towards the door.

Both the guest and the Regent having found some respite amidst the reports, a pleasant air was left in the audience room at the departure. As slowly as Yuuhi moved to the balcony did Raiko pace towards the stairs. In equal measure, both were also reminiscing of days past. Yet, whereas Yuuhi's smile flourished, bloomed wildly upon the sunshine that still dared to linger in the sky, Raiko couldn't help but to sigh deeply, hunching over slightly as she folded her arms. The same person they were recalling due to their talk, yet the feelings spurred were clearly in stark contrast.

Which caused intrigue, curiosity in the gray dressed attendant that walked besides Amato, "Raiko-sama, what would be the matter?"

"Hm? Oh, it's nothing. I was merely pondering something," She says, dull and composed.

"Is that so?" Doubtful of the veracity of the reply, the shinobi remained staring, "Did Yuuhi-sama say something you deemed… inappropriate?" Thus, she insisted.

"Sigh… That would be too strong a word," Raiko relented, caressing, treading her hair as her gaze lost itself towards the faint, frail threads of light that filtered through the fluttering curtains, "I simply… I knew

our Lady Regent favored passivity as of now, and I am aware of the reasoning behind that choice. Yet… to also apply those actions towards Takeru-uesama's retrieval…"

"So, you oppose leaving him in Yokohama?"

"Perish the thought, I am not blind," She scolded, arms folded, "I know caution is a must when dealing with the UN Farces. However, to dally to this extend… And if that weren't enough, Yuuhi-sama is still referring to him as before," Grimacing, steps dragging onto the floor, she slowly, oh so slowly, shook her head, "She still hasn't learned a damned thing…"

A minute moment of surprise, of suspicion, Tsuhi treads her chin with a finger, "What exactly are we speaking about?"

"Do not feign ignorance, Tsuhi," Raiko again scolded, "Not only she still relies on the *Tsukuyomi*, not only she still wishes to parley with the other forces instead of holding her ground, but she still is mired by hesitation when ordering me to act. If she fears conflict, why even send us to the field?"

"Huh… I was under the impression you favored the orders, however," Tone lowering even more, almost growing to a halt, Tsuhi asked as they descended the stairs.

"I do, which is why I insisted this much during the briefing, to no avail," She admits, swiftly stomping her way down, choking the railing as she did, "I'm just… I cannot reach a reaction to all I've learned in these few hours, truth be told," Allowing her eyes to cascade onto the floor, she admits.

With delayed and petite steps as her hand slid along the railing, Tsuhi finishes her descent as she observes Raiko closely, "Yet… You still agreed to her terms. Will you start supporting her commands, then?"

"… If she remains resolute. Frankly, I cannot tell how can you remain composed in the face of this board. Being ordered around by *Tsukuyomi*, left in the dark about Takeru-uesama's survival…" A deep breath as they began walking again, Raiko held her gaze, weighed Tsuhi's complexion, "… Why don't you return to the Chains? With some work and the right results, perhaps we could gain Yuuhi-sama's authorization to visit Yokohama at one point."

Her eyes closed, slowly as her steps. Ceasing her breathing, both hands interlocked. A tiniest shiver ran down her back, yet Tsuhi again met Raiko's gaze head on. Sharpening her glare, the shinobi allowed a small dose of venom to drip from her lips, "… I shall remain loyal to the order I was entrusted with. Remaining rooted deeply at the shadow of the blossom, I dream of the skies no longer."

"… My apologies, I did not meant to imply anything," Raiko relented a small nod, lips narrowing at the sudden hollowing weight in her stomach, "Yet… If so you decided, how can you remain in such stillness?"

"Well… there is little I can do, but no matter how little, it is important for me. However…" Looking away, she threaded a few curly strands of hair behind her ear, "… I do admit working under Maya-sama has been rather exhausting lately."

Reigniting the curiosity, Amato stared, "… Is she… truly acting as she was during the invasion?"

"I won't accuse her of anything, yet I do find it odd that she departed to Kitanomaru so hastily upon the very first call," Tsuhi stated, still twirling her dark hair.

And knowing what the words implied, as well as how it would mean Maya departed despite knowing a report about Takeru was inbound, made Raiko's breath stop cold as another blaze fumed out, another combustion filling her eyes.

"However, something urgent might have come up," Tsuhi says, trying to douse the welling anger in the guest.

"… Has *Tsukuyomi* done anything else that warrants suspicion?"

"Well… She did fail to report Takeru's identity to Yuuhi-sama some mere days after his arrival to Yokohama."

"… Excuse me?" Taking a step closer, the nod the shinobi returned sent further shocks into Amato.

"I said Maya-sama did not-"

"No, not that!" Amato repined at Tsuhi's usual reiteration, "Are you saying she met him in the base and did not notify anyone of it?"

"That is the case, yes. It seems Maya-sama also advised Mana-sama to remain quiet, to avoid Takeru's presence to be compromised. It wasn't until Mion and Shion met him during the CCSE that Yuuhi-sama was notified of his presence in Yokohama, despite how… well… both of them tried to gravely injure Takeru during their encounter," The shinobi told slowly, Amato's expression gradually tightened into a faint frown, "Also, I do have to note that both the Tsukuyomis and Yuuhi-sama did not notify me of this affair until… much time passed," She quietly complained, lips shrugged.

"I see… And you still believe *Tsukuyomi* to be worthy of being Yuuhi-sama's personal retainer?" Fuming an explosion out, she stared.

"… See your enemies as your allies, for the moment when they bring you an opportunity to act," Tsuhi reminded calmly, nodding to herself, "Even if Maya-sama could… be swayed back to such prideful approaches, there is no proof of such a thing being true. She very well might be deceiving her allies first, to ensure nothing athwarts Takeru from our hands."

"… I suppose we shall see in time. However… I suppose I can leave her to you, should the need arise," Raiko affirmed, smiling faintly,

"Still… Regardless of that four-eyed traitor… I cannot believe Yuuhi-sama remains so fixated on 'binding his ire'," Sharply shaking her head, again she fumes, "I cannot believe she still believes such."

"Can we truly blame our Lady for the confusion she's feeling?" Tsuhi asked, looking up into the vast, hollow hallways of the castle, "Did we ever understand his motives to choose the path of the shadows?"

"We did not, that's… true… However-"

"Do we even know today?" She continued, expression darkening, arms joined behind her back, "It's been two years… and I still cannot understand his words nor what compelled his actions, nor the logic on which he operated when he was our Leader."

Grimacing harshly, light vanishing from Raiko's complexion as it the afterglow was on the skies, a fissure dragged down the resolute voice into a whisper, "Siiigh… Believe me, I also am bereft of explanations on that end. Yet… yet he was not deserving of the brand, of the word they brought onto him."

Sighing, softly biting her lower lip, Tsuhi again shook her head, "That was all they saw. The monster that brought down an entire base to ashes and smoke in a single night. And even if we were by him, to this day I cannot comprehend his decision, what those echoes whispered to him on those nightmares…"

And then, silence.

Only their slow footsteps resonated in the empty hallways, where even the flimsy light that remained hesitated to enter.

A set of stairs, the passing of a few Guards on duty to their offices. Still no words from neither.

"… Do believe he might relieve those accursed dreams?" Amato hesitantly asked in a whisper.

"Perhaps, it's a possibility," Tsuhi then nodded.

"And the date of his arrival…" The Shinpan eyed her sideways, Tsuhi slowly nodded again, "So, if he does fall prey to those nightmares, do you plan to do something?" Inhaling sharply, her purple eyes fixated onto the shinobi's composed stare.

"… There is little this humble shadow can do. And few are the actions we could take, even if our Lady decides to move."

"So we can't even try to do anything, is what you're saying?"

"Well… it is something to ponder. I wonder, where is our burnt and feeble present heading to?" Slowly looking to the windows, the sinking afterglow, her steps slowed down, "Yuuhi-sama wishes to safeguard the peace, if we can call it that, which we enjoy today. Yet, in the end, will everything sink within the rising fear and paranoia?"

"… Tsuhi, I don't believe such words are warranted," Amato repined, and was met with a small smile in the shinobi.

"Why would they not? I believed you thought the same. That it is time for action and not words."

Grimacing slightly, Amato shook her head, "True that might be, yet we seem to be bound at the moment. And a careless action…" Looking down, memories of a scorching day of summer came back. Thus, her grimacing intensified as she started wringing her hands.

Yet, Tsuhi tilted her head, still smiling, "Truly? Isn't there a small glimmer of hope shining through for us?"

Holding Tsuhi's gaze, Amato pondered the words for a moment, "So… you're saying we have a way to approach Takeru-uesama without hampering our duties?"

"Well, Yuuhi-sama was clear. She does not approve of us approaching or revealing much intel at the moment," Taking a small

pause, a faint gaze towards Amato, the shinobi's steps slowed down, "However… there may be a method that could help our current predicaments, perhaps," She told, again twirling some strands of that black hair of hers.

"What do you speak of?"

"If our Lady wishes for us to remain quiet, if certain eyes would fall upon us and him if we move carelessly… perhaps, something could be delivered to Takeru? I believe we both know who Yuuhi-sama will send to meet with the Vice Commander about the scouting missions. He could ensure the item reaches Takeru's hands safely."

"… I see," A small twisting of her lips in sympathy, knowing Tsuhi was speaking of Chief Yoroi, Amato slowly nodded, "Well, that option is something I hadn't considered. Still, I rather not betray the trust Yuuhi-sama placed on me by acting behind her back," Folding her arms again, she mulled over for some moments.

"… Perhaps, you could mention this during the report tomorrow?" Tsuhi suggested.

"Oh, of course. How did I miss that?" Lightly hitting her forehead, Amato sighed, "Indeed, we still have one last report at our disposal. Still, making haste would be in our best interest. Meiya-sama might be by him, yet little does she know about him."

"… So you believe she can aid Takeru if he were to grow pained once more?"

"Well, who other than her could, in that base?" Amato concluded, convinced of the idea.

Yet, the shinobi's lips narrowed as her gaze veered away. And so, nothing was else was said. Descending another set of stairs as the beams above lighted up, showering warm light onto the hallways, Tsuhi slowed down even further to point at a door.

"Fujikagi-kun is reading here. He has remained quiet for the most time," She notified, slowly as always.

"I know. Give him a picture book he favors and he won't tear himself away from it for no reason other than for dinner," Sighing again, she then chuckles, "I hope he did not gave you much trouble before you found a fitting book."

"No, not at all," Smiling, Tsuhi shook her head, "He was no trouble."

Opening the door, Raiko called for the child. Fujikagi looked up, and upon seeing her quickly paced towards the pair, hugging one of Amato's arms tightly once he reached them.

"Did you have fun, Fujikagi?"

"Yes, Tsuhi-san gave me a nice book to read," Smiling much, he nodded twice.

"I see," Ruffling his light brown hair tenderly, Raiko smiled back, "Well, it's time for us to go back. Say your parting words," Patting his back as she guided Fujikagi out of the room, she whispered.

Looking at Tsuhi, taking one small and hesitant step towards her, the boy gave her a bow along a smile, "Thank you very much for the book, Tsuhi-san. See you later."

Nodding and returning the smile, the shinobi petted his head softly, "No, it was my pleasure. See you later, Fujikagi-kun," She gave one last rub to the boy's head, allowing herself to breath in deeply the vanilla aroma of the perfume, relaxing from the prior discussions.

"2nd Lt Yasomaga, I shall be seeing you tomorrow," Amato said, saluting her fellow.

Who then returned the gesture, swiftly standing in attention despite the usual slowness of her voice, "Indeed. Until tomorrow."

"Are we coming back tomorrow?" Fujikagi asked, curiously staring as he pulled Amato's sleeve.

Who then chuckled, patting his head, "No, I have a small report to hear so I'll be coming here on my own," A minute cross of his brows, he noted his displeasure with a faint groan as she again chuckled, "Well then, we shall be going. May the tailwind remain by you, Tsuhi."

"Likewise, Raiko-sama," She nodded, firmly.

And with that, the Amatos turned to leave. Fujikagi waved one last time towards the shinobi, who smiled as she returned the gesture. As they went further into the hallways, Tsuhi's hand remained still and risen in the air. Looking at it for a moment, she allowed the arm to limply fall and sway by her side.

Eyes closing, slowly exhaling, then taking into the words, all that occurred on just a few hours, Tsuhi couldn't help but to feel a shiver on her sides. Despite going towards the windows, catching the very first stars glimmering in the distance, all she could feel was the compacting pressure on her shoulders. Gaze lost itself on the nearby greenery that surrounds the castle yet Tsuhi did not lighten her complexion, feeling as if she were staring down a tall wall of pure pitch-black mystery.

"… So this is all I can do as of now, huh," She repined, scolding herself as she scratched the glass, "Yet, it will have to suffice… until the time is right…"

Folding the sigh and dulling the small cracks, the hints of annoyance, Tsuhi once more strode back the way she came. In rather fast steps for the gray shadow, if you'd allow the observation. Now free of company, her feet traced the shadows, swift and unseen as a gentle breeze. Steps but a distant noise to the others, following the hidden pathways of the palace Tsuhi quickly found herself standing before the door to the audience chamber once more.

The lascivious golden, all the overflowing opulence, the imposing ornaments, the fine details engraved onto the wooden doors. The deep red of the carpet, a faint smell of incense. As fleeting as a shooting star in the dusk, she understandably allowed herself to frown for an instant, her teeth slightly raking her bottom lip.

An olden ruin devoured by moss and disdain falling, crumbling to an earthquake. A vast, open temple now growing hollow, losing its last standing candle. The cries of the gust as it had no more grass to caress on the barren fields. The silence of a forest abandoned by all wildlife. Such was the expression of his she had engraved onto her mind, rising back to the surface now due to the circumstances.

Not of war, not of hatred. All the contrary to the brand he endowed.

Her throat ached, her shoulders burned. As they did during that time.

Inhaling sharply, she shook her head. Opening and closing her hands for a moment, looking up in silence for another, Tsuhi managed to, faintly, smile earnestly this time.

"… I wonder, who fell prey to who back then? And… who will fall to who this time?" Moving her neck in half a circle, she couldn't help but to smirk, *"Or perhaps, the question should be… who has already fallen in your clutches?"*

Chuckling for a second, brushing her dress with both hands and regaining her habitual composure, the shinobi then opened the doors slowly and readied to resume her duties in looking watching over the Shogun with renewed spirits, you'd understand.

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A/N: So, originally, I wanted to end this chapter right before the mock battle. Turns out holiday season isn't exactly the best time to write much, what with alcohol and sweets being everywhere. At the least, I decided to put this out here to finish the 'Imperial' side of the build up before we return to Takeru's and the other's side.

I know the story is dragging on, that many would rather jump into the action and the good stuff, that people want the coup, the XM3, Sadogashima, some smut and the rest of the cool shit.

But.

From here on in is where the main efforts of this rewrite have gone to, where the fic will diverge from the prior version of it. And it's where the story takes a different road than the VN took. So, yeah, don't expect as much mecha action as Alternative had to be present in the fic for the foreseeable future. The coming conflicts will be more… let's say… close and personal than that. Or at least that's the ideal outcome. And no, not all of it will be pure undiluted angst. Though, the overall tone won't change much to be honest.

Between juggling the sidestories, seeing what to cut and what to keep, I decided to again try a minimalistic approach with this chapter to keep my long descriptions at bay, mostly. I dunno whether I'll upload during January, I wanna take some time 'off' the fic to not get burnout on it and get some fresh air. I'd like this rewrite to be the final one for the story, despite some adjustments I could make here and there, otherwise I'll be stuck in a perfectionist loop and never finish the damn thing. I might screw the execution, but getting something done is better than to keep mulling over whether I'm writing the cast as OOC or not for so goddamn long. And I do want to get some of the sidestories done, and finish the ones that are already posted.

TL; DR: Last update of the year, probably won't post on January. Story will diverge from Alternative, and epic mechas won't be the focus of the fic. Cue in Rain Clouds BGM.

So well, that's that.

As always, thanks for having read thus far. I wish you all a happy end of the year and a good start of the next one.

Keeping staying safe. See you later.

Zuoriel

# Behind the Mask

## Chapter 62: Behind the Mask

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*December 2nd, near 3 PM.*

*(In the elevator.)*

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"… I believe I had told you to keep your composure," the Vice Commander fires off as soon as the door closes up and they begin the descent.

Leaning on a corner, he closes his eyes as he hunches over, "I did what I had to do."

"Shirogane, we both know what could happen now that you reacted rather aggressively towards the guards," Swift and cold, she counters immediately, then sighs, "I'd like to believe you made a convincing enough act, yet I can't deny they might not stop in their attempts to ascertain your identity."

"… What are you getting at?" He asks, low, still looking down.

Rolling her eyes, she shakes her head, "Regardless of what they choose to do from now on, I can't have you growing emotional every time you go through a memory recovery. I do compliment your idea to use your rising displeasure at the last recovery session to push for answers and fish out their intentions, but in the end, you only delayed the inevitable. I don't know what you saw, but-"

"I didn't lose my cool. All I did was put up a front," Admitting it only serves to hollow his insides again, those echoes reappearing on the back of his head.

"… Wait, you were faking it?" Her curiosity piked, she stares right at him, unblinking.

"Not everything, no. But that's all I know to do, fake being upset when my back's against the wall," Shrugging, Takeru heaves a sigh.

It is very much alike to when the scientist left on his first experiences. Grin and bear it, keep a stoic mask as he argued with the new authorities, as he shielded his squadmates and young Yashiro from the hostilities born from ignorance. That's all he could do then to truly keep himself in check, to not end up contributing more problems to those he cared about. And it's all Takeru can afford to do now.

Shrugging as the scientist didn't release him from her gaze, he scratches the back of his head, "I did get pissed off for real once, but I managed to stay cool in the end. I know I can't place you in more problems, I'm not that stupid."

"I did not refer to you in that way," She states, gaze blazing up a bit, "So, care to enlighten me on what exactly were you aiming to do?"

"… Nothing much. Test the waters, see their reactions. Considering how I used to be, there's no way I'd have kept my temper in check after seeing… those memories."

Yuuko sighs, leaning against the wall on the opposite end of the elevator, "Well, the plan worked and they should have no other pretenses to be hostile to you. Still, it was a surprise to see you were right. You really think they erased you when you were little?"

"Sigh… Feels that way, at least," He admits, as Tsukuyomi's reaction to Takeru's words had only made the soldier more convinced of his suspicions, "I dunno why they had to do something like that but… I don't see him leading a good life after that night I saw," Softly biting his lower lip, his gaze crashes down further below. *"I had thought Maya-san had grown attached to him, I had thought Yuuhi did earnestly favor him… But those other memories I saw must have*

*been from before Mom and Dad died. And as soon as they saw this world's little me had no skills they could exploit…"*

"I know you said that before but, how can you be certain you wouldn't have wanted to stay under their care?" Yuuko asks, stare unmoving from Takeru's face.

"… It's how I am, Sensei," Again he shrugs, again he sighs, "I can tell that… if he didn't have anyone who remained by his side, in the middle of all that mess… All I could feel and see was that sadness enveloping him, and I know what I tend to do when left alone in such a mood."

Grimacing a bit, I believe it is quite fair to affirm his heart was split in twain right now. Not only for the pain he had just inherited from the memories of that night of solitude… but from certain similarities they had with a particular moment of his life, well before the soldier found himself trapped by causality.

" *Just like when Meiya took me to that damn mountain and I had to endure her grandfather's trials. Before I ceased to be a Shirogane in that world, when our marriage became official and I started my life as "Takeru Mitsurugi". The difference is, I had Meiya with me back then when I could have gotten in a foul mood. I had her unconditional support and love, so the struggle didn't feel pointless and I could push through."*

His throat closed tight, as if it were a security door during a BETA alarm, and that cold, piercing feeling started skinning his nape, cruising over his entire back as if a scalpel it were.

" *However, he had no one to rely on back then. Maya-san seemed to have grown cold again, that old woman who I assume is Yuuhi's mom seemed so… distant in the memory, and even if that young man whose name I believe was Masahide did try to cheer him up… In the end, this world's me didn't have anyone by his side as I did. And the words of that moment, the clear echo I can somewhat still hear without even meaning to, they tell me all I needed to know. That*

*feeling of being inadequate, the fear, dread at the thought of becoming a burden to those you care about… I know how it feels all too well. And what would I do without anyone to rely on or get me out of my head."*

"But, if that is the case," Yuuko slowly ponders, inching closer to the sinking shape of Takeru, "why is the Shogun so intent on learning of your identity? If he was sent away after this moment you speak of, I doubt he would have been allowed to join the Guard as well. It doesn't line up, your assumptions with their insistence."

"… I mean, I dunno what happened to him after that day, but chances are they had him be a servant or something. Maybe they left him as Yuuhi's attendant or something."

"… Is that so," She dismisses, "In any case, I won't insist on learning of what happened to you back then, but if you recalled so many memories, won't you truly reconsider the option to have them confirm you're actually Takeru Shirogane?"

And for a second, he felt as if he were underwater, pointlessly reaching out towards the rays of light above like a plant stretching through a canyon. Only to fade to the dark, and sink further beyond the sea.

"… I can understand his feelings, and I can relate to what he went through. But I can't be him, Sensei."

"… Yet, your security needs to be assured. Assuming they do grant us the folders of your father's service in the IRG, and that you can retell the memories you regained, we could form a defense for the identity theft claims that might come your way," Directing a finger at his face, she smiles, brightly, "You could even become a bridge between me and Her Highness, and with your new identity I wouldn't have to keep tightening your cover every time someone tries to poke their nose where they shouldn't."

"Wait a sec, Yuuko… were planning to link me to his memories to… solidify my existence in the mind of the guards? Does this have anything to do with how you said you wanted to stabilize me here?"

"Oh? Wow, I didn't expect you to figure it our. Bravo," She slowly claps, he groans a bit, "Yes, that was the idea. I believe we discussed this before, right? How other people's awareness of your existence is what ties you here, since you're an unstable existence. So by making more people think about *you* as someone who exists today instead of someone who has passed away, the pull of this reality on the Nucleus would increase, making the stabilization process easier on both us. I had believed that was your goal as well?" He nods, leaning on the sofa. So, she continues, "I admit, I expected more… tangible results from you today, to have a solution ready, but the meeting went well enough, I believe."

"… And why didn't you tell me about the meeting's true goal? I told you… I don't want to deal with the guards."

"I merely acted how I saw fit to safeguard my protegee, that's all. It's on you for not noticing my plans earlier. If you don't want to be merely strung along my plans, could you start trying a little harder to make yourself useful?"

"… What's with that question?"

"Hm? What about it?"

"Is… everything I did for you until now not enough for you treat me as an equal? To have you take my wishes into account?" He asks, voice low for the moment, as he stares into her eyes, coiling his hands.

"Your efforts thus far only matter if you can bring yourself to finish the job, Shirogane. The same applies to me, doesn't it?" She shrugs, sighing, "Did it matter in your first experiences how far had I reached? Did it matter at all when Alt IV was canned?"

"W-Well… But, even so, this isn't like-"

"It will get to that point, if we do nothing," She reminds, sharp and venomous, returning his stare, "So… What do you plan to do from now on, Shirogane?"

"… I already gave you my answer, Yuuko," Unblinking, the soldier return her cold stare, in full force, "This is all I'll remember and I don't want to go to the Capital."

"And you won't reconsider your position?" She stares, he shakes his head, she folds her arms and groans for a second, scanning his face and overall posture, "Then, what do we do if they do press charges against you? I need you alive and well when the 00 Unit is awakened, let me remind you."

Looking away, eyelids gradually closing, he again sighs heavily, "The intel I learned should be enough to prove my identity, if anyone stupid enough tries to screw with you through my issues. All you have to do avoid the Guard from growing suspicious of you is to talk amicably with them, I'll remain declining their offers if they insist. And moreover, *you* have a pact to uphold. You haven't told me anything about how you plan to fix the ripples of my world, have you?"

"Even if I told you, you wouldn't understand," She says, rolling her eyes, "But solidifying your self in this world is the first step to have all the causal ripples of your existence attach themselves here, to prevent any further risks of you vanishing away. And for that… I need you to stop running away from the Guard, because without the 00 Unit, I cannot fix the disturbances of your experiences."

"I'm… not running away. And I told you just now, I won't let this issue get in the way of Alt IV or Sumika's recovery," He nodded, firmly and enduring the silence of her stare.

Determined to *no way in hell* let these issues obstruct Yuuko's research, a small hint of embers resurfaced in his eyes. Despite not feeling a bond as tight as they shared in other worlds, the soldier felt

his insides ache at the prospect of the Shogun growing to believe the scientist to be manipulating him. It reminded him of days long gone, when he did an effort to support her after everything was over. In fact, you'd understand if he also was quite upset at the Guard's overall conduct, as it reminded him much of the setbacks he endured in his first experiences after Alt IV's failure.

Inhaling sharply, the soldier folded his arms and again rested his weight on the wall, *"But I also can't have others doubt Sensei's motives for having someone with such an uncertain identity in the base. If it comes down to it, I'll use what I learned of his life thus far to prove who I am even if I have no intention of meeting with anyone from the Guard. This is my problem, and I'll deal with it myself if it comes down to that,"* He concluded with a nod, relaxing his features.

And as he looked up, his eyes found Yuuko staring silently. Squarely in the eye and closer than before, to the point that he could see a small reflection of himself in her eyes as they scanned the soldier, as he gulped the breath he was about to release.

"… Sensei?" He managed to ask, after a moment.

She remains saying nothing, poker face in place. Lost in the maze of her gaze, a shiver ran down his back. The motion of the elevator stops, the door opens and she moves away quickly. Sighing slowly, the soldier follows after the scientist to the office, as they had done so many times before. Navigating through the papers and books, Yuuko preps up the coffee machine while shooting a finger at a sofa, indicating for Takeru to merely sit down and wait. While she made the coffee, the door opened and Yashiro paced into the room, bringing a small folder with her. Smiling at Takeru, she walked to Yuuko's desk to leave her report of the morning duties. The scientist quickly readies a mug with cocoa for the small bunny, handing Takeru his cup as well before going back for hers. For a moment, they merely drank and relaxed on their seats, enjoying the silence. But then, she starts to spin, faster and faster.

Looking up as she keeps drinking mid-spin, Yuuko then rests her cup on her legs, trying to keep the soldier in her field of vision despite the spinning, "Do you still think past you was in bad terms with the Shogun before? Are you absolutely certain of it, Shirogane?"

"Sigh… I told you, I think he felt that way, yeah. It's… disappointment, regret… heartache, kind of. I think he was… hurt a lot, and not only during that time where he was adapting to the life of the nobles."

"And how exactly are you sure he was made to 'adapt' to the life of the nobility?"

"Well, some of his trials and the words some people told him kind of…" Slowly tracing his bottom lip with the tip of his tongue, hands quietly come together into a lock as he looks up. As the sweet smile and the kind azure eyes caresses his mind for a second, Takeru hunches over and sigh, "… It all reminds me of something I went through before."

"… Takeru-san?" Bunny ears jolting up and remaining standing, Yashiro too felt a jolt on her back. As it was the first time that the claret aura that signals affection was mixed with the deep blue of sorrow, wondering if that was the reason why the soldier had, once more, cut off the recovery session today.

Halting her mug as it was right by her lips, Yuuko corks an eyebrow as she sees the twisting expression Takeru had endowed, "What does that mean? Did you… have to deal with the Guard before in one of your prior experiences?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. That did happen, yes," Scratching his head, he slowly sips at the coffee, trying to regain his composure, "That was when I… had to give you the pass for the migrant fleet in that memory I showed you, and other times when me and the guys were sent on salvage missions," Yuuko nods, taking her time to drink, eyes veering away, while Yashiro had her eyes glued to the soldier's

back, as the colors swirled, "But that wasn't what I was talking about, though."

"Then, what happened between you and the nobility?" Fixing Takeru a frontal gaze, the scientist hurries.

"Well… It's… Sigh, really, it doesn't matter," He says, low, and goes back to drinking.

"The one who decides that is me. Shirogane, why are you being so rejecting towards the IRG all of a sudden?" She presses, halting the spin, staring at him.

Yet, he stays silent, and drops the empty mug on a table to then hold his face, obstruct his eyes from all around him. Yashiro quivers as his aura darkens, as he starts gripping his hair.

Yet, the scientist force palms her desk, the onset of a frown lurking, "Shirogane, we can't keep pushing the issue to tomorrow. Alt IV requires you to tune the 00 Unit, and regaining your identity and citizenship is of utmost importance for the plan, for humanity's victory," He remains unmoving, it felt as if a twister of rusted metal had spawned in her stomach, "… And it's also for your own goals, isn't it? If you wanted to forge a peaceful world, and you have to remain here after we stabilize your self, then you have to face this head on. You're the only Shirogane in this world, and like it or not, you'll have to deal with this sooner or later. And I rather solve this in the short term, if you wouldn't mind cooperating."

"P-Professor, stop pressuring him, please," Yashiro pleaded, almost in a whisper.

"What? I'm just stating the obvious. I can understand him being reticent to see more… painful memories, but that doesn't change what we have to do to ensure our plan bears fruit," She shrugs slowly, shaking her head at the dejected eyes of Yashiro, who hung her head and remained still, "Surely, you don't plan on staying hidden under my skirt for the rest of your life, do you Shirogane?"

"… It hurt, hearing his grief," He relents, barely a whisper.

"Yes, I am aware. You were about to start bawling your eyes out after the session, after all."

"Professor…" Yashiro gave the scientist the scariest, darkest glare she could muster, still trying to comfort the soldier, to rid those dark colors from his aura.

"Our situation has not changed, however. All we did was delay the confrontation," She reminds, staring at the hunched posture of the soldier, "If you do want to stay in this world working for me, you'll have to to find a compromise to offer if following my orders isn't to your liking. Failure to manage this situation tactfully will mark an abrupt end to our partnership," Forcing the frost out, firmly looking at him, at his stillness, made her frown a bit, "And let me remind you, your world is-"

"I don't need a fucking reminder," He let out, lashing out. Yashiro flinched away, her skin crawling at the dark hue of blue enveloped the soldier, "But thanks for the brutal honesty, Yuuko. I'll… think well what it is I can do."

"Takeru-san, don't take this so hard," She reassured, hesitating for a moment before again reaching out for his shoulder, "We are your allies."

"Sigh… You're even making Yashiro worry. Can't you see that it's for the greater good, to heed my words?"

"Hehe… Hehehe…" The soldier lowly chuckled, through a hoarse throat.

"… Shirogane?" Yuuko looked at him, who was subtly shaking as he chuckled to himself.

"… It's all about the greater good, isn't it," Shaking his head, a twisted smile raises in his complexion as his eyes squint and narrow,

as if he were in front of blazing fire.

"… Is something the matter?" Yuuko frowns, leaning forward and interlocking her hands, "Do you have a… Huh?" Stopping cold, she could only remain silent as Yashiro moved away from Takeru while shooting the scientist a firm glare, for her anyways you'd understand, "Shirogane, what's the matter?"

"Nothing… Just…" Inhaling sharply, he remains silent. The scientist sighs, standing up to serve herself more coffee. Slowly smiling and thanking Yashiro, Takeru then shot a gaze at Yuuko, a neutral expression on his face, as she also observed him well while filling her mug, "… Yuuko, you're dead set on having me talk with the Guard?" She nods, immediately, "Then, do you… know of a mission… called Shura's Dance?"

And her eyes widened, as did her mouth. And a shiver ran down her spine, along a buzz in her ears, suddenly tasting metal in her mouth as the memories of that day, that accursed day of defeat returned to her mind.

"Wh-What did you… Ouch!" The shock loosened her hand's grip, and so her mug fell and shattered on the floor. The warm coffee hit her leg, burning her momentarily, having her hastily step away from the mess.

"Hey, are you alright?" The soldier asks, standing up only to freeze in his tracks as Yuuko drove a blaze of a gaze into him, gritting her teeth.

"You… You just said Shura's Dance, didn't you?!"

"Y-Yeah… I… heard that name, in the middle of the memories. So you do know of this mission…"

"… I may, yes. So… Wait, I have to clean this," Shaking her head, frowning at the scattered pieces of the mug, she heaved a sigh. But

before she could move towards the locket where she stored a few cleaning supplies, a small mop rubbed itself against her leg.

Somehow, the young Yashiro had changed into a cleaning form, a small white cloth covering her forehead, a small mop at the ready to clean, and a small plastic bag and a broom to pick up the broken shards. As she diligently cleaned the spilled coffee and broken mug, in small and slow movements, Yuuko couldn't help but to remain staring, blinking in quick succession, her brows corking in confusion.

"How… did she even… Where did she got that broom from?"

"Eh, from the Hammerspace, probably," Takeru said, chuckling lightly as Yashiro was finishing her cleaning.

"… Hammerspace?" Yuuko shot him a look, "What is that supposed to be, Shirogane?"

"The way in which a pirate can shove a dog into his pockets, or a young elf boy fit a bow, a dozens of bombs and arrows, as well as a grappling hook on his backpack."

"… What?"

"Don't worry, it's just a gaming term."

"But… But how did she even-"

"Professor," Yashiro said as she tied the plastic bag, "Where do I leave this?"

"Just… Sigh… Take the mop to one of the service areas and have it cleaned, the staff there can dispose of the broken mug, too," Shaking her head, deciding to not think too hard about this, she nods towards Yashiro as she turn around to leave, giving the soldier one last look as he waved away.

And for a moment, both merely sat down again, sharing the quietness. Seeing he was not willing to speak up, she leaned on the

desk and stared.

"Shirogane, I do share the displeasure towards the more… extreme elements of the IRG, to an extent. I did have a few allies in the IRG before, and they were rather… ruthless, truth be told. But this… attitude isn't making you any favors. If it is for your own good, is it that hard for you to share one dance with the devil?" He remains silent, closing his eyes, gripping his clothes. She shakes her head slowly, tapping her chin with a finger, "If you are not willing to make a compromise, I believe you know fate will force a sacrifice out of you."

"… Is that a threat, *Vice Commander Kouzuki* ?"

"A word of advice, from your boss and legal guardian. So, I am aware of the… pain that you felt during this last recovery session, but if you keep delaying the decision, they will only grow more distrustful towards both of us."

"I know…"

"Then, why are you running away?"

"I'm not."

"Then, what's this pouty attitude of yours?"

"I'm just… trying to calm down, before I snap," He then sighs heavily, she noticed he was clawing at his knees.

"… Shirogane, talk. Now."

"Sigh… I am not running away. If he made it out from that night, and became a surface pilot at such a young age, I won't… dishonor his struggle. But… I never had such issues with the IRG, not on such a personal level. And… it echoes in me, the pain he felt," Looking up, he met her eyes. She didn't find any of the usual cheer, only a poker face, a tight expression she saw in the soldier's face, "So Yuuko…" He started, clasping his hands together as tight as if he were

praying, "You do know about this…" Lips shook, as did his knees, "mission called Shura's Dance?"

"Sigh… Yes, I do. What about it?"

"Do you have access to the casualty list?"

"What? Why do you want to know that?"

"Do you or not?"

"… I do, yes. What do you want from it?"

"… Can you search for the surname 'Kurosawa' in it?" He asks, staring into her eyes.

And she could only wonder why, why were his eyes firm yet wavering, where was his prior fire he had during the talk with the guards. So she sighed, and started typing on her computer, bringing up the UN's report on the mission, "So… Who exactly am I looking for?" He tells her the correct kanjis, she nods with a hum, narrowing her search.

"… Are there… four people with the same surname?" He asks, low, his face again covered by both hands.

And Yuuko flinched slightly, as she arrived at their names a second after he asked that, seeing that there were, in fact, four people in the report with the surname and kanji the soldier had asked. Taking a second to gauge his expression, she leaned back on her seat, "… Do you think these people's deaths affected… how past you saw the IRG?" And gulping hard, folding her arms, Yuuko asks the conclusion, "Were you deployed to Shura's Dance, then?"

"He was sent to fight then, I think," He nods, still holding his face tightly, "And that's why… I can understand now the anger I felt in the CCSE."

"Sigh… Why? You didn't have this kind of reaction to-"

"Remember the day you threatened me with your gun?"

"… What about it?" She asks, low, eyeing him sideways.

"Remember what I showed you, those fuzzy memories of Iceberg?"

"Wha… Are you saying…"

"Shura's Dance was to him… what Iceberg was for me, Yuuko. It feels that way. But…" Lodging his nape on the sofa, looking up as he sighs, Takeru felt as if all warmth were leaking through his legs, through his back, enveloped by the coldness once more, "It's crushing… like my nightmares. That's why… I can understand, why he would hate, despite the Guard. And… that's why I don't want to see anything else, or get close to the Guard or Yuuhi."

"If you have these memories… Shirogane, we can confirm your identity now!" Rising from her seat, hitting her desk with a hand, the towers of papers shaking and about to collapse, Yuuko couldn't help but to smirk, "It's all a matter of presenting in the right way, and you can regain your-"

"Didn't you hear? I want none of that shit in me anymore."

"… Excuse me?"

"I… don't want to be near them, Yuuko. This was enough."

"… Then, what do we do if they press charges? No, even if they don't and we prove your identity, do you really think Her Highness will simply desist in her insistence to see you?"

"… I don't care. I'm not meeting with them."

"… Alt IV requires you to remain safe. Shirogane, what is it with you now? You… wouldn't happen to be getting cold feet, are you now?"

Frowning, he returns the glare, yet sighs again as he shakes his head, "There's… a few things I really do hate, Yuuko."

"Huh?"

"Not just dislike. I mean, really, really hate. You know what I mean?"

"I suppose… What has this to do with Her Highness or your identity?"

"Sigh…" His teeth start grinding each other, tension boiling over in his stomach as he hunches over, resting his elbows on his shaking knees. And all the while, his eyes were blazing again, as the soldier he once was, "That it's really, really hard for me to keep my cool when in front of shit I don't agree with. I can try to keep a poker face, try to grin and bear it… but there are a few things… that I just don't vibe with. And… if I snap… the one who pays for it is you. So I don't want to force a situation where, most likely, I'll lose my cool."

"Nice way to dodge the issue entirely, Shirogane," Yuuko slowly claps, rolling her eyes, "Why do you not want to meet with the Guard? Out with it."

"Because he felt back then as I feel about Iceberg now," The restrain is scorched, the fire roars alive, and his words shoot out as fast and roughly as a cannon ball would, "Those bastards filled their mouth with the preaching, saying it was all for humanity's victory… but in the end, it was only for their own benefit. They left us to die, holding out pointlessly against hordes of BETA. They could have deployed the G-Bombs faster, they could have saved many lives back then. But they didn't… they let us all die as meat shields."

Lips twisting, a cold shiver ran down Yuuko's back, a soft twinge of pain below her ears as she curled her hair behind them, "The military has to do what it has to, Shirogane. You should know that well. Humanity's salvation comes before saving a few lives, I'm sure… that the HC of Alt V also thought the same. And the same goes for… the authorities that planned Shura's Dance."

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean abandoning your subordinates to a cruel death just because. They had options… and they chose to do

nothing."

"… And what does this has to do with you not wanting to regain your identity?"

"Because… after that night where he was left alone in his room… I saw glimpses of that mission, that's why… I cut Kasumi off again. But…" Clutching his head, clawing at his scalp, the frown intensified, "I can still hear that, the sounds, the voices… it was buzzing in my ears for a long while, even during the meeting. That's why… I can understand why he grew to despise them… It reminds me of my first loops, and… it makes me upset, frustrated."

"… Your first loops?" She asks, leaning on her desk.

"Yeah. That pressure, that struggle… kind of reminded me of my own trials when you left the base and I tried to keep the squad afloat, when I tried to keep Kasumi company. And…" Silently hugging his elbows, he shook his head.

"… And, what?" She presses, tapping a few papers with a finger.

Looking at her, looking away, he licked the inner side of his mouth time and again for a moment, sensing that lavender perfume again for a second, "And it reminds me of… the time when I married Meiya, of all I had to do to be… worthy of standing besides her. So I can share that dejection, that cold trickling on my back, that… hollowness in my chest that he felt back then. That's why… well… I'm still kind of shocked, trying to keep my cool."

And again, those memories came back, and for as much relief and warmth they gave to the soldier, it also caused his fingers to bend, to clutch his sides as his heart was piked over and over.

" *It wasn't easy, on me or Kasumi, to hear that night's echo. All the while, his other struggles, the dismissive nature of the tutors, it all cemented that loneliness that was seeping in his heart. Of course they would only find disdain for little me, as the outsider he was, just*

*like me,"* He reasoned, frozen hands poking his sides as he shook his head, " *And as crushing as his feelings were… recalling those days with my Meiya, both the good and the bad, leaves those memories of him so, so lacking in comparison. Of course he'd grow so distant, so disappointed in the IRG as a whole. In this world, where the old values are upheld as if a sacred treasure they were, anyone who doesn't follow that to a T is seen as a stranger. And in our nation… those who stand out, those who are different… only receive disdain and scorn."*

The smile by his side when waking up, the advice she always had at the ready, and the insistence to have him duel with her, it all made the soldier lose more and more tension, as the nostalgia hit his heart and hollowed his insides.

" *Even amidst the coldness of that mountain, the silent disapproval of Raiden-san back then, I still had something to cling onto to make it all worth it. And as much as I miss my Meiya, I had her then. I remember her. I was blessed to be with her. But… going by the crushing sadness he felt then…"* And for a moment, a glimpse of a young Yuuhi's face flashed in his mind. It only made his heart shrink, his breath cut in half.

"… What does that mean?" Yuuko's sharp question, low voice, yanks the soldier out of his mind. She was in the act of walking to the coffee machine, yet she had stopped cold in her tracks, the mug held in midair and frozen as her expression.

"Hm? What is it?"

"Shirogane, you said you… married Mitsurugi?"

"Yeah?"

"… In your world, I assume?"

"Oh, no. In both worlds, actually."

"… Are you being serious?" Yet, the scientist still remained still, her brows corking more and more in confusion.

"Well… if you must know, we never got actually married in my first loops. There were some issues back then, what with Alt. V being enacted and all, so Meiya had her head elsewhere at times. Still, we did get engaged… but thanks to Iceberg we didn't get to, you know, put the rings on," *Sigh… She was just my fiancee back then, but from my eyes it's all the same. I loved that Meiya, and nothing will change that,* he concluded, allowing himself a small smile.

"Huh, is that how it is then," She grumbled, eyeing Takeru sideways as she, very carefully, filled her mug this time, "… And you didn't mention that until now because…"

"Huh? What's this about?" Squinting his eyes, he stared in confusion.

Yuuko merely sighs, pinching the bridge of her nose, before grabbing her mug and drinking as she slowly sits down, "Ahem… First, are you certain you're not being… led astray by your own emotions?"

"Sigh… I'm not. On the contrary, remembering my old lives… kind of lets me figure out what he'd have done. If we're truly similar, being the same entity but in different worlds, then… chances are he'd have been super crushed by having to endure all that pressure on his own. I don't think little me would have wished to stay there, and being so young I don't think he'd have… well, any restrain to not react badly against Maya-san or someone else," *I'd be surprised if he didn't yell at them or said something hurtful. Even back in my world I had somehow gotten mature enough to not snap most of the time, but still, he was just a little kid* .

Yuuko nods, silent for a second, drinking her coffee and enduring the urge to scratch her ears, "I see… And you don't suppose that, perhaps, Her Purpleness could have been for him what Mitsurugi was for you before?" She inquires, eyeing the soldier sideways.

"Well, it's true he did seem to like Yuuhi back then…" *And they did knew each other since they were little… I don't think that sweet little girl had any malice towards little me back then, no. But the core of the matter isn't what Yuuhi did or didn't do,* he reasoned. And then, the smell of gunpowder, the explosions surrounding him, singing on his ear as they had during Iceberg made the soldier wince, release quite some air from his nose, "The real problem here is… I can't wipe that feeling creeping on the back of my head, that he and Yuuhi didn't stay on good terms."

"Care to elaborate?"

"Sigh… You won't let this go?"

"Shirogane, if you want my collaboration in halting the Guard's attempts to file a demand of identity theft on your neck, I expect you to do your share. To properly analyze the data from each recovery session, I need you to tell me everything you think is worth mentioning, no matter how inconsequential it might seem. Both for the tuning of the 00 Unit and your own stabilization, let me remind you."

Yet… as you'd understand, those words were poorly chosen by the scientist. After all, she did not truly know how the soldier operated below his determined and driven demeanor.

"Still… I want nothing to do with these people. I'm sure… they don't have any good intentions towards someone like me. We can prove my identity, yeah, but I won't… be talking with them or seeing anything else. Let's… leave this at that."

"Sigh… Look, I cannot shield you if you refuse to cooperate. You'll have to stay in this world, and like it or not, you're the only Shirogane here. I cannot risk this issue to grow any more than this, it is quite fair to assume Her Highness will be notified of the meeting and your answers during it," She nods, arms folded. Takeru gives a nod and a sigh in agreement, relaxing his posture as he again crashes his back upon the sofa. She shakes her head, sits down, and starts to slowly

spin once more, "If the Shogun even hints at being displeased with me, or… if any eyes are directed to you… We will have to take extreme measures to prevent that from obfuscating Alt IV's success, as I'm sure you'd understand. The shock you're feeling is noted, yet I expect you to regain your composure by tomorrow. I'd like for us to reach a zero risk solution."

"Haha… Heheheh…"

"… What's so funny, Shirogane?"

"No, you see… Someone said the same in the memory I saw," Again, the twisted smile, again the sinking of his shoulders, and a small, minimal watering of his eyes, "When I… When he tried to hold his ground to help the nearby settlements, someone told him that their goal was to halt the BETA at all costs. No matter the casualties suffered. That so long as they secured a zero risk solution for Tokyo and Hakuryo Base, the mission was a success."

Yuuko looked away, her insides freezing over for a second, eyes squinting at the reminiscence took her to days she'd rather forget. So she crossed a leg over the other, and after inhaling sharply, she looked back towards her soldier, that she expected to still be grieving.

Yet, she found a scowl, a cannon ball of pure fire rushing into her eyes, "And, wanna hear something crazy, Yuuko? Within his heart… there wasn't just anger towards the authorities of the IRG that refused to move from their positions or to the MDF that refused their aid…" He said, low. And the scientist could tell where he was going, and she, too, could smell gunpowder around her, sticking to her face, to her hair and lab coat. And returning himself fully upright in the sofa, their stares met, "There was also… quite some anger towards a particular name, the one person who requested the mission, the one who ordered to hold the line regardless of the cost in lives… Care to take a guess who that someone is?"

"… Are you seriously going to do this?"

"If you want me to pass as him, if you want me to keep recalling these memories no matter what… if that's what it takes for you to devise a way to stabilize me and help my world with the ripples of causality, then I demand to know what you truly know of this mission, that broke him in half as Iceberg broke me before. As the one who devised it, I'm sure you can see… why it's hard for me to hold it together," He admitted, and Yuuko then took notice of the shaking of his knees, and why his voice and eyes had lost so much luster.

Sighing, finishing her coffee yet tasting metal and smoke, she grimaced for a moment, "I can… understand the anger towards the Guard, considering your… prior experiences with them going by what memories you showed me before. Yet, I believe this… animosity towards your only ally is unwarranted."

"… Considering how you get when backed into a corner, I'm not so sure."

"What are you trying to say? That… I'm not worth your trust?"

"That I know you wouldn't doubt to… crack a few eggs to make a good omelet. Just like how you risked the base's crew during the XM3's test before, or sent the Valkyries in secret to Niigata despite the warning I gave you."

"And those decisions gave us the XG-line, if your memories are to be believed," She leans forward, rising her chin, bolstering the fire. And in doing so, the orchestra of destruction flashed over her eyes for a moment, and forced Yuuko to look away. From the soldier's eyes, from the broken cities, from the burnt ribbons and plushies, "It was… quite a profitable exchange, and it delivered us to the ultimate victory at Kashgar, didn't it?"

"… And exactly that, is what both he and me despise about you."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I was not aware I had to appease your own morals when handling the salvation of the entire human race."

"It's not about morals, Yuuko. It's about the future, about the world that'll come after the war. I… don't want to go through that suicide again. I… don't think I can take it. Not again."

"It gave us enough time to devise a counterattack on the BETA. The perfect timeline does not exist, Shirogane. Sacrifices are unavoidable," She says, louder, more to herself than to the soldier, you'd understand.

"… And just because of that, you rather surrender our future to those pigs?" Looking up, the fuse of his temper about to light up.

"The authorities only did what they thought was best. Lingering on hatred will do nothing for you."

"It's not hatred… at least not from me…"

"Then, out with it. What is wrong with you? Because, if you're going to be this unstable… I won't let you get close to the 00 Unit, you're useless to Alt IV as you are now," She redirected the conversation, to douse the echoes that lingered in her background hearing.

"I'm just-"

"And don't forget, the more unstable you are, the harder it'll be to stabilize you. Your world is on the line too, isn't it?" She pressed, slamming her mug against her desk, as she did with her head after that mission.

"You… don't have to remind me. Siiigh…"

"So? Are you going to give me an explanation, or will you keep rambling?"

"… I'll keep it simple then. I won't be assuming his identity, because that comes with me involving myself with people which I hate. And… I don't trust in my ability to remain composed in such a situation, so I think it's for the best to give up on this line."

"If you hated them in this world, yet still worked with the Guard until the end, what's the difference?"

"That, since you want me to mingle with them, you plan to negotiate with the IRG for support. Using me as bait."

"And why would you be against that? You said it before me, we need all the allies we can gather," She reminds, waving a finger.

"Because I… don't want to support those kind of people. You've seen how this Empire is in this world, and that's when it's at the brink of destruction. What will they do when they regain their power?" He says, frowning a bit, folding his arms and looking away.

"And why do you care so much about that? Do you have a… particular sympathy for a faction in this nation?" Holding his gaze in silence, she stares unblinking.

Yet, Takeru shook his head, shrugging, "No, that's linked to the second question. Yuuko, do you… plan to go through Ouka?"

"Ouka? Oh, you mean the assault on the Original Hive? Well…" Leaning back on her chair, doing a short spin as she grasped her chin, she hummed for a moment, "It depends on how Sadogashima is handled, but we will have to nullify Target One sooner rather than later. You told me why, since the Reactors can grow stronger and that… entity in Kashgar could become a hazard we cannot remove. If you have an alternative plan, I'm all ears."

"… We need time. I told you before that-"

"Time is a luxury we do not enjoy. One thing is for you to be… in denial about the options you possess, after the shock of these memories, but the handling of the war is another matter entirely. Do you have a concrete reason to oppose a raid on the Kashgar Hive?"

"… I don't want to go through that again. I won't accept that future," Feeling his skin peeling off by heat, as it did when firing the cannon

on Mitsurugi, feeling that cold embrace as he did when the power plant blew up, the soldier again held the scientist's gaze, enduring the silence.

And seeing his veneer not bending, Yuuko folded her arms, frosting over, "Your emotions matter little in front of reality. I can see how a… younger version of you might have taken the cruelty of war in quite the negative light, but you're supposed to be a veteran by now. You once worked by my side in one of your loops, did you not? Compromises are required to reach our goals, you'd understand."

"… Sorry, but my emotions matter to me. They're what guides me forward, what is keeping me from lashing out in anger towards the Guards, what makes me who I am *instead of another mindless dog* . My goal is to save people, I won't surrender to that suicide. The world after Ouka is not a solution."

And then, something teared in Yuuko's heart, as the echoes of that mission kept playing in loop on her ears,"What… What are you saying? Are you hearing yourself? Defeating the BETA is not a solution for you?! Then, what? What are we supposed to do, huh?"

"… I don't know yet. But that road is not a solution," He says, holding himself firm in front of the towering tsunami of her wrath.

"Defeating the BETA is the only way for us to reach victory and save this planet. Neutralizing the enemy before we pass the point of no return is our shared objective, do not forget that Alt V is still looming over our necks."

Licking his lips, crossing his legs, and his eyes too for a moment, instead of coldness… He could feel fire, fire running through his spine, through his veins, "… Once we defeat the BETA, I wonder who 'the enemy' will be."

"There won't be a tomorrow if we don't defeat the BETA, and you should know that well," She says, hitting the desk lightly, spinning as she folds her arms, fumes and groans, then releases it all to regain

her poise, "You should know it better than me, perhaps, as you lived through a detonation of a G-Bomb."

"Exactly," He replies, firm and seeking her eyes, who squinted upon seeing his fixated stare on her features, "There won't be a 'tomorrow' if we don't take actions that will bring about a true change to our situation, beyond the BETA threat. There has to be something we can do. I… I can take accidents in the field, I can understand a sacrifice in a mission… but to surrender so many lives… when we could have done something to save them… True peace won't come about by building it atop pillars of corpses, and you should know better than me that… the real war starts after Kashgar is taken down."

"… Was there an incident regarding G-Elements in your prior experiences you haven't told me about?"

A cold shiver on his back, a warm one in his heart, the soldier twisted his lips as he scratched his head, looking upwards, "No, it's not that. It's more like… a background noise, an uneasy feeling… Even without the BETA, if you keep pushing for this kind of compromises… things will get out of control again."

"Do you have any proof to back up these 'hunches' of yours?" She presses, frowning.

"What, besides the fact that humanity will get loads of G-Elements and start mass producing XG-like machines? My world had it tough with terrorism, and… I showed you what happened during Sadogashima in my last loop. We cannot leave the G-Elements in the wrong hands, or something worse than that collapse will come to pass. And last time… I didn't help at all with that, so I don't want to leave that disaster behind me again. I… won't be leaving that mess behind, never."

"… Without the support of the current governments, we are bound and gagged. Without compromising on certain topics, we won't make any progress in our plans," Yuuko states, sighing for a moment,

before re-locking her gaze on his, running a hand over her hair, ignoring the echoes, the taste of metal, "I… do understand your concerns, however it is not your duty to handle those matters. There are no other alternatives left for us at this stage of the game, I am convinced that your last experience was, quite possibly, the best possible outcome. I'm sure that world's me was also content with the result of her struggles."

But then, he hunched over. And this time, he didn't fight the impulse and his eyes watered.

"… Then, why did you bring Kasumi along when you asked me to kill you?"

"… Huh?"

"If that future really was the best outcome we could forge, if you truly were satisfied with that result… Then, you wouldn't have tested me like that, you wouldn't have dared me to stay there."

Like a petal landing on her skin, a raindrop of cold hit Yuuko's nape, "… I don't follow what you're-"

Hands shaking as they tightened, his gaze remained crashed down, burning on the ground, "If you wanted to die, if you really wanted me to kill you… you wouldn't have brought Kasumi along. And even if you did want to die, I don't think you'd ask. You know your genius is necessary for the progress of humanity, to make sure the BETA never bring us to near death again, and to protect the research you worked on for most of your life, to ensure it was not used to destroy the planet you fought so hard to protect. Even if… you were screwed for sure, you wouldn't have ran away from the consequences of your actions. But then, if there was nothing else left to do, if you were content with how things played out, you wouldn't have brought Kasumi along."

"What… What are you getting at?" Gulping slowly, the shower of petals drizzled over her, a small yet continuous collapse.

"… I don't know if that Yuuko knew what would happen to me once I got back to my world, and I'll probably never know," Smiling, yet biting his lips, he shook his head, "But what I am sure of… is that she wanted me to stay. That's why she brought Kasumi… because if I killed her then and there… Kasumi would have been left all alone. But I… already was aware Sensei would be made responsible for what we did during Ouka. I knew… Kasumi was going to end up alone…" Hitting his knees, closing his eyes, his eyes burn and burn, "… and I still left."

"And what… does this have to do with-"

"I didn't see it, I didn't recognize the signs. Even when I remembered my relations with my squadmates… I remained in denial about having been with her… so I couldn't see it… The last card Yuuko played, the last thing she tried… was to see if I wanted to stay, if I had the will to keep struggling… After all, most of her allies would have forsaken her once she was of no more use. At the very least, I could have shielded Kasumi for her. But I… a-abandoned them…"

"I… I do not… think you're correct. Even if you stayed in that world… as the sole human to have communicated with a BETA, you also would have been-"

"I'm sure I would have been too valuable to kill. Even if I was useless during Kashgar as I sat down firing missiles, I learned to handle an XG in record time. And you credited me for the XM3, too. And… if I had stayed, I'm sure you would have done everything you could have done to shield me. You always do, even if it goes against what I want most of the time," Sighing, he again hunches over.

It made her feel a blade of fire thrust into her gut, the petals bombarding the back of her head as if she were under hail, "However… You're merely assuming she wanted you to-"

"I'm not assuming anything. I'm sure she… wanted me to remain by her side, as I did in the world were I chose her over the squad. Up

until the end, I was Sensei's wildcard during last loop. And I left her hand empty when she needed me the most."

Spinning away from his sight, she took in a deep breath, "And… you're convinced of that because…"

"Because, *Vice Commander*, you don't allow yourself to be Yuuko… unless you're about to jump into the abyss."

"What? That's… quite the odd assumption you've made," Ruffling her hair, she fakes a smile, shrugging, "Sadly, I don't know what-"

"Did you know that you chased me away the first times I tried to reach you in Sendai?"

"I don't… see how that-"

Smiling again, chuckling as he kicks his legs off, relaxed and stretched, Takeru places both hands behind his head, looking up, looking back, "You were like you're being right now. Poker face in place, stone cold tone, barely even moving your body, not even meeting my eyes. Took me a lot of insisting to even get to meet you in person, only for you to shoo me away. Do you have any idea how much trouble I got into, trying to get pass the air-tight security of the IRG in Sendai?" He sends her a bothered glare, she merely looks away, "But I kept at it, until one day… you allowed me into your lab. The day I brought you the pass, and you allowed me to help you get out from there. And while you remained as you always were most of the time from then on… there was one occasion in which… you asked me something similar to when you handed me that gun a second time…"

His breathing halted. Rubbing his eyes, cleaning the water in them, he could only shake his head, run a hand over his neck. For as pleasant as remembering those days was, they also came with their fair share of poisonous spikes. For as much as the storms he had endured had cleansed the bitter feelings from his heart, the wound… still remained, open and aching.

She, however, couldn't see it. And merely shrugged, slightly frowning, "… You're speaking of other versions of myself. I have nothing… to do with those individuals, don't expect me to behave as they do."

"Yuuko, I'm sure you know Kashgar isn't the end," He immediately countered, she relented a small nod as he stared, "And… I can understand his anger at Shura's Dance, as I was during Iceberg, because it meant… the annihilation of the life he so much loved. And you don't have to tell me anything about it… but the you I know, both the XO and Yuuko, would never, not in a million years, have abandoned Yokohama like that. Not without a good damn reason."

And her hands shook. And her eyes blazed. And running a hand into her hair, burning away the petals, wanting to spit away the metal and the poison she tasted in her mouth, she faced his stare, everything else blurring for a moment, "… So you say you understand my thought process? That you understand what I went through then? Then, come on! Say it, why did I order that 'inhuman' mission?!"

"… Because you were gambling on the BETA making a Hive. Because by showing the military that they were fucked ten ways to Sunday, it would make the Empire stop refusing UN aid. And I'm sure you knew Yuuhi was not going to leave Tokyo once she was appointed as the Shogun, so you used that to your advantage. So by sacrificing northern Yokohama… you crafted a scenario that would force the IRG to cooperate with the MDF, that would make the defense lines more compact, more efficient for the amount of troops the Empire had at its disposal."

"… Huh? How… How do you-"

Pointing a finger up, he continued, never letting go of her stare, "This also would let you move to Sendai, where the government was located. To let you operate there yourself, and possibly have the STF monitor any… insurgent desires within the more fervent members of the Empire. You created a path that would lead to fewer deaths in the long run. You did what the IRG and the MDF did not want to do,

you forced them to act in unison, to let everyone see… that Japan's days were numbered," Sighing, he then eases up, doused and cooling down, "And even if you didn't know… your actions forced him see the… r-reality of the shelters, of the madness that was to not evacuate our civilians to another nation. You were the fire that burned away the pointless hopes they harbored, and pointed them to a real solution. You woke them up from the daydream, into a dark reality that still could be saved."

"… Is that so. So then, if you think this about the mission, why do you refuse my idea? If you know what I do is truly for the best, after all your loops, why do you refuse?"

Again smiling in a twisted way, barely raising his voice, "Because that's why he hated you, just as I despised you after the XM3's test. Because he did not understand what fueled the orders, the cruelty he saw, and many used your… evacuation to fuel their own agendas. And I'm sure you know… you're facing a similar board right now. And you didn't surrender back then, when you had nothing close to a working 00 Unit, when the downfall of the Empire would have meant a direct shift to Alt V."

"… Get to the damn point, Shirogane," She threatened, barely enduring the smell of burnt steel that came from the city, the image of the assault, of the downfall of Hakuryo. As well as her own inner devils, which reminded her of how she abandoned her family's lab, the streets she walked every day, the parks she visited. The city she swore to protect, the dream, the duty that pushed her forward… reduced to ashes, as the hazy dark blurred her surroundings. So she gulped as took a deep breath, before she shifted back to those days… before Yuuko sealed herself away…

Seeing her well, Takeru nodded, returning her stare, trying not to focus on those old days of war under gray skies "I… I can fight well, but I can't negotiate. I get upset, I care too much. But… this can't be the only option we have in our hands, because I'm here and this world is way too different to my last loop. And I know it's unfair, to keep pushing everything onto your shoulders but… Can you really

not look for a better solution that doesn't involve a massive suicide, Yuuko?"

"… And if I do, and the answer does not please you, what happens?"

"… I help you out for as long as I can. Then… once the 00 Unit is working at full output… if I'm a hazard, you're free to erase me or send me back the way I came."

"… Excuse me?"

"You heard me. If our goals don't align… if my hopes have no worth in this world… I'll just leave. Once the 00 Unit is in working order, all you gotta do is prep Model D to 100% power. I… wasn't even of much help during the Kashgar raid, to be honest."

Uneasy as she saw his fire whisked away in a flash, watching his dejected posture, Yuuko took a moment to herself, "Just to be clear… What are you expecting from me?"

"… For you to stop trying to shoulder everything on your own, and to not rush Kashgar again. The world needs you strong after the end of the BETA war. And you can't… you can't chase the fastest solution all the time. You can't take on the curves if you're blasting the accel all the time," He affirmed with a nod.

"Quite the request, coming from someone who has given no answer to what a solution would entail," So, she spew a bit of the venom that was brewing.

"Come on… I'm just trying not to get negative right now. Of course I can't come up with an answer on the spot now. And anyways, you can't let yourself get locked so easily, Yuuko. You told me why that was bad yourself, didn't you? That when you focus too much on one kind of feeling, your vision grows narrow, the link you establish with other worlds pulls only one kind of data. At this rate… all you'll do is attract the tachyons of the worlds where you can only win by

sacrificing everything. We can't keep let that result to come to pass now!"

"… What?"

"I mean, if you're not even handling the tech of the 00 Unit now and-"

"No, not that. What did you say before?"

"That you can erase me if you-"

"No, no! Right before!"

"You mean the stuff about the tachyons?"

"… Pardon me?"

Staring at her, Takeru couldn't help but to recall the talk he had with his world's Yuuko in the restaurant after the incidents, and how shocked she was when he told her of the 00 Unit. Only this time, I believe it is quite fair to affirm the scientist was at least ten times more flabbergasted at the words he so casually uttered.

"Yuuko, what's up?" He asked, raising a brow.

"You said… tachyons right now, didn't you?"

"Yeah?"

"… Why?"

"What do you mean, why? It's as you told me before, those… faster-than-light thingies that disrupt causality and junk?" He asked, raising a brow.

It only made Yuuko gape for a moment, "I… told you about tachyons? What did I tell you again?"

Squinting his eyes, blackboards full of strange annotations and long ramblings filled the soldier's mind. Shortly after, he shook his head and gave up in understanding it at all, "Uh… You know, how the grandfather theory was all wrong because all worlds are parallel… so it was like the idea I had during the CCSE about the trees and the worlds. I remembered your words back then, when I thought of the branch theory and how my memories related to it, and is how I realized a few things about- Uh… Yuuko?"

Eyes twitching, lips shaking, eyes blazing, the scientist made an effort not to raise her voice, "… You never… told me of this 'branch theory' you had. What is this about?"

"Come on, now. You know, don't you? Since any changes to causality spawn a different branch in a timeline, the grandfather theory was flawed. Uh… let me remember how it went… If A sends, like, a warning to the past to B, then that creates a rift in the timeline. But since tachyons ignore causality, that spawns a branch where B did receive the intel and another where B didn't. So the future where A sends the data to B still exists along the past where history was never altered, but there's another branch in which the B from the past receives the warning from A, thus changes the future to another outcome," Stopping for a second, scratching his nose and shifting his posture on the sofa as Yuuko silently stared, he then coughed, "You see, I was doubting if had used the boat or not during the CCSE during last loop. There was a world where I solved literally everything perfectly back there but… I didn't take that route last loop. But the data existed, and the possibility is out there, somewhere. And the same is happening now, right? Since I'm a strengthened Nucleus, I'm basically a tachyon magnet since the fact that I can draw memories from other worlds is a big middle finger to causality, right? That's why I can even remember stuff from other timelines, and why the girls got so negative so fast."

And then, silence.

For a moment, then another.

With only the clock on the wall and the buzz of the computers lingering in the air.

"… Shirogane?"

"Yes?"

"Since when did you knew of all this?"

"What do you mean, since when? Uh… I, um… Since always? You told me… Well, not you, but, you know…"

"And… And why didn't you tell me before?!" Blasting away from her seat, Yuuko erupted in shock and elation, and a bit of anger, towards the words she just heard, "I've been racking my brains to understand the Nucleus' theory and… and you're telling me… I was right all along?!"

"To be fair, when aren't you?" He asked, eyeing her sideways.

Still blazing, her words shoot out faster than bullets from a Gun Sweeper's raid, as she started hitting the desk over and over, steam spewing from her ears, "Praise won't save from this! Do you have any idea how much this changes my research?! Do you?!"

"No, but-"

"Everything! It changes everything!" The babel towers of papers fall apart, she keeps blazing, "If there is something that can actually disrupt causality to such lengths, and the Nucleus is the state in which a human can become a vessel for the phenomenon to occur… Then, that explains the difference! How did I not see it?! Yes, yes… They are two different anomalies, so if the oracle tries to devise a solution to an impossible setback… then, it is through it that the sharing occurs!"

"Uh, Yuuko? Could you come back to Earth, please? We kinda need you down here," Again not understanding anything she was

blabbering about, he could only stare and wait.

"Shirogane!" Clipping through the desk, she approaches her soldier, grappling his shoulders.

The closeness made him flinch, stand still and frozen, "Y-Yes?"

"Is there any other secret that I wouldn't tell anyone that you know about?"

"… Your three sizes, for example," In his nervousness, he blurts out.

"… Do you want to die?"

"Sincerity is a virtue. Also…" Scratching his head, he looks away, "I don't know what qualifies as a secret for you. You… did kinda like to rant when we were working together as I made you coffee, there's lots of those crazy theories you've told me," She groans a bit, releasing his shoulders, restoring the soldier's personal space. He sighs, oh, so heavily "And… anyways, are you sure we didn't talk about this already? I could swear we… discussed this before, when dealing with the papers of the Nucleus."

"No, you certainly did not mention anything of this importance before. I would remember it if that were the case."

"I see… Must have slipped my mind after the CCSE, I guess. Anyways, those tachyon thingies are why I… well, would like you to calm down and clear your mind. I know I tend to get super down when something serious happens, so that's why I don't wanna meet the guards. I'm not doubting you or anything, it's just… Since I'm a stronger Nucleus, well…"

"You claim I could be… influenced by my own desire to see Alt IV to fruition, being locked into chasing only one possible solution?"

"Yeah. I think you're the most fitting person to be susceptible to causality, being the main researcher of it. Like when you were

researching the theories before I even appeared in this world, both this time and in the other loops. Being so close to the answer yet failing to get it… I think you got set in your ways, in… what you thought was the correct path, and couldn't break the link to the data leak of a wrong approach," She groans, folding her arms in frustration at what was a fair guess, you'd understand. Waving a hand, he rose his voice as he nodded, "I mean, my world's you tackled the theory from a completely different angle and that was what allowed her to complete it, right? I know it's easy to say, but… you didn't allow yourself to doubt on your theory, and that's why I think you're doing the same now. Don't you notice a difference in your mood, in your way of handling your work now compared to before I arrived or gave you the papers?"

Caressing her hair, she breathed in. Easing all the swirling feelings, exhaling slowly, she nodded yet didn't meet his eyes, "I suppose… that holds water. The theories do… go to places I didn't think of, and I've been more productive in these months since you've been here than in the rest of the year, I'll give you that. By the by, how did the me of the prior world react to this? What did your home world's me said about my methods?"

Chuckling as he recalled, Takeru allowed himself to smile, "Oh, you choked me when I told you I recognized the formulas. It got worse when I told you the methods you use were outdated, stale and obsolete."

"Excuse me?!"

"Your words, not mine," He then swiftly takes a step back, raising his hand as Chief Yoroi does, "The thing is… After what happened in my world, when I ran away and… Marimo-chan and Sumika paid the price, I can tell when I'm about to crack, since I get hyper-focused on only one thing. Happened all the time with Valgern-On, with my training, and with… my lover. That's why… Sigh… I'm trying to calm down, because I know that when I get set on something, I won't stop thinking about it. Just as my world's you told me, I'm trying to halt the link before I get sucked into that twister of negative feelings he felt

during and after Shura's Dance," He affirms, looking straight into the scientist eyes, to let her see his honesty.

Yet, she merely nods, running a finger over her chin, *"I wonder, why the first data that he absorbed is of such grief? How did he even keep on fighting in this world if the war had crushed his spirit so much? And… why are these memories we're forcing out having such an effect on Shirogane… Maybe…"*

Seeing her silence made the soldier uneasy, so he coughed and took a step closer, "That's why… besides taming the fire of his anger… I think we both need to play our next cards carefully, we cannot make a mistake. It might come out as me being indecisive or passive, but if I only have one bullet… I gotta make it count. And two worlds are on the line, I cannot screw this up. That's why I rather wait and see, what's ahead, what's around, to then make my decision once I'm cool and the gears of thought are oiled again."

She gave a nod, fixing her eyes back on him, "So if I want you to regain your identity, you first want to ensure your… wish for a peaceful world with zero wars can be reached afterwards?"

"Yeah, I will not give up on my goal to reach a ze… a world without wars."

"… And is it only about your memories? Or, is there something else you're concerned about?"

"Well… After seeing how this world is, I know it might sound odd, but… Believe me when I say that the third incident I told you of may end up happening even if we do everything perfectly until Sadogashima, or even after Kashgar," He said, his throat again shutting up after he sighed, "Just that… it might be a quiet thing, and we won't notice it until it's too late. This world is far more nationalistic than any of the prior ones I've been to, so… it's possible the UN won't get to even act, that something… real bad happens while we're busy elsewhere. You know this world's political situation better than me, we gotta be careful."

"Then, why not… use your prior identity to gain a foothold into the IRG? If you believe the threat to be this high… you could be my eyes within the Guard."

"Because… I may end up surrounded by enemies."

"… Do you truly think you were all alone back then?"

"I told you before, he felt isolated in the Guard. I… showed you, what I saw, how I felt at the end of Iceberg. Now imagine that… but you're surrounded by faces you once trusted in, and now are out for your blood. I… don't know if I can take any more memories of that, to be honest," Running a hand over his clothes, clutching his heart, his gaze again crashes and burns away, fading, "And I won't lie to you, dealing with the Guard is something I'm awful at. It brings… a few bad memories of my own."

"… I see. Perhaps… we can take a few days, see how they react to the mock battle," She relented, and it took him to see her nod as she sat down again to believe the words. Yuuko spun for a moment, then directed her usual cold gaze at him, fingers entwining, "However, I will need you to remain in top form. If you do want me to look for another path… You will have to be willing to do different actions as well, Shirogane. If you ask me to compromise, then you will have to join me in the struggle."

"… And that means… you want me to take on his role?"

"It's a possibility. But first, let's dispense with the intrigue," Going to grab her notebook, she turns it on and starts writing something before addressing the soldier again, "I want you to detail all you can about what you effectively saw thus far in the recovery sessions, everything."

"Sigh… It might take a while."

"Do you want me to heed your warning or not?"

"Fine, fine. Just… wait a sec if I get emotional, okay?" Voice lowering as his gaze, Yuuko gave him a firm nod, in honest support.

And so, the soldier started telling the scientist of the recollections he had gained in these recovery sessions. Despite the small pauses he had to take at times, and how she had to convince the young Yashiro to go tend to the XM3, despite her insistence to remain by Takeru's side.

"… And you're absolutely certain he was residing in their house?" She asks, staring at him.

"Yeah? I think he was. That's what… Yuuhi's mom, I believe, had told him on the day where he got the letter."

"And if you knew that, could you kindly explain to me why did you insist so goddamn much on how you were never adopted in this world?"

"… I was gauging their reactions, that's all. And trying not to lose it, while I was at it. Tsukuyomi-san wasn't in the memories so… I wanted to see what they thought of the claim. And I think their reactions told us much," He asserts with a nod.

She shrugs, "Fair enough, I suppose. That does… bring up an interesting question to the table," She says, expression sober, "Do you think this world's you stayed in the Koubuin House after that night?"

"… Or was sent as a vassal somewhere else, I dunno."

"Sigh… Look Shirogane, I can sort of make a case on why this world's you could have been erased, if it brought issues to a Regent. Problem is, for that to be the case, it equals that he was far, far closer to the Shogun than we thought."

"I know… I know that. I told you, he was living with them, even being friendly with the Pickles at times. It's just…" Licking the inner side of

his teeth, it tasted like rusted metal.

"You think that, at some point, this world's you grew dejected at the Shogun, and that's why you're assuming they threw him away?" She presses, noting something down in her notebook then in her computer.

"Well, yeah. Think I'm wrong?"

Spinning slowly, she shrugs again, "I have no leads to claim otherwise. However," Sharply stopping, fingers locking together, she smiles, devilishly, "What we do have are your hunches, Shirogane. You did say that his situation reminded you of your… marriage with Mitsurugi, correct?" He slowly nods, raising a brow, "Then, could we assume that he was undergoing a similar trial of sorts? After all, it is very, very rare for a commoner to be allowed to reside in a Main House, let me tell you."

"Huh… So… you think they adopted him?"

"It's a possibility, yes. If you recognize his trials as what happens when someone of common descent is tested to join the nobility, or high society, then perhaps this world's you was tested to see where he would join in their ranks. Are you certain you cannot recall the talks, even if slightly?"

Folding his arms, a small twinge of pain below his ears surges up, as if touching a source of heat. Cowering at the headache, Takeru shakes his head, running a hand over his forehead in circles, "It's all messy. I do think… Maya-san wanted to look after him, and her dad was really insistent on how little me should 'adapt to their ways of life'. But…"

"You still feel that sadness creep up when you try to recall those times?" She concludes, scribbling it down, typing it fast.

"Sigh… Yeah. I know we can't let my presence here make any noise but…"

"I have one condition I'd like you to accept, before anything," She states, looking straight into his eyes, "If anything does happen, I want you to take responsibility for it on your own."

"… Don't worry, I don't wanna let my own issues ruin Alt IV, Yuuko. If you gotta send me back to my world, then just say the word."

"I wasn't talking solely of that, however," She squints her eyes, "And no, I'm not talking of disposing of you either, even if you should take that option into account as well. What I'm talking about is… if having you 'regain' your identity becomes our best choice, I want to hear no complains coming from you. Do remember that until the 00 Unit is tuned, you have to stay alive. Both to ensure Alt IV bears fruits and to fix the ripples of your world."

"I know that well," He sighs, a boulder piling on his shoulder, tearing his skin, "So… you think Yuuhi might press you until she can meet with me, no matter what?"

"Perhaps," She spins slowly, looking away, "Point being, when the time comes where I need you to disclose what you recalled through the recovery sessions, you'll do it without complains. Understood?" He nods, slowly. She smiles, nodding back, "Good. Now then, I have one last question I'd like you to think about."

"What is it?"

She leans closer, a stone-cold blizzard within her eyes, dry ice emanating from her lips, "If this world's you didn't remain with the Shogun, how did he become commissioned under the Guard and end up on that 'special' squadron you mentioned on one previous recovery session?"

"Well… I don't know why, of course. But… what I can tell you is that the disappointment, the sadness felt… stronger during the CCSE," Waving both hands about, as if trying to grasp something fluttering in the wind, his brows tensed and narrowed as the words eluded him, "Like… when everything crumbles down and the ceiling falls on you."

"So, something worse than the night you recalled befell this world's you? And despite that, he remained in the Guard?" Giving him another side glance, lips pursed in annoyance, she shook her head, "Do you have any idea why that might have happened, or are you just grasping at straws?"

Gulping, looking down as another cold blanket falls on his back, the soldier's voice collides in his throat and refuses to leave for a moment, "I… I think… I can make a guess…"

"Oh?" Interest ignited, Yuuko inches closer, "What of it?"

"I think… he had made an oath, and that was what pushed him forward. Being this world's me, I'm sure he had… a strong reason to keep marching forward even when he was alone, and that's what… made him remain in the Guard."

"Hmm… What makes you think that, if I may ask? Another memory you saw of his life?" Squinting her eyes, a stinger aims at his as she doesn't release her soldier from her gaze.

Yet, seeing that confrontational shine in her, that emotion, that drive to keep pressing forward… send a lukewarm pulse into his body, as if basking under a pleasant sun " *Even if it is a bit bothersome, that firm resistance… does bring back a certain memory… And if… if his fight was as brutal as that sole memory I saw, if his squad was left on its own in the front lines…"*

"Shirogane?" Yuuko was, again, narrowing her brows at Takeru, who only noticed it after a few seconds of dwelling within his mind, "You were saying…"

"Sigh… Sorry, got lost in thought. So… the thing is… well, just don't laugh, okay?" He asks, rustling his jacket. She nods while raising a brow, bumping a hand on her chin. So, taking in a breath of air, he slowly recites, "Ahem… *In the silver blossom of a cherry tree, dwells a brave and loyal soul. Rooting itself into the Earth, it dreams no longer of the sky* ."

"Was that… poetry?" She asks, tilting her head.

"Yeah, it was a poem someone… important wrote for me at a crucial point in my life."

"… Wait, the silver blossom refers to you?"

"I guess, why?"

"Huh… What an odd thing, to use a flower to refer to a man," She then chuckles, smirking a bit, "Does that mean that you 'blossomed' by that point?"

"Mmgh… I don't know what I expected of you, really."

"Come on, don't get mad," Waving a hand, Yuuko still chuckles at his groans, "So then," Sobering up, she folds her arms, "A brave and loyal soul… that still refers to you, I suppose. And rooting itself into the Earth…" She closes her eyes as she spins slowly for a second. When she's facing him again, a small frown was etched on her features, "This is about Alternative V, isn't it?"

Hunching over, he smiles as he nods, feeling the grasp of those hands, those begging hands on his body again, those wails right by his ears, "… Yeah. There was someone who helped me with… my pass for the migrant fleet. I received that poem when I got the confirmation I could give my pass to my lover, before everything went to hell."

"Bold of you to say that to my face, Shirogane," She smiles, raising both brows up and down for a moment.

"Huh? What are you… Wait! I wasn't referring to you!"

"Oh, you weren't? So you never gave me a pass then? What of that memory you showed me?"

"Ugh… I did give you a pass for the fleet, yes."

"Then, does this have anything to do with how you 'took care' of that me?" Giving him a side glance, she pokes the wound, in a small act of retribution. A small jest, you'd understand.

"L-Look, it… might. But we… we weren't… Sigh…" Hollowed out again, he hunch over.

"Hmm. I was merely poking fun at you, not intending to get you even more down," The scientist stood up, gesturing him to hand her the mug, which she then goes to refill along hers, "So… your point about the poem was?"

"Well… That even if everything is crumbling around me, so long as I have a clear goal to aim for, I don't stop moving forward, little by little," He affirms, sticking out his chest, hugging his hands to dispel the memories of the other hands, that tugged and begged, that kept on pulling, "Back then it was the same, even when I knew what madness I was up against. And the same on last loop, I… managed to keep my shit together most of the time," Then, he looks up, accepting the mug Yuuko offered, " *After my talk with Sensei on the brain room , after seeing Sumika was alive… or rather, the 00 Unit that inherited Sumika's memories needed me by her side, I tried to get my shit together to do the most I could do to help. I've always been like that, no matter how hard stuff is, so long as I have a goal and someone with me I rarely give up. I am a stubborn bastard when I'm motivated. "*

For a moment, a few things flashed in his mind. Receiving a cake at night. Nursing kitties in a dojo. Preparing some food in an apartment. The sight of his house's table filled with laughter, and a jab about his similarities to Chop-kun. And the feeling of cold all over his body, as he rolled and rolled, embraced by those azure eyes.

" *Be it when adapting to my new life with Meiya, learning to compromise on some of my tastes when dating Sumika, when adapting to life as a couple with the rest in my own world. Or when I had to step up to keep Kasumi and my squad safe after Alt IV was canned on my first loops, or keeping myself in check in last loop to*

*always be ready to help out. On the contrary, when I get down and I'm alone… I tend to do stupid shit, like when I was… seriously considering jumping off the roof after Sumika's accident in the gym,"* Then, he looks up, staring at Yuuko, who raises a brow and asks what's wrong, yet he doesn't answer, feeling a vice grip on choke the life out of his heart, *"Until you gave me another reason to look up, to not give up, Yuuko-sensei."*

And so, he drank in salutation, of the teacher he abandoned in the reactor along another version of him, both of them who had to endure the charges of his actions.

" *Yet… despite the sadness… I don't know why, but this world's me didn't give up, either on himself or the world. Maya-san seemed to be cold again on that night's memory, he was upset a the Pickles on the flash I saw of the Swordbreakers, and his feelings towards Yuuhi… are a mess, I can't even tell what I should feel,"* Inhaling well, hearing the worried, crushed spiel of the young boy as he fell asleep in the darkness of his room, Takeru could only sober up, drag the blazing blade he held somewhere in his gut, dragging it out, forcing himself to return Yuuko's stare, "But… if he kept moving forward despite everything, it means he had something worth protecting. What that was, I have no idea. But going by the dread… Well, I showed you what I remember of Iceberg already. I suppose you can guess what this Shura's Dance did to him."

"Fair enough," Yuuko nods, frowning for a millisecond, "Considering the how invasion happened, I suppose I can see how he was faced with… something like that memory you showed me. Still… You're certain that you do not wish to claim his identity?"

"… I can't be him, Yuuko. I think… it's for the best that we keep this as is. After all, I doubt Yuuhi or anyone else could actually come after me with what I recalled already. Since they erased him, to claim he existed would give them lots of trouble. One thing is you making up an entry but… if they don't wanna erase me again, and they actually want me to take on his role once more, isn't that more trouble than it's worth for us? I'll become a target, but for entirely

different reasons," He shrugs, one eye closed as he goes for his drink.

"I suppose, you're right," Yuuko relents a nod, sipping some coffee, "Still, I rather not be the recipient of Her Highness' wrath. And you're the only Shirogane in this world, so if she asks to confirm your identity…"

"… I'll do what I have to do when the time comes."

"… You're convinced they were harsh to this world's you, huh."

"His feelings are more than enough. Well, is that all?"

"I suppose… I'll analyze the data and call you back if I need you for anything," She affirms, with a single nod.

"Alright. So… Do I go back to my cell or-"

"You need some time off. Go to your office and spend your time as you see fit. Work on the weapons, work out with some weights, or just rest there. It's for the best that you stay away from your cell, in case anyone tries to interact with you in your current state."

"Sigh… Yeah, you're right. Well, I'll be going then," Standing up, not even waving back, he moves towards the door in slow steps, dodging the papers and books as if he had spikes stuck on his feet.

Something tugged at her nape, something didn't let her look away. So, going for another spin, she didn't unlock the door. When Takeru realized he couldn't leave and looked back, he found her staring, fully focused on his figure.

"Are you truly completely against reclaiming your identity in this world?"

"Yeah."

"Why? Because of the pain and fear of the memories?"

"Well, that too…" Inhaling well, hiding his hands on his pockets, he looked up, away, "There are a few things I can try to understand, that I can stomach even when I don't fully agree with them. I am a soldier, so I have had to follow orders I didn't agree with at times. But… pushing someone into a corner, after exploiting their trust in an hour of need… I don't think I have it in me to look past that, Yuuko. Even if I can dull the pain and endure the meetings, I cannot forgive that kind of thing."

Scanning the lines of pain, the lines in his words, Yuuko blocked her mouth as she interlocked her hands again, waiting a second to see if he would return her gaze. He did not, so she sighed, "Did something like that happen to you in your loops?"

"… Not to me, no. You did manipulate me at times, but… you never really threw me away, even when I was more trouble than I was worth."

*That turn of phrase would mean that… "* Then, something resembling that did happen, to someone close to you."

"Yeah…" And meeting her gaze, he winced, creaking apart, "To you."

"… What?"

"After that Christmas…" He began, nibbling at his bottom lip, feeling heated charcoal hit his gut, "one faction of the IRG offered you some help, it seems, when the UN was dunking on you," His words, although slow, ignited the petals, the hail back onto the scientist's nape, "Yet, you saw how you were imprisoned in Sendai. You even had to wear their black dress at times, when I went to try and talk to you. And you kept it together well despite…" Again, something pierced his veins, wringing his hands at the powerlessness he felt back then. He was looking down, trying to keep his composure. So he couldn't see it, how she was compacting upon herself, supporting her head with a hand, leaning on the desk, "despite everything they said, despite how dead and empty your eyes looked, how dry your

hair and cheeks were, how more thin you were getting with every visit."

"I… got it. That's… enough, Shirogane," Just a whisper, that did not reach his ears.

"And you stayed there by choice, in the end. You had some support to get out, you just needed… a safety net. But…" Frowning, his voice picks up, shaking his head in rejection, "Doing that to a little kid? After they took Dad to his death? No…" Breathing deeply, both of them met the other's gaze, regaining their composure, their masks, "I know myself well enough, Yuuko. I can hold it in, I can try… but this, this is something I want nothing to do with. Sorry… I cannot be him."

"And… what happens if and when they come after your, or our, neck? What if they do try to strike at both us before you reach your answer?"

"Hmph… Let 'em come, then. I'll despair after I'm dead."

"… Huh?"

"I ain't letting them ruin my efforts. And this is, in a way, payback for what they did to him. So Yuuko…" Straight ahead into her gaze, her poker face, he looked, pausing for a second as she tends to do, "you better keep your end of the deal. I want my reward, and then… we'll cross that bridge when we get there."

"Sounds fair, I suppose. I will… be waiting for a report on your activities at 1900 hours. Until then, stay in your office and do as you like."

"Understood," He nods, she unlocks the door, and he leaves. Without waving, without a salute or a gaze back. Simply leaving, in silence.

The scientist stands up, again making herself more coffee despite the lack of any food nearby. Reading the notes she had taken during

their talk, rubbing her temple as that intrusive feeling which struck her like a thunderbolt a moment ago tried to rise back up, Yuuko then pondered the readings she had scanned from the recovery session.

"It is surprising… He did endure a large recovery, despite how he piloted the Mind Seeker along Yashiro first thing in the morning," Swiping the pages of the notebook, the images in her computer, she took a few moments to align the graphs.

To think on all he had told her, about the theories, his pull as the Nucleus, and the… tachyons she hadn't told anyone about. Not in a decade, at least. Recalling his own reaction, his choice of words, what he revealed about the other experiences he had lived… what she had seen during the meeting within the guard's complexions… and above all else, even beyond the tidbits of her theories…

"So you'll despair after you're dead, huh? Hehe…. Hehehe…. Hahahahaha…"

# Downtime in the Masquerade (II)

*A/N: The start of this chapter picks up after the end of Ch. 49, instead of following right after the end of the prior one.*

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*Chapter 63: Downtime in the Masquerade (II)*

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*December 2nd, a bit after noon.*

*(Yokohama Base. Valkyries' Hangar.)*

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The whirring of gears, the clanking of tools, the whispers and jokes of mechanics and the beeping of computers was all that could be heard in the background of the ample space of this hangar at the moment. Alongside a sharp and firm smacking sound, which drowned all idle chatter in the place.

As wide as the reddening of her left cheek were 1st Lt Hayase's eyes becoming, standing still, frozen in place as her hands wrung tight. Equally petrified were the younger members of the squad, as if they had caught a glimpse of Medusa having intercourse with the Basilisk through the crack of a door. Static and jolts ran through the older ones, caught off guard by this sudden action.

And so, with a stone-cold facade which betrayed no emotion, save for disapproval in this occasion, the slender shape took a step closer to Hayase as her most delicate voice aimed to pierce through, "I believe I had already given you all a most thorough briefing on how to handle the Takemikazuchi units you were bequeathed with," Mst Sgt Kazama calmly said as a single finger cruised her chin, the hollowness in her gaze betraying her tone, "Could you kindly explain to me what idea caused you to perform such an idiotic maneuver at the end of the battle, 1st Lt Hayase?"

"… Excuse me?" Hayase glared at the woman, whose complexion did not waver, "I already told you, I was aiming to shoot down that-"

"Your unit collapsed on top of the aggressor you were facing," quietly lashing out, holding the Lieutenant's glare, "Not only you employed quite barbaric maneuvers throughout the entirety of this mock battle, you also put your own unit at risk of being severely damaged. Let me remind you, even if they have been loaned, these Type-00C units belong to the Shogunate. And as the Chief of their maintenance crew, I'd like you all to take proper care of them. I won't accept another excuse as an answer for your mishandling of such an asset."

One of her brows twitched as she inhaled sharply, "Listen here, you… Ahem… I understand your concerns, Master Sergeant," Sheathing the anger, Hayase gave a minute nod, feeling the pressure of her captain's glare skinning her nape, "However, as I said before, I was not expecting such intense output from the Takemikazuchi. It was vastly different to the sim runs we have been doing as of late. And if you watch the battle, I am sure you'll realize most of my 'idiotic' maneuvers were done to counter the eccentric patterns of our aggressor."

A single finger treading her short jade green hair, the Chief frowned slightly, "I do not believe it proper for you to place blames on other pilots for your own failings."

"W-What?! I am not-"

"Regardless of your foe's dexterity, 1st Lt Hayase, weren't you the one who chose to face that pilot on your own? Am I correct in that she dismissed your support nearing the end of the battle, 1st Lt Munakata?"

"Eh? Ah… Well, yes, that is correct," She answered, low.

Unabated, the Chief continued, "Thus, I am expecting no more… recklessness from your mock battles, Valkyries. To think the A-01

STF would be made up of such novices…" Shaking her head, Kazama allowed a sigh to escape her slim lips.

"… Bold words, aren't them," A minuscule shaking on her tight fists, Hayase's lips twisted in, bit by her teeth, "Then let me ask you something, Chief Kazama. Compared to other units, how was our performance with the Type-00C? I believe we piloted them far better than most in the IRG would, for a first sortie with them," She ascertained, in part due to her frustration at the woman's conduct, on the other due to the excitement that was still rushing through her veins after her very first time piloting an XM3 machine, after her bout with the Viking that had just ended but moments ago.

Taking a second of silence to consider her words, the Chief treads her chin slowly, "The younger ones were not even up to par to our fresh recruits in the IRG, no," The calm assessment sent Asakura's gaze and mood to crash down a ravine, whereas Takahara's frustration came out pouring in ample quantity. The other three of the newest members could only wring their hands, look away. Uncaring to the overall stiffness and emptiness in the younger ones' eyes, the Chief continued, "Cpt Isumi and 1st Lt Munakata performed at an acceptable level of aptitude, in my opinion. However, despite the difference in the OS, your skill in close quarters is *very* lacking," She stated, firm, grabbing a wrench from a nearby supply crate, spinning it in her grasp, and doing slow, precise movements with it in the air, bending her wrist just slightly, "I did not see you employ any such parries. And I believe you'd be accustomed to wielding something more delicate than a wrench."

"… May I ask what exactly do you think our piloting is lacking, Chief Kazama?" Touko asked, rather dryly for her own person, as she stared straight into the other Kazama's eyes.

She brought the wrench to her person, bumping it slightly on the base of her chin, "Surely *you* should know. A seasoned member of the Guard wouldn't have been bested as Cpt Isumi was."

"… In my defense, the reaction time of our adversary was like nothing I've ever seen," A small dose of embers shot out, looking straight into her eyes, "Even with the XM3's superiority and the technological advantage a Type-00C grants, I still am in disbelief that my firing line was so easily predicted and avoided," Michiru commented, taking a step closer to the Chief in an attempt to ward off her crew's rising animosity, "I believe you'd agree that such sharp dodging techniques are not commonplace in our doctrine, or in any combat doctrine as far as I'm aware. Our rival on this occasion was… an outlier," Descending to a whisper her voice, descending onto her throat a pair of knives, she then coughed to clear the stagnant frustration of her defeat at the hands of the 'Vikings', "Ahem… While I would welcome your advice in how we should handle the Takemikazuchi from now on, I don't believe this battle in particular can form a fair judgment of our abilities, Chief Kazama," Stoic and sober, she stated.

A small nod afterwards, the Chief dulled her disapproval, placing the wrench back in the crate, "Yes, perhaps such final judgments are too early to be spoken. However, I was led to believe you were the cream of the crop, the elite within the elite, the mighty sword of the Fourth. And yet…" A narrowed gaze towards Hayase, a shaking of her head, the Chief sighs, "… all I see here is arrogance, recklessness. And immaturity, above all else, for your second-in-command to have chosen such a barbaric end to this mock battle."

Brows twitching, Hayase ruffled her hair to try and calm down. It was not very effective, you'd understand, "… Look Chief, I merely wanted a one-on-one with those pilots. I admit it was… childish, almost, but I had no intention to cause my Takemikazuchi to collapse like that. I was answering to the display of my aggressor, testing the limits of my new craft."

"Excuses don't create solutions, 1st Lt Hayase," Chief Kazama dryly said, Hayase flinched slightly as she again bit her lips, "I am not allowed to know how exactly does the XM3 function, thus I cannot judge your dexterity with this new OS. However, what I can offer are

my critiques on your overall movement patterns. Which, to be frank, seem to not be anything new besides this supposed ability to bypass the shock countermeasures. Compared to the aggressor you faced… I found you all lacking tempo and dexterity, 1st Lt Hayase in particular. Remove the advantage this new OS gives you, and I can't say you're a fair match for the IRG's elites, save for your captain," She nods, placing both hands behind her back, finished with her small piece of advice.

Putting a hand over Hayase's shoulder, gripping it, Michiru forced her subordinate to bow down alongside her, "Thank you for your words of advice, Chief Kazama. We shall take them to heart for our next training drill. On that regard, was 1st Lt Hayase's unit damaged?"

Brows furrowing, lips shrinking, she nods, "Slight damage to the head visor, and we are still evaluating the state of the cockpit's outer armor. Sigh… I know I am repeating myself, but do take care to not hurt these units. Spare parts are very scarce, and expensive. Should you continue to abuse the craft in this savage a manner, I will have to notify this on my reports to the Shogunate."

"Alright, we'll make sure to redouble our efforts from now on," Michiru affirmed, hoping to end this discussion here and now, "If there's nothing else you'd wish to tell us, we shall be on our way."

"Excuse me, Captain?" The younger Suzumiya stepped up, still petrified, unable to meet the gazes which fell on her person.

"… Suzumiya? What is it?" Michiru asked, blinking fast for a moment.

"I was… wishing to ask a question to Chief Kazama, if you would allow me," Barely squeezing the words out, she said.

"Well… I suppose you can, go ahead," She nodded to her subordinate.

Who took another step closer, stealing glances at the immutable ice wall garbed in the white attire of the IRG, "Chief, you had mentioned before how our performance was lacking to your eyes. To what exactly are you comparing us? And, what did you make of our rival's piloting?"

The questions reigniting the interest, the honest curiosity in the Valkyries, most of their members stared in wait. Hayase took a step back and shrugged as she saw Haruka's nervous smile, both awaiting the answer as anxiously as their captain did. All the younger members were also eager to hear this reply, as their adaptation to the XM3 has been rather… dicey, to say the least. Touko was the only one who closed her eyes and sighed, wishing to be able to divert the talks or halt the answer.

After a second of pondering, the minute, delicate movements as she caressed her hair once more betrayed the harshness of the equally tender voice of the Chief, "You have been lauded as the top squadron of this base, of none other than *this* base. Thus, I am comparing you to what is, in my honest opinion, the most formidable squadron in the IRG I have seen. And as I said moments before, save for Cpt Isumi and 1st Lt Munakata, none of you are deserving of such a title. I highly doubt the young ones could fend for themselves on the battlefield should the need arise," A quiet collapse, the crumbling of concrete against towering waves of Destroyers was caused on the newest recruits' complexions by the words, yet the Chief continued, "I would suggest them to return to the Shiranuis, they do not deserve to pilot a Takemikazuchi with such meager skill. And should you fail to restrain your recklessness, I advise the same to you, 1st Lt Hayase."

"… Oh, really? It's a shame we have orders to field test all these units, though," Hayase replied in full venom, ignoring the hand Munakata placed on her shoulder and Michiru's warning glare, "And just so you know, all of us here were trained by one of *the best* pilots in the whole Empire. I can get that our approaches may not mix but, you know what? All the Valkyries were forged by the one known as

the Reaper, a veteran like no other. You won't find a better crew than us in the Empire, no, in the whole world, I bet," Endowing the entire blaze yet restraining it barely under her skin, she affirmed as she returned the frontal gaze of the Tozama.

Who dismissively shook her head, "Such arrogance will only lead you to an early grave, 1st Lt Hayase," *Or perhaps, you're shielding your ego behind this anger?* She mused momentarily, "Anyways, failing to account for the difference in skill between your crewmates will only serve to beget an incident on the field," Chief Kazama coldly ascertained, Michiru and Munakata grimacing at the prospect, recalling failures of the past, burnt hopes and dreams, "Furthermore, it would be in the best interest of the newest members to not form their skills with the Takemikazuchi as their baseline. Such power and performance can be… limiting, addictive. I do earnestly suggest you try to perform some trainings with the Shiranui again, either live or in the JIVES," She said, giving a minute bow.

"Huh?" Hayase recoiled at the mixed signals, void of words for a moment, "Wait, so, how could that be? I don't think using a better machine up to higher standards could backfire on us. Isn't that why the Fubuki was made as our training craft?" She asked, rhetorically, as she looked back at her squadmates. Munakata nodded with a perplexed expression, the newbies were also as lost as a penguin in a desert, whereas Michiru had folded her arms and words inwards as she pondered the Chief's suggestion.

So another tender voice rose in answer, as Touko took a step, feeling acid on her throat, "In the reality we live in, shortage of units and spare parts is something we as pilots must always take into account," A hand swimming through her long hair, she states as she looks at the ground, continuing as if on a monologue, "Adaptability to the field's conditions and the availability of crafts is a must for all surface pilots. And while our circumstances as the STF are vastly different to most other units, there is certain risk in allowing our new members to blossom under the Takemikazuchi, as it differs greatly from the Shiranui in many aspects," She concluded, softly.

Chief Kazama nodded in agreement, a small smile on her face, "Precisely. For example, 1st Lt Hayase would not have performed such savage maneuvers at CQC had she been piloting a Type-94, I'm certain," She stated, giving a minute glare to Hayase, which she returned, "Which is why I suggest you to allow the newest members of your crew to continue training with the Shiranui, so that they don't grow complacent under the Takemikazuchi's specs. There might be a time when you won't have access to such a machine… and your habits as pilots will make you take wrong lines of thought, and may lead you, and many others, to an early grave."

Michiru nodded, thankful for the insight, "I see… You're right, I hadn't taken that into account. If I may, is this how the fresh recruits of the Guard learn to pilot before receiving a Takemikazuchi?"

"Well… Sadly, this procedure is not always followed upon," Frowning a bit, she taps her ear, looking away into the swirling cables and rows of crates, "As I'm sure you're aware, the IRG does not have access to the Fubuki due to…" Lips twisting, eyes closing for a second, "… bureaucratic decisions. However, even if it is recommended to train at least half a year with a Zuikaku, there are those who receive a Type-00 as their first unit, due to their House's… connections. Seeing the performance and attitude of such individuals is what makes me think you should not discard the Shiranui just yet, as it has advantages that the Takemikazuchi units do not."

"Um…" Akane again stepped closer, "What would those advantages be?"

"Figuring that should be your first priority, 2nd Lt Suzumiya. As well as those of your same generation," Chief Kazama nods, sheathing her ill mood. Hayase and Michiru share a gaze, both sighing and shrugging, wordlessly deciding to relent on their arguing wishes.

"I see… So, well, about our rivals…" Akane insisted, gulping slowly, awaiting the answer, "… What did you think of their performance?"

Eyelids almost closing, expression dulled into another poker face, the Chief remained silent for a moment, then another. As she looked up into the vast hangar, into the colossal shapes of the Type-00Cs of the Valkyries which reflected the bright glare of the overhead lights, she quietly began, "While the… adusted impulse of its stride was rather concerning, I must admit that said pilot's skill was… exquisite," The smile, the small smile as she threaded her hair, that surged forth shocked all Valkyries, but Touko in particular, who felt something acid, unpleasant swirling and twisting in her stomach. The feeling only worsened when Mst Sgt Kazama continued in a slower, calmer tone, still smiling, "Despite the… odd craft they were made to pilot, all of its movements were connected through purpose, and the execution of them was near perfect, to boot. As Cpt Isumi mentioned, I believe the greatest point in favor of your aggressor was not their eccentric movement pattern but… its ability to foresee your movements, to predict your attacks and counter them with swift precision. And even then, they still contributed to the learning experience of the mock battle by not neutralizing all of you from a sniping position, crossing strikes with you all despite the advantages available. If you might forgive the rudeness, I believe that pilot to be more skilled than any of you, truly fitting of the reputation of your unit."

Michiru and Munakata frowned at the words, very strongly so. The younger members shared a surprised, flabbergasted round of gazes, while Hayase begrudgingly nodded in agreement as Haruka tried to appease her friend, gently patting her arm. Touko had remained composed, her gaze squarely on the Chief despite the stomachache, and slowly looked away as she saw the words to be genuine.

Taking a moment to gauge their reactions, the Chief then asks, "If I may, where is your comrade as of now? I… would be liking to share some words with them."

"Huh? Oh…" Michiru coughs, "That pilot is not a member of our unit, sadly. They are working under the XO's personal orders, and not even us have ever met the person."

"… Is that so?" Chief Kazama sighs, dejectedly, "Well then, I believe there are no further questions?"

"Actually…" Michiru's tongue lashed against the back of her teeth, half of her wanting to ask, the other wanting to stay quiet, "… You had compared us to 'the strongest unit' of the IRG. To your eyes, how does our aggressor fit in your ranking?"

"Mmh…" Veiling her sight, she pondered for a moment. Again looking elsewhere, arms cradling her elbows, the Chief's voice barely rises from her lips, "… If it were up to me, I'd say that pilot is worthy of an induction."

"W-Wha…" Touko was struck by harsh lightning, as if Thor himself had delivered his hammer through her chest, "S-Surely you're joking?"

"Why would I be? You saw it yourself, the most polished control of the jump units, the careful evasive maneuvers, the decisive yet not blind charges. Had the pilot been on equal grounds with a Takemikazuchi, I do not doubt all five of your squadmates would have been bested soundly, without any sniping support on their side," She concludes, nodding in serenity.

Which salts the wound on Michiru's neck, reminded of her failure when arranging the members for the battle. The newest members' gazes crash across and beyond a ravine, yet manage to keep their cool as Munakata smiled at them, shrugging. Despite how she, too, bit her lips as she turned around.

"That's… taking it too far," Hayase said, her chuckling creaking at times, "I mean, even with a Takemikazuchi, there's nothing a single pilot can do against five of us. They… had luck on their side, because we didn't know their tells that well."

"I see you severely overestimate yourself, 1st Lt Hayase," Chief Kazama noted, low, "Yet, there is no reason to debate. I believe we both can agree that pilot was truly skilled, regardless of our personal

assessments," The quiet tone appeased the wish for conflict within Hayase, who took a step back as Haruka pulled her arm, "I suggest you rewatch any available footage of this sparring, and see for yourself the minute detail of that pilot's movements."

"That we shall do," Michiru states, nodding, "Well, I suppose that is all?"

"If you have no further questions. All that's left is this report. 1st Lt Suzumiya, if you may?" Chief Kazama approached Haruka, who immediately solidified herself into a statue. Extending a folder towards the operator, who remained stiff and moving as if bolted to the ground, the Tozama then briefly brushed her hair as she looked to Michiru once more, "Then, I shall be overseeing your units during the afternoon. If you wish to ask anything, come back here and I should be available."

"Understood," Standing in attention, they shared a salute, along the rest of the Valkyries, "We shall endeavor to truly master the Takemikazuchi from now on, I assure you."

"I expect as much from the fabled Valkyries," Once more gazing at Hayase, she noted, "Well, if you'd excuse me," And with a faint bow, Chief Kazama turned around and approached the crew working on the Type-00Cs that had fought with the Vikings moments before.

Taking a second of pause as the Tozama paced to the other end of the hangar, Michiru breathed a heavy, oh, so heavy sigh. Combing her hair backwards as she shook her head, feeling a needle poking her forehead, she then turned and faced her crew, expression sober and firm.

"Well, you heard the woman. Looks like we're not even worth a dime in comparison to the Guard," A wry smile, she commented.

"Uh, Captain?" Hayase asked, a step forward, her eyes narrowing quite tightly, "Should we really let her trash talk us like that?"

"While I'd normally ask for some peace in the talks, don't forget that woman is the one in charge of the new units. And the Professor made herself clear, she wants us to take good care of the Type-00Cs. Whether or not they are adopted as the Imperial branch of the UN's top craft will be decided by our performance. So we all have to redouble our efforts from now on, you hear me!?"

"Yes, Ma'am!" All replied in unison, even Haruka.

"Good. However, just making an effort isn't enough. We got our heads handed to us some minutes ago by a pair of unknown pilots using a much inferior machine, after all."

A chuckle as she leans on Hayase's shoulder, Munakata smiles with an eye closed, "And when we had the chance to subdue the Vikings, *someone* got so needy."

"You raise a valid point, Munakata," Michiru smirked, arms folding, "Hayase, what do you have to say for yourself?" She inquired, piercing her sight into her second-in-command's own gaze.

She then stood in attention, grimacing a bit, "I fucked up the battle, Ma'am! My own selfishness made us lose the chance to subdue the Vikings without any damage to my unit!"

"You're goddamn right you screwed up," Michiru plays along, chuckling. Then sighed, raising a brow, "Really, why did you try to end on a one-on-one? You're not telling me you *actually* had an org-"

"No, Ma'am!" Frowning, she retaliates, "I merely was wishing to spar with the Vikings, to test their strength. I… was expecting them to join our unit, so I wanted to see for myself the ability of a possible partner as a Storm Vanguard," She admits, sighing at the end.

"Uh, Captain?" Akane asks, voice as frail as the step forward she took, "Is the Viking truly not going to join our unit?"

Sighing, ice down her throat and filling her stomach, Michiru shakes her head, "It seems so, for the moment. There's nothing we can do about that, so don't waste time worrying about it," Smiling a bit, she nods at her subordinate before glancing towards her 2IC, "However Hayase, I expect you to rein in your mood from now on. I won't tolerate another tactless comment towards the mechanics from the IRG while we're testing the Takemikazuchis. Kazama, could we rely on you for when we need advice on formal speech?" She asked instead of ordering, guessing right at the ties that bound her squadmate to the Chief.

Touko then nodded, forcing a smile, "Of course, Captain. Just ask when you need anything."

"Touko, are you sure?" Munakata inquired, "I know you're used to Keigo and the formal etiquette, but-"

"Misae, it's okay. If I can bridge our point of view with the Chief's one, that's what I should do. So don't hold back and rely on me whenever you need," She smiled at the rest, who eased up on the tension that permeated them ever since they saw the similarities between both Kazamas.

"Alright, that's much appreciated," Michiru smiled in approval and thankfulness, "Now then, we have the rest of the day free of duties. Does anyone have any proposals?"

"Yes, yes!" Hayase immediately rose her hand, Munakata and Haruka sighed.

"What is it, Hayase?" Michiru asked, rather resigned.

"Could we gain approval to train with the WMTS later in the afternoon, Ma'am? There are some patterns I want to try before our night sim runs with the XM3."

"Hmm… Do you all want to have another practice run today as well?" She asked and immediately received firm nods in answer,

even from the hesitant Tsukiji, the eyes of all Valkyries blazing with motivation, driven by frustration, "Siiigh… 1st Lt Suzumiya, could you try to contact the Professor for the approval?" Haruka swiftly nods with a smile, Michiru returns the gesture, "Well, waiting on that is all we can do. After we eat, you can go train with the WMTS if we're allowed. However! I will be taking this as another official training session, so don't think on slacking off. For now, though, our duties are finished. Dismissed!" She declares, her crew returns a salute and all of their postures loosens up, "Alright, let's be on our way to the PX. Kyouzuka-san must be waiting for us."

"Oh, hell yeah! I really need some of that good shit right now!" Hayase said, stretching her arms upwards, cracking her shoulders, walking to the exit of the hangar.

"Sigh… Mitsuki, could you at least mind your tongue around the mechanics?" Haruka admonished as she followed her friend's lead.

"Don't worry Suzumiya, not like she'd listen to us," Munakata said with a wink, to which Haruka groaned in disagreement.

"… That's right, don't worry too much about it. There's nothing to be done, after all." Akane reassured, lowly, walking side by side with her sister.

As the rest of the crew moved towards the hallway, relaxed and refreshed from the prior talk's issues, Michiru felt a tap on her shoulder. Turning to her right, Touko was hesitating on whether or not to meet her gaze.

"What's the matter, Kazama?"

"Captain… Would it be okay for me to approach the Chief?"

"… For a personal talk, I assume?"

"Yes, Ma'am. I won't disclose any sensitive intel, I merely want to… ask some questions, is all."

"Relax, Kazama. I wasn't implying anything," Chuckling, she pats her squadmate's shoulder, "Just don't try to defend Hayase too strongly. She was at fault for dismissing the Chief's earlier points."

"Yes, Captain. I… do think the slap wasn't deserved, however."

"Well… I agree, but at the same time, I do think Hayase needed to come quite a few steps down from her high," Shrugging, she then ruffles her hair, "Anyways, we'll be waiting at the PX. Don't take too long, Kyouzuka-san will get worried."

Touko smiles and nods to her captain's words, watching her depart along the rest. A moment of silence around her, when she gulped down and all other noises around blurred against what laid within, she found her knees quivering.

Slowly turning around, pacing towards the crew servicing the Takemikazuchi units. Long steps, hesitant steps. The smell of oil, the clanking of the tools, it all vanished from her perception. Focused only on the jade green hair, on the dismissive and neutral expression her older sister made when they crossed gazes.

"… Chief, do you have a moment?" Touko asked, bowing down slightly.

"Do you have an inquiry regarding the mock battle?"

"No… I would like… to share some words with you."

"As you can see, I am in the middle of work."

"… Please?"

"… Sigh. Onimura, I leave the check-ups to you," She says, nodding towards the young mechanic that she was tutoring, who gulped hard at the words, at the responsibility.

Both Kazamas then move away, walking over the sprawled cables, the echo of their footsteps on the bare metal of the hangar growing

more and more as they grew distant to the work area. Reaching a corner filled with crates bustling with simple supplies, bolts, cables, tools and other equipment, the Chief remained looking at the wall, upwards.

"So, what do you want, Touko?" She says, low.

"… Are you still upset at me, Sister?" Hanging her head, a hand clutches her elbow.

"I do not reproach your decision, no," Turning around, still calm and collected, the Chief shook her head, "There is no blame on you. Just as you chose to walk your own path, I chose to remain serving our family's traditions. However… If we are seen talking, people will reach a wrong assumption. Thus, what did you need?"

"… How have you been as of late? You… haven't answered my letters."

"I cannot disclose such information. As you surely know, my duties are tied to the businesses of the IRG. And you… are a key member of the UN's STF."

"… Please, Sister."

"I am fine, as you can see. Considering the state of our nation, even when I find some displeasure in my line of work, I don't have it in me to complain," Her eyes lower along her shoulders, "These last few months have been hard on me… but I am well. And I know… you're in good care in this base, with the people you chose to live with."

"I see… That's… good to know," Smiling, sighing the pincers out of her chest, the acid still remained. So, clutching the edge of her BDU's neck, Touko took a step closer, "Sister, I know you take your job seriously but… Was there a reason for you to be so harsh to us? I… do not believe the slap was warranted."

"Holding back on my critiques won't aid anyone. Without listening to the maintenance crew, pilots will grow complacent, arrogant, reckless," She nods, fuming a bit, releasing a puff of air from her nose.

"Sister, you could have worded your answers better. Why… did you say such harsh words to us? Are you… displeased to be here?"

"No, I merely believe sincerity to be a virtue, is all," She nods, Touko sighs, "By the by…" Staring, she interlocked both hands, hiding them behind her back, "have you found your answer yet, Touko?"

"Eh? Ah… Well, I've been… busy with my duties in the Valkyries. I have been meaning to try, but I haven't found the time to."

"… As dull and hollow as always, I see," Shaking her head, she sighs.

Causing a flinch, a tear in Touko's heart as her breathing hiccuped, "W-What?"

"Must I remind you of my advice again, Touko?"

"I… I have been trying, Sister. It's just… the missions keep coming, and I don't… find the drive to-"

"No, you're just refusing to," She affirms, causing all words to vanish from her sister's lips, which clamps shut as her gaze crashes down, "Regardless of how skilled you are, if hesitation resides within you, you will never be able to shine."

"T-That's… not true."

"Then, what of Munakata's and Higurashi's own struggles?"

"Huh? Why are you bringing them up?"

"You know. Munakata parted ways with her family, she cut her ties to it. I don't know if… she has found some measure of peace,

however… she still hasn't come to terms with her failure, has she?"

"… No, Misae is still… But this has nothing to do with-"

"It does. Take Higurashi as an example. She, too, turned her back from her issues, using your and Munakata's departure as an exit."

"Don't… talk about Eiko in that way…" Gritting her teeth, her hands tightened.

"I merely speak the truth. I… didn't see her today, by the way. Is she injured or…" Touko grimaced, moistness in her eyes as she bit her lips, shaking her head frantically a few times. Short of air for a moment, Mst Sgt Kazama bowed her head, "I'm sorry."

"… You didn't know, it's alright. But… But Eiko… did try. No one answered her letters… no matter how many she wrote. So that's why…"

"Sigh… My apologies, I have been busy," Leaning back, she rested against a crate, grabbing a wrench and spinning it.

"No… It's fine. So, Sister…" Wiping a hand over her face, regaining her composure, "Why did you… bring them up?"

"Because their issues limit their viewpoint for the war, there is unresolved chaos in their hearts. Remember the code," Pointing the wrench at her sister's face, she slowly recited, "Within the warrior…"

"… Dread must not make nest. Nurture your own valor, to luster your life and mind," Touko softly sang the answer, sighing at the end, "Sister, no one in the Valkyries allows fear to impair their decisions. We also have a motto to uphold. To carry out our mission at all cost; to fight to the very last breath; and to make our death count, above all else. I know you take pride in our traditions, but please, do try to not bring the honor code up. Your words may end up misunderstood. I can only do so much to keep my squadmates' temper in check,"

She reminded, snatching the wrench from her sister's hand and throwing it back into the crate.

"Then, why are you unable to answer my query?" She asked, stepping closer, breaching Touko's personal space.

"I… I did answer. I haven't had the time to-"

"When was the last time you played the violin?"

"I… well… a few months ago…"

"And why did you not simply answer that?" Upon her sister's silence, Chief Kazama shook her head as she stepped back, allowing her heel to get caught on a cable, falling back and resting her hips' weight on a crate, "If you cannot endure the shame, you're merely using your duty to douse your mind. Then, you won't be able to truly perform at your best. Or in the worst case… you'll overload when your allies might need your aid."

"I just haven't… It's heavy, on my hands, on my chest," Touko admits, hunching over, walking and resting by her sister's side, kicking the cables softly, "I got many unpleasant looks when I played it last time on the roof. Just holding it… makes my hands burn."

"Pay them no mind," She reassured, again spinning a wrench, "If any Japanese sees your talent with the violin as "treason", then they're only narrow-minded fools."

"… It just hasn't been the same… since everyone died…"

"… Was Higurashi the last one?" Touko nods, looking down. So the Chief sighs, looking up at the beams and machinery, and the light that filters in between the cracks, "Then, won't you honor them with a performance?"

"… I can't. I just… can't. How did you… manage to keep serving amidst the war? When everything started crumbling…"

Looking down, coldness in her neck. The smell of intense oil, the feeling of sweat mixing it in her hands, smearing her entire face. And the nights that turned to days, the hours that blurred in a flash. Chief Kazama frowned for a moment, until a particular day came to mind. A day of intense heat, the sun reddening her skin to the point where she could peel it off without much effort. A day of battle, a sleepless night. The day she was forced to stop, catch up with her stress and drown in cold. And it is quite fair to affirm, Touko could again feel the acid crawling up her throat as if an ant army it were. Never had she seen her stoic and composed sister wince or shake, not even in front of her Father's admonishing belt whips.

"Sister?" Placing a hand on her shoulder, whispering in concern, Touko brought the Chief back to reality.

And sighing, a hand in her forehead, she took a moment to catch her breath, "Those days were… arduous to endure. To this day those echoes linger in my ears, if I'm foolish enough to recall them. However…" Clutching the crate, pressing the wrench to her stomach, a small ember rose in her eyes, "I saw a small glimmer of hope shining through."

"… What was it?"

Coughing, halting herself before she spoke words she had sworn not to disclose, she merely spun the wrench again, "A lesson on how to see the war, and my own struggles. Someone… set a good example for me, for all of my fellows, and we… could do little else than to follow in his footsteps. That is why, despite my own reservations, I am here in this base. That is why I will remain honest on my criticism. To honor his death, his life besides me, and all he taught me and I could never fully repay."

"I… Sister, were you… in love with that person?" Touko asks, a few fingers tracing her lips, eyes wide at the words she just heard.

"Huh?" Equally wide were the Chief's eyes now as she gaped.

"I've never heard you speak of another, much less a man, in such fashion. Did you…"

"Wh- No! Why must you always equal respect with romance?!"

"No… Sister, you never, ever, have shown such… light in your eyes, graced another with such praise. Who… Who was that person?"

"I… cannot tell you," Looking away, standing from the crane and throwing the wrench back in, making it bounce a bit, she sobered up, "But he showed me what… true tenacity is."

"… I see," Twirling her hair, Touko was left bereft of words in front of the development, you'd understand, "To be honest, I did find it odd that you'd welcome the order to work in a UN base. Was this person in favor of the UN as well?"

"… No, at all."

"Eh?"

"He did not… favor the UN Farces in the slightest."

"S-Sister… Why must you still use those words?"

"Because they are true, to an extent. However, herein this base lays a path to the victory I long to see. That is why I am here, and in aiding your squadron to adapt to the Type-00C the war efforts will certainly benefit. The Empire will benefit, our people will. Thus, even if it is against my better judgment, chasing this superior alternative is what I must do."

"I didn't… think you'd be so resolute about this," Licking the back of her teeth, watching her sister's back, she couldn't help but to ask, "Have you found your answer, then?"

"Yes, I now have no regrets. My path… lies in the Imperial Guard," Smiling, nodding back to Touko, she held her sister's gaze, her own eyes blazing, "I merely… have to keep moving forward in caution, to

honor the lives of those who aided me during the invasion. Thus, in their stead will I work towards our shared dream, so that this war ends in our victory. No matter what trials might lie in wait… I have a duty to uphold. I've already pondered, doubted enough. It is now time for action and not words, for me to carry on the fire which I inherited within the shadows. I've a goal to achieve before I vanish, so I shall despair after I perish," She finished, bumping a fist into her bosom, looking up sharply at nowhere. Feeling that blaze of a gaze enveloping her once more, from the top of her head to the tip of her toes.

Touko felt the acid recede, replaced with a dense confusion at her sister's display of raw emotion, "Despair after… you perish? That's… an odd turn of phrase."

"No different than the motto of your squadron," She countered, arms folding as she twisted her lips.

"Our words have a rousing effect. To make our death count, to fulfill the duty we're entrusted with. Why would you mention despair?"

"It's simple, Touko. Despair and dread must not make nest, they do not belong with the living. Therefore, since it is a waste of precious time to dwell in regrets, I shall despair after I perish. My time alive has better uses than to wallow in such negative, self-destructive thoughts."

"However… I can see what you mean, Sister. However… to ignore your regrets?" She bit her lips, the last moments of the Niigata battle, the beating of her head, the buzz in her ears, Eiko's broken, teary voice, her own frantic and manic concern as she saw the Viking's machine swarmed by Tanks while she was recovering her friend, whose lower half was limp and unresponsive, having to be forcefully removed from the seat, "… Just marching on through the pain? I… am not convinced that is wise, Sister."

"Let it be a reminder."

"Huh?"

Her eyelids slowly fell, a hand firmly planted in her chest. And so, she chanted the mantra he had made for himself, which she recites as gospel, "Let the voices that don't stop serve as a reminder of all you failed to achieve, all you still wish to accomplish. Let it take you to your feet, let it drive you forward. Take it all in, and break through the dread of today. And when the time to strike comes," Eyes opened wide, a cold feeling creeping up her back, the piercing stare again in her nape, so Chief Kazama couldn't resist and her sight crossed, "we shall crush the fangs of any and all obstacles that stand in our way."

"… Sister?" Touko stared, frozen, at the tightened expression, wrathful gaze her sister had endowed. Taking a step back, hitting herself on a crate and sending a wrench and a few bolts to the ground.

The echo startles both sisters, and Chief Kazama runs a hand over her face and into her hair, sighing heavily as she regains her composure while Touko lifts what she had tumbled down.

"In any case…" She begins, breathing deep, "I merely decided to further my career in the IRG, even if I still do not agree with Father's desires to have me married to someone from another fellowship. I do not regret everything that has happened, even if… some nights are harsh to endure. I am certain this is what will lead me to see my objectives to fruition, which is why…" A step closer, a stare into her eyes, "Touko, you should also reach a resolution. Soon."

"I… am trying, thinking. But my role in the STF-"

"Clinging to your duty doesn't make you stronger, Touko," Smiling wistfully, she then sighs, "If you had decided the UN was your path, you wouldn't have remained so silent at my questions. No, you wouldn't even have approached me. Are you pleased here?" Touko looks down, hands fumbling about on her arms, before she nods, "In that case… don't let my presence disturb your progress. You and

me, we're merely working in the same place, nothing else. Go back to your squadmates, they must be waiting for you."

"… I see. I will do just that, then. I suppose… we'll be seeing each other in our next training?" She didn't mean to ask it, but couldn't even hold her gaze.

"Of course. If you do have something to tell me, wait until my shift is over. Let's not… force any rumors while we're on duty. And… I hope you let me hear your violin at least once before my duties on this base are finished," Smiling again, she patted her sister's shoulder.

"I… will try. Um… Ahem…" Taking a step back, standing straight, she rose a hand in salutation, "We shall be seeing each other then, Chief Kazama."

Returning the salute, back to a neutral expression, "Until then, 2nd Lt Kazama," And with a nod, the Chief returned to her duties.

Watching her sister's back, Touko remained thinking on the words, the new expressions she had seen. The advice, the decision her sister had taken. As she saw her aiding the young man she had left in charge, her soft yet serious voice echoing in the hangar, Touko couldn't help but to smile. Turning around, she slowly paced towards the hallway, dodging the working crew, the crates and machinery.

The smell of oil subsiding, the pristine and sterile scent of the hallways replacing it instead, she tapped her hair, grasping it, closing her eyes and dragging her feet. Recalling the weight on her hands and shoulder, the sounds of her instrument in her ear, the shiver on her back right before a performance. The booming cheer of the crowd at times, the tapping, slapping of a long baton of her instructor. And the imposition that with her talent came, the cage she did not want to live in.

"Sigh… And yet… I can't even play anymore…" Pressing the button of the elevator, gaze firmly planted on the bottom of its steel doors, she sighed again, hollow.

Once the doors parted, she moved to allow those inside to leave. Throwing herself onto a wall once the ascent had started, she hugged her sides.

"Still… Sister's words do have much truth behind them. I… shouldn't be second guessing my decisions so much," A small smile, a relaxed leaning of the back of her head against the wall, "But… to think she'd praise someone to such lengths…" A brow corked, she then giggled, "I wonder who that someone was, to leave such an impression. Someone gallant, brave, perhaps cold and logical… Yes, that does seem to be the kind of person Sister would favor. Still… That last expression was… completely out of character for her, even the wording was far more aggressive than I've ever seen her be," Touko pondered, massaging her chin for a moment, "Hehe… Imagine if he was actually a brute, uncivilized and reckless, daring and temperamental. Oh, Father would faint at the news. Who would have said you'd favor such savage a man, Sister?"

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*Same Day. Near 6 PM.*

*(Takeru's Office.)*

**[Takeru]**

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"Achoo!"

Ugh… Dammit, what the hell. Rubbing my nose, I look for a spare tissue or anything to use. Damn… I hope I'm not getting sick. Either that, or someone is talking shit behind my back. I bet Sensei is chuckling at something I said back then.

"Sigh…" Sitting back after grabbing a handkerchief, I reread the graphs, redoing the math.

The business on Hangar 90 seems to be going well. The Shin is not anywhere near done, so luckily my calcs about the extra armor

helped the crew. Especially since we can make the fins turn and bend, to give the craft a boost in the air instead of leaving them locked in place. Shame we can't make the chainsaw blades faster… Everything else is going good, though it seems like we're gonna have to talk with the Guard's crew before we can mount the machineguns on the last Type-00C. And most likely… since the idea is mine, I'm gonna have to be the one asking the questions…

"Thank God I can use the punishment as an excuse for being involved in these projects…" Even if it means working nonstop even on Sundays like I'm doing now, "Still… I hope the crew of mechanics ain't the prideful type. Just imagine their reaction to the questions…"

*Hey! I wanna put more GUNS on the IRG's best machine! Would you tell me how to vandalize your pride and soul with large doses of More Dakka?*

And then, they slash me in half and I gotta restart the loop. Sigh… if they don't start openly calling me an American sympathizer, I'll take it as a victory.

"Maybe I should ask Sensei for some support… Nah, can't back down. My idea, I gotta stand my ground. I'm the only one who can explain it in a fitting way… since everyone from the crew thinks I'm nuts, heh," At least, the mechanics here are still as chill as always.

Leaning back on my seat, shielding my face from the light with a hand, I take a breath with my nose. And keep inhaling. Until my stomach can't take it anymore. Partners… Did *you* have them in the Guard? Your squadmates… why were there with you? Did they agree with your views? Or…

The cold pokes at my sides, pressing itself onto my back. The quietness of the room, the blinding white of the walls, of the furniture, even of the tower PC…

" *No, I don't wanna be eaten!"*

Chewing sounds, on metal, on bones. And something… a squelching echo…

" *Shi-Shirogane… Uugh… Please… It burns!"*

Bursting bubbles, as if someone had thrown a dozen mint candies inside soda. But along the slick, burnt feeling on my teeth like when stuff got stuck on a frying pan. Stuck to metal, reduced to liquid… boiling and melting…

"… *The only thing a dead soldier can do…"*

And a sudden explosion. The rumbling of the shockwave. And then… silence.

Pain, on my cheeks. A hand was clawing at my mouth, covering it with the cloth I had used moments before. It now was drenched in…

"Blergh… *Cough…* Fuck it…" It really is the same… Fuck, I can't… No, calm down… Breathe in, exhale… Feel the air coming to the stomach, hold it it, hold it… and let it go… empty the lakes… calm down… "Haah… Haah… Fuck… I almost lost it again."

Throwing the dirty handkerchief away onto a small trash bin, I support myself on the desk with a hand. Wobbling, my ankles shivering as a jolt tries to rouse them from the slumber, I approach the coffee machine. Preparing the brew, I lean on the wall.

It's the same. The feelings are mirrored, and only serve to rouse my memories of Iceberg… of every one of them… every death… of my beloved…

Then… Wait… if these feelings are mirrored… Someone who was irreplaceable… Who was…

"Ugh! Kgh… No… Fuck, no…"

Legs shake, knees feel weak. Throat closes up, I can feel the acid burning its base, my chest hiccuping as I claw at it, to try and

breathe in. Hunching over the desk, a ringing in my ears grows louder and louder.

A strong slap on my cheek, burning as if I had been hit by a laser.

" *Farewell, Shirogane…"*

A heavy weight on my hands, crushing me. Cold… and fading…

"… *Goodbye, Bro."*

My eyes hurt, gouged by needles in slow motion. I might not be about to drown, yet my heart suffocates with every breath I take.

" *A small compromise it is. Rid yourself of this excessive empathy you have. It binds your actions."*

The echoes continue, I hit the desk with a coiled fist. Gritting my teeth, breathing through them, panting through them, I cough and cough to calm down. Easing up my breathing, running a hand over my chest, I blink, touch the desk, become aware of what's around.

And taking one last deep breath, sighing and screaming the air out at the end, my eyes water.

Because… his answer… it's the same as mine… when I lost it during Iceberg…

"… I guess we really are similar, *you* and me," Grabbing the mug, I slowly trace the rim as I sip, sitting down slowly.

But I can get it together… because I had someone there for me. Marimo-chan, even if my stupidity got her devoured. Sumika, even if being near me sent her to a fate worse than death. And Yuuko… both of them during last loop, and before I came here, too. I have an oath… a hope I chase after…

Even if it is only to mend my own mistakes, that difference lets me draw the line. I… don't have anyone to direct my frustration at. I did

hit Dad back then… but only because he talked shit about Meiya. Same for when Meiya herself pushed the wrong buttons… and I almost raped her.

"But now… I've nowhere to send my frustration at, save my work."

It's all just a matter of giving myself time, since I don't have anyone to hate for my fate. But… I wasn't always like this. Learning to grin and bear it during the CCSE as we shared our rations with Mikoto, learning to make a little of daily effort to make large progress down the line as Tama tutored me in sniping… and so many more things…

"… Why did you fall in that rage then? Wasn't there… anyone with you?" And… why are you so different to the me from the other world's loops?

Well… I don't really know anything about him… But Her Highness didn't recognize me during the coup, and Tsukuyomi-san was only suspicious of me due to my lack of data. I had thought this world was just another branch of the BETAverse I traversed in my loops… but stuff is so different…

"… Well, to be fair, compared to my world, this one is fucking crazy. The differences aren't that big with the other worlds. I mean… yeah, I have already seen two completely different timelines. Some small changes aren't that surprising."

Meiya didn't knew me either in this universe or in my first loops, nor did anyone else from the squad. Chizuru wasn't the daughter of a politician back home, either. And Mikoto is a guy over there. I guess this timeline just has its own unique aspects and that's that. Just that, for some reason, this world's me was actually made to fight… and just like me and Meiya, he and Yuuhi knew each other.

" *You did say that his situation reminded you of your marriage with Mitsurugi, correct?"* The XO's question floats back up.

Yeah… I'm sure he was getting tested to join them. But in the end… Wincing, I finish my coffee, gulping all that remained in a single go. Sigh… At least his feelings are enough to tell that's not the case, they ended up falling off, drifting away for whatever reason. Imagine if this world's me was actually Yuuhi's love as I was for Meiya in my world…

…

… Then, his feelings would make sense, I guess. The hurt, the anguish, the disappointment… would line up. If he were the one who held those feelings, if they had a similar relation… No, how did he even remain near her? I… can't see that being the case, with all this sadness.

"Sigh… No point in dwelling over this. Let's return to- Oh?"

The door slowly opens, two small bunny ears walk in. Her gaze hesitating as she approaches, Kasumi was holding her hands together.

"… Good afternoon, Takeru-san."

"Hey, Kasumi. Feeling better?"

"Eh? Yes, I'm fine."

"Really?" She nods, her eyes shining clear like crystals. Looks like me cutting off the recovery session didn't harm her this time… Sigh, "So, what's up? Sensei wants her report now?"

"No, I was free for the moment and… Would you have some time to give me your opinion on our mock battle of this morning?"

Ah… Right, after we came back the XO had us do the recovery. We couldn't talk about the fight, huh.

Flashing her a smile, I pat the desk, "Alright, bring a chair closer. My PC should have access to the footage, I think."

Blossoming widely, her smile grows as her eyes spark to life. Quickly procuring a chair, even faster she gets to my side, making sure to bring the chair right besides mine. Her bunny ears flap a bit, she sits down and stares at the screen while I was getting through the confirmations.

"Oh? Takeru-san, what's this?" She lifts a paper, with my drawings of the weapons.

"That's a Drive Blade."

"Why does it have spikes?"

"Because it's supposed to be a chainsaw."

"But… the motor has an odd… vial-like chamber here. What is this for?"

"Oh, that? A small idea I had, to place a small bullet or something in it."

"… Why?"

"To shoot out the HM-Cloud ammo from it during NOE flight," Clicking the mouse, tapping it as I wait for the slow OS to do as I tell it to, two of my fingers from my free hand tap some papers scattered about the desk, "Saves us the need to load it, or lose the 120mm rounds of a rifle to deploy the cloud. If that one rifle has to be discarded, we lose much by no longer having the HM-Canister with us."

"But why did you put the vial inside the blade?"

"To shoot it with the force of the motor. Also, having a gun-chainsaw-sword sounded metal as fuck in my head!"

"Takeru-san, I don't think this is how weapons are designed. All the small parts might fail at the most crucial time."

"That's what the self-des button is for! Pop the blade, spray the cloud, hit 'em in the confusion. Better yet, you can thrust the blade into a BETA and use them as carriers before detonating it," Waving a finger, I smile. She groans a bit, picking some pages to read, "Most of our swords end up unusable after a BETA skirmish, even when being careful and precise with the amount of CQC battles we engage in. I think the versatility of the design is worth considering. You can keep using regular swords, it's not like they're gonna disappear or anything," Checking a few pop-ups, I reach out for the keyboard to input my ID and junk.

Kasumi groaned, resting her arms and chin on the table, looking at the drawings, "Takeru-san… What does 'MMM' means?" She asks, pointing to one of the papers.

"Magrozzo Missile Massacre, basically spamming enough missiles to sink the moon in. It's kind of like what we did in Niigata, use the air assault as bait to then rush at the Laser-class. And it also works against other TSFs, very few units can dodge as I do."

"I see… You did use some of those odd terms when we were fighting," She leans on my arm, some of her hair falling inwards, "Is how we fought today your ideal way of fighting?"

"Yeah? I mean, I never had the sniping you do nor the larger radar," Makes me understand why so many players picked the Frei back in the tournament, the extra reach is too much of an advantage, "Still, having some more options in weaponry wouldn't be a bad thing. Hard to believe we've been using the same model of blade since the start of the war, actually. With how different current TSFs are to what the Gekishin was back then, one would think someone would have devised a lighter sword, with a better center of gravity. I dunno, maybe even have it share the pylons with our rifles. You know what I mean?"

"Yes… The Professor also complains about old stuff that's outdated from time to time," She then sighs.

"Haha… Yeah… Yuuko does not like things to stay static for long. Sigh… Still, I'm not asking for much with these designs I believe. It ain't like I'm telling the crew I wanna make a lasersabre or anything."

Just imagine it. Dual wielding those red lasersabres, shooting lightning out from your hands, choking them with the Flow's power… the BETA wouldn't stand a ghost of a chance!

A shake of my arm, clinging tight. The tingly feeling on the back of my head, remaining there. Still, unmoving, merely there… as if watching.

"Kasumi?"

She was staring at me, blinking slow from time to time. Her bunny ears move, remaining up, "Takeru-san… What were those swords of light?"

"The lasersabres?"

"Is that what they're called? Are they… from one of your other lives?"

"Ahahaha! No, no. They're from a movie, Galaxy Wars."

"A movie?"

"Yeah. You see Kasumi, in another timeline, in a cluster of stars far, far away from Earth…"

Telling her of the movies, she forgets all about the training. The tingly feeling covering the back of my head, falling like a warm blanket at night, remains there as she grabs onto my arm with both hands, staring as I tell the story, remembering the details.

"… But why did he became bad? If he protected his son in the end… Why?"

"No idea. The prequel movies didn't get to that part yet back in my world. But there's a lot of cool stuff in the movies, and more in the

games and comics!"

"There's also games of this?"

"Of course, Kasumi. You get to shoot out lightning from your hands and wield a sword of light. Who would not want to play a game like that?" I chuckle as she curves her brows, "Imagine if we could actually make the lasersabres in this world… That would be so hype," Well… the XG is kind of like a mini Doom Moon, so maybe we could?

"So…" She pulls my arm, "In the end, does Lucky have a happy ending?"

"Yeah. The last scene is with him seeing the ghosts of his mentors and his father, as energy beings united to the Flow, as everyone else is celebrating. It's a nice ending for the first three movies, though I still like the second one more."

"I see… Those Shedi Knights sound like good people," She smiles, making a doodle of Master Iota in a paper, wielding five lasersabres for some reason.

"Of course they are. They follow their teachings at all times, trying to not tip the scale of balance in the galaxy. I mean, it's a tossup between them and the Zith. Can you imagine a world where the authorities hold everyone by the throat under the threat of the Doom Moon's beam?"

Shivering, the tip of her pencil breaks off, "Don't say that, Takeru-san. That's…"

Petting her head, some hair strands in between my fingers, I smile at her, "Don't worry. That's not going to happen in real life. It's just a movie, Kasumi. And anyways, no matter how dark life gets, the Shedi will always be there to restore the balance."

"They're like a light of hope, kind of," She smiles, going back to finish her doodle.

"Heh, yeah, I guess."

Looking at the drawing, she nods, pleased, "So Takeru-san… Why do you like the second movie more?"

"Oh, because you get to learn what the Shedi are. Or were, anyways. Lucky gets to train with Iota, and he teaches him about the Light and Dark currents of the Flow. It's where you get to see the difference between them and the Zith, besides the color schemes."

"… I see. You seem to remember much of these movies," She says as the tingly feeling got stronger, as she again rested her weight on my arm, "Did you watch them with Sumika-san?"

"I mean, yeah, but Sumika liked Kaiju movies the most."

"Kaijus?"

"Giant monsters. Like… Kingzilla, and all of its movies, Slothra, Reykong, you name it. If it was a giant monster, she would get super hype about it."

"… Why? Sumika-san doesn't seem to like that kind of violent things."

"Oh, because she liked rooting for Kingzilla, most of the time. You have no idea how many times she made me watch that thing…" Even when we got together, she'd drag me to the cinema, or to the rental shops, to watch them over and over again, "And somehow, she'd find new details with every rewatch!"

"Really? I see… So Sumika-san liked that…" Nodding with her eyes closed, her shoulders sunk a bit, "So, did you watch the Galaxy Wars movies with her?"

"Yeah, but… the time I watched them the most was with Meiya," I lean back, hands behind my head as I lift the frontal legs of the chair, swaying in the air, "When we… got married, I showed her a lot of stuff so that she could enjoy her free time, however short it was. But since playing games was kind of hard for her, we settled for watching movies together as we cuddled each other," Closing my eyes, I can almost feel the lavender scent of her perfume, her grasp on my shoulders, over my knees, her breath on my neck… those small, short, quiet moments where we just held the other… and nothing else…

"Takeru-san," Kasumi pulls my uniform, brows furrowing and almost touching, staring unblinking at me, "what does 'cuddling' means?"

"… You'll understand once you grow up," She puffs her cheeks a bit, and they enlarge more as I chuckle, "Anyways… Meiya really loved Galaxy Wars, the second movie the most as I did. I think even my parents loved the saga, what with the Shedis and all the homages to some old films. The Shedis are basically space samurai monks, so you can imagine how much Meiya liked them."

"Yes… That does sound like something she would enjoy…" She says, low, as she looks away.

"Yeah… until I jokingly told her it would be cool to have a laser version of the Minaru Kamui. We had a goddamn blackout thanks to her crazy idea. Sigh… Ahahaha…" I keep on chuckling, remembering her pout as her face was smeared in dust and oil, complaining much about how me and Tsukuyomi-san dragged her out of the place before she tried something even more stupid. So innocent yet so bright… compared to her, this world's Meiya is just… Sigh… "So… Me and Meiya would usually rewatch the movies before going to sleep, or as we were in bed. She got really into it, lemme tell you. Before I knew it, half of the master bedroom was filled with figures of the series, and she even bought most of the games and comics."

"Really?" Kasumi's bunny ears flap up, the tingly feeling intensifying, "That… looks fun. She seems…" Kasumi pursed her lips, eyes squinting, voice creaking, "happy."

"… Yeah. She was. Sigh… You have no idea how much she always insisted me to be like Lucky, to follow the right path. She even started trying to do the handwave thing during the meetings, too. Can you believe it?" Worst part is, it worked for some fucking reason.

"… The handwave?" She tilts her head, moving her bun ears. Only to twitch as I tell her about it, puffing her cheeks, "That makes them sound kind of bad."

"Well, some deception is unavoidable, Kasumi. Intrigue is necessary to achieve your goals," I nod, petting her head.

"You sound like the Professor," She counters, still pouting.

"Huh? No, get real. Yuuko would be a Zith, no questions asked," I can clearly picture her zapping everyone while laughing like a madman, screaming like 'Unlimited Processing Powah!'.

**CHOP!**

"Takeru-san, the Professor wouldn't do that."

"My world's Yuuko totally would, just for the kicks of it. And… I don't see her agreeing with the Shedi's code."

"But she wouldn't use her powers for bad things. She wouldn't be like that old creepy man in the cloak."

"Yeah… That makes her a gray one, then."

"Why don't you think she'd be a Shedi?" Her shoulders drop as do her bunny ears, looking at some of the doodles she had made, then back at me, "The Professor isn't a bad person."

"… I know. But the Shedi are kinda too passive. Yuuko wouldn't be like that."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, the things Iota tells Lucky as he trains him in the swamp. Meiya *loved* that part, she actually made part of it a slang for our attendants."

Clearing my throat, readjusting my posture on my seat, inhaling slowly, slowly as those days come back. Kasumi brings her chair closer, hitting mine, as she leans on me, the tingly feeling spreading. And it's… as if she were right in front of me…

The perfume coming from her hair, the light seeping through it as she walks hurriedly from one corner to the other, aligning her figmas with utmost care.

The rapid stream of words, the sun that she emanated with her eyes when she used to tell me about the new comics she read at night, as I massaged her back and shoulders, or her feet at times.

The smile… the gentle caress that covered me, that enveloped me as she brought me closer, brought herself closer, until my shoulder was made into her pillow and her hair into mine. As we watched the movies, simply… spending the night… together…

"… Takeru-san?"

"Hm? Oh, sorry. Ahem… Well, let me remember that part…" Petting the back of her head, that scene, those scenes come back… as did the grasp, the pull on my sides, the weight on my right shoulder, "So… the lesson goes like this… Iota tells Lucky about how the Dark current of the Flow is easier to link with, easier to gain power from, but that once it seeps into you it'll never release its grasp, and you'll basically become a vessel of the darkness."

"… Like Dersh Blader," Kasumi says, her bunny ears moving as she groaned.

"Exactly. So Lucky asks Iota how can he tell which current to follow, and that's where the line comes. Iota tells him 'You will know when you're serene, calm, at peace. Passive. A Shedi uses its knowledge and power for defense, never to attack.', and that… stroke a chord in Meiya, with all her samurai teachings and all. She took it to heart as if it were another line of the honor code," And… I think there was a game or a comic, I can't remember well, where she could actually train in a Shedi academy. Those latter years are more fuzzy than the ones closer to that day when I had to choose between her and Sumika, but… Yeah, I don't see Meiya falling out of love with that franchise.

"I see…" Kasumi smiles, releasing my arm, "But yes, I don't see the Professor agreeing with staying quiet."

I nod, smiling back, "See? I mean, just imagine Yuuko having Flow powers. Reading emotions, psychokinesis, shooting thunderbolts from her fingers…" A shudder ran down my back, cold, "That'd be real bad."

"But then… Um, Takeru-san, do you think I could be a Shedi?"

"You? I mean…" Suddenly smirking, I poke her forehead with a single finger, then part her hair away, "I dunno, Kasumi-kun… You're always dressed in dark clothes and you're so close to Yuuko…"

"I'm not bad," Pouting, she protests, her feet lightly hit my legs.

"See? You're falling to anger, young Gadawan… to the Dark Flow…"

"Uhh… You're mean, Takeru-san. I would never be a Zith."

"But think about it, you could erase all carrots from existence! Who would oppose the reign of Dersh Bnnuy?"

**CHOP!**

"Takeru-san, stop it!"

"Ahaha… I'm kiddin', I'm kiddin'," Blocking her hand as she kept chopping while I chuckled, her cheeks puffed and puffed, "But, you're right. You're too good to ever be a Zith," She flinches, her hand stopping cold, and as I pet her head she can't hold my gaze.

"… Thanks."

"I mean, if you were to become a Zith… you'd have to become the complete opposite of you. Like… wearing only white clothes, getting all assertive… and eating carrots."

A large flower field comes to my mind, the plants waving as the wind blows. The sun shines, down at the grass, at the giant carrots that bounce back and forth like dancing. And in the middle of it… Kasumi, dressed in all white, swaying in circles, dancing along the carrots, wearing a smirk as evil as Yuuko's one.

Stopping cold in her tracks, crouching and plucking a carrot from the ground, she chuckles, " *The world belongs to me… and the carrots… Mmfh!"* Biting into it with gusto, the carrot is devoured in a second by the bunny.

"Takeru-san…"

"Ouch! Not my ear! Kasumi, stop!"

"Then stop teasing me…" She lets go, pouting.

Rubbing my ear, closing an eye, I chuckle, "Why did you even look into my thoughts?" She just holds my gaze, silently, "I get it, I get it. Sorry… So… Right, what were we talking about?"

"Hmm… I think about the movi-"

**Beep!**

A sound comes up from Kasumi's pockets, she quickly fumbles in there until she takes out her comms.

"Yes? Eh? No, I'm with him now," She says, nodding, "Yes… Takeru-san," She offers me the comms.

Sigh… Now, what? Grabbing the thing, I bring it up close, "What's up, XO?"

"Shirogane, what is Yashiro doing with you as of now?" She asks, sounding confused, curious.

"Nothing productive, that's for sure."

"Huh? Then, why is she there?"

"She merely came to talk, that's all. Is there a problem with that?"

"… No. So, are you done with your work for today?"

"I mean… Yeah, kinda. Did you need me for something?"

She coughs, seeming to take a sec to drink something, "The Valkyries are having some… difficulties with their training session in Valgern-On. Isumi called a moment ago, asking for advice on how to handle this… 'Hard Mode' setting of the software. If you're done and feeling up to it, can you go train with them?"

"… As the Viking, I imagine?"

"Of course," She sighs, I can practically see her shaking her head with a hand on her hair as always, "You can send me your report now, I'll be setting up a separate room so that you and Yashiro can practice against the Valkyries using the ethernet connection. Once you're done in your office, come to mine and I'll take you to the room."

"… Roger. Just so we're clear, I won't have to talk with anyone, right?"

"I'll leave a comm so that Isumi can speak with you, but it's going to be distorted too. Don't worry, they won't have a way of knowing who you are."

"… If you had prepared everything, why even ask me if I'm up for it?"

"Because it's no use to send you to them if you're not capable of offering them a challenge. I also thought you'd welcome the change, to enjoy some time in that game after all that happened. If you're not up to it, I'll tell them you're busy for-"

"Nah, I can do it," Cracking my neck, I reach out to the keyboard to start closing up stuff, saving what I had worked on, "Just… What did you have in mind? Do I go serious against them?"

"I mean, if you wouldn't mind…" I bet you just rolled your eyes.

"Yuuko, let me remind you I'm better at Valgern-On than I'm at piloting," Mostly because I don't get subjected to any G-Forces as I play. And we have lasersabres in there, too, "If you want me to give them a training session… I'm gonna go at 'em seriously," And also, I'll probably end up enjoying myself, so holding back is gonna be out of the question.

"That's fine by me. Do let Yashiro practice as well, and try to teach her whatever you can."

"Got it."

"Good," She takes another sip, "Then, that's all."

"Oh, one thing."

"Hm? What is it?"

"Eat something with the coffee."

"… Shut up."

The sound cuts, leaving only static coming from the comms. Sigh… I bet she hasn't eaten anything substantial since the meeting, too. Goddammit, Yuuko…

Looking to my side, Kasumi had arranged all the papers already. Sorting my drawings and schematics in folders, she was taking them to the nearby bookshelf. She even put all her doodles in a neat folder too, left it besides me.

"Takeru-san, are we leaving right now?"

"No, I gotta send a report. Lemme write it down real quick. Hehe… I guess this is gonna be the first time I'll show you my skills in Valgern-On, right?" Smiling at her as bring my chair closer to the desk, I wait as the OS lags when firing up a doc while I close everything else.

"Ah… That's true," She again sits by my side, grabbing and clutching her folder to her stomach, "Is it going to be as shaky as a battle?"

"The camera? Maybe, depending on how fast you move. But don't worry, I'm sure they must have not yet gotten very good."

"Why?" She asks, resting herself onto the desk.

"Because if they're having trouble with Hard Mode, then they're still fooling around. The game has four difficulty modes: Beginner, Normal, Hard, and finally, Maniax. And, honestly? Even on Hard the AI is kind of bad at times. So I don't think you're gonna get steamrolled or anything."

"I see… So, what mech should I use?"

"Hmm… Maybe the Xao-Myun, to let you get used to both melee and ranged fighting, and since it moves fast it's good for you to learn well in it," Mikoto did say he thought the Xao was better for new players compared to the base Kaizer, who was a jack-of-all-trades mech with average stats across the board. Sigh… Stopping my typing for a second, his face returns, his shock and fears during the

tournament. Heh… I wonder if I'll be able to teach Kasumi as well as we did together when we just started.

"I hope I don't crash…" She says, hiding her eyes into her arms.

"Did you… have problems piloting before?" She nods, bunny ears cascading down, "Well… Don't worry, Kasumi," Petting her head slowly, I smile as she raises her sight up, "Let's just work slowly, one step at a time. Okay?"

"… Yes," And then, another of those precious, shining smiles. She truly is too good for this world… "So, um, Takeru-san, what will you be using? The Raioh?"

"The what? Oh, right," We had to edit lots of stuff in the games, namely the credits, and also the Takemikazuchi's name and look. Now it's called the Raioh, and has three horns instead of one. How did Yuuko manage to hack into the game and replace the model, I've no idea, "No, the Take would expose too many of my tells. It's literally what made me shift my style to full-blown hyper-offense in the first place, with the machineguns I wanna put in the Type-00C and all. So…" Smirking, I drown a chuckle, "I'm gonna have to bust out the secret unit of the game…"

Her bunny ears move, tilting her head she stares at me, "… Secret unit? What's the secret about it?"

"You see… once you clear the game in Hard, you unlock one secret mech. It even has a special campaign mode that's different to the rest of the other mechs in Oratory Tango. This story follows up right after the bad end of the game, with this unit as the main character. I played through it back home, when seeing if the game could be used to train here. And, not gonna lie, if the Take didn't exist I'd be maining that unit."

"I see… And, what kind of mech is it?" She asks, looking straight ahead into my eyes. Only to flinch, rise her bunny ears in attention, letting out a low, cute squeak.

"Hehehe… It's none other than an improved version of the original main unit, the Skull Kaizer!"

# Downtime in the Masquerade (III)

*A/N: During this episode, Takeru will start singing as he plays games . The song is basically an in-universe rendition of 'Legend of Kaizer' from Mazinkaizer SKL. P oint being, th ese 20k+ words are the most* ***cringe inducing*** *and* ***self-indulging*** *thing I've written in a long while. It's a complete non-plot related filler mess of a chapter filled with dumb jokes and drawn out interactions , and I will not apologize about it.*

*Also, some of the machines mentioned during this chapter will be direct counterparts to the playable units of the real life version of Valgern-On, Virtual-On Oratorio Tangram , so I will not be using my long descriptions all th e time by instead pointing you to the source material . If having a mental image of th e machines is not important to you, you can skip the next paragraph.*

*Takeru's machine of choice, the Skull Kaizer, is basically a fusion between the Temjin and the Specineff. The Tipharet is based on the Angelan, the Ravager Mk-II is the clone of the Viper-II or Cypher , the Colossus is like a Belgdor, the Struggler is a reflection of the Apharmd, and finally, the Void Watcher is equal to the BAL-series.*

*As an aside, after the next chapter, we're sinking back into the meat of the plot. I recommend that any readers that have not yet read the sidestories I've posted to go do so before going into chapter 66. While most of them are not yet complete at the time of posting this chapter , all those stories hold some importance for the events going forward . Or you can save yourself the intri g ue and try to figure out the plot twists without the aid of the extra material.*

*E njoy the light filler chapters to cleanse your palate, assuming you don't die from the cringe. A nd if you have the time check out the other stories, as they'll help you understand the core issue of the Paranoia arc without forcing me to do so through text walls of info*

*dumps or never-ending inner monologues like in the OG chapters 50-51 of Reversal .*

*As always, thanks for reading and commenting. Keep staying safe.*

*Zuoriel*

*PS.: To that one commenter who asked me about Project Mikhail, sadly my dedicated GPU-less PC can't run the thing. And after seeing the grindy nature of the game, I don't have much interest in it due to a lack of time. Writing is hard, and time consuming.*

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*Chapter 64:*

*Downtime in the Masquerade (III)*

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*December 2nd. A bit after 6 PM.*

*(Yokohama Base, B17F. Training Room.)*

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Sparks flying off as it traded paint with a building, a Ravager Mk. II kept on boost jumping away in regular intervals. This new version of the Ravager is sporting a pointy and defined look resembling a Shiranui if it were to receive stealth-based armor like that of the Raptor, coated in vibrant blue in this occasion. As the machine kept on boosting away into a desolate landscape, as a few pixelated clouds came and went up into the sepia-tinted skies, it had to fire off a few of its homing missiles to deflect the incoming assault that chased after it like cat would to a mouse. A beeping rising in a flash, some of the enemies missiles broke through the homings. Hayase groans as a veers the analog, making the Ravager perform a tight crouch which allowed the machine to squeeze itself through a crumbled bridge, trying to do a power slide, as a few missiles missed their mark.

However, the Ravager and its operator had little to no time to relax under the few threads of light that waddled through the clouds to shine on the ruined city. Another round of missiles, another round of the beeping, which forced the boosters to activate, to dash away through the tilted buildings.

"Shit… Someone's on a bad mood today, huh," Hayase complains, clicking her tongue.

Sitting right besides her, Touko lets out a small chuckle, "Why, to me it would seem like you are not in top form today, 1st Lt," Using her Tipharet's larger boosters, shaped as wings to go along the angelic motif of the slim unit, Touko's machine clears the buildings, locking onto Hayase, firing off the Neige Cannon, a twister of ice shards joining into one final beam towards the enemy unit.

Yet, a smirk rises in Hayase, who presses both shoulder triggers as she did half a tilt. The Ravager jumps backwards and remains in the air, hovering over the beam, rising towards the now attack-locked Tipharet. It was not remotely close to Takeru's backflips, you'd understand, yet the movement was nimble and fast enough for the Ravager to clear the distance before the attack animation ceased.

"And now, you're done!" Quickly pressing the combination, clicking noises echoing about, Hayase's unit's proceeds to do a sharp dash, morphing into HSST-mode and ramming itself into the Tipharet.

Piercing through its chest, oil is splattered around, pieces of metal and cables start flying about from the gaping hole left in the machine. Its wings are clipped, torn from the body, a few cables and fuel lines stretched before being torn apart, splattering sparks and fuel before catching on fire. And as the wings burn, as that mantle of fire and smokes gently falls upon the angelic mech as if someone was tucking it into a bed, the S.L.C. combo of the Ravager shaves the last remaining health Touko's unit had. A shriek, pained and high pitched, comes from the speakers as the explosion occurs, the small detail added for when a mech is defeated with a hit to the cockpit.

As the victory pose of the Ravager Mk-II played out, pointing a thumb to itself as a prideful prince would, Hayase snorted as she rose a tight fist up. Touko sighed as she shook her head, shrugging as she looked back at Munakata. By their side, the quick clicking of the joysticks could still be heard, frantic and hurried. Sweat beginning to be noticeable on their foreheads, lingering as a small veil on their controls, Tsukiji and Takahara were also having a duel.

Amidst a carrier ship's runway, littered with cargo and hooks swaying about, the large pixelated sea and clouds on the distance, their two machines played tag as they circled around the map. Tsukiji's Colossus, a machine that resembles more a Wadatsumi than anything else, slowly but surely evaded the incoming attacks, sharp cornering at times to dodge the reckless, fast and unidirectional charges of Takahara's Struggler, a machine colored with a camo pattern covering its compact and simple frame, perhaps comparable to the austere design of the first Tomcats and Eagles.

Hands shaking, aware of her breathing, of the air slowly coming into her nose, squeezing itself down to her stomach, Tsukiji tried to no avail to reach long range, to use the missiles of her unit to end the match without risking damage to her unit. Sadly, Takahara's superior speed and weapon combination did not allow for that and, as you'd understand, this only stockpiled anxiety over nervousness on the girl's shoulders. The Struggler did not have an easy time, that being said. It is quite fair to say Takahara also was at her wits' end. Not releasing her bottom lip from her teeth's grasp, her heartbeats clanging against the base of her neck, the pressure, the grip on her joystick became all the more harder, vicious. She was very, very upset that Tsukiji had managed to both elude her charges and keep her in check.

Usually, as I'm sure you'd know, matches in Valgern-On did not go for more than a minute. Perhaps two at max, if both players were being extra careful. However, when the skill ceiling is raised, the matches start to drag on and on. What usually would be surefire shots now became misses, what was a guaranteed starter towards

lethal was a risky maneuver that would leave one exposed to counters. Sadly, in this case, it was not due to sharper dodging techniques or the dreaded stun-lock some units could cause, or the issues and mind games that take place in a team fight which caused this scenario. I believe it is quite fair to affirm… the reason was a more simple one.

"Shit, Tae! Stop spamming those damn grenades!" Takahara repined, quickly pressing the shoulder buttons like a child playing with a bell at a counter. Her machine again rushed forth, only for its animation to halt as the small explosion of a grenade played again, causing her to groan and huff in frustration.

"You're always right on my trail, I can't do anything else!" Tsukiji cried out, her hands cramping up as the claw-like grip she had to take to always be on the move while also firing the grenades away started to hurt. A small moment, she eased up her grasp on the controls, her wrists wailing in pain. In that instant, Takahara dashed forth, landing a strike with her machete, tumbling the Colossus to the floor.

Tsukiji softly groaned, both at her inability to finish her off and at the pain in her hands. She didn't know what else she could possibly do, as lost a penguin in a desert. Takahara, on her end, also fumed a bit, as when her unit had to land it was punished by a grenade, which prevented her from pushing her advantage. And so, as the rest of the Valkyries stared at the chase, the two playing grew more and more frustrated.

Tsukiji's Colossus is a slow unit yet has above average defenses, only truly threatened by beam-based weaponry. Most of its available weapons are not particularly decent at close- and mid-range, as they're more effective in the story mode against the BETA due to their AoE despite their light damage. That being said, the napalm missiles that lay hidden in its large shoulder pads would wreck havoc upon the surrounding area if launched, anything but the heaviest machines taking more than 50% damage. However, Tsukiji's own nervousness, the ingrained patters she had learned, and the restriction of the time limit only served to unnerve her will, lessen her

performance as she failed time and again to put enough space between her and Takahara's unit to fire off the napalms without risking damage to herself. Her own shields were lower than Takahara's, so her best weapon might actually knock her out before her enemy.

However, Takahara is on the other end of the spectrum of emotions. The Struggler is a decent pick, I suppose, for most players. It counts with the largest weapon selection in the roster, and can play a variety of roles. It also has good speed and defenses, nothing too remarkable but solid enough. However, this machine comes with one limitation: It has no beam-based weaponry. All of its guns use shells, its missiles are on the light end of the damage spectrum, and, while decent, its machetes do little against a tank like the Colossus.

And as I'm certain you'd understand, since this match had already been going on for nearly two minutes, the beeping of the alarm had started to chime in, notifying that less than sixty seconds were left before a timeout. Each Valkyrie only managing to shave a small percentage of the shields of the other at a time. Unable to break away from the conventions they learned from, they cannot break through the other's defensive patters, no matter how many jumps they chain with the hooks that linger up above, no matter how precise their cornering around the crates is. Health bars getting lower and lower, only by small amounts at a time, neither can manage to get a lock on the other, not without risking serious damage. And while in another world, in another timeline that would have been just another aspect of a game, for the Valkyries… this was no game. Losing came with its fair share of consequences.

Which is why, Takahara circles her thumb on the stick, pushing it forward, her own breathing blazing as the thrusters of her virtual machine were, "Damn… I won't let you win by timeout again!" Frowning as she switched her weaponry, one hand of the Struggler aims a rifle, sending a downpour of bullets towards the Colossus' left, making a few crates explode and forcing Tsukiji to strafe to the right, to the outer side of the runway.

And as Tsukiji again deployed her grenades, to try and stun the Struggler's assault to let her get to cover, Takahara grinned, pressing the analogs, activating the special finisher of her unit. The Struggler's Force Skill, Blitzkrieg Amp, doubles all the damage the unit does and grants it unlimited dashes for the duration of the skill. It also makes it glow in a blue hue, which looks pretty awesome in all honesty, as it shines along the clear skies of the open sea the virtual arena had as its background.

"Eat this, Tae!" With a triumphant smirk, she drives her unit forward, determined to smack the life out of the Colossus.

Which only forces more panic into Tsukiji's heart, her button presses growing manic, rushed, "Awawa! No, there has to be-" Her machine tumbles over, near the edge of the ship, her erratic fire hitting a few poor virtual seagulls instead of the Struggler, the roasted chickens falling into the ocean as failed divers would, "I can't lose… I won't lose!" *I won't be subjected to that torture again!*

And with desperation as her fuel source, she starts spinning her analog stick, faster and faster as if a spinning top it were, to force her machine to stand up faster. But once she does, as she saw Takahara's unit was already in the air, boost jumping with the machete at the ready, Tsukiji couldn't help but to press a specific combination of buttons.

The trigger of her own Break Skill, Last Gambit Assault, which releases the restrictions of her beam-based weaponry for ten seconds, allowing the Colossus to fire off those type of weapons without charging. It would make the overall armor of the mech to expand, emit quite some steam as its system releases all limiters, and give it a decorative aura of translucent marine green along the cape of steam that pours from the shoulders.

And Takahara started to feel the coldness of sweat tickling her nape as she sees in her TV how the shoulders of the Colossus retract and expand, readying the napalms. So, she commits to a full dash, to try and tumble the machine and prevent the attack. With a sharp step

back, the Colossus avoids the charge of the Struggler at the last second, the machete scratching, scalping the steel. Quickly igniting both jump units, Tsukiji then aims her cannon at the floor, firing it off. The beam comes out pouring like a newly discovered petrol well, sending her unit flying off into the skies. Quite the clever move, I'm sure you'd agree, to use the intensity of the beam to propel herself upwards. Into long range, to be specific.

Knocked back by the shockwave of the beam as she did a last minute backboost, Takahara's Struggler barely has the time to stand up and re-lock onto the Colossus as Tsukiji fired off the napalms while still in the air, with the pillar of destructive light as her support. Like hail to an unguarded garden, the missiles ravish the dock of the ship, destroying the environment, large splashes of water rising as the explosions continued.

As the aquatic chorus of the sinking parts continued through the speakers alongside the beam's screeching and the stock explosions, the Struggler starts using its large ammo supplies to shoot down the missiles before they explode upon it, hoping to endure the assault as it hovers in midair, to avoid the shockwave of the beam and the missiles that do fall on the carrier.

And for a few seconds, that's all that happens. The beam drilling its way down into the carrier, the myriad of missiles flying down, some shot down by the Struggler, others falling and exploding on the wreckage the ship had become. Until a beeping appears on both sides, the signal of the end of their special skills. And as the beam suddenly shuts off, as the Struggler's own ammo supplies returned to normal to shoot down the last napalms… the Colossus started to fall down, crashing onto the Struggler. As both machines plummeted onto the carrier like a falling meteor, the damage done by Tsukiji's assault caused the impact to tear off a part of the ship. And thus, both units ended up taking a nosedive into the pixelated sea of the arena.

"Huh?! We can fall to the sea?!" Takahara started button mashing, trying to get her mech to swim somehow. Sadly, there is a drawback

that comes with her Break Skill. The Struggler cannot dash or boost jump for a few seconds after the skill is used up. Many curses come pouring from her mouth, her machine keeps sinking and sinking.

"No… My unit won't even move!" Tsukiji wails, as the aftereffects of her own skill were showing up. Once her skill was used up, the Colossus was left unable to move for a few seconds and all of its beam-based weapons became unusable as well, "How are we supposed to fight underwater? Are we- Huh?"

A timer appeared in the center of both TV screens, shaving closer and closer to zero as they started to button mash like crazy. Once the clock reached zero… both machines stopped moving, only to then convulse as jolts of electricity enveloped their metallic bodies. As it were, the game has a particular mechanic in which, if a machine falls into some areas, failure to escape them results in the destruction of the unit. And for the first time since they had started their training sessions with the Stallion machines, the Valkyries were all silent at the end of a match. For the word 'DRAW' was all that remained on the screen as it slowly faded to black.

"… Huh, so you both lost?" Akane comments, arms folded as she raises a brow, "I didn't think we could make draws in this way."

"What the fuck?!" Takahara swings her arms in the air, fuming a flamethrower out, "How come we can die if we fall? Why is that even a thing?!"

"Come on…" Tsukiji tries to appease, tapping her fingers after she slowly rested her controller on her seat, "It's the same as that map's rain of debris, right?"

"Yes, Rigulla's wreckage could create a similar outcome," Asakura nodded, brows furrowed, "I didn't think the destruction of the arenas could be so severe, however. It stands to reason your units would short circuit if they fall to the sea, though. Not only that, but if your boosters do end up submerged, you won't be able to rise back to the surface anyways."

"Oh, shut up!" Takahara whips back, arms tightly folded, the anger cracking the shell of her composure, "This is all Tae's fault for playing like a chicken and then doing that stupid assault."

"Huh?! I was… I was only doing what I always do." Tsukiji couldn't hold the blaze of a gaze Takahara had endowed, so she again lowered her own to the ground in silence.

"Takahara, this kind of attitude won't help you improve," Munakata reminded, resting her arms on the back of the seat, poking the fuming pilot's cheek, "You could have done better, right?"

"Uh… But there's only so much I can do if Tae keeps running in circles. If I let her go, she uses the missiles or snipes me, but if I chase her I can't clear the distance in these cramped maps!"

"And that's what you should learn to do," Munakata reminds, sobering up, now poking the tip of the girl's nose, "You can't keep relying only on the speed and power of your machines. If you're only an arrow, you'll end up hitting yourself against the wall all the time, right?"

"T-That's… I can't do much else with these controls," Folding her arms, she looks away, putting up pitiful excuses, "My hands are so cramped after pumping this thing for so long, and the stick gets so hard… it's so sensitive, reacting to the minimal push, I have to barely press the tip all the time."

"Yeah, I know," Munakata, smiling a bit, ran a hand over Takahara's long hair, "It gets so hard… your hands are so full of it, tired of the constant gripping…"

"Yeah…" She nods, sighing, relaxing her anger, "Yeah, I'm a bit tired of this small one. I rather have the usual, the extra size makes it so much easier on my hands," She smiles, as Takahara had quite many setbacks in using the analog stick as opposed to the lever stick that's on both simulators and cockpits.

"I see. So, you like your sticks on the… bigger side?"

"Yeah, the bigger the better in my opinion. I can't see myself getting used to anything other than-" Halting her words as she heard Hayase let out a drowned snort, a slight pink fire starts to spread on Takahara's face, "1st Lt Munakata…"

Smiling, winking, she gestures in circles, edging the girl to continue, "No, no, please do tell us about how *bigger* you like your *sticks."*

"Not like that!" Rising from her seat like a geyser, she tried to take a swing at Munakata.

Who simply danced away in a short spin, giving the furious girl a slap on her bottom, "Come on, don't get so upset. One would think you're… hiding something, otherwise."

"Shut up! You and your damn sex jokes… I'm not interested in that kind of stuff!"

"Then, you don't swing that way, Takahara-kun?" Hayase asks, a small smile as she caressed her hair, staring right ahead into the shocked Takahara's eyes.

"Eh?! Ah, uh… well… It's not that I don't, you know, *want to* someday… you know…"

"So you *do* like 'em big, huh," Haruko comments from a corner, smirking at the gaping expression of her comrade.

"N-No! It's not like that, dammit!"

"So she says but…" Hayase chuckles, making a stroking, slow gesture with her hand, "Now that I think about it, she always kind of stares a lot at us when we're changing, right?"

"I'm telling you, it's not like that!"

"It's alright, Takahara," Munakata pats her shoulder, nodding a few times, whispering again as she leans closer and closer to Takahara's ear, "It's alright to be curious of that kind of thing at your age, to want to explore all the roads. But you know what happened to Goldilocks. She wanted to have a taste of every soup so badly that…" Licking her lips, she chuckled.

"Shut up!" Moving away, face red in anger and embarrassment, Takahara's fists again tried to lunge for Munakata's face.

"Calm down!" Akane grabbed her by the waist from behind, barely managing to hold the rush of her comrade, "You can't hit your superiors, Takahara!"

"Hehe, I think the lady protests too much," Hayase pokes the wound, chuckling alongside Munakata. It only makes Takahara fume more blazes out, as you'd understand.

"But, you know," Munakata winks back at Takahara, freezing her anger solid, "If you ever wanna taste the other side of the street… Just knock on my door whenever."

Takahara's growls and stuttering voice made the aggressors start laughing, unrestrained. Akane, Tsukiji and Asakura desperately cling to the swinging arms as they, pointlessly, try to appease Takahara's desire to indulge in bloodshed at the moment. Yet, the chuckling of the older ones is halted as they receive a sharp folder to the face, which also freezes Takahara and those that tried to keep her in check. The soft groaning, the narrowed gaze of Haruka met their eyes then.

"Mitsuki, Munakata-san, please do not use those words against Takahara," She says, waving the folder at their faces, "I can't believe you'd so shamelessly utter such things… You're horrible."

"Wh- Haruka, we're just messing around," Hayase counters, feeling a dart in her heart.

"It didn't look like that to me," Akane says, low, giving her a side glance as she released Takahara, who then sighed as Asakura places a hand over her shoulder.

"… Come on, it was just a joke."

"Those vulgar matters are not a joke, Mitsuki!" She scolded, pointing a finger at her friend's nose, "And… A-And… It's so embarrassing to hear you say such things," Face flushing, she starts lightly hitting Hayase's shoulder with the folder, "Don't go talking about pe… those things so lightly!"

"… She's right," Tsukiji braves, still looking down, "I mean, there's so much more to a relation that just… *that* ."

"Well, I'll have to agree," Touko nods, smiling a bit, "Love and companionship truly are more precious than… the pleasures of the flesh."

"Yes, exactly that!" Takahara nods repeatedly, pumping a fist, "Even if I'm… curious… those kind of encounters aren't what I want. I'm not some sex crazed thing, I want more than mere meat."

"… Well, what did we expect?" Akane shrugs, smirking, voice low, eyes colder, "They seem to enjoy the fabled 'touch and go' approach, after all."

"HUH?!" Hayase recoiled in shock, gaping.

"Suzumiya, what are you saying?!" Haruko scolded, hands quivering as the breaths she took in.

"Oh? Weren't you the ones suggesting to Takahara to indulge in superficial relations?"

"It was just a joke, come on," Haruko rushes to deflect, yet Akane groans in disagreement.

"Really? Who was the one whose brother was… a little bit too handsy again?"

"Grr… Suzumiya…" Haruko tightened her fists, losing her easygoing smile as they stared at each other.

"I cannot believe you all," Asakura shakes her head, appalled and eyes losing light by the second, "I didn't think you'd be like this…"

"Yes, everyone's different but…" Haruka groans, yet her eyes and shoulders cascade down, quite saddened, "For you to mock romance and love in favor of such… lustful things. I thought you were different, Mitsuki…"

"W-Wait just a damn second! Haruka, it was all just a joke!" Hayase waves her hands around, only to be left breathless as she met her friend's dejected eyes.

"It didn't sound like one," Takahara counters, Akane nods.

"Sigh… Come on, you all," Haruko ruffles her hair, leaning back onto a desk, "It's all just a teasing round. And I do agree, there's more to an encounter than mere sex."

"Could we *please* move on from this talk?" Asakura asks, face flushed while she facepalms.

"Yeah, let's just let it go." Tsukiji sighs, Takahara doing the same along Akane.

"Sorry, didn't mean it as an insult or anything," Munakata nods towards them, scratching the back of her head. But then, she smirks again, "But just so we're clear, there's nothing wrong with liking 'em bigger, you know," She winks their way, Akane groaning as she taps her forehead, Takahara seething through clenched teeth.

"To hell with you, Munakata," Folding her arms and looking away, Takahara shakes her head, "Coming from the one who… seduced

the cyborg, are you not just projecting *your* preferences right now?" Smirking, she says. Munakata remains gaping for a second, quite shocked as you'd expect.

"Oh! Got her good!" Akane cheered, sharing a high five with Takahara.

"W-Wait a moment… I only did what I did for the sake of the mission!" She immediately counters as she steps forward, hitting a chair, her heart leaping as she recalls the talk by the hill, the kiss engraved in the hand she was coiling.

"Even the… intimate stuff by the pool?" Akane asks, smirking a bit.

"Why, Suzumiya, weren't you the one who endowed the Brasilian carnival's attire, in two separate occasions too?" Touko mentions, a hand on her cheek as she smiles and giggles.

"Wh- I only was following orders!" Face reddening, she yells.

"As did everyone else," Haruko sighs, one eye closed, "But seriously, those uniforms were kind of cute, right? If the skirt wasn't so skimpy, I wouldn't mind wearing them during summer," Smiling bright, she says.

"Oh, that's true!" Haruka claps her hands, nodding, "They were really well designed, too. It felt nice, to not have to always wear the tight and restrictive formal dress."

"Yeah, to have clothes that let themselves breathe was a nice change of pace, as opposed to our usual here. But that skirt was… you know…" Asakura looks down, a single finger scratching her cheek, "I still can't look at the mechanics in the eye after having to wear those things for so long."

"Y-Yeah." Tsukiji nods, tapping some fingers together, "At least they understood our situation and why we had to wear those… uniforms for so long while we patrolled the base when the cyborg was here.

But the Royal Guards…" Eyes crash down, she runs her hands on her arms as if she were trying to dispel the chilly air outside as her chuckling cracks at times.

"Ugh, don't remind me!" Hayase shakes her head, a cold shudder down her back, "Just recalling the nasty gazes they gave us when we crossed in the hallways, their comments under their breath…"

"Yes, that is… true." Touko chuckles then heavily sighs, relieved that her sister did not have to see her endowing such tight and revealing clothing, "Still, it was indeed a nice piece. Perhaps, we could attain permission to actually make some simple pants or a more… formal skirt for next summer?"

"Well, I guess we'll have to ask Cpt *Michirun* what she thinks," Munakata says, shrugging.

"If the Captain hears you saying that again, you're as good as dead," Hayase reminds, shaking her head, fiddling with her hair, "But anyways, we strayed from the topic at hand. The training must go on!" Chuckling, she hurls a finger at Takahara's face, then at Tsukiji's, "And, you two lost the match. Which places you two at the bottom of the scoreboard."

"Huh?! W-Wait a moment, please!" Tsukiji bolted up, hands gradually closing, "Let us have a rematch!"

"Yeah, yeah!" Takahara agreed immediately, blasting forward like boiling bleach.

"You two, this part of the session is already over," Haruko reminds, showing everybody the scores she and Haruka had been tailing, "And you two ended up in the bottom, which means-"

"You take the punishment!" Hayase announced, smirking widely as she again rose a finger to the ceiling.

"No, anything but that!" Takahara shook her head frantically, "I won't survive that a second time!"

"I… I don't think I can endure that again…" Hunching over, Tsukiji's voice torn to shreds, she could do nothing but shiver in place.

"Come on, Tae," Akane patted her friend's arm, shoulders sagging heavily at the prospect, sighing in sympathy, "It can't possibly be worse than before."

"Oh, why don't you join them in the duty then, 2nd Lt Suzumiya?" Touko suggested, giggling as Akane froze over in shock.

"N-No… I mean, we have a tally for a reason."

"Huh… So you're going to forsake your friend, Suzumiya?" Haruko asks, giving Akane a side glance and a smirk. Which made Tsukiji stare at Akane, like a lone puppy would.

"Come on, all of you," Hitting a desk with a folder, Asakura grumbled as they kept teasing each other and chuckling over the matter, "The results are absolute, and we need to continue the training session."

"Shut up. Just because you got lucky with the grenades…" Takahara shot her a bothered glare, host of quite the amounts of envy and anger.

"I only followed my plan to the letter, adapting to the flow of battle. It's not my fault you find the recklessness of the aggression pleasurable."

"At least I'm not a coward who hides behind cover all the time."

"Sigh… See?" Asakura again shook her head, "That attitude won't help you at all, Takahara."

"Yeah, jokes aside you need to relax a bit," Hayase says, staring squarely at the fuming pilot, "If you're always in such a rush, you won't be able to survive in the field. You all saw how Niigata was

like." All five of the newest members look down, losing their smiles. Touko and Munakata grimace, also sending their gazes into an emergency landing, "And not to mention, you and me got done in quite badly by the Vikings today, right?" Smiling, patting Takahara's shoulder, she held her gaze, hoping to send some vigor into her soul, "So we have to step up our practice, until we're at the level where we can make the most out of the Type-00C. Got it?"

"Yes, Ma'am!" Standing in attention, spirit replenished, she replied in full force.

"Same to you, Tsukiji," Hayase continued, nodding firmly despite the serious tone and face she made, "You did a damn nice move at the end there, but if you keep waiting until the last moment to bust out your best moves, you…" Closing her eyes, she folds her arms inwards, along the poison she was about to inadvertently release, "might be blindsided as you got during the match by Takahara."

"Yes, Hayase-san." She whispers, deflating like a balloon untied.

"Sigh… I told you honorifics aren't necessary. Well, anyways, you gotta face your failures head on to truly learn something from them. And that means, you gotta deal with the punishment."

"All that talk just to go back to this…" Takahara grumbled, Tsukiji nodded in agreement.

"You can't break your word, now," Touko reminded, "So, it's the first time we have two people assigned to aid the Captain with her paperwork, correct?"

"Yes, I think so," Munakata nodded, winking at the two slumped figures of the girls, "Maybe she can give you some advice regarding your taste for *big sticks* ?"

"No!" Takahara shouted, as Tsukiji lowers her gaze further below after stealing a glance at Akane, "Like I would ask the Captain for romantic advice. Do you want me to die or what?!"

"Yeah. I suggest you to not do that, ever," Haruko relents a nod, a weary sigh, "I was only trying to lend an ear… and the complains just never ended."

"Sigh… Anyways, hang in there, you two," Akane nodded to them, using a firm tone coming from her stomach as she did when she was their squad leader, "Don't let this get in the way of the rest of the session," She holds their gazes, they nod back even if they also sigh as they do, "So, should we return to the training or-"

The door opens and slowly, so slowly, Michiru enters the room. Lips compressed into a line, she shuts the door close without making any noise. Sighing, she ruffles her hair, and when she looks up she blinks fast and corks and eyebrow, meeting the curious gazes of her crew.

"What is it? Did you finish your matches already?"

"Yes, Captain," Hayase informs, saluting, "Did you receive word from the Vikings, Ma'am?" And immediately presses on her curiosity.

Which causes Michiru to pinch her nose for a moment, "… Yes. The Professor just notified me both of them agreed to lend us a hand just a moment ago. Let's prepare the simulators, the Viking requested to watch some of our runs in Hard Mode."

"Huh?! Is that possible?" Akane asked, feeling a quiver, a few waves hitting the back of her head.

"Apparently," Michiru shrugs, "By using the ethernet connection, we can share replays of our runs it would seem, and the scoreboards can be shared as well. Before fighting against us in these sims, they want to see how we're measuring up to the challenge. Now, as you know, those two made short work of most of us quite easily during this morning. I want you all to give it your best during this part of the training, you hear me?!"

"Yes, Ma'am!"

"If you make any rookie mistakes… I'll tell Kyouzuka-san to withhold your weekend dessert for a month." She threatens with a smile, all their complexions tighten, answering again in unison. "Good. Also, for today only, I won't need your aid for my paperwork."

"Huh? Really, Captain?!" Takahara asked, eyes sparking alive.

"Yes. It seems the XO arranged someone else to lend me a hand, so that you all can stay well rested. With how much you've been training with these things while testing the XM3, we don't want you losing sleep. So then, let's decide which five of you do your runs first."

"Ma'am?" Akane raises a hand, slowly.

"What is it?"

"Will we also spar against the Vikings with the WMTS?"

"Yes, that's the idea. I have a communicator here to link me with them once they arrive at where the last WMTS unit is. We'll coordinate to link up the software."

"… Huh? So, we don't get to see them?" Munakata asks, brows and eyes narrowing, "Might I ask why the secrecy? I believed we were the base's most secret unit. I know we may not need to be read on at the moment, however…"

"Sigh…" Michiru's shoulders sink, lips narrow as a bit of acid rises in her throat. All of the Valkyries wince at the tight expression, dejection seeping through the cracks of the facade. "I tried, believe me. All I got from the XO was a 'You'll meet the Viking soon enough!' and then she simply cut the connection after telling me to return here while she contacted the mystery duo. So!" Coughing, straightening up, she stares at her crew, who also stands in attention, "I want you all to perform at your best. If we impress the Vikings, perhaps we can make them request more trainings with us, or to hasten their arrival to our ranks."

"Yes, Ma'am!"

"Good. 1st Lt Suzumiya, do you have the report for the trainings thus far ready?"

"Yes, Captain," She steps forward, offering the folder.

Michiru takes it with a thanks and a smile, which Haruka returns, "I assume no one wants to change their unit of choice?" She stares at everyone in the eye for a second, no one replies, "Alright. 1st Lt Suzumiya, the arrangement was?"

"Ahem… Most of our newest members will use the Struggler, 2nd Lt Tsukiji will use the Colossus like you, 1st Lt Munakata and 2nd Lt Kazama have chosen the Tipharet, and 1st Lt Hayase will use a Ravager Mk. II."

"I see. Hayase, you won't change your mind to use a normal machine?" Michiru asks, arms folded, only to feel more ice down her throat as her subordinate shook her head with much vigor.

"It is the only machine which moves to my liking, Captain, ma'am. The Raioh could be a decent second option… but I believe its beam weaponry to be more of a detriment than the HSST mode of the Ravager, as that attack is similar to a frontal charge."

"Fine, fine," She shakes her head, not wishing to argue any more, "I know the Professor joked about how we'd have railguns and beam rifles in the future, but please try to keep the usage of those unrealistic weapons to a minimum. We won't know what the Vikings will be piloting until we fight them, so you all better be ready for anything!"

"Yes, Ma'am!" And again, a unison as they all saluted.

Michiru then opens the folder Haruka had handed her, shifting through the pages to arrive at the results, "Let's see… The top five of

the prior training get to tackle Hard Mode first. I'd like anyone to at least get past the tenth mission this time."

"Uh, Captain?" Touko asks as the others were already turning around.

"Hm? What is it now?" Michiru asks, eyes widening slightly in surprise.

"If it isn't much trouble, could we ask the Vikings to go through Hard Mode as well? In that way, we also can observe their maneuvers as they will while spectating on our runs. If our own runs can be shared to them, then theirs also could be shared back to us, am I correct?"

"Oh… Yes, you're right. I hadn't thought of it. I'll try asking once they contact me," She nods in thankfulness, which Touko returns with a smile.

"Nice one, Kazama!" Hayase returns a smirk and a thumbs up as she crashes onto her seat, excitement coursing through her arms like a bolt at the prospect of watching the Vikings try and clear the setting that had stumped their progress.

"Why, it is nothing. However, I assume you and Misae wish to make amends for this morning, right?" She chuckles at their sober expressions, at the fire in their eyes, "Don't worry, I'm sure you'll be able to defeat this mystery pilot in a one on one."

"Yeah. And not just for today. that mock battle in the Gekishins…" Hayase groans, tightening her hold on the controller as she rested her back onto the seat.

"That, too, is a debt we have with this pilot," Munakata nods, crossing a leg, leaving an elbow onto the armrest, "We'll be in equal footing for the first time. So, let's play ball and see how they react."

"… I hope they don't knock us out as quickly as this morning," Asakura says, slowly sitting down.

"Don't worry, think positive!" Takahara reminded as she leans on the back of Asakura's sofa, "They won't have that weird machine with them now after all."

"Yeah… Still, we already saw their skill. Viking One's, in particular," Akane says, eyes unmoving from the swirling patterns of squares and lines of black and green, the loading screen that was reminiscent of a system as it booted up, "It won't be easy, at all."

"Best of luck, Akane. I… I think you can do it!" Tsukiji nods and smiles, encouraging and bright.

"Yeah, no point in getting all stressed out about this," Haruko winks at them as she brings a few chairs closer, so that everyone can sit down, "It's a training course in the end. And I'm sure we'll learn much from the Vikings' performance. Maybe they'll clear Hard Mode even?"

"Ha! I'll eat a sock if they do!" Hayase chuckles, severely underestimating the soldier's prowess in her blissful ignorance.

"Change the first letter to a C, and we have a deal," Munakata whispers, poking one of her cheeks as she chuckles.

Yet, Hayase simply raises a brow as she squints her eyes, "Huh? What are you talking about? To change the letter to a C… Then it would make-" Eyes part away as clouds after a storm, only to allow a meteor rain to follow as she groaned, "Mu-na-ka-taaa…"

"Could you two stop being all over the other for *one damn second* ?" Michiru says, slamming a folder onto a desk.

The rookies chuckled at the matter, as Munakata also did while Hayase slowly hit the arms of her sofa, oozing bloody murder intent from her very being. Business as usual, as you'd expect.

A beeping in Michiru's pocket, she holds her comms close to her lips, whispering for a moment as everyone else stared. She then

nods towards Haruka, who starts a timer as she readies her pen to write down the events of the session. All the Valkyries accept the prompt to have their run shared through the 'multiplayer' scoreboard before starting up the challenge and preparing their units and their loadouts, and their preferred color scheme. Taking one second to accept the plastic cups with water Tsukiji and Haruko had just filled, another moment to hydrate and relax, roll up their shoulders or make circles with their necks, the first five nodded towards their captain.

"Now then… Valkyries, start the course!" Michiru barked the order, and all five of them fired off the confirmation, starting their runs of Valgern-On's Hard Mode.

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*A few minutes later.*

*(In a nearby room.)*

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Sparks and explosions flowed in the TV screen, twisters mixing into vortex as the beams are fired and the special skills triggered. Yet, the stages repeat themselves, the scenarios are left uncleared. As the last Struggler of the final round of four falls to the ground in flames, Takeru sighs and shakes his head.

"Just what the hell are they doing?" He says, resting comfortably against the sofa, stretching his legs.

"Takeru-san," Pulling his arm, the young Yashiro that was seated besides him asks, "why are they having so much trouble?"

"Because they're still moving within the conventions they learned from. The rules of airborne warfare still hold some water in regards to TSFs, especially for Anti-TSF combat. But you saw it yourself, they're still jumping and dashing as if they were using the old OS. Not even trying to strafe, to do simple power slides… I wasn't expecting them to try out my acrobatics as if they were naturals but after playing so much in Valgern-On, they're still only doing some

basic jumps and stuff. Sure, they're more nimble than with the old OS… but that's all." Folding his arms, he simply shakes his head.

"So, they're not training well?" She asks, tilting her head.

He shrugs as he grumbles, slowly crossing his legs, "I won't say they're bad. But, they really are not making the most out of the game. If they limit themselves to what they have on their hands today, they'll never make any real progress. To try out things that may sound dumb, to try and defy the current status quo is what they should be doing! What good will do to them to refuse to use the system's liberties for airborne maneuvers? Or for them to get used to newer long range weaponry? Really, they're just stagnating in their comfort zone…" Frowning a bit as he tapped the sofa, he nodded with much impulse, speaking his fair judgment.

"… You sound a bit like the Professor," Yashiro says, smiling at his flinching.

"A-Anyways… I wasn't expecting them to change their style overnight, but they've made very little progress. It's like they don't realize which moves are best suited for each mech, and they've barely used the combos at all. Not to mention how to do anything besides Nairs while jumping… Sigh, they're still playing it safe instead of using the freedom of movement the game has," *I know you can't spell success without succ, but they're sucking harder than a drunk Santa Claus,* he complained, twisting his lips as a certain image flashed in his mind due to his poor choice of words, understandably spurring a blush in the soldier's face.

"… Takeru-san, what do you mean?"

"That I was thinking they'd be doing some more air dodges and stuff, and trying out different combinations as opposed to them just… playing at the surface level," He answers, leaning further back onto the cushy sensation, placing both hands behind his head.

"No, I wasn't talking about that," She moves her bunny ears, still staring into his eyes, his swirling aura, "You just thought about a 'drunk Santa Claus', but I heard from the Professor that he was a nice old man that gave presents to the poor. Why do you think he's bad?"

Choking on empty air, face flushed slightly for a moment as he struggles to not think of that night, "Don't… Don't worry about that, it was just a turn of phrase."

She held his gaze, seeing a strange tint of colors swirling around him, near his face and lungs in particular. Not understanding, she tilts her head, leans on her sofa to stare closer, "Do you dislike Santa Claus, Takeru-san?"

"No, I don't. Sigh…"

"Was he mean to you? Did he give you a bad present?"

"No… all the contrary, actually…"

Her bunny ears perk up, she stares in confusion at the swirl of colors, reminded of the lights she sees when she closes her eyes very, very tightly, "What do you mean?"

A beeping from the comms saves him from further questions, further reminiscence. On the other room, the Valkyries laid hunched over their seats as they once more failed to clear level ten of Hard Mode. Only Hayase had actually reached a point where she could say victory was close by, but for the rest, they hadn't shown any improvements as they were concerned.

So, Michiru called out in a whisper, so that only her could hear the answer, "Vikings, do you copy?"

"Viking One, loud and clear," Takeru replied, crossing a leg, sighing as young Yashiro remains staring, peeking as she rests her head on the sofa's arms.

"I assume you have already watched all of our individual runs?"

"Yes, we were just done with the last one some seconds ago."

"So, may I ask what did you think of them?" She politely said, as she was unaware of the rank that the mystery pilot had. The small groaning on the other side of the static-mired line only served to make her nape feel overflowed by said static itself.

"I found some… drawbacks to your approach," He began slowly, breaking the ice tenderly as he leaned back onto the seat, a hand resting by his ear to support his weight, "While your overall strategies do have much work put into them, I find your… insistence on using the old movement patterns a bit baffling, truth be told."

"Could you elaborate?" She asked, low, the tip of a knife pressed against her chest.

"While the tactics we use won't change drastically, you have not been using the advantages the XM3 offers. Your jumps are as short and sparse as they would be on the old system, the stride of all of you denotes a lack of… valor, might I say. You could employ dodges to evade most attacks, and then counter when you would normally be under the cease of inputs. Since the increased sensibility gives you far more options for three-dimensional movements such patters are easy to achieve, more so to perform multiple changes in direction in quick succession, yet you all have stuck to the tried and tested ways. If all you use the XM3 for is to bypass the shock countermeasures as you did during our earlier bout today, you're better off just switching back to the old OS," He concluded, covering the comms as he sighed heavily. For the soldier knew that, even if he raised valid points, speaking the truth and nothing but the truth, Cpt Isumi was not going to receive the words well.

And the groaning that came from the other side of the line, the deep and sharp inhaling she had to do to keep her voice as a whisper should tell you the effect his words had on the leader of the Valkyries, "Viking, with all due respect, such movements would only

worsen our performance. We are required to be the spearhead of the Project, as you should be aware," Stopping for a moment, dousing the fire she was breathing, Michiru then coughed, "Employing newer, untested tactics will only make it more difficult for us to complete our mission, which is why we stick to strategies we know are successful. Furthermore, the risks of losing units by employing such… reckless piloting as you did during our battle is decidedly high. Not to mention, the tear such approaches would leave on our machines could backfire on the field, rendering a TSF unusable or putting the pilot at risk should a limb cease to work properly due to the abuse. Basing our trainings on methods proved through years of experience is what I believe is best for my crew."

"Still, you're fighting with the ways of yesterday, when you should be adapting to the strategies of tomorrow. You're going to get blindsided if you don't even take a few training sessions to try out new things," He nods to himself, clear and resolute, also truthful, "I understand your duty as the leader of the STF requires you to look after the safety of your crew and the success of your mission," Inhaling softly, he lays a cold blanket over his voice as he frowns, "however, there is much to be gained were you willing to truly break the conventions you're being chained by."

"… Chained?" Michiru couldn't help but to raise her voice a bit as she frowned, enough for the rest to hear her well, "With all due respect, I do not find the tactics available limiting in any way. There is no need to resort to such endangering maneuvers when the ironed out patters already benefit much from the XM3. You speak as if you… had plentiful experience in the field, Viking. Yet, if you did, I believe you wouldn't be casting such doubts towards the protocols crafted with the sweat of many through decades of warfare."

His eyes squinted, inhaling sharply, softly clawing at the cushioning around him, "Putting the protocols you were taught with atop a pedestal will only narrow your field of view, *when you should be seeking new alternatives to turn the tide of this endless battle, to prevent more sacrifices* . And… In a way, you could say I have many

lives worth of experience, yes," He replied, low and harsh at the anger Michiru displayed, rightfully countering despite the welling displeasure in his own words, "Which is why I believe newer tactics are required. As we are, we will end up extending the stalemate and losing this war. *So, with all due respect, I believe our duty to the people is more important than safeguarding the 'honor' of these protocols you're clinging onto, Captain, ma'am.* " He releases acid and pure blight, twisting the sofa in his crushing grip.

Recalling figments of Iceberg, of how Michiru herself allowed an exception during 21st to let him clear the Forts so that they could dispose of the Laser-class present made the soldier wince. Hearing her harsh, serious words of rejection had sent another small dagger into the open wound the soldier had, another dejection. Yashiro pulled his sleeve, staring in worry at the darkening hue of his aura, at the thickening fog that surrounds his body. He then smiled, petting her head and relaxing back to his usual way of being to not burden his psydekick of a bunny.

"I… I see…" Michiru, on her end, remained dead silent.

Thinking on the words, the tone that came through the static, the sword aimed at her throat. What at first was indignation towards someone who dismissed her efforts, those last words, the tone that spat venom, told her something beyond what the words meant in the sole sentence, making her tongue regress into her throat. It reminded her of days long gone, of days of intense battle and emotion. And with those thoughts, the sensation of being drenched in drying sweat came back to her arms. The smell of humidity mixed with the buzzing of the flies, and the stench that with them came.

So, as you'd expect, her whisper descends even further beyond into the sea, "However… I cannot risk my newest members to learn under untested methods, or for them to suffer an accident during a mock battle while testing these movements you apply. We already received quite a reprimand from the mechanics due to our encounter this morning. While I'll admit the XM3 is indeed surprising-"

"It does not have any tangible results in the field." He fired off, scratching the sofa as if skinning it, making young Yashiro flinch and wince at the color of his aura, while he was reminded of what he and Yuuko had to go through to get the OS accepted. And what those issues made Yuuko do… and the ripples his weakness caused back then. "I know you'd rather repeat trusted methods than to risk employing an unknown plan. I know that, when you're deployed, there is no room for failure. And I know that asking you to practice such precise maneuvers at high speeds sounds like madness, more so with the maintenance cost they come with. However, if it's clear results you want, if you'd like proof of the XM3's real superiority…" He chortled, smirking for a moment, until young Yashiro pulled his arm, groaning in disagreement to his scary expression, "Well Captain Isumi, why don't you and I make a bet?"

"Huh? A bet?" She rose an eyebrow, as the incognito chuckled behind the veil of static.

"Yes. If me and Viking Two manage to perform better than you Valkyries in Hard Mode, you will heed my advice and start practicing with the methods I suggest. Both in the WMTS and in the sim runs you do every night with the XM3. You can then continue your usual approaches in live mock battles or in the JIVES trainings… and see for yourself the difference in results you get."

"Huh? Excuse me, how do you…" Turning her back to the others, leaning onto a desk, whispering even lower, "Why do you know that we're testing the XM3 at night? That's a top secret matter only my unit and the XO herself knows about." She paled, thinking she had made a miss, that somehow the intel had been leaked or her unit's movements noticed. She was aware the Viking was also given the OS for their battle at morning, yet she had thought her nightly trainings had gone unnoticed thus far.

"… I know many things about your unit, Captain," Takeru said, cold and low, unnecessarily countering Michiru's dismissal of the XM3 a second time, quite foolishly so.

"… What are you trying to say?" So she asked, tense as a small quiver appeared on the back of her head.

"That you have my sympathy for having to shoulder the drunken stupor of your 2IC," He nodded to himself, smiling as Yashiro started to chop his shoulder lightly.

"Huh? You… know of…" Yet, Michiru felt cold water run her back, over and over. She *did* have to tend to Hayase's drinking sessions at times, and it is quite fair to affirm it was distressing for the Captain when that occurred. However, Hayase hadn't gotten that wasted in the last few months, so her shock, her widening eyes and mouth are justified, I believe.

Takeru, however, was not done yet. And chuckling as he stretched his legs, crossing them over as he rests a hand on his chin, he whispers back, "And I also can sympathize with the… rivalry, let's call it, you have with your sisters over the love of a dense guy."

"HUH?! H-How…" She gaped, gripping the comms, that hand shaking as veins popped up in her eyes. The rest of the Valkyries stared in wonder, in worry, as she hurriedly paced to the other end of the room, tightly pressing the comms into her person as if she had received a call from a lover right before dinner, "How… do you know that?" She whispers, and then she frowns, "And… why are you bringing this up, Viking? Surely, you're not trying to blackmail me, are you?"

"No, I would *never* do anything of the sort to you, Cpt Isumi." He smiles, rolling his eyes as he lightly shakes his head, "I'm just letting you know, that I know many things about you Valkyries. Secrecy aside, I am your ally, even if my words might sound harsh or hard to believe. My advice comes with no ill will attached, ma'am. As I said during our first talk before Niigata, all I want is for us to bring Alt IV to fruition, and reach a world with ze… without wars."

"Is that so? Then, how did you find out of… such personal matters?" She asks, frowning harder when he chuckles again.

"I *am* the Professor's bodyguard, Captain." He nods to himself, smiling, "You'd do well in… keeping my words close to you," He said, chuckling at the end, pleased with his performance and delivery as he blocked young Yashiro's relentlessly chopping hand.

Michiru blinked quickly as she took a deep breath, running a hand into her hair, "Is that how it is, then… And if you fail to perform better than us, what do we gain from this bet?" She asks, turning back, sitting on the desk, crossing her legs.

"Well… Is there anything you'd like from us? So long as it isn't something the Professor would forbid, that is."

"Let me see…" Grasping and treading her chin, Michiru doubts, thinks on what she could ask. The chance was unexpected, but now she found herself void of answers. After all, the last thing she wants is to overstep her boundaries and risk angering Yuuko, you'd understand, "I suppose you're not available for more mock battles?"

"Sadly, no."

"Does that also apply for practice runs on the WMTS?"

"Hmm… That might be possible to arrange. Is that what you want if we, somehow, lose?"

One of her brows twitched, she suddenly wanted to be able to have the person at arm's length, "Yes, that will suffice. I accept the bet, then."

"Good to hear, ma'am. So, should we start our own run of Hard Mode?" He asks, Yashiro already standing up to look for the controls and set up the match in online mode.

"If you could. I… am expecting you to put on a good show, Viking," Smirking, clicking some fingers together, she said.

"If that's what you'd like from me, I'll gladly give you the time of your life. Let's see if the fine painting we'll draw in the skies is fitting to your palate, ma'am."

"H-Huh?! What do you-"

"Please enter spectator mode, so that you can see our runs in real time. Well then, I hope our performance pleases you, Cpt I-su-mi."

"Wait a mome-" The connection dropped, static miring her hearing. Clutching the comms, she fumed momentarily, "Damn it…" *How did… I haven't painted or visited a gallery in years…*

"Is something the matter, ma'am?" Haruka asks, head lowering, slowly walking towards Michiru.

"No… It's nothing. Alright, you all. Pay attention." Once everyone was, indeed, focused on her, she smirks as she shrugs, "It seems lady Viking was not pleased at all with our performance so she's gonna give us 'the time of our lives', in her own words." A few raised brows, a chuckle or two, and quite the confusion and displeasure brewed within their shifting, tightening postures. "So, make sure you watch their moves closely. The Viking made her point clear enough, she doesn't believe we're using the XM3 to its fullest potential, so she'll show us how to handle it best. She proposed a bet to me, and if either of them manage to get past level ten I agreed to employ their suggestions."

"That's… unexpected," Touko notes, bumping a hand onto her chin, "Do you believe their words to hold some merit, ma'am?" *It is very odd, Cpt Isumi rarely backs down from her plans, unless the one suggesting a change is the Instructor or the XO .*

"Sigh… I think so, yes. At the very least, the Viking's words lent credence to the experience she possesses in her shoulders. And, well, five of us did almost lose to a single unit this morning, outlier or not," Sighing again, her gaze falls momentarily.

"But… Speaking of, why was that machine different?" Tsukiji asks.

"Didn't it have better radars?" Takahara answers, arms folding, looking around.

Asakura nods, tapping one of her brows as she tries to recall, "I believe that model was… a derivative of the F-14 Tomcat, by the looks of it. I don't recall reading of such a model, but I suppose those odd features on its shoulders and arms were extra sensors. Which is what allowed the unit to snipe us from such a distance, thanks to the increased processing power of the XM3."

"Sigh… It's crazy to think about," Munakata nods, running a hand into her hair, "An old dusty prototype that was discarded as a failure might very well see a revival to its full glory with new tech at one point. Perhaps, those radars might become commonplace if the Professor's testings are successful," She concludes, the younger ones nodding in agreement to her, oh, so correct words, despite her not being aware of the Mindseeker's true purpose.

"Captain, what if they can't beat our results?" Hayase asks, sobering up and returning the talk to the point.

"Well, it seems they're willing to spar with us more frequently in these sims," Michiru nods, only to flinch at Hayase's sparkling eyes as she squealed.

"Really?! We'll get to train with them regularly?!" She steps towards Michiru, holding her gaze firmly, waiting and holding her breath close as if she were a little kid asking for candy.

"Captain, is this true?" Akane stares at Michiru, gulping slowly and trying to mask her equal excitement at the prospect.

"Only if they fail to clear level ten. Now, let's set up this spectator mode they mentioned," She says as she walks up, smiling again and waving to dismiss the formality.

And so, the Valkyries hurried to connect all five of their Stallions to spectator mode on the only signal available. As they huddled closer, chairs squeezed in between the larger sofas, whispers and opinions, bets and expectations start to be shared as if they were relaxing in a bar after an arduous day of work. Except for Michiru, who remains collected, absentmindedly playing with her hair, as she tried to make sense of what the Viking had told her, of the cold and acid tone which told the mystery pilot indeed had 'many lives' worth of service on its shoulders.

" *Just… who are you supposed to be? Why does the XO trust in you to such degree? And… where did you even come from, to know such things about me?"* She so mulled, until Munakata wrapped a hand over her shoulder, joking about how she had been charmed by the Viking, which spurred another round of jabs and teases as they had done before with Takahara and Tsukiji.

On the other room right besides, however, two bunny ears flapped up and down quickly. Almost as if she were trying to use them to fly away, young Yashiro kept her stare firm upon the soldier's worry.

"For real, let me go at it first," He insisted, resting his hands on his waist.

"No. I want your opinion on my piloting."

"It's not like I ain't gonna give you pointers after you finish, Kasumi."

"But if you win first, the Valkyries will start asking you lots of questions…" She again flapped her bunny ears, "I can sense it in their auras. They're feel as pushy as your comrade was when we worked on the consoles."

"Sigh…" *You really do not like Meiya, for some reason,* "Fine, alright. At least we got them to wait a bit before we watched their runs, so you did get to play for a while. But, you're sure about your pick?" Folding his arms in worry, he stared, "I think the Xao-Myun is still better, since you're not used to the controls."

"No, I like the Watcher. It's not that hard to use," She insisted, puffing her cheeks a bit.

"… You just like it because it also has bunny ears, don't you?"

"That's not it." Bunny ears dropping as her gaze did, her hands join slowly, "I, um, find it easy, to tell when to move with it. With the other units, I have to worry about the range and all… but with the Watcher I can stay away from danger, observe things from afar and attack when I think it's best." Nodding once, she looks up at him, hands joining even harder, "Do you think I'm wrong?"

"No, if you like that one, go for it, Kasumi," Petting her head, he smiles, "So, ready?"

She nods, sitting down and grabbing her joystick. He sighs, chuckling as he shrugs. Going to make sure everything was right with the cables, he then gives young Yashiro a thumbs up. She softly presses the confirmation button, preparing her unit with the soldier's help as he sits again by her side. A few seconds later, they were all ready to go.

So, grabbing the comms, Takeru calls, "Captain, do you copy?"

Startled a bit, more so by all the gazes and smirks that fell on her person, Michiru answers in a whisper, "Loud and clear. Are you ready to start, Vikings?"

"Indeed we are, ma'am. As it were, Viking Two requested to take the first shot, so you'll be seeing their skills next."

"Can we expect 'the time of our lives' from this run?" She asks, smirking as she leans on the armrests of the sofa.

"Well, Viking Two has had little training under me. However, there may be something worthwhile in their piloting for you," Grinning, he shares a nod with Kasumi, "You'd be wise not to blink, ma'am."

"… Very well. We're ready on our end, too. You may start whenever."

"Roger." Cutting the connection, he smiles, "All yours, Kasumi."

And with a small groan and a faint flap of her bunny ears, young Yashiro began her run through Hard Mode. Yet, as her unit appeared in the Valkyries' televisions, as most of them stared in wonder or puzzlement, Michiru felt her knees quiver, her insides twist. I believe you'd understand the shock, for the unit that young Yashiro had chosen, the Void Watcher, has a particular identification code: XB-80E.

The slim machine was nothing like a TSF, looking truly humanoid except for its large shoulders which bent backwards, making it seems as if the Watcher was always sticking its flat chest outwards. The armor of its arms and legs had a triangular, curved feel to it, and its head was an inverted triangle, sharp and pointed with two antennas like those of a Shiranui, which the soldier compared to Yashiro's bunny ears. Coated in the default overall white paint, with undertones of blue and red in its inner armor and underside, the machine seemed alien enough to surprise the Valkyries at first glance since they had not trained with it, not even once, since it was rather hard to control. And for Michiru, it was unrealistic in its patterns. And she also wanted to avoid her crew speaking of the code of the unit in the game.

The small bunny, however, merely swayed a bit, softly holding her controller, as the opening stage appears in the TV. The same ship carrier where Takahara and Tsukiji were duking it out moments before, her rival on the first mission being a base Kaizer.

"Here we go…" Gently tapping the triggers, Yashiro causes the shoulders of her machine to splinter off it, flying about towards the Kaizer.

Controlling them with the D-Pad, as one would command the AI partners during single player mode, she switched offense to area control to defense, the droid turrets her shoulders had become

keeping the Kaizer at bay, preventing all movement. The Watcher was rather slow on the ground, yet the Kaizer could not dash carelessly without hitting the turrets or the nearby containers. So, Yashiro is now free to gun at it from a distance along the floating shoulder turrets.

In a similar situation to what the soldier had encountered during his match against the Frei at the tournament, the Kaizer found itself tumbling and unable to move. Small enough to dodge auto locks, more so with Yashiro's conservative and reactive playstyle as disruptive cover, the shoulder turrets kept running circles over the machine once favored by Takeru as the AI struggled to neutralize them or get out of their firing lines. And yet, Yashiro kept a poker face, tapping the buttons in a rhythm while gently curving the tip of the analog, in the pace she had learned through scanning his mind, swaying her head as if she were listening to a pleasant song. Having fun, I believe.

However, I cannot say the same for the ones watching the bunny's performance.

"Hey, isn't this situation… a perfect control of the flow of battle?" Akane asks, a hand almost covering her half-open mouth.

"The constant firing of the turrets… and their movements as they sway back and forth… It's very well handled," Asakura notes, equally surprised.

"But this kind of thing is unrealistic. Stuff like that doesn't exist in the battlefield," Takahara says, sulking as she rests her frame on Asakura's shoulders from behind the sofa.

"No, I do not believe so," Touko says, leaning forward to look better.

"Yes, that's true," Michiru admits, "Attack copters can do that to TSFs. If they use AL-missiles, the heavy metal clouds will interfere with our aim systems greatly. Not to mention, if they support a TSF

element from the sidelines while constantly on the move, and at high altitude, hitting them might prove difficult."

"Not to mention, fighter jets could easily run circles around even the newest TSFs," Hayase nods, twisting her lips as slowly starts to dig her nails on the sofa, "Their speed, the altitude they can reach… TSFs are not the end-all be-all of warfare, we all know that. But…"

All Valkyries then stared as the odd machine did a singular dash forward once the Kaizer had made the mistake to try and clear the containers to rush it. Stumbled by the firing support from the shoulder turrets that remained in midair, the Kaizer was left wide open as the Watcher dashed at it. Holding two blades that closed in on the enemy as a pincer, the vicegrip of Yashiro's attack starts crushing the Kaizer, slashing it in half.

A victory fanfare was played, longer than usual, as the Watcher struck a pose which the soldier would describe as a hundred-years old vampire screaming the 21st tarot arcana to the winds. The word 'Perfect' was etched in golden letters, a few sparking shines glittering around it, one or two fireworks blasting right behind for a moment. As Yashiro smiles widely, sharing a highfive with the soldier, all the Valkyries were left in utter silence. They had never, not a single time, had achieved a perfect victory in their time training with the game.

"Cpt, did you know we could score 'perfect' victories?" Munakata asks, low, as the next stage began.

"No, I was not aware. I wonder if they'll manage to keep this up, however," She chuckles, yet still feels the cold air of winter on her back. More so when the Watcher kept dodging fire, countering swiftly on the screen.

"Hmm…" Yashiro groans, bringing her controller closer to her chin, as her machine dodges fire in the airport stage, "This… is a bit bothersome." So, she slightly pouts.

"You don't have to stay so much on the defensive, you know?" He suggests, leaning on the sofa, almost meeting her bunny ears.

As the three Strugglers of the map tried to blindside the Watcher, all of them coming from different angles, forcing her to retreat into the empty runway, Yashiro called the shoulders back, closer to her unit. Sensing something in his aura, a few images blurred into her sight. Before she knew or was aware of it, she pressed the analogs, triggering the R3 buttons, alongside the shoulder bumpers. A small combo was executed, as the turrets opened fire incessantly upon the charging Strugglers, and a clear input chain made the Watcher rush forward, do a backflip, and send a wide slash at the chasers. All three Strugglers fall to the floor in flames, the Watcher taking its victory pose as the shoulder turrets kept firing on and on.

"Sigh… That was scary." She admits, resting the controller on her lap as she sighs.

"Wow, didn't think you'd go for a combo breaker like that. Nice one, Kasumi!" He beams, she smiles back. It was a simple three button combo, dash, jump and attack, which caused the simple combo to occur, and yet…

In the other room, gaping and silent, all of them stared in equal shock.

"Hey, that was… that was one of the moves they pulled during the mock battle this morning, wasn't it?" Hayase says, giving the sofa small punches.

"It was, yes," Munakata says, leaning forward, roughly resting her chin on her coiled hands, "Did you see the timer, though? They got a faster time than any of us in this mission."

"And no one had managed to strike down three TSFs in one single attack, either. In these sims or in our usual trainings." Michiru admits, wincing. *"You weren't kidding, Viking. And if this is how Two performs… Just where do your limits lie?"*

"W-Well… This is still the start of the course, they might have gotten lucky," Takahara shrugs, Akane and Asakura give her a side glance.

"Anyways, the next mission is starting," Touko reminds so that they make silence, her eyes unmoving from the screen as the next opponents were shown. Two Colossus and two Kaizers.

"And this time, it's in the Valley Waterways," Haruko says, crossing a leg over the other, one eye closed, "I wonder how they'll tackle this stage?"

"But, are the movements in the water accurate?" Tsukiji asks, as she had many troubles in this particular stage.

"Believe me, they do feel real, the controls," Hayase remarks as the fighting starts, the Watcher again deploying the shoulder turrets, escaping into the surrounding greenery over a lake, near a waterfall, "The machines slow down, your dashes might be impaired if you fight too close to the water, the footing near the sand or damp ground becomes unstable. And if you don't get close to the water, if you try to stay away from the valley-"

As if following on Hayase's words, a few missiles descended onto the Watcher fired from atop a large rock formation, like an arrow rain of the olden times. Yashiro furrowed her brows, very tightly, as she leaned forward, as her fingers gained haste to play the clicking song. Since the valley was deep and the surrounding mountains large, refusing to approach the waterfall would leave one vulnerable to the Colossus' napalms, you'd understand. However, as the impact hurt the scenery, burning down the nearby forest, as the scorching, creaking sounds of the woodlife filled the speakers…

"… That's horrible." Yashiro frowns, lips shaking, "That's horrible. Why would they hurt the forest like that?"

"It's what happens when you fight near nature," The soldier comments, sighing hard, "That's why… sometimes, you have to employ more aggressive approaches, before collateral damage

happens," He finishes. *"Though, chaining a few boost jumps would let her close the distance with the valley. Maybe skim the surface of the water for a while, before doing a double jump and bouncing off the wall, then she can cream the Colossus up there, since they can't shoot at her if she's hugging the valley's mountain …"* He nods, grasping his chin. But then, he groans as one edge of his lips sinks, *"Yeah, that's a tad bit too much for the bunny as of now."*

Bunny ears perk up, she pouts a bit. Shifting her grasp on the controller, the shoulder turrets shift to defense mode, blocking both Kaizers from approaching. Amidst the fire, the pixelated trees fading into a burnt model, the Watcher takes flight, making small waves surge forth from the lake.

"Oh?" He corks an eyebrow, recognizing the patterns.

When the alarms beep, she moves sharply to one side or the other, cutting a diagonal slice upon the lake. Her thumbs hurt a bit, wanting to stop. Yet, Yashiro keeps the analog in place, the shoulder trigger of the dash sunk in, evading all incoming missiles, dancing atop the water, painting faint traces and ripples above the calm canvas of the lake.

"Oh!" Both hands coil and raise, a warm smile decorating, casting brightness upon the soldier's face.

Unable to hop and bounce off the rock formations as Takeru does, Yashiro had to make due with a chain of boost jumps to reach the top of the valley, then opens fire in close range at the Colossus, dashing in mid air with the blades extended and closing in a deadly embrace.

"Ooohhh!" Wagging both arms quickly, almost blurring them due to the speed, he couldn't help but to squeal like he did when but a curious kid he was.

No damage was inflicted upon the Watcher as it spun and slashed about, drawing a sphere, a radiant glow with her patters upon the

slow and clunky Colossus duo as they stumbled down, only to follow it with her unit's short beam rifle directing a shot at each enemy. Once the long range support was disposed of, Yashiro merely kicked back and relaxed onto the sofa, smiling as she sniped the Kaizers that couldn't clear the lake to even attempt to reach her.

"Kasumin, Kasumin! Naal ok zin los vaahlrin!" Singing the Wyrmborn's song from The Olden Papyrus VI: Merrowgale as the last Kaizer crumbles in defeat, Takeru raises a hand as if aiming to offer a chalice of wine to the sun. As the victory tune chirped to life, she giggles when the soldier pets her head and smiles, congratulating her efforts.

The Valkyries, on the other hand, were again left lacking any and all words. Quite befuddled and incredulous, tight postures keep shuffling on the sofas. Simply put, they didn't believe their eyes.

"… Um, are those kind of jumps actually possible?" Tsukiji asks, feeling as if her seat were vanishing and she'd fall on her butt any second now.

"Yeah… They did that and more drastic maneuvers this morning," Munakata says, biting a nail, "Hayase, they had… bounced off the buildings, right?"

"Yes, they ran circles all over me in less than a few seconds," She clicks her tongue, resting both arms behind her head, "If not for the Takemikazuchi's better radars, they'd have offed me then and there. With a modified *Tomcat*, too," She spits out that last part, grimacing as her tongue traced the back of her teeth, drying her mouth.

"They also did something similar during our battle in the Gekishins," Touko says, curling a strand of hair, "I believe they had done an Albright Turn as we were cornering them?"

"Sigh. Yeah, I think so," Haruko hunches over, scratching her head, "I didn't see that one coming at all. And again, they're clearing our records without much effort," Grimacing, her feet hit each other for a

moment as she shifts, sinks into the sofa, into stillness within her thoughts, "I can't believe this. Those movements… Are they truly so easy to achieve?"

Meanwhile, in the other room…

"Man, that was so awesome, Kasumi!"

"Thanks. I just tried following your advice," She looks down, he ruffles her hair for a moment longer.

"Still, you creamed those Colossus real good. I had trouble with this stage at first back home, not gonna lie, but you aced it like it was nothing."

One brow twitched for a second, "*… Back home? Then, what are we to…"* Shaking her head, flapping the ears, she sighs. "No, it was thanks to your tutoring," She insists, tapping her fingers, stealing glances at him, "So, do you think I'm doing well so far?"

Winking at her, he smirks, "You're doing perfect. Just try to reserve your fuel better next time. Aside from that, just keep a steady pace and you should be golden." Again petting her head, again making her blush as she stutters words of thankfulness, he smiles in support while giggling at her embarrassment. Which, as you'd expect, made the girl give a chop to his shoulder.

As usual, always offering honest advice, always trying to motivate those around him, to light their mood up however way he can. To be a spark for those who need it to start their own fire, to be that small nod, that faint smile which dispels cold shackles, untying the iron ball. That small sign which still shines in the sky. His trusting gaze and nods, his honest and happy reactions bolster young Yashiro's spirits, which drives her to further her performance, now ridden of fear and self-doubts. Acting as a tailwind, a warm blanket of support, he keeps giving her tidbits of data without interfering with her runs, minding his words but always ending on a positive note to motivate her to keep at it. I believe you'd agree, Yashiro couldn't possibly

have asked for more, or anything resembling the soldier's friendliness. Which is why the sun would be left blushing in envy were it to be put besides the young girl's shining smile as she practiced, heeding his advice, basking into his supportive gaze. I think he'd be a good father, one day.

The 'training' session continued, Yashiro proving herself quite capable of improvising on the spot against the AI TSFs she faced. The Valkyries remained as surprised as Viking Two continued to best their times, even if the difference began closing more and more. Even when the first BETA strains appeared in the campaign mode, she managed to best them easily despite her initial hesitant and fearful approach.

"Kasumi, you sure you wanna keep going?"

She nods immediately, "Yes, don't worry. I'm not tired."

"No, that's not it." He sighs as the Watcher skewers a Grappler in half, raising it so that the shoulder turrets can fry it into quite the outlandish brochette, "Level ten has lots of Tanks, and is where there's a jump in difficulty."

"I can do it," She says, flapping her ears again.

"Sigh… Fine. Go and show them the might of Dersh Bnnuy, my young Gadawan!"

**CHOP!**

"Takeru-san, don't start," She complains, pouting.

"Ahaha… Well, good luck in next level." He nods, and she smiles as she leans back into a comfortable position.

As the opening area played out, as the usual timer ticked closer to the start of the mission, both Yashiro and the Valkyries gulped down, licked their lips as they wait for the signal. Fingers diving into their

forearms, tracing the outer side of their muscles. Their breaths very much conscious, regulated, as the air filters in, out, from the stomach to the nose. A small shiver on the back of their heads, spreading down to their shoulders and the rest of their bodies. The second it took for the level to start felt so, so much longer for them.

Level ten, as it were, was the turning point of the story mode. As humanity was fighting among themselves over Tango's remnants, a certain meteorite fell down to their planet. The adversaries thought to have been kept in check away from the planet surfaced from the ground, a rumbling of dread announcing their march to war. As the scenes the soldier had seen during the opening sequence of Oratory Tango play, the ones which spurred his full rebirth, level ten of story mode begins… in the stage called the Fallen Frontier.

A large and expansive desert of white, as far as the eye could see even when the machines performed boost jumps. The relentless, freezing snowstorm raging on and on over the frozen tundra, working against the player since more fuel was needed to engage full boosts, and the overall speed and visibility was severely hampered. Some would say this level was prey of lazy design, as it's simply a large expansion of ice.

However, I believe the simple, minimalist approach works perfectly for this level. Not only it drives importance away from itself towards the introduction of the BETA to the Valgern-On universe, but it serves to sell their danger. In a harsh environment, they thrive where we struggle. Under inhuman conditions, they march on where we retreat. And, even when the snowstorm recedes, in the open, even field of the frontier of pure ice, in a bare bones map which gives no advantages, where both sides stand in equal footing… they score a definitive victory whereas we crumble away under their assault.

Said reason was why the Valkyries were having so much trouble with this mission, since they could not endure for as long as the map required. The winning condition was survival, to remain alive until the timeout. And while they could have cleared this mission were they

used the multiplayer functions, in single player's Hard Mode they had not yet been able to endure more than two minutes.

"Damn, it's always the same with the Destroyers." Hayase clicks her tongue, grimacing as the monsters appear from below, digging through the elevations of snow. "I swear, this mission is even worse than the first stages of the Volk Data."

Munakata nods, arms folding, a hand grasping her chin as the Watcher manages to elude the first waves, the shoulder turrets keeping the Destroyers in check. "I cannot imagine how it must have been, to fight for hours on end in the middle of such a snowstorm."

"And that is not all," Michiru says, taking a moment to drink some water from the plastic cup she had, "The terrain in this mission is firm, when in real life the snow would give away under the weight of our machines as they land from a boost jump." She drinks some more, eyes narrowing as the lone machine drags itself through the snow as a few stray beetles rush after it as the Tanks and Grapplers appear.

"I believe there should some data based on the fall of East Germany, correct?" Touko asks, choking a strand of hair as the Watcher manages to dance and spin away from the wave, turning the many Tanks into mere stains in the snow.

"There should be, yes. Perhaps we could request the data, to train under these harsher conditions." Michiru answers with a nod, not moving her eyes from the screen as the fighting continued.

As the Valkyries held their breath, surprised that the odd machine was withstanding the assault as well as Munakata, Michiru or Hayase had, in the other room a faint groan echoed.

"… There's no end to this," Yashiro grumbled, her fingers hurting as she continued to spin that analog, to dance and dash, to slice and dice above the snow as the blizzard whipped against her unit.

The turrets in defense mode near her, away from jumping Grapplers, managed to shield her unit from the Tanks that swarmed, surrounded the Watcher. Yet, the three minutes of the clock seemed to extend more and more. And the beetles kept appearing, rushing forth and giving her barely any time to move away. And the spiders kept jumping, extending their many arms to deter her movements. And the crabs kept waddling towards her, wanting to pierce the life out of her machine. All of them uncaring of the strong winds and piling snow, all of them rushing forward like the mindless beasts they are.

"You just gotta keep on moving," The soldier says, resting his arms on his legs, giving her frightened face a smile, "Short bursts of speed to escape, to let you maneuver well."

"There's too many of them." She counters.

"Pierce through, slash the Tanks apart. You have the turrets with you to get you enough space." He nods again, she grumbles as her lips purse.

"But… I don't know if… Ah!"

In the moment of hesitation, Tanks had managed to swarm through her turret's covering fire. Holding tight onto the legs, the spiders climb over each other, stomping their fellows' arms and squashing their eyes in their quest to sink their teeth into the machine's frame. The arms of the Watcher bend, their joints twisting outwards as the Tanks pull on them, the wiring within exposed and torn apart, leaking oil and sparks as if someone had taken the first bite of a juicy beef steak. The turrets cannot hold back the tide, cannot clear the swarm in the main unit. As Yashiro hastily presses more and more buttons, trying anything and everything as her breath picks up speed when the 991 alarm starts to beep, as her heart clangs against her frail skin the more she sees her inputs are pointless, all she can do in the end is watch.

Biting her lips and shaking a bit, she looks down as her machine is tumbled over, devoured by the BETA, as the screen fades to black.

Only to be followed by a splatter of blood, tainting part of the 'Game Over' message in deep red. Her hands relax, lose tension as if she were but a puppet with its strings cut, her joystick slips from grasp and begins to fall. If not for the soldier's reflexes, it would have ended exactly where the girl's gaze was. Tumbled over the floor, unmoving.

Softly patting her head, he whispers, "You did well for a first run, Kasumi."

"… That's not true. I… lost so badly. I couldn't even last a minute."

Pressing his hand onto her hair a bit, he laughs, "Don't forget that you're playing on Hard. Sumika and Tama had a lot of trouble dealing with Normal back home, you know?"

She looks up, eyes wide and unblinking, staring at him. When the colors didn't recede or change shape, when he smiled back at her and she saw it was no lie, Yashiro felt a small shiver in her back as his fingers traced her hair, massaging in circles as if he were giving a pizza its circular shape.

So, she could only whisper as she edged closer, "Really? I did well?"

"Yeah. And just between you and me…" He leans closer while covering his mouth with a hand, filling her view, "I also wasn't that good when I started."

"Eh? Really? But… but you're so good now."

"But I wasn't at the start, everyone starts from somewhere. Keeping at it despite how much I sucked at the start is what has gotten me this far. Time and effort, Kasumi," *And many nights without sleeping, too,* he says with a smile.

"Takeru-san, missing sleep is not good," She admonishes, grumbling as he laughs when he leans back.

"That might be, but you must be ready for when Lady Luck comes knocking at your doorstep. Without that practice, I wouldn't have been able to win the championship back home," *And maybe I wouldn't have recovered my memories in time to avoid a calamity…* "In any case, daily small efforts are the key to reaching an aptitude level you're happy with, be it in your work or your hobbies." Shaking his head a bit, he brings a fist to his chest as he puffs it, "With the will to keep pushing upon the first failures, the desire for knowledge to keep looking deeper, and a complete disregard for one's sleep schedule, humans can accomplish anything!"

"… You sound like the Professor," She scolds, eyes narrowing.

"Who do you think taught me that line?" He smiles, moving his brows up and down a few times. "But anyways, you did great for a first time. Don't be so down, Kasumi." Again smiling as he nods, Takeru pets Yashiro's head. She looks down, stuttering words of thanks. A beeping on his pocket, he brings the comms to his lips, checking the distortion was still active, "Viking here."

The sliver of a whisper that came through sent a few nails into Takeru's throat, reminding him of a certain moment, one of the last moments of Operation 21st.

"… Viking, was that truly Two taking on the missions?" Michiru asks, dull and low.

"Yes. Why, is there a problem?" He counters, fuming a bit, raising a brow.

Michiru grimaced, looking at the stone-cold expressions of all Valkyries, the open shock of the start of the session having turned into a quiet, sober pondering. The newest ones could not hide the dejection of their sinking shoulders nor the paling of their complexions. While the older ones had endowed a serious poker face, silently awaiting the answers. After all, young Yashiro had reached a comparable performance to their own trainings. Reaching a final score and lasting more or less the same as the newest

members in the mission, the apparent fresh trainee had tied their efforts after quite some time training with the WMTS.

Obviously, Yashiro could not yet reproduce these results inside a cockpit by any means. But they did not know that, and even if they did, I believe it is quite fair to affirm that all of them were sort of humbled, raising their plastic cups in salutation towards the unknown pilot. Since not only did she manage to equal their results, which meant the mysterious pilot would make a decent addition to their starved ranks, but that she did so with the odd machine that was too hard to control for all of the Valkyries, and employing the maneuvers the soldier preaches for.

So Michiru sighs, heavily, and for a second she stares at nowhere while clamping her lips. "Let Viking Two know we were all pleasantly surprised by the performance. It was a very good training run." She says, allowing a smile as the others relax and begin chatting, debating over the matter, "I know it is beyond your control, but we cannot wait for the day when we can welcome you into our ranks comes."

Takeru nudges Yashiro, smirking as she looks down in embarrassment, "The compliment is appreciated. So, I believe Two did not manage to best your times, right?"

"Huh?" Michiru flinches, as she was willing to lose the bet in front of the impressive show of skill of the bunny, "Well, it is true the older members have scored higher numbers… Are you saying you can surpass them, Viking?" She asks, gulping as she waits, as she hears the others, namely Hayase, whistle behind her back.

"… Well, why spoil the surprise? I suppose it is time for the main dish." He chuckles, rolling his shoulders to dispel the stiffness. "Also, we're still having a few matches afterwards?"

"Yes, if you'd be so kind," Michiru immediately replies.

"Then, could we have the newer members of your units spar against Viking Two, while I spar with you and the olders?"

"I suppose…" One of her brows twitched, not pleased at the soldier's lack of tact and poor choice of words, "Well, it would save us quite some time. Very well, let's do just that. However…" She leans back on the sofa, looking at her crew with a smirk and speaking louder while distancing the comms from her chin, "I expect you to fulfill your words, and give us that show you mentioned before."

"Oh, don't you worry, ma'am. I'll give all you want and much, much more…" He then licks his lips, chuckling as Yashiro stars chopping his shoulder yet again, "In any case, I shall be getting ready. Please return to spectator mode," He then cuts the connection, blocking the chopping as he goes for his joystick.

"So… What is this about 'all you want and more', ma'am?" Hayase asks, smirking and chuckling.

"Wh- It's nothing. They're merely teasing us, is all," She fumes, looking away with a slight frown.

"Oho… I wonder why are you so upset, Cpt Isumi? Don't tell me…" Leaning closer, tip of a finger on her chin, she chuckled as Michiru groaned.

"What is it? You wanna join in their fun, Hayase?" Munakata shot an arrow at the opening, placing a hand over her mouth as if embarrassed, "I didn't knew you were into threesomes…"

"What?!" Haruka shouts, face paling, "Mitsuki and the Captain… doing… doing…" Unable to bear the image her imagination crafted, she covers her eyes quite tightly as she squeals in embarrassment.

"My, I didn't knew you favored such encounters, 1st Lt," Touko says with a smile, stockpiling pressure.

"I cannot believe you…" Akane says, low, as she shakes her head alongside most of her cadet squadmates.

"Come on, now." Haruko hits Akane's shoulder as she chuckles, "They were just kidding… R-Right, 1st Lt, Cpt?"

"Of course it's just a joke!" Michiru blasts away, face as red as her hair. "Don't mix me in Hayase's and Munakata's sexcapades!"

"Wha- Captain!" Hayase yells in complain, also blushing, "What are you talking about?!"

"You know what I'm talking about," Michiru glares, both hands on her waist as she levels a stare at both of them.

"Pay her no mind, Hayase," Munakata leans on her comrades shoulder, playing with her hair, "She's just jealous of our pure love…"

"Mu-na-ka-taaa… This is all your fault for getting drunk!"

"Oh? You didn't send me away, though."

"I was half asleep! And you even ended up stealing my sheets," She folds her arms, shaking her off. "It ain't my fault you can't tell where your room is. I couldn't just have you sleep on the floor, you stupid idiot. You say I'm a drunkard, but you can't go back to your own room when you're wasted."

"Mitsuki, you can't even stand after you drink," Haruka counters, hitting her friend's weak point, making her gape at the unexpected stabbing.

"Shots fired!" Takahara smirks, laughing at Hayase's tightening expression along the rest of her cadet comrades.

"Sigh…" Michiru couldn't help but to rest a finger on the bridge of her nose, shaking her head. "Anyways, if you don't want people assuming the wrong thing, could you tone down the steam?"

"And here I was, merely supporting you after Hayase's teasing…" Munakata brings the back of a hand to her forehead, shivering dramatically, before hugging her forearms, "Your distrusts hurts me much, Captain."

"Siiigh." Chuckling for a moment, realizing the small banter had eased up the tension in the youngers' complexions, she merely shakes her head. "Try to keep the teasing to a minimum, Munakata. You too, Hayase."

"Yes, Ma'am. Sorry, Ma'am!" Both salute, serious for a second, before shrugging and sitting back down.

"Still," Hayase puts both hands behind her head, staring at the score and time displayed in the screen, "I cannot believe a novice truly did perform on par with us."

"You can say that again." Munakata nods, ruffling her hair, "I expected this from the Viking, but their sidekick also has quite some skill under their hood."

"It is no wonder they're kept as top secret pilots, then." Touko smiles, handing Munakata a cup of water.

"Uh, Captain?" Akane asks, arms compacted by her sides, "Is Viking Two truly a novice when it comes to piloting?"

"I wasn't told much about it, to be honest," She admits, shrugging, as she truly did have no idea who Viking Two was supposed to be, "Yet, the XO did mention that while they had some prior experience with piloting, they're being tutored personally by Viking One at the moment. But even with that in mind…" She eyes one of the TVs, locked on the placement in the scoreboards the unit named 'Viking 2' had reached. "And with such an odd machine, to boot."

"I don't think you should be so afflicted, ma'am." Munakata smiles, sighing, "While most of those moves do seem very unorthodox, their prowess has been proved in these sims. At the very least, they

deserve some testing in an actual TSF simulator before we assume they're that superior to us."

"And even if they are," Touko slowly starts, fumbling with her controller to connect to the one signal available, softly and quietly leaning back onto her sofa, "their aid will greatly benefit our missions. Viking Two bested our times in the earlier stages, and even when they couldn't continue that performance throughout the run, there are many small details that warrant more examination." She then smiles, before reaching out for her plastic cup, "I believe we should be grateful for their presence."

"Exactly that!" Hayase nods with much vigor, arms folded tightly, "I thought One was doing all the work during the mock battle, but it does seem I was clearly wrong. Two's reaction speed was nothing to scoff at, and frankly, I can only tip my hat in front of the results we've seen. If they really are a novice, then I praise their grit to reach that level of aptitude so fast."

"Yeah, all the sharp movements made me a bit dizzy at times," Haruka relents with a laugh, looking over her notes, "I honestly don't know how to describe most of the movements, it was like watching a very menacing pendulum swing back and forth over the battlefield."

"Yes, that's true." Haruko sighs as she nods, her eyes glued to her boots, "I thought we were all decent pilots by now but…"

"It took us so long to even reach level eight, let alone beat it…" Takahara punches a desk, shaking her head and walking away, a crushing grip choking her plastic up.

"And they took very little damage in most missions as well," Asakura points out, her neck resting fully against the sofa as she stared at the ceiling, mind as blank as its paint.

"W-Well… But, but! We can try to see if we can polish our moves with theirs, right?" Tsukiji suggests, tapping her fingers as her elbows

sank into her stomach. Her arms relaxed once the older ones nodded in approval.

A beeping echoed about, all of them stared at the screens in unison. Those with the controllers accepted the connection, the loading screen flashing for some seconds, Takahara returning to lean on Asakura's sofa, Haruka readying another blank page for the report, Haruko and Akane sharing one firm nod as they inhaled sharply, Hayase and Munakata staring firmly as a hint of a smile appeared, the rest simply drank some water, awaiting the connection. And once it did…

"… Huh?" Michiru opened her eyes wide, mouth gaping.

"What… kind of joke is this?" Hayase says, barely managing not to start laughing.

"Um, we did connect to the right option, right?" Tsukiji asks as her hands quiver, hastily looking at the other TVs to make sure she did not screw up. Her brows cross and lower as she sees the same sight replicated in all five screens.

"No, it's the same on all the TVs." Akane scratches her head, sharing the furrowed brows and a gaze of confusion with Tsukiji and Asakura.

Their eyes puzzled, confused, open as if they had hit an electro field while they looked at a machine that was not available in their roster of options. Painted mostly in black with a few underlines of white in the outer side, and green in the inner parts. All of its body was sharp, angular, weaponized. The two backwards antennas it had were also sharp and pointy, they resembled horns instead of bunny ears. The clear triangles on its head visor made it look as if it were frowning, while also having a wide smirk on its lower side. But above all, the paint job of the visor and part of its shape made it look like a skull. A smirking, frowning skull with two large horns folding backwards, with its eyes glowing in a deep emerald green.

The fingers were long, ending in sharp points as if they were a homage to vampires. The hands resembled claws more than anything. Its arms and legs were covered by modular plating with a rugged surface that seemed to be folded over and over, giving it a look similar to an old medieval armor. Two small knives protruding from its feet, ready to also slice anything with its kicks. But above all, it had two larger wing-like objects on its back, selling the diabolical motif well. And to top it all of, as if its macabre appearance wasn't enough, it had two large scythes extending from its forearms, as if it were constantly holding two blades in a reverse grip.

"… Skull Kaizer? Was there a unit like this available?" Akane asks, yet nobody answers. "Captain, may I reset my unit to check the available crafts on the sim?"

"Yes, you may," She immediately answered.

Yet, as Akane brought back the game to the starting screen and opened the selection mode again, she could not find the machine that was depicted in the other screens. So, understandably I believe, they all sobered up as they examined the image of the vampire-reaper-tiefling machine.

"So, is it some sort of evil counterpart to the Kaizer?" Hayase asks, grasping her chin. "So it has the blades backwards, huh… Those things look too long to actually be just blade armor."

"I agree," Munakata nods, firmly staring, "They do look more like actual blades attached to the machine. I'm more curious about the things on its back. Are those wing-things extra boosters?"

"They might be, for all we know." Michiru shrugs, only to look back at the screen as the preparation screen ended, establishing the connection.

Showing the usual preparation screen with the loadout of the unit before the starting stage, the name of choosing of the player was displayed up top along the machine of their choosing. Narrowing

their eyes, sharing some glances, blinking and rubbing their eyes, the conflict towards the skeletal and evil looking machine did not change. And as the Valkyries tried to make sense of what they were reading as the loading screen changed, Yashiro was again pulling on his arm.

"Takeru-san, you should use another unit," She says, pouting.

"Why? The Skull Kaizer is awesome, Kasumi," He answers, raising a brow. "I mean, look at it. It looks so sharp and slick, it has the chainsaw spinning wings and all, it's all painted in a simple but welcoming black. And don't forget about the scythes!"

"… It looks scary, I don't like it."

"But it has scythes for hands!"

"But it looks scary," She flaps her ears, still pouting. "Why do you have to use this one?"

"Well, first, because it's the only other thing I like in the roster, that can match the Take's speed and damage output. The Skull Kaizer is the best damage dealer in the entire series of playable characters, save for the OTH Railgun of the heavy mechs. Second, because I really liked the alternate take of the bad ending of the first game that was told through the campaign mode of the Skull Kaizer. And last…" He smirks, moving his brows as his voice slows down, "its special moves are awesome. The Sky Rend you can do while its Break Skill is active is one of the most epic things you can do in the game."

"… Why? You can already do lots of amazing acrobatics."

"Yeah, but the Skull Kaizer spins, Kasumi. It's a literal lightning vortex of destruction. Not only it makes it hard for others to lock onto it, but you can also shout 'Let it R.I.P.!" when you score a kill while spinning!" Puffing his chest as he nods, Takeru chuckles as he sets up his machine's loadout.

"Why would you want to shout that?" She asks, brows narrowing in growing confusion.

"For the references, Kasumi."

"Huh…" Mouth gaping, eyes unblinking, she, in fact, did not understand what he meant at all. "But, even with that," She edges closer as he quickly clicked the last arrangements away, "are you sure it's fine, to use a secret unit?"

"Yeah, it's no problem. And anyways, I'm going to end up cruising through this thing, so they're gonna have other stuff to worry about. Don't forget I won a championship, and cleared Maniax mode back home." He reminds, puffing his chest as he smirks, waiting for the loading screen to take him to the game.

"Is Maniax Mode that much harder?" She asks, her shoulders compacting upon her already small frame.

"Yeah. For example, in level ten the snow actually can make you stumble, and there's like double the amount of enemies. The players in the forums didn't nickname it 'Get Raped by the BETA' for no reason." Her bunny ears flap up, eyes wide as she stares in surprise, quivering like an actual bunny before it dashes off in hops. Only she sinks in worry, folding upon herself. He sighs, petting her head. "So don't worry, I'm just going to show the Captain how far above the ceiling of my baby is." Nodding with a huge smirk, Takeru pressed the confirmation button, starting the game.

As the campaign mode started, the Valkyries again opened their eyes wide for a second, sharing gazes as the images did not align with their expectations.

"What's this level? Cathedral of Shadows?" Hayase squinted her eyes, arms folding. "And the opponent is… Two Strugglers? What's going on here?"

"Maybe they chose a different mode?" Asakura suggests, receiving more puzzled stares and groans.

"First an unknown machine, now different maps…" Michiru shakes her head, choosing to replenish her composure as she drinks water.

The stage is loaded, an expansive underground facility with cables strung on the ground. Multiple pillars, obelisks decorate the main hold of the place. Some sort of cylinders with marine green liquid, resembling the one found near the scientist's office but much, much larger, are in the center of the map. And in the starting position of the player, one of said cylinders was broken, wires swinging like an earthworm cut in half, sparks flying about as the liquid substance drenched the floor.

Unlike the usual opening scene of the runs the Valkyries were used to, where two sides would suddenly start fighting in the open sea of the carrier, now the Skull Kaizer walked slowly through the large space colored in ebon dark and marine green. Quickly, the camera shifts, revealing two Strugglers painted in light blue, UN blue to the women's eyes, and without hesitation decide to engage the Kaizer as the usual starting screen appears with its countdown.

"Okay, this is more somber than the other missions, alright." Munakata comments, low, slowly crossing her legs.

And as the piano started to slowly play, as a guitar's riff began to pick up speed, as the adversaries started to grow closer, as the sound of heartbeats started echoing along the BGM in the soldier's room, and as the Valkyries wondered why the machine was not moving…

He chuckles, "… This is my life, a survival that knows no end."

With a precise combo, the Skull Kaizer did a few zigzags around the obelisks and pillars, dodging fire without receiving a mere scratch. Confirming the lock, the Kaizer dashed forward, spinning as it flew NOE, tearing everything apart in its stride.

The obelisks cracked and began to fall, some of the cylinders were crushed. The small lights of green in the floor broken as if a thunderbolt had fallen right on them. And the smoke, the smoke and fire keeps on raising from the exploding remains of the two AI-controlled Strugglers, both defeated by the spinning combination in the blink of an eye, pierced by a cannon ball and torn apart into a pixelated mess.

"… Huh? Did… Did they just win with one move?" Michiru asks, receiving the fanfare with the golden letter of 'Perfect' playing as an answer.

Only this time, the fanfare is slower, more subdued, reminiscent of a classical chorus that would play in a church. Only with hints of metal behind as the riff continued, with the Skull Kaizer taking on its victory pose, spreading its wings and shrieking wildly.

"Takeru-san, what did you say?" She tilts her head, he smiles.

"Oh, I'm singing the intro song of the Kaizer. In the last stage, instead of one of the default BGMs you get to hear a unique song as you fight the last boss." He says, waving a finger, nodding much, "And, guess what? The song is made by no one other than JellyProjection!"

"… And who is that?" She flaps her ears, upset that he teases the question despite knowing she doesn't know.

Yet, his all too shining smile melts her pout, "The band that makes the most badass and awesome mecha anime openings, Kasumi! I think Valgern-On's devs had to lease their houses just to get them to make some songs for the game. There was even an anime coming out in a few months back home." *And I'll never get to see it… Fuck you, causality. Just fuck you.*

"But why are you singing?"

"What do you mean, why? It's fun, singing along the openings. And the Skull Kaizer deserves the fanfare," He states with repeated, solemn nods. She narrows her eyes, not understanding.

The following stage loaded, the interior of a military facility of some sort. Lifts and supply crates in abundant quantities, the stage had both an inner hangar and an overhead platform to fight in. Again, the Valkyries were left in offside at the unknown stage as the enemies were displayed. Three Kaizers and two Colossus.

"Just the second level and five enemies already?" Touko comments, arms folding.

"And the Colossus start at the top of the level already." Asakura points out, arms compacting onto her sides, "How are they going to dodge the napalms?"

According to their expectations, the machines immediately started blasting the missiles upon the dark knight as the Kaizers sent suppression fire at it, limiting its escape routes, trying to drive it towards a corner of the map. The young Yashiro held her dress tightly, lips regressing into her mouth as she wondered how could Takeru clear the level. Equally expectant were the Valkyries, who already were thinking on his defeat.

*Yet, they clearly underestimate the dexterity of the soldier.*

Bursting into a sudden jump, the Skull Kaizer flies towards the platform up above. He chuckles, swaying his head as if lightly headbanging to the tune. Reaching the high area is impossible without using the lifts, yet that was not necessary for him. Under the platform, the missiles of the Colossus were unable to reach him since they couldn't lock onto his machine. And since he was already flying up… he didn't need to aim elsewhere.

"… A script that has only anxiety and dread in stock." He slowly starts, only a whisper.

Both wings start to spin, a shower of bolts flying off them as if fireworks they were. Quickly flickering the trigger, the shuriken-chainsaw wings are released, tearing the platform as if it were a paper put atop a candle. The Colossus duo falls prey to the attack, one losing an arm, the other a leg. Inevitably, both machines also are pulled down to the ground as the platform crumbles after the damage. Diving head first and firing off their guns erratically, they end up crashing and losing quite some health due to the fall damage. And as they fumbled about, trying to stand, a shadow was cast over them. A dark twister enveloped the surrounding area, a blurry gale of sharp metal which sent both units recoiling back, blasted away against the supply crates which end up flying about like the winning ball of a baseball game.

"What… How did he finish off both of them, with *melee* weaponry?" Munakata gapes at the pincushion both machines had become, as if they had given a hug to a bunch of Grapplers.

Short of stopping, the machine started doing zigzags over and over, looming, gliding like a bat for a moment, charging for the enemy's neck at the other. Barely using his guns to force the Kaizers to halt their own fire, the twister of blades approached. Caught in the stride, lifted off the ground, only the fire of the forced death animation remains after the fact.

"… I wonder, where is our burnt and wounded present heading to?" Smiling, his voice raises as he starts headbanging softly.

Bunny ears pointing to the sky, mouths remaining open, eyes unmoving from the erratic and dazzling camera that followed the dark knight. Stage three, the Valley Waterways, only the water is colored in neon green, there is no wildlife around, the ground instead of a healthy coffee is a gray in the darker side of the spectrum, and the sky was already setting. In the distance, the glow of the machines looked more ominous, filling the top of the canyon, awaiting the dark knight's approach.

"Three Strugglers, Two Ravagers, Two Colossus… What is this even?" Akane said under her breath, taking another sip from her water, holding it in her mouth as the camera flashed and an explosion rang out, *"They already scored a kill?! But… the map barely started!"*

Mechanical limbs fly about, head visors are sunk in. The acidic water melts the sinking remains, merely flying over it damages the units. But the heartbeats keep echoing right behind the BGM, the tornado remains dodging all fire, its spinning and long dashes forcing the enemy to spray and pray, wait for the napalms. Sadly, the soldier already had a solution for that.

"In the end, will everything sink within the rising fear and paranoia?" He keeps singing, now moving his knees along the tune.

Like a tumbleweed rolling under a sandstorm, crouch cancel after dash cancel. Spinning and spinning, altering its speed, its trajectory. Sliding, skiing over the toxic water, the shadow falls upon the Ravagers, using its own guns to shoot down the incoming homings, to sail the enemies' stride to the center of the lake. If he is close enough to the enemies, the napalms won't be fired after all. Quite an unrealistic and honorable choice of behavior, I'm sure you'd agree.

The shuriken wings intercept the ones which thought to take the reign he had over the skies, those who were foolish enough to try and pierce the veil found the end of the scythes buried deep into their frames. Loading a railgun of its own, the camera shakes as it erupts into a full boost, taking aim at the Colossus. In one burst of light, the last remaining enemies were cleared. And without exception, the Valkyries were simply staring in amazement while he and the bunny shared a smile.

"It is now time for action and not words," Slightly moving his chin, as if he actually had a mic nearby, the soldier quickly pressed the buttons to continue on, "for a small glimmer of hope of shining through."

The next stage, the airport level. Armed to the teeth with five Strugglers, a few turrets, and three Raioh units. Michiru thought this level would serve as a deterrent, yet found herself gasping as the vampire blasted the accel, approaching the horde. And her grasp on her cup slip, falling down, forcing her to bend over to avoid the water to be spilled.

"To inherit the fire of the fallen star…" He grins, pressing his fingers onto the analogs, only a few well timed inputs on his end.

When she looked up, half of the enemies were left on the ground, or whatever was left of them, as the camera kept tilting, changing orientation, flickering along his dashes. The purple tint of its shots blurred as Takeru moved faster and faster, dancing along the Takemikazuchi clones, their longswords having a double date with his scythes. Spinning for a moment, shifting the machine's weight as he stood on his heels, the Skull Kaiser sent a kick to the aggressors. Throwing them off balance with the knives in his feet, the reverse grip stance ensured the sharp end of his scythes had an intimate encounter with the cockpit of his enemies. And again, a perfect victory.

"… that burns within the shadows." Making a quick pose with his joystick, he shares another highfive with Yashiro, despite her complains about the scary song which he answers with a chuckle.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Hayase spat out, forever distorting the shape of her poor, frail plastic up. "What kind of…"

"Come on, now." Munakata tried to laugh it off, shrugging and sighing her own surprise and shock away. "We did face against similar enemies in the later levels of our runs, right?" She gives a small smile, patting Hayase's shoulder. Her face tightened when she realized the 2IC was shaking.

"Mitsuki, what's wrong?" Haruka asks as she stops taking notes, her hand frozen in midair.

"… They were holding back." She says, smiling and frowning at the same time. "This, I dunno, this motherfucker was holding back this morning!"

Quite the fair shock, you'd understand, they were feeling at the results. And yet, as the next level popped up, as the name 'Fallen Frontier' appeared on screen, they all stood in attention, unblinking fixation on the TVs despite the strain of their eyes like little kids trying to stay awake past eight pm to watch their favorite shows.

And as Yashiro huddled into herself, trying to pay utmost detail to his performance in the next mission, she couldn't help but to stare, to leave her mouth open. As a yellow tint enveloped Takeru, who now smiled honestly as he had done in his first days in this world. Images of him playing in an odd location filled with what seemed like TSF sims to her, of two of his squadmates and Sumika, of another moment with him and the flattest one sharing food as they talked excitedly, and other, more blurry, images of him taking the mean and insistent squadmate to the same place filled with simulators, entering into the sim with her to spar against Sumika and one of his friends. Yashiro couldn't help but to also smile, feel her fingers move on their own to mimic his button presses, as she stares away from him and back to the screen, back to the valiant shadow which braved the white snowy desert against the BETA horde.

"When you release the anxiety that's welling up within your cries-" Closing his eyes for a moment, his training with Maya, his talks with his world's Yuuko, his talks by the tree with the memento he shared with his squadmates of another world came up.

So, he pushes the analog forward. And as wide as the eyes of the Valkyries is his smirk as his Skull Kaizer thrusts his arms back, raising the scythes, pouncing upon the BETA in a reversal of roles.

And smirking much, eyes blazing, his voice surges from his stomach as his grip on the joystick tightens. "-then it is when you'll be ready, to reclaim our blue ski-i-ieeees!"

"Takeru-san, don't raise your voice. Your shouting out of tu-"

Mincemeat, the virtual BETA had become. A mirage, was the specter that preyed upon them. And within the blizzard, the hazy figure of the Skull Kaizer flew about, piercing the snow and flesh alike. And the only thing that contested the repeated jet engine noises coming from the chained boosts and backflips was the completely out of tune voice of the soldier, who simply forgot he was training and chose to recall older days. When he had people he could actually count on by his side.

"Turn into an accursed fiend so that you can brave-" Torn limbs form a carpet, inviting the Destroyers. A sharp jump, a quick cancel, only a few button presses, and the charging dive combo was executed without a wasted second, impaling three of the aliens in one shot of its frame perfect performance, "-the ruinous day that lays ahead!"

The shurikens watched his back, all the weaponized armor became a grinder for the Tanks who were touch starved. And he was more than willing to quell their need for affection, closing his scythes over all of them in quite the tight embrace. Tight enough to deplete all air in them, I dare say. His rifle's purple barrages halted the Destroyers that tried to cut in line, yet he was kind enough to forgive them. The soldier still found it in himself to give them a soft pat in the back, a gentle hug of his scythes.

There were still thirty seconds remaining when he had felled the last enemy of the rush. And thus, he cleared the level by elimination as opposed to survival. Not that it had any effect in the sequence of events, the game was not programmed for two outcomes, yet I suppose you can already imagine the ruckus that was ongoing in the Valkyries' room. More did it increase when the next map appeared, a map they hadn't yet seen. A highway, that still had some greenery around, surrounded by a few hills and mountains, as the BETA numbers deployed were larger than before, with the silhouette of the Fort-class in the roster of enemies. Now, the snow no longer worked as a hazard, yes, but still, one could get surrounded easily by quite the number of aliens.

*Yet, little does he care. It isn't anything he hasn't done before, as you'd understand.*

So relaxed he is, that he keeps on singing out of tune, headbanging to the BGM, "Even if the path you attempt to waaalk-" And as he did when supporting the XG, he dashed about in between the aliens, giving his machine small scars similar to those he has in his back, "-leads only to your downfaaall!"

And the levels were cleared, and the vortex kept swallowing aliens and virtual machines. Unseen, unheard, unnamed, undefeated, only a single unit remained standing with the fire of war as its cloak. Holes plunged into their formations, their bodies and weapons, the cannon ball kept rebounding off and off, diving from the skies to meet the aggro of the tide of enemies.

All the while, he remains smiling as he headbangs, "Because an accursed fiend never ceases to retaliate," Suffering damage for the first time, the vibration of the controller only enlarges his smile, reminding him of his games in the arcade. One of his eyes waters, his voice hoarse as he keeps on singing, a needle in his heart as the once pleasant memories turn sorrowful, "even as it descends to hell aaall by its lonesome!"

While the Valkyries were all silenced, petrified as they watched, while young Yashiro slowly moved her head sideways to meet the tune, even if she was pouting at the words, he grimaced as the next map came up. The Mirraoph Canyon, the map where he had started remembering. A round of ice cream he could not enjoy, a friend he could not protect. Veiling the angst that he had felt for the better part of the day, inhaling sharply, he decided to redo that match. In honor of that friend, his cannon shots became all the more accurate, all the more deadly as they started taking larger chunks of BETA. He bids his time, his fuel, knowing how to quickly end this map.

And dashing under the Forts, he rose in rebellion, ready to rend their flesh apart, to release the acid and melt with it all the BETA he had lured under the Fort. As well as murder all the reinforcements that

laid hidden within the Fort as the acid also spills to other inner organs, effectively shortening the map by quite some time.

"Anybody never can stop me! Release the power that lurks in within!" Both scythes slice the Fort apart, as easily as if he were merely preparing some chicken to roast.

An equal scorching comes as the acid falls, as the Fort falls, and as large as the dust cloud are the eyes and mouth of the Valkyries and Yashiro. Yet, as I'm sure you know, there were more Forts still around. And it is quite fair to affirm, the soldier wasn't feeling particularly merciful at the moment, no.

"Destruye todo lo que soy hoy; Déjame renacer en quien debo ser!"

Pressing both R3 triggers, a dark aura surrounds the Skull Kaizer. Its shoulders move up, releasing fire breaths as the small unit overloads for a second. Activating the Break Skill, Pain's Gainer, causes the Skull Kaizer to be impervious to any damage or knockback for thirteen seconds. All of its damage is exponentially increased as well. There is, however, a catch. One those thirteen seconds pass, the machine will die. And with every second, the heartbeats will beat faster and faster, louder and louder, drowning the BGM and other sound effects as the screens goes black and white, hazy and narrow. As if… the pilot within was perishing along the machine, one could say.

Yet, little did that do against him. The blood-soaked specter, tormenting the waves of alien soldiers that can only march forward. The vortex of blades, leaving only a crimson visage in his wake. And the minute detail of the movements, exploiting every jump, every cancel, dodging all attacks despite the invincibility. As he had done during that mission in Sadogashima, drawing arcs above the skies, running circles around the Forts before slicing them apart to use their acids against their fellow aliens. A rhythm, a dance, a pace like that of an orchestra of veterans who played by ear after years of tours together. That is how his movements look, to me at least, despite the fact that he is still merely playing around, even if the vicegrip on his

joystick does tell me he is doing some manner of catharsis by proxy as he did when regaining his memories.

"For you're the only one who can illuminate…"

Soaring high, silently sinking into a slicing stance with both scythes seeking slaughter.

"… this enthralling darkness…"

And in the middle of the twister, in the eye of the storm, the meteor rain that were his cannon shots fell upon the virtual enemy before the hurricane he had become ravished whoever had survived, as he had done in a time he did not recall, when alone he was during Iceberg.

So, it is understandable, I believe, that upon that hazy memory resurfacing… he'd choose to mix it, to dull his grief with his emotion, with days of happiness as he screams the finisher when his Skull Kaizer dives in for the kill, right before the thirteen seconds expire.

**"KA-I-ZEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEER!"**

# One Last Night in Peace (I)

*Chapter 65:*

**One Last Night in Peace (I)**

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*December 2nd, some minutes after 8 PM.*

*(Yokohama Base, B3F. Hallway, Office section.)*

**[Takeru]**

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Making an effort to bite and chew on the rough dough of synth food, I keep walking towards my objective. It is at times like this that I'd like the food packs to come with something liquid. Look, I like peanut butter as much as anyone else, but my mouth is not made to deal with cement. At least the one back home was a bit more soft, this one is straight up trying to fuse my tongue into my palate.

Gulping part of the mixture, popping a small piece of… something that resembles a cookie to help me deal with the peanut cement, I keep slowly walking on the hallways. A few odd gazes follow me, some whispering behind my back, sometimes about the fight in the sims of a few days back, others about shit and rumors. So, I pick up my pace into a stroll.

Reaching a locked door, saluting the MP standing guard and notifying my business, he takes a moment to speak on this comms. After a while, he nods back at me as he swipes his ID card on the reader. Saluting each other once again, I walk past the sliding door as I clamp my cheeks together, scraping what remained attached to the back of my teeth to clean my mouth in its entirety.

"Sigh… Guess I'll have to leave the rest of the 'dinner' for after I finish this duty." Seriously Sensei, what is it with the random

assignments? So much for chill and rest in my office.

Arriving at a familiar room, the sign by the door frame stood clean and shiny in all its pristine glory, reflecting the illumination that comes from above, pridefully showing off the emblem with the valkyrie holding two swords. Inhaling slowly for a moment, feeling the synthetic smell of… Sniff… Yeah, that's the same old pine perfume she always used. Rolling up my shoulders, letting the air go, I finally straighten myself up and knock on the door.

"Come on in," She orders from inside, so I quickly do as told.

Closing the door behind me then standing in attention, I give a salute as customary, "Good evening, ma'am."

"At ease, cadet. Welcome, please do take a seat. First, I believe we have not been properly introduced yet?" Resting the papers she was working atop the desk while she places a pen above one ear, she nods my way as she entwines her fingers, "I am Cpt Michiru Isumi, of the squadron called Valkyrie. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise, ma'am." Giving her a bow, remaining in position for a second, I rise back up to meet her eyes, "I am Cadet Takeru Shirogane, from the training squadron 207B. Though, I suppose you already knew that, since you came to see our first sim run."

She nods again, giving a small smile, "Yes, indeed. I must thank you for that day, however." She then chuckles, the smile turning into a smirk.

"Huh? Why?"

"As it were, you bested Hayase's record on your first simulation run, did you not?"

"Ah, yes. I think they told me something like that. But, why are you thanking me?"

Slowly grabbing the papers to straighten them, before procuring a transparent foil to place them in, the smirk does not wane, "You see, we have kind of a tradition in my squadron. We bet about when our records will be bested, and thanks to your performance I have been enjoying a few relative days of peace."

"May I ask why? What did 1st Lt Hayase bet, to not drink any alcohol for a month?"

Her hands twitch, the papers left halfway in their descent into the foil as she blinks for a moment. "Yes, that's precisely what she did. How did you know?"

"Eh, I'm kinda good at guessing random stuff." Also, I can totally see Hayase doing that. I wonder if the same happened last loop. Maybe that's why she was so wasted that night, since she couldn't drink anything for so long. Would also give a new light on why she wanted to fight me so much when I joined the STF, as her 'revenge' for me taking her drinks away. "In any case, the XO told me you required my aid for something. What may I help you with, Captain?"

Finishing to place the papers away, standing up to leave them on a shelf, she sits down slowly while folding her arms, a sober and serious expression in her face, "Well, I am sure you must have quite many questions about why you were brought to this side of the base. I am thankful for you aid, even if you're here under the effect of your… punishment," She then gives me a small nod, which I return with a wry smile and a shrug. "So, do you remember how I told you my squadron has a tradition, to make bets on when our best records will be bested?"

"Yes, what of it?"

Cpt Isumi then leans back on her chair, sighing super hard. As if she were cutting a container full of onions, she squint her eyes as she groans. Wow, didn't think I'd ever see her this distressed outside of battle. What the hell caused her to… Oh, fuck. It was me, wasn't it?

"As it were, all of our records in a certain training course were absolutely crushed today," She says, some embers lurking in her words. Resting her elbows on the desk, edging closer to it, she looks straight into my eyes, unblinking, "I believe you were the… ahem, creator of the two smaller simulators?"

"… Yes, I was. However, due to certain circumstances, I am no longer legally allowed to speak of them in that fashion."

"I see. However, I suppose you could aid me in reviewing our approach? Frankly, I'd have liked to have this conversation with you at an earlier date, but the XO did not seem to find you with free time sooner."

"Well, things have been rather hectic lately, yeah. But don't worry, I can lend you another set of eyes, if that's what you require. I am not allowed to claim ownership over the sims, but the XO did allow me to aid in their development until they're finished. So," Coughing, inhaling slowly to dispel the small shiver of jolts on my back at what I know I'm about to ask, "did you want to review your opinions on the sims, or would you like me to speak of the programs made for it?"

I know she takes much pride in her methods, and I did kind of get real angry at her during our talk at one point. Not only I cruised through Hard Mode, but our fights weren't even proper fights. I just did my usual, but no one of the five I faced could come close to besting me. It was such a one-sided battle that Kasumi started chopping me halfway through it as I sang the Kaizer's song, saying my aura was all spiky and scary. But that's the problem, the real one. I was playing around, and they were being serious. Of course, I have more experience with Valgern-On, but still.

She readies a few papers, grabbing the pen she had in her ear, twirling it for a second as she again locks her eyes onto mine, "First, you were the designer of this Valgern-On software?"

"Yeah, you could say that." Sorry, MofuMofu, Andoku. I swear I'm not stealing the rights, this is for the greater good. "I only made a light

alpha version of what you see in the WMTS. Most of the heavy lifting was done after my transfer to this base under the XO's commands."

"Sigh… Alright, then, do you know of a unit called 'Skull Kaizer'?"

So it was me what caused her to be this moody. I mean, for the Cpt to call Sensei to request help something big had to happen. "Yes, it's the secret unit of the ga… program."

"Secret? May I ask why is it a secret?"

"Eh… I just thought it would be nice idea, to leave a surprise for after you beat Hard Mode."

"I see," Quickly noting something down, her eyes again lock themselves onto me again, "And, why is its campaign mode so different to the standard? I find it odd that the majority of the enemies have the color scheme of the UN."

"Well, that's…"

No way in hell I can tell her of the prior games, or why the story is so different. Even if Sensei removed all the voice acting, the fact that some, or most, of the enemy units in the Skull Kaizer's route are painted in that same blue was bound to come off badly. In that story mode, the Earth Feds were going bonkers in trying to gain the most powerful tech available after the bad end of the first game. That's why, when the MC of the first game awakens the Skull Kaizer in the Cathedral of Shadows, everybody gets against him to try and gain the most powerful machine available. It is kind of sad, how the Furia System ends up consuming him by the end even if he wins that war against both the Earth Federation and the BETA invaders. The Skull Kaizer's skill, Pain's Gainer, is kind of foreshadowing for that, actually, as well as the name of its standard music theme in the game, Anti-Hero.

But, again, I can't explain Valgern-On's lore to the Cpt without either establishing links to 'a prior game' or risk making lies that would fall

apart sooner rather than later. So, I'm gonna take the easy way out.

"I was not told of it, ma'am. As it were, I only had a rough sketch of the Skull Kaizer and an outline of its scenario written down. The one who revamped that campaign in its entirety was the XO, so you should direct this question to her." Sorry, Sensei. I'll make sure to tell you soon, didn't think anyone would actually press inquiries about the Skull Kaizer of all things.

She sighs, nodding slowly, her curiosity forcefully satiated and sealed, "I see. However, was she also who devised the odd choice of weapons for that unit?"

"Well, no. I, uh, suggested to use non-conventional weapons to avoid any issues with other armies trying to claim we used their designs in the software. That's why some things look so eccentric, like the Raioh's Thunder Rifle, for example." Necessary bullshit is necessary.

"Hm, makes sense," She says, scribbling and scribbling, "Are there any other secrets in the software?"

"Yes, once you beat Hard Mode, you unlock both the Skull Kaizer and another higher difficulty setting, Maniax Mode."

"Another one?" Corking a brow, her pen froze in midair, "How does it compare to the previous mode?"

"There is no comparison, Maniax Mode is made to be the ultimate challenge," I say, nodding solemnly.

As if a cloud had covered the sun, her expression darkened as she looked down, taking a deep breath. Leaving the pen on the desk, it rolls a bit until it stops while she rests a hand on her forehead, rubbing it slowly.

"Is something the matter, ma'am?"

"Eh? Ah, no, it's nothing," She immediately straightens up, poker face back in place.

"Is… the software not to your liking, maybe?"

"No, that's not it at all, cadet. It's just…" Blinking fast for a second, she then remains staring. Just looking at me, saying nothing. "By the by, have you ever taken on this training course, cadet? Since you're the original creator. And don't worry, not a word leaves this office." She ends with a smile.

And I know she says the truth, being the leader of the STF she wouldn't go around spreading rumors. Sighing, I give a nod, "Yes, during the early stages. I was alone back then, testing this software. Since I'm not yet commissioned, the XO has kept this as a secret. Uh, she did tell me I could talk openly with you, but please do keep this as a secret, ma'am." I then give her a small bow, which makes her chuckle, quickly gesturing me to rise again.

"I know, I wasn't planning on doing that. It would be a shame for such a… talented novice to suffer further setbacks." Why is she smiling so much? Again twirling her pen, she taps its tip on the edge of the papers, "So then, I suppose you have some sort of guideline to follow for each mission?"

Nodding with a smile, I then start telling her some tips for each mission of the campaign mode. Referring to Sensei when the missions become about the BETA, saying that I only crafted an outline for the challenge the map is supposed to give. And for the most part, she found my words worth something, giving me her own opinion on the specifics of the mission. However…

"I do not believe such line-piercing maneuvers to be the best solution," She states, expression tightening. "They bring more risks than anything else, and the chance of them failing is too high."

"I don't… particularly agree. Having more options on the table is never a bad thing, plus I kind of tested one of those maneuvers

during one of my trainings. While I ended up losing that bout, I believe the tactic to have some merit."

"And what happens when you fail in the field?" Narrowing her eyes, a small blaze in her voice as her lips starts to shrink.

"I know of its risks, but with proper time to train and perfect the move-"

Glaring my way, she taps the pencil against the desk, "Allow me to be open with you, cadet. Do you know how many 'hotshots' I've seen die because they think they've discovered some new maneuver that suddenly is the solution to our woes? Many. Too many," She then grimaces, sighing as she she shakes her head, throwing the pencil into a small cylinder. "Such aggressive patters have been dismissed for a reason, cadet. If they were so effective, they would have been adopted after these many decades of war."

"I dunno, maybe the technology wasn't quite there yet to facilitate such a strategy."

Holding my gaze in silence, her face slowly tightens, lines marking on her nose and forehead, as a hand grasps her chin, "Then, let's say these tactics are adopted. What exactly do they bestow the military that other tested methods do not? Those who execute the move are now surrounded behind enemy lines, perhaps low on both fuel and ammunition. And even if the enemy lines are scattered…" She suddenly stops, coughing for a moment, "The battle against the BETA is nothing like what trainings you've had until now. You'd do well in dropping this kind of moves, they'll only worsen your performance," She affirms, solid and resolute. Dismissing my words, not even giving them a second in her ears.

*As dry as the pages of the books she so tightly holds onto, as narrow as her view when reading them over and over again. How idiotic, to limit herself only to what others accomplished in the past. I don't even know what I expected of…* No, don't take it personally. She must be simply worried about the possible repercussions of the

move failing, that's all. I can't get upset at this, but maybe I can try to change her view a bit.

Getting a bit closer to the desk, I look at her as I fold my arms, "Of course, I don't know how the BETA fight just yet but, is it really that hard to ask you to try those moves in good faith at least once, ma'am?" Yet, despite my small nod, she grimaces, real hard, as one of her hands shakes. "Captain?"

"… Those kind of moves only increase the inherent risk that comes with a mission. Vastly, compared to other approaches."

"However, if they're properly executed-"

"How many missions do you think have failed because of one selfish maneuver?"

"Eh?"

"How many missions, how many lives were lost due to an 'ace pilot' deciding they knew more than their superiors and instructors?"

"I… don't know, I suppose many. Yet, I'm not saying these methods are better than yours, ma'am." Giving a small bow, biting my lips as I wait to rise back, I then face her cold gaze head on. "However, not testing alternate moves does seem a bit extreme to me. How are we supposed to improve our tactics if we only repeat the same approach over and over again?"

Twirling the pen as she squints her eyes again, she shakes her head, "The planning of a mission requires a surefire way to ascertain victory with the least amount of casualties. My experiences have taught me that relying on these 'miracle maker' maneuvers only serves to make everything worse. It's a gamble, trusting in an ace pilot, placing all your chips onto their shoulders, into their maneuver being successful. And if they fail, which they do most of the time, the rest of the mission pays for it." Looking down, not even frowning or anything, her shoulders, her arms, her everything sinks as if she

were made out of gold, as if she were in open sea. "Following a polished plan yields better gains, without any of the risks that come with these reckless methods. Perhaps they would benefit other kind of army, but I do not believe our approaches require any modifications."

*As rigid as an obelisk, unchanging as stagnant water. Outdated, obsolete… What good are these 'trusted methods' if all they do is lead us to a stalemate? You're just shielding your inability to make better judgments in the spur of…* No, don't snap. I do think she's taking this too personally, though. Maybe, because my moves aren't that easy to replicate. Because failing to do them against the BETA loses you a squadmate and a TSF while forcing you to retreat and redo your plan. Trusting in these methods, to push forward and be more aggressive, comes with the risk of the front liners failing and being forced to retreat when you're ready to attack. That's why she chose to employ a stationary defense tactic during Sadogashima near those cliffs, despite allowing me to rush into the BETA lines to clear them a path towards the lasers. You did trust in me to hold out on my own, so why are you being so hardheaded now, Captain? Wait… don't tell me…

"Uh, ma'am? Does this rejection towards these maneuvers stem from how you said your records had been bested today?" She flinched, so that's what this is about.

"No, it's nothing like that," She denies it, far too quickly. "I'm merely stating my opinion, as I believe it might be helpful to your growth."

"I see. So, if I may, how were your records bested? I assume a Skull Kaizer was used in Valgern-On by your opponent?"

Slowly, she squints her eyes. Leaning back on her seat, again spinning the pen, she nods, "Frankly, it was a surprise. I don't know how you and the XO crafted this software, but it is… hard to stop training with it. It feels rewarding, learning to control the machines better. It's," Playing with her hair, she looks away as she purses her lips, "entertaining, almost."

Is she embarrassed? How slowly she scratches her head, the slight twist of her lips, even the puffing of her cheeks… Looks cute.

"Well, that is why I warned the XO that you could get sucked into the experience. But, it sounds as if you had been making good use of the sims."

She nods, sighing, "I thought we were. We had other duties on our shoulders, but we did use the small sims regularly. We are impressed by your inventions, truth be told," Smiling, she nods again. Then, her brows narrow as she spins her pen, "But then, today we were bested soundly. All of our records that we polished, all paling in comparison."

"Hmm, I see. Oh, considering your traditions, I can see why a random showing up would make you this upset." I already knew it could be taken badly, but if they have this thing going on it's obvious they'd be super pissed.

"Siiigh…" Hm? Again hunching over as if deflated, Cpt Isumi simply shook her head as she smiled wryly, "Well, that's how it is sometimes."

"Did… something happen during this training, ma'am?"

"Well, I had made a… bet, let's call it, with the pilot who bested our records. And," Frowning a bit, lips plucking, she starts tapping the tip of her pen onto the desk, "I was soundly defeated. Not only in the actual training, but also in this bet. I had thought to possess the advantage, yet to be defeated by such approaches…"

"Huh, so you *do* have problem with the Skull Kaizer's way of moving."

One of her brows twitches, "Perhaps I do, yes. Yet, I thought I was…" Shaking her head, she sighs again, "Never mind."

"Is it something classified, ma'am?"

"Yes. I… am merely intimidated by that pilot, is all. You can say my ill reception of these unorthodox movements is in part caused by my… utter defeat at their hands. At least it bought me another week of peace," She then smiles, starting to note something in her paper.

"What do you mean, another week?"

"Oh, remember how you breaking her record deprived Hayase of a month of alcohol?" She smiles, I nod as I furrow my brows, "Well, she made a similar declaration during this training. That if our rival bested Hard Mode in its entirety she would swallow a sock."

"R-Really?"

"Haha, yes, she did. However, of course we couldn't have her actually eat a sock, much less to follow Munakata's suggestion," She says as a small blush appears on her face for a second. What the hell did Munakata- No, I don't wanna know. "So, I had Hayase lose another week of alcohol instead."

… I think Hayase is gonna kill me.

"In any case, I was completely defeated today." Inhaling sharply, resting her pen on the desk, gripping it hard, she looked my way again, "And while your words are valid, I would like to first make sure this defeat happened because of my own overconfidence and not because of my tactics lower performance compared to that pilot's methods. So, with that in mind," Coughing, she looks straight at me, "do you have any suggestions for the trainings?"

"First, could you tell me how are you tackling the training? Have you been using only the campaign, or did you tackle the other modes?"

"Other modes? There are other challenges in that software?" Leaning a bit forward, one brow of hers sink as her eyes light up.

"Yeah, there's the time attack missions. Basically, you can tackle any of the scenarios you unlocked and see how fast you can clear them.

It's in the option called 'Extras', haven't you checked that out?"

"No, we only delved into the options to silence the added music, since it was distracting."

"Huh?"

"Hm? What is it?"

"Ma'am, forgive me if I heard wrong but, did you just say you disabled the 'added music'? Are you playing with the game muted?"

"Oh no, the explosions and other sounds are still active. I ordered to disable the odd tunes that play in every mission, since it isn't exactly easy to concentrate on the fighting with those songs playing in the background." She says, smiling for a moment.

"… Captain, you have sinned."

"Huh?"

"How… How *dare* you to not listen the awesome music of the stages?! Of course you're not winning, how can you get pumped up to fight without listening to them beats?!"

"Wait a moment, I don't understand why are you getting so upset."

Narrowing my lips, resting an elbow on the armrest, I aim a finger at her face, "Look Cpt Isumi, the music is there for a reason. It sets a mood, it builds atmosphere." It's also dynamic so the track changes depending on whether you're winning or losing. "There is nothing more fulfilling than executing a combo right at the peak of the song."

"Combo? What's that supposed to be?" Corking an eyebrow, she asks while leaning even closer. Looking into her firm eyes, I can tell she isn't lying.

"Wait, what? You don't know? Didn't you go through Beginner Mode when using Valgern-On?"

Chuckling, she spins her pen as she shakes her head, "Why, of course not. We're all commissioned pilots already, so we decided to start in Hard Mode. I do not think it'd be worthwhile for my squadron, to linger in lackluster training courses, so I decided to have us tackle the best course available so that we learned through the hardships."

…

"Is something the matter, cadet?"

Unable to hold her gaze anymore, I just facepalm. "No wonder you're having trouble if you're not using the combos. Sigh…" Maybe I should have written a manual or something to ease them up on the game, since we can't use the official one due to the questions about where the hell it came from it would cause. Yeah, that's my B.

"Ahem… So, could you explain what these combos are?" She asks, arms folded as she brings her seat even closer to the desk, her eyes again fully focused on me.

"Yes, but it will take a while. Also, I'll try to explain other common moves you can do with the software that should help you and your squadron." I nod her way, she immediately tenses up as she readies her pen again.

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**One explanation later…**

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"You just have to lightly tap the down button, or push the analog in that direction. Then, you'll be able to do a 'tech', which lets you return faster to the ground," I slowly repeat.

She sighs, brows locked in their narrowing, "How is this any different than the cancels you spoke of before?"

"Cancels null the movement, they free up the machine from the pattern used right before. The teching instead focuses the

commands to more quickly return to the ground. It also lets you regain your footing faster if you were to be tumbled, since the commands you input remain in the buffer."

"I… see," Closing her eyes as she inhales, she ruffles her hair for a moment, "So, does this mean that we can execute combos from a cancel and a tech?"

"Kind of. You can deploy a combo from a cancel, yes. But a tech only hastens your recovery, either from a jump or a tumble. You add it to the commands being executed. Since those directives will still happen, you can't perform another combo unless you do a cancel. And if the tech is instead used when the usual cease of inputs would occur, the commands cannot be chained to since you're going to be dodging. What you can do instead is turn the tech into a combo."

"Huh? But, how would you go around doing that? If the machine is already dodging, or descending, there is a risk inherent to activating such an action at the wrong time. Not to mention, the terrain might be adverse to those types of moves."

"Simple. You just use the tech to move where you want to go, and also buffer an attack in the midst. By using the R2 and L2 buttons, you can adapt the maneuvers to your own style and then have the machine move where you want it to. The second analog also lets you control the jump units, if they are not active, so you can safely combo off an evasive maneuver without placing yourself at risk. What's more, you can make the combo into a fully defensive one, focused only on dodging."

"I see…" Her face tightens, and even if she quickly covers her paper with her arm I clearly saw what she just scribbled down. Well, no wonder she'll find it similar to the XM3. I just hope she doesn't link me to the Viking. "Now then, what kind of basic evasive maneuvers could be achieved in the software through this 'teching' you mentioned?" Again looking into my eyes, as if everything else had blurred, she waits.

Coughing, I fold my arms and think for a second, "If the proper mech is used, you can do some interesting stuff. For example, if you're locked onto melee weaponry, you can tech to perform a tuck and roll to then follow it up with a slash. Or at least, that's how it should go." I add, scratching my head and looking up, "The XO was the one who finished the software, to handle that the movements were similar to a real TSF. Now that I'm training I can see what she meant back then, but the rest is up to what she did personally." Sigh… Luckily, just dropping Sensei's name is enough to quell her questions.

Still, it explains why they didn't last that long against me. If they only use the basic attack combos and skills, no wonder they haven't cleared level ten yet.

"I suppose, most of these features are explained in Beginner Mode?"

"Yes. In Normal Mode, you have a prompt asking you if you'd like to review the tutorial. I thought anyone using the software would start there, I didn't think you'd jump straight into Hard Mode without any other practice."

She sighs, nodding and resting her pen, "Is that so. I suppose this is my miss. However, is the background music truly necessary?"

"I think it is, at least. But if it distracts you, you should simply proceed as you're most comfortable." This world is different, and they see this as training instead of a game. Imagine if they knew I was headbanging all the time while I was fighting with them.

"We shall keep training without it, then," She nods, placing the papers away. Your loss, ma'am.

A small knocking on the door, Cpt Isumi allows the visitor entry. The door gently parts open, Haruka-san steps into the room. Her eyes widen for a moment when she sees me as I salute her, but she quickly returns the gesture.

"Good evening, Captain, ma'am. I've brought you the report from the maintenance crew," She then takes a few steps forward, offering the folder she had on her person.

"Thanks, Suzumiya. Were there any issues in the hangar?"

"Eh? Ah, no, nothing major, ma'am." Replying too quickly, twirling her hair, it looks like she's nervous.

"Really? Don't mind the cadet, you can speak freely," She orders, poker face in place as she interlocks her fingers.

Haruka-san then gives me a brief glance, I smile and give her a court bow. She sighs, her shoulders sinking a bit, "You see, they were very insistent on how we should treat our craft more carefully. Especially Chief Kazama, she was truly upset at the damage the head visor received."

… Wait, Chief Kazama? Wasn't she one of the Valkyries last time? Yeah, she was with us in Niigata, after all she did try to save Eiko-san with me. Also, damage to a head visor… that's what I did to Hayase's Type-00C during this morning's mock battle, right? So I did end up damaging it… Shit.

"Well, pay it no mind," Cpt Isumi says with a nod, "after all she would have said the same to anyone else."

"I know, but still… It is a bit upsetting." She closes her eyes, kind of tightly, as she folds her arms, tugging at her dress. Huh, how strange. I never thought I'd see Haruka-san being upset.

"What is it, cadet?" Cpt Isumi calls out, leaning onto a hand as she smiles, "Why the long face?"

"Huh?"

"You looked a bit," She smirks, "distressed, as you heard the reports."

"Eh? Ah, well, you see," Scratching my head, I look away, "my Instructor tends to tell me I damage my machines much during sim practice. I was a bit worried, hearing how the mechanics seem to have a short temper, is all."

"Oh, don't worry, cadet Shirogane," Haruka-san smiles brightly as she nods my way, "Most of the mechanics in the base are actually pretty warm people. Our current crew is merely a bit, uh, peculiar," She says, almost stuttering. I bet she was about to spill how they were actually from the Guard, but recalled she can't speak of the matter.

"I see."

"Well, was there anything else you needed, Suzumiya?" Cpt Isumi asks.

"No, that was all. Should we wait for you at the PX?"

"No, you can start whenever you want. I'll be reviewing some papers for a while longer."

"Understood. Good night then, ma'am," She stands upright, giving a salute. Once she loosens up, she smiles my way, "And good night to you as well, cadet."

"Ah, yes. Good night, ma'am," Giving a quick salute, I nod her way. She giggles before giving her parting words and taking her leave.

"Sigh… Really, it's going to take a long time to review all this," Cpt Isumi slumps into her seat as soon as Haruka-san closed the door.

"Um, do you really have to tackle everything tonight, ma'am?"

Nodding as she straightens up, she then coughs, "Sadly, it's my duty to have the state of our machines reviewed for tomorrow. And not to mention, you gave me quite the amount of homework to tackle," She then chuckles a bit.

"I see," Yeah, when I was the squad's leader I also had to file all these papers. At least back then it was easier, since thanks to using my style our Gekishins ended up requiring lots of maintenance. Coughing, rolling my shoulders up, I look at her, "Did you need anything else from me, ma'am?"

"No, I didn't particularly- Hmm…" Blinking fast for sec, she then eyed me frontally, spinning her pen again, "Cadet, could you perhaps aid me in sorting your words on the software?"

"I suppose I could. What did you had in mind?"

"A simple explanation on the best way to make the most out of the software's properties. Also, which missions should we tackle if we want to see these tutorials you spoke of."

"Roger. That's simple enough."

Smiling my way, she hands me a few pages and a pen. And so, after I bring my seat closer to the desk, we start to write away in silence. Now then… the levels with the tutos for the combos and cancels, as well as the aerial moves, were in…

…

"… I didn't think you'd be so focused," She comments.

"Hm? Why?"

"Well, most cadets are not that used to filing reports. Also," She looks down, peeking at my papers, "your form is actually well polished. That is a surprise."

"Really? I mean, I think it shouldn't be like that. Especially in the Empire, where everybody likes to ask for written reports."

"Ahaha, that is true. However, there is a certain… finesse that comes with experience. It's simply surprising to see a cadet already spacing his words properly, or even doing an apt introductory paragraph."

Well, at this point it's kinda second nature to me. After college, and after getting drilled the proper way of writing by Meiya and Chizuru during my first loops, I just do this all the time now.

"I see," Not that I can explain that one. "You could say it's thanks to my squadmates, since they lent me their notes I've taken a page out of their styles to better my own."

"Is that so. That is indeed a wise thing to do," She nods, smiling as she goes back to writing. "By the way, might I ask how it feels?"

"Hm? What thing?"

"Being the only male in your squadron."

"Huh?"

She looks up, smiling, "Oh, I was wondering if… there was something going on between you and one of your squadmates."

"Wh- I, well, no… No, there's nothing between us." Unlike in the other worlds… when we actually grew closer… Sigh. Back to the page, I reread where I left off before keeping at it.

"Is that so? I assumed they'd at least have made a move on you by now."

"It ain't as if I were a particularly enticing target, what with my punishment and all."

"Hmm. Still, I've heard your training is going well. And that you… did what you did during the CCSE to shield your comrades. That has to matter for them, right?"

"I guess. But, really, there's nothing romantic going on, ma'am. Sorry to disappoint you," I smirk her way, shrugging.

She chuckles as she turns her page around, "That's disappointing. Do they not fit your type, maybe?"

Sigh… You and your talks of romance, ma'am. What did I just get myself into? I'm too hungry for this. "No, that's not it. I do think they're good looking, but my mind is… kind of elsewhere."

And, even if there were a possibility of us being together… Would it even be possible? Nah, no way in hell. Compared to the others from the my loops, to the ones from my world, they're so rough here. Sure, Tama and Mikoto are still as sweet as always, but they don't return my gaze fully. They also kept their fair distance from me before the CCSE. Is that much to ask, for them to simply be openly friendly with me after all that's happened? Kei and Chizuru seem willing to start over, even if their eyes aren't as shiny as the ones I've loved. And Meiya has been a rollercoaster thus far, sometimes she gets all cold and rejecting, other times she acts as serious as the one from my loops was, and very few times she acts as sweet and oblivious as my world's Meiya was. Honestly, I'd like her to settle in one mood if at all possible. My heart can't take so much flip flopping. And this is coming from the dense and indecisive guy, of all people.

Looking up for a second as I thought on how to word a phrase, I noticed Cpt Isumi had remained staring at me, tapping her bottom lip with the back of her pencil.

"Is something wrong, ma'am?"

"… You said you had your head elsewhere, correct?"

"Yes?" Why is she so serious all of a sudden?

"Does that mean you have, well, someone in your heart already?"

Inhaling slowly from my nose, feeling the air come down my throat, filling my lungs, I nod as I exhale, "You could say that, yes."

Back to writing, now my hand stalls the movement. Recalling the finger doing circles as she scolded me, the bitter pout when she got jealous of others, the tears she shed when we had to find a house for the kitties we nursed, the proud voice as she presented me with

some new recipe she found online, or her honest joy whenever we spent time alone at night, simply sharing the silence.

… I miss you, all of you. Even you, who always shrugged me off with a smile after your teases whenever I offered you your coffee.

"Ahem… Cadet, if you don't mind me asking, what kind of relation do you have with this special someone?"

"Which one?"

"… Excuse me?"

"Hm?" Looking back at her, she was gaping. Cpt Isumi was, literally, tilted. Still as a pillar or a statue, if not for her widening eyes and quivering lips. What's her deal? "What is it, ma'am?"

"That is my question, cadet. What do you mean by *which one* ?"

Huh? I'm just talking of how I used to love all of them, all in equal fashion, even if each relation was different. All of them are dear to me, of course. What's so weird about it? Why is she so- **Oh, fuuuuuuuuuu** -

"What an… odd reaction," She says, flinching back. "Um, cadet Shirogane, I do not want to assume anything but, were you, uh, in a polyamorous relationship?"

"W-W-W-WHAT!? No!" I wouldn't be able to live with myself in an open relationship. I'm too jealous for that kind of thing. That, and I think I have only eyes for one. Even if… the swirling feelings for all of them are a bit hard to handle, when I think about my beloved ones for too long.

She then eyes me sideways, "Then, what is this about 'which one'?"

"Well… Sigh. I just had many people I… loved, at different points in time. So, each of them was different, even if I loved them nonetheless."

"I see. Did you not manage to confess your feelings?"

"… Ma'am, what about the reports?"

"We can easily write them as we platicate," She says, going back to her paper despite being stealing glances at me. "So?"

"Sigh… I'm alone now for a reason, ma'am." Let's hope she shoves her questions with that answer, I'm already sad enough from just remembering a bit. Not to mention, I don't want to end up comparing my relations to his. I'm finally calm again after the recovery, I don't wanna ruin it.

"I see… So, if you know what attraction feels like, do you have your eyes on someone at the moment? Don't worry, I won't say anything."

"Why are you even asking? Sorry, I don't want more rumors going behind my back."

"Oh, no. I give you my word, I won't disclose anything," She nods, firmly, stopping her pencil to look into my eyes. I nod back, returning to my paper. "It's just… if your squadmates have not fit your palate, perhaps there is another someone you fancy? Is there someone tutoring you or aiding you in your trainings?"

"… No, not particularly. The people here… are not what I'd like as a partner, to be honest."

"Hm? Why do you say so?"

"After being in… love with them, I can say what I want now with certainty. And while I appreciate my squadmates, they're… they're not like them." My pencil stops, I sigh as I look back and lean back onto the chair. "There's these little things, these small details that… just aren't there. Not to mention, with all the rumors hanging over me, I don't think anyone would actually want anything with me, to be honest."

Shrugging, I go back to the report. Cpt Isumi does too, scribbling away faster than me. And for a moment, there was only silence, and the sound of a clock tickling the seconds away, and the pine fragrance of her perfume.

"… Aren't you letting your nostalgia blind you, cadet?" She blurts out outta nowhere.

"Huh? Blinded by nostalgia?" Looking back at her, Cpt Isumi's brows were almost coming together.

Resting her pen again to fold her arms while she sighed, she then again looks straight into my eyes, "Do you know how unfair that is? To be compared with someone else?"

"I'm not actually comparing anyone. You asked a question, I gave you my answer, is all."

"Then, let's assume one of your squadmates were to confess her feelings for you, what would you do?"

…

That's a good question.

I mean… If, and that's a big if, such a thing did happen, "I think I'll just answer honestly, let my heart find the answer. While I am, well, happy to be part of the squad again without anything in the way, it… It's hard for me to picture them as my lovers as they are now." They're too different. I know, they might open up in time, yes. But still, their mood and their actions are too different. I still want to protect them, to help them reach their peak, to lead them to a better life. But… I'd like them to open up a bit more, I'm sure that sweet side is in there, somewhere, hidden under all the rough skin they wear in this world.

"And don't you think that is extremely unfair for them?" She says, eyes narrow and blazing away.

"Why? I'm just being honest with myself."

"Do you know how diminishing, how demoralizing it would be to be constantly compared to your prior lovers? How do you think you would feel if your lover was constantly comparing you to her ex?"

"Eh? Ah… Like shit, to be honest."

"Exactly. I, well, don't have first hand experience, like yourself, but I have seen many fallouts, both before and after joining the military. And what little advice I can give you is this. Stop romanticizing the ideal image you have of your previous crushes. Don't expect other women to act as the ones you loved did, it's unfair to judge them against such an idealized vision. Not only for their sake, but for yours. If you're expecting something out of someone, something that isn't natural for that someone, you'll end up disappointed. And your relation will crumble apart, perhaps with your lover not even knowing the root of your displeasure."

…

"… Does it really look like that?"

She then holds my gaze, before nodding with a frown, "Yes, you do look charmed by whoever you were in love with. I, uh, never thought I'd see that glint, that small blush in a man's face, but damn it, you're truly in love with that special someone. Or is it, they?"

"W-Wait, blush?"

She then chuckles, "Did you not notice? Your face has been red since you started speaking of your crushes?"

Gah! Shit, this is so embarrassing! But, well, I guess it's obvious… even if I don't like how she's chuckling at my expense.

"You see, two of my squadmates also have this crush on one of a guy," She starts slow, probably talking about Hayase and Haruka-

san, "And when talking of him, both light up as you did. But, their… situation is very different." Closing her eyes, she then sighs, "One of them has this… idealized vision of him, which your words reminded me of. And frankly, it is odd to see a man of your age holding onto such affections."

"Huh? Why?"

"Well, males are in limited supply, if you haven't noticed. I'm not saying you have it easy, but I'm sure there are many that would take an interest in you. Yet, here you are, chained to the idealized vision of your crush."

"… With all due respect, ma'am, they were great people. Even if… I'm alone now, we got to know each other at another level. And that's why, there are things I see in my squadmates that just make me doubt on whether we'd work together."

"And that is fair," She nods, going back to her report, "But don't let your 'list of preferences' blind you, cadet. No person is ever the same, and I'm sure even your past crushes had bad traits that you might be forgetting about. Is it that hard for you to look and judge your squadmates for who they are, instead of for who you would like them to be?"

"… For who they are, huh." Picking up my pen, I also go back to writing. Yet, thinking back on all that happened in this world… If I judged them for how they've been thus far with me…

"You shouldn't push those expectations onto other women, otherwise you'll stay alone all your life. You also wouldn't like to always be made to measure up to some idealized ex, right?"

"Yeah, I wouldn't. I'll… give this some thought."

"Good to hear. So… Ahem, if I may ask, did you ever… get to confess your feelings?"

"No, not even once."

"Is that so…"

"What is it, ma'am? Do you also have love problems?" I smirk, she twitches.

Coughing, she rolls her shoulders as she stands up, grabbing a plastic cup from a nearby shelf. "Well, you could say that."

"A coworker, maybe?"

"Ha! Thankfully, no." Drinking some water, she slowly sits down. "But…" Looking my way, then closing her eyes and edging closer to the desk, she whispers, "Do you have any advice you'd like to share?"

"If I may, why ask me of all people?"

"It's easier talking with an unknown face. My squadmates seem to never endure a long talk of these matters. I'm just looking for a new point of view, considering you're not from here."

"Fair. Then, well, I guess the main point to tackle is the way in which they see you. Uh, I'm right to assume we're talking about a men, right?"

"Wh-" Coughing, a bit of water splashes about, "What makes you ask that?!"

"Just making sure." And covering up how I already know who we're talking about, and how 'the Viking' also knows of this.

Groaning as she cleans herself with a tissue, she nods, "Yes, we're talking about a man. And no, I'm not Bi either. I may have had… small deviations but I've only felt romantic feelings for this person."

"TMI, Captain."

"TMI? What does that stand for?"

"Too Much Information. I did not need to know you had… small deviations in your love life." I sigh, she flinches as she covers her face for a moment. "Anyways, there's a simple solution to your woes."

"Oh? And that is?" She leans forward, eyes shining as her hands close up and get closer to her chin.

"Simply go up to him and confess."

"Huh?"

"It's as simple as that. You arrange a nice atmosphere, maybe invite him to a dinner, or to visit some place you like. Somewhere where you can talk as you walk and stuff. If you can cook something for him, all the better. Then, while the feels are still fresh, BAM!" Punching the air as my eyes blazed, "You confess."

"There's no way I can do that! If I could muster the courage I wouldn't be asking you for advice!" She looks as angry as she was back at the cruiser while we were on our way to battle. Only she's blushing a bit.

"But you're gonna have to say it eventually, either as the starter or as the answer. What are you gonna do if he confesses to you? Leave him waiting in silence? We men have hearts too, even if you don't think so."

Just remembering how much I freaked out when Chizuru apologized as I confessed to her is enough to make me mad. I was literally about to cry. You muster the balls to say the words, to look into her eyes, and then… she says sorry. But at least Chizuru did answer, even if she was just nervous. It's better to be clear and frontal with this stuff. But staying silent, dragging out the answer as the other is literally dying of anxiety in wait? That, that right there is a crime against humanity.

"If… If he confesses, I would say yes," She says, coiling a strand of hair. "However, I do not know if, well, I have it in me." Sighing, she hunches over, "I've tried inviting him over to some restaurant in the Capital, I've taken the time to call and congratulate him for his promotions, and I always send him letters for his birthday, as he does for me. But… it's… as if he takes it for granted, maybe. Since we're childhood friends, maybe I'll never be anything else for him."

"… And what if he's scared?"

"Huh?"

"What if, I dunno, something tells him he's not good enough for you? What if everyone tells him that?"

"What?"

"He might be super insecure, for all you know. How many other women actually talk with him? How much does he appreciate you being there? How… afraid is he to ruin it all by trying to be something more than a friend?"

"I… well… I don't… I've tried to show him I'm serious. He hasn't-"

"What are the chances that he's like 'Oh, she's just being nice. I'm just an old friend, that's why she's so nice to me. She's pitying me.'?"

"Ah, well…" She looks down, her shoulder compress themselves upon her figure.

"When was the last time you actually tried to have an honest talk about how he's doing?"

"… Honestly, I don't remember. My missions… leave me little free time."

"Well, try and fix that. Write him a letter, try to get a schedule going. I can say it now, if something is gonna happen, just better to deal with it ASAP. If you want him as a lover but he doesn't, better to stop

pining for him and accept his answer. Or vice versa. But, when you're insecure, when you're alone, you just might be frozen by fear. And that's why you say nothing."

After all, that's what me and Sumika did in my world. Did I like her? Yeah. Would I have liked to date her? Yeah. Was I afraid outta my mind of what would happen if she said no? Fuck, yeah. Back then, the sole thought of everyone laughing at me for getting rejected, of losing her company, of not having her to fool around and make jokes with was mortifying. It's just gonna happen, I thought. If she likes me, then she'll make the first move. Guess I just wanted some reassurance or some shit. It wasn't even about being the one receiving the confession, I just… wanted to hear her say it, to rid me of all the ambiguity. To hear her say, 'I love you'.

Little did my idiot young self know, Sumika was exactly the same but worse. If I do so much from him, why isn't he asking me out? Is just using me, or is he scared? And then, as if our own insecurities weren't enough, a certain blue haired samurai decided to enter my life.

… Looking back, at that moment on the hill, at both decisions, I can see why I would choose either path. Either to fully accept that I was comfortable in my previous routine, wanting to truly return Sumika's affection, or to come to terms that for all she did, I couldn't bring myself to *love* Sumika, as opposed with the connection I felt with Meiya. It wasn't even about the promise anymore. I loved… No, I love that Meiya. Her obliviousness, her direct way of being, the way her eyes spark up whenever she sees something new, even her stubbornness about wanting to cook, despite all the kitchens that ended up exploding when we married.

"But it all comes back to a simple decision, to be honest with yourself. To be able to voice it, without assuming anything on the other end. If you're just letting time slip by, you might regret it one day. And if it's not meant to be, better to face the answer now. It's gonna suck, you may cry, and it may take forever to feel that tingly feeling again. But… life's a gamble, if you want love and affection

you've got to fight for it. So, first step, you should think on how *you* want to portray your feelings, Captain."

Hunching over, a hand rustling the opposite arm, she looks down, "However, I'm out of ideas. Masaki is just too dense to notice all I've done so far."

"Then, just be yourself."

"… Huh?"

"Yeah. Is there any hobbies you have? Invite him to spend some time with you, show him what you like, even if he already knows it. If you know he likes something, tag along with him, show him you're willing to share his joy even if you're not particularly interested in the topic. You have to make it clear to him that you enjoy being with him, and then you drop the confession."

"D-Do I truly have to be the one?"

"What, would you rather see him with someone else? Walking with their arms entwined, laughing under the daylight, feeding each other an ice cream cone, and then kissing as they hug." I ask, raising a brow and smirking. And she gets tilted, an entire bombardment flaring behind her eyes. Reminder to self: Do not upset the Captain, ever.

"… No, I would not like to see that, if at all possible."

"Then, you already had your answer, looks like."

"Siiigh… I suppose being more aggressive is all I can do now, huh."

"Come on, ma'am. Don't be so down, he might be into that for all you know."

"Into 'that'?"

"Yeah, he might like competent, assertive women. You know, the typical older and confident kind."

And again, she gets tilted for some reason. Oh right, she was competing against her sisters for the guy's affections, right? Huh… Yeah, Cpt Isumi does have an older sister, now that I think about it. If this Masaki likes them older and confident, the Captain might be screwed.

"Well, but you won't know until you try. So, best of luck in whatever you decide to do, Cpt."

"Sigh, thank you, truly. Still, I don't know what I'll do, or if I can bring myself to be this assertive. By the by, what about you?"

"Hm? Me?"

"Yes. You never managed to confess, yet seem very… knowledgeable on the matter. From where does this confidence comes from, cadet?" She says as she stares, smirking as she resumes her writing after the tilting.

"Well, it's just, like, my opinion after what I've gone through, is all."

"I see. Do you think you'd be able to confess your love to someone, assuming you get past those ideals you have?"

"Sigh… No, I'm not sure if I'll find someone like that. There's… much for me to do before I worry about settling down into a relationship."

"Well, I understand. Your commission, these rumors, the war, there is much for you to focus on at the moment," She nods, misunderstanding my words. "Still, you should not close that window, cadet. Just as you told me, you might regret it later."

"Haha, I guess that's true. Still, I've enough with my training for now."

And for a moment, we just write our reports.

"Speaking of," Halting her scribbling, running a hand into her hair, she looks back at me, "I had heard some rumors about your training I was wanting to ask about."

"Hm? About?"

"Well, it seems you had some sort of standoff against two of your squadmates in the simulators. However, I doubt Sgt Jinguuji would have normally allowed such a thing." She then remains staring, tapping her papers with a finger.

"Sigh. Yes, it was my idea. I proposed it to the Instructor and she went along with it, is all."

Smirking, she nods, "I see. I heard you put on quite the show back then. It's a shame we weren't nearby, might have managed to have Hayase sober for another pair of weeks."

"Is she that troublesome when she gets drunk?"

"Well, not troublesome per se," Licking her lips, grimacing a bit, she sighs, "She gets kind of down or very angry. It's either endure her screaming and raising her voice at every little thing or, if she drinks something very strong, to have her slumped on a table crying her woes out. Oh, please don't tell her I told you, it's supposed to be a secret of the squad."

"Don't worry, my lips are sealed, ma'am. Not a word leaves this walls." I smile with a nod, she returns the gesture.

Picking up her pen, she begins writing again, "So, were the rumors of the show accurate?"

"I guess, yeah. I ended up losing, but I managed to pull off one of those stunts we talked about before during it, so I'm content with the result."

"One of- You mean those unorthodox line-piercing maneuvers?"

"Yeah, three times in total."

"Wh- Three? How?"

I smile, simply shrugging, "It just came naturally, I guess. What I did was a sudden dive, similar to what the base Kaizer's Break Skill does."

"I see. Still, did you actually do so with the same blinding speed?"

"Of course, there's little point otherwise." I nod, she again gets tilted.

"Heh, I can see why the Instructor sang that praise for you, 'hotshot'. You truly might end up surpassing Hayase's cadet records."

"If it keeps her off the alcohol, you should root for me then."

"Haha, I might, I might. Still, don't get overconfident, Shirogane," Back to a serious expression, she held my gaze with a poker face. "I won't try to dissuade you from using those moves, but don't let the pride get to your head."

"I won't. I still lost that fight, in the end." And I also lost against your squad this morning. Seems the only thing I can win at are games.

"That's a good thing. Hayase herself sometimes gets too reckless, and we did lose to this pilot I spoke of before. Keep your feet on the ground and your gaze on the sky, and you'll become a fine surface pilot, cadet."

"Thanks, ma'am. I'll keep your words close."

She nods back, smiling, "They'll help you much, I'm sure. Perhaps, you may even end up joining my unit once you become commissioned," Chuckling, she says as if joking. She must think I'll be surprised once I effectively do.

"I'll end up ruining the motif of the squad, if you're all females. Can't exactly be a Valkyrie as a male."

"It would be a shame, if we lost such a promising novice due to such concerns," She chuckles and I go along, rereading what I wrote thus far, seeing I'm close to finishing. "But still, I'm certain your future squadron will benefit much from your skills, Shirogane. Just don't try to shoulder all on your own, ace pilots are sent to fight on their own for a reason."

"I know, and I don't plan on becoming a burden." Finishing my read, nodding to myself in satisfaction, my report is done. "Well, my work is done, ma'am," I pass her the papers, which she takes and starts inspecting.

"Hmm… Despite how we were talking, you did manage to keep the spacing well and to choose the proper wording. Very good work, cadet."

"Thanks. So, I suppose I should be on my way."

"Ah, yes. It has been a long while since you arrived." We both stand up, but as I was about to offer her a handshake, she walked up to me, eyes focused on mine as she folded her arms. "Shirogane, may I ask you a personal question?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"Why do you fight?"

"Huh? Why?"

"Indeed. I've heard the rumors. A Japanese that was living abroad, enlisted in the UN, returns to the Empire and shows himself to be an ace recruit. A very promising pilot, as well. And yet, despite the setbacks you've encountered, despite what transpired during the CCSE, you are still here." Leaving the silence hanging, her eyes never leave mine, scanning and delving. "I know you're not obliged to answer, but I'd like to hear your reasons. Why are you here, near the frontlines? What compels you to fight?"

…

"… I want my peace back."

"What?"

"I want my world back. I want to show the children that will come that there is more to life than learning how to handle a rifle. I want a world… with zero wars."

"… That's quite ambitious of you," She says, slowly grasping her chin, treading it with a finger as her brows arc, "Yet, it isn't so simple, I'm sure you know. Perhaps, having a more closer, personal goal would help you?"

"I do, besides the bigger picture." And that's saving my world.

"And that would be…"

"Someone out there… needs my help. I'm here because this is the place where I can make the biggest difference, for their sake."

"And what about you? What do you get from this?"

"… Leaving something behind that isn't flames and debris."

"Huh?"

"I… suffered an accident, before coming here. I couldn't do a thing, to be honest. So, I kind of… want to prove to myself that I can make a difference. That I can save someone."

Not like during Iceberg, where everyone under my command died. Not like the fleet, that also met their doom against the BETA in the long run.

Not like last loop, where my efforts in Sadogashima didn't matter in the end as Model B exploded. Not like during the defense of the base, where I couldn't make a difference, having to leave Hayase

behind, failing to protect the others, and crashing my Shiranui in my frustration. And definitely not like Kashgar, where I just was a spectator, where my own squadmates and Sensei didn't think I had it in me to do what was necessary, to the point of them deceiving me with that radar glitch.

Thus far, all I've done is fuck things up. Not this time. This time, I will save as many as I can. I won't be a burden again.

Feeling a pat in my shoulder, I get out of dreamland to find the Cpt smiling, her own eyes clouded a bit. "It's a hard thing to manage, a survivor's guilt. I won't tell you how to handle your feelings, but don't try to do any heroics to make up for your past failings. And, if you need it-"

"I don't need more hypnotherapy, no."

"I see, forgive me for mentioning it."

"No, it's fine. I… just wanna help, as much as I can. There's no bigger meaning, I simply want to leave a world worth living in. Just that." I shrug, sighing then placing my hands on my pockets.

She nods, folding her arms, "That is a worthy goal to aim for, cadet. But, don't forget. You are not alone in this fight. If I may… Would you allow me to tell you a small motto me and my squadmates employ?"

Raising a brow, to fake my surprise, I nod. Smiling a bit she then straightens her posture as she coughs. Business game back in her face, both arms folding behind her back, the fire pouring from her eyes towered over me, as it did during the few times we trained and fought together, despite her not being Walken levels of tall.

And with a sharp breath, Cpt Isumi spoke firmly and loudly, like a waterfall of crystal, "Carry out your mission at all costs! Fight to your very last breath! Make your death count!" Fuming the air out from her nose like a bull, she then chills down, her arms again joining in a relaxed knot. "That's our motto, that we repeat before we march to

battle. If you're so determined to see through your goals towards such a wide scope, perhaps you could keep these words close to you."

"Yes… It's a fine motto, ma'am. But…" Looking up, folding my arms, can't help but to twist my lips, arc my brows as that cold feeling covers my back, "I don't think I agree with it one hundred percent."

"Hm? Oh, I see." Far from being annoyed, she smiles as she tilts her head, again playing with her hair. "Then, what do you find it hard to accept in the words? Let's assume you just joined my squadron and heard the motto, what would you say?"

Again with that, huh. She seems a bit too intense about me joining the Valkyries. I thought Hayase was the only one, but looks like I was wrong.

"Well, the first line is kinda iffy for me. While I know there is no easy solution, that we as soldiers must do what we have to, I… I do not agree with that 'at all costs' part. I know it probably means to have us be willing to lay down our lives if it comes to it, but, well," Yuuko's pale face comes back, the lab coat dangling like an overcoat from her lithe body, that was getting thinner and thinner with every visit. The explosions of the XM3's test, the madness that it caused, the result of Iceberg, of Alt V, all of it makes me grimace as the foul taste of rusted metal and acid fill my mouth, "I don't think such extremes are a good choice. Sometimes, the cost of a victory is far greater than it would be to admit a quick defeat."

"A Pyrrhic victory, huh? I suppose, if you had to endure through an accident of this war, your views of the aftermath and its repercussions might be different than ours. Still, there will be times when it's all or nothing."

"… And refusing to truly look for a solution may send you into a downwards spiral from which you might not be able to escape, in my opinion." I shake my head, rustling my pockets. She gestures me to

continue, so I do after clearing my mouth. "The last one is… well, I kind of have a problem with it."

"And that is?"

"Replace death with life, that's what it should be. At times, you might not get to decide how you die. And, for all you know, your death," The G-Bombs explosions come back, the blurry wasteland filled with death. How in the end, all of that carnage was pointless. "might not truly mean anything, more than to be a meat shield."

"… I do not think it wise to hold those views. It's true, some missions…" She looks down, holding her elbows tightly, as if they were a crack in a ship, about to burst open to the sea's pressure, "will have many die pointless deaths. However, I believe there is much to gain by reminding ourselves that our deaths are not pointless."

"I disagree. I think that reminding your troop that the best thing they can do is stay alive is more important. Your everyday efforts, what you do for your comrades and people, all of that is more important than the last seconds of your life." I nod, meeting her gaze, feeling my own eyes blazing.

"Might I ask why you think so?"

"Because someone once told me that the best thing a soldier could do is to stay alive. Even if others call you a coward, even if they deem you useless, so long as you remain alive you'll have a chance to make a difference. Changing the present is something only the ones who survive can do." Feeling that same gale, that tornado in my gut, the valor Marimo-chan imprinted into me during my first loops is enough to make me take a step forward and nod, arms folded.

She seems taken aback, perhaps because she sees the similarities of my words to the Instructor's, but holds my gaze as she stays cool.

"That's a fair point of view. It's…" Then, she smiles, "refreshing, to hear such words coming from someone so young."

"Huh? Why?"

"Because most pilots your age are all about their bravado, their over eagerness to prove themselves worthy. A surface pilot fears not death, but to die pointlessly," She tells, sighing and shaking her head, quite strongly. "The fact that you know your life isn't over even if you're a coward tells much about you. And even if I do not entirely agree with your assessment of our motto, I respect your opinion, Shirogane."

"Thanks, ma'am." Taking a step back, I then give her a bow. Sigh, thank God she didn't get upset at my usual speeches.

"So, do you also have something to say about the second line?"

"Well, yes. That's more of a personal thing, however."

"Feel free to speak. So, what do you think of it?"

"I don't have a problem with the 'Fight to the last breath' part. It's just… Again, it kind of implies we're gonna die."

"Well, chances are, once we step into the battlefield we might perish." She notes, raising a hand to point a finger at me.

"Still, I think that's a bit too doomerish."

"Doomer… what?"

"Like, way to pessimistic and negative. I know there's no battle with zero casualties, and that strengthening your mental game for when shit hits the fan is important but… I'm back to what I said before." Shrugging, feeling those hands pull at my shoulders as they cry, those cries as they vanished during Iceberg, I can't help but to frown as a cold blanket covers me. "I want to be a guiding light for the rest-" Just like Yuuko, Marimo-chan and Meiya were for me when I

needed them the most. "So instead of basically telling them to do their worst before they die, I rather inspire them to overcome the adversity. To dare to hope for our victory, to howl towards tomorrow. Instead of wasting my time worrying about dying a pointless death, I rather take it all in and break through the pain."

"That's… a peculiar way of thought." She says, arms folded as she raises a brow, looking at me as my mom did when I actually got good scores in college.

"I said it before, I want to make a difference. That's why I favor those 'flashy' and dangerous moves, because they inspire others. They show them that we can pierce through the adversity. Of course, I haven't yet fought officially, so I can't say my ideas hold water. But…" Inhaling deep, recalling my own times of war, the blurry mess I inherited from you, that Shura's Dance mission, the cold hands embrace me from behind as I can't help but to smirk. " *Rather than remaining isolated, stagnant, I'll face the adversity and break through it all. I've a goal to accomplish, and such hesitant and negative words won't rouse me to my feet. I'll be the guiding light others need me to be, so I don't have time to think about dying pointlessly or anything. I will carry on, until I reach my objective."*

She slowly claps, making a small smile, "Your determination is noted, Shirogane." Getting serious again, she then fold her arms, "However, do remember that we remind ourselves those words for a reason. We follow the surface pilot code to the letter because of that, even if we must force ourselves to smile at times, so that we can keep on marching."

" *And is that how you plan to win the war?"*

"Huh?"

" *To simply grin and bear it? To ignore the madness around you? No, I disagree, ma'am. That's why instead of simply convincing myself that's how things are, I'll struggle to make a positive difference."*

"And, what happens when you meet a wall you cannot overcome, cadet?"

" *I won't be alone. Even if it might seem impossible, there's always a solution. So even if it's more painful than to accept the cruelty of war, I want to try to inspire others. And even if I'm met with another failure… I'll struggle until the end, not thinking to make my death count, but to live on and help rebuild what's left behind. Life is tough enough already, so I'll despair after I'm dead. I rather try to spread hope than to surrender to dread."*

I wouldn't forgive myself if I fuck things up again. This time I'll try to truly help, not just with what's in front of me, but what with comes after the fire dies down. I know that for the other soldiers, they're facing a losing war and that's why they remind themselves not to lose it. But, for what will come, I believe inspiring people to have a reason to dream of tomorrow is more important. There will be a time where the war will end, and the soldiers will return to their homes. *If their own personal wars are not over by then, it's up to those who lead them to guide them away from the aggression of the military lifestyle, of this endless battle. They need their own reason not to give up hope, otherwise, if only soldiers remain behind, humanity is fucked.* Just as Marimo-chan did for us in my first loops, I wanna teach whoever ends up under me to be more than a mere soldier. Though, that might be my guilt talking.

"Sorry if I rambled too much, I tend to get carried away when I start with a speech."

"… No, it's alright." She says, low, arms folding tight as she takes a step back, eyes veering away as her brows got lower. "So, you're determined to 'despair after you perish', so to speak?"

"Yes, basically. I know it might be presumptuous of me, but perhaps you could try to widen your vision, Captain." I'm sure you'd like to have a life with your lover, and you can't do that if you keep focusing on the negatives. As Yuuko says, you have to focus on what gets

you out of the problem. Otherwise, those tachyon-thingies will only lead you to a solution that can only be reached through your death.

"I see. I shall take it into consideration." She notes.

"Well, it's just my opinion, is all." I scratch my head, chuckling a bit.

Yet, she nods while still looking away, "If I may ask, if you're set in this way, what do you think of the protocols that would have you stand your ground for the sake of a mission? Of leaving a comrade behind?"

"… If it is for a fair cause, I will fight tooth and nail until I can't go on. And if it is unavoidable… I'll honor the life of my comrade, to ensure the memory of their life carries on. If it's time for action and not words, then I'll do my best to carry out my duty while not betraying my ideals. And no matter who or what stands in my way, *I'll crush the fangs of anyone who dares to harm either me, my comrades, or my goals.* I want to see the end of this war, but for the day after it, I want to give others a reason to fight their despair. So, that's why I'll lead by example and despair after I die," Even if I'm doing a terrible job at it as of late.

"Is that so. That's a very firm belief you hold, cadet," She nods, eyes closed. Then, she stands there, not looking at me, not saying anything else. As I was wondering if I should say something, she again fumes as a bull, walking past me, opening the door. "It was a pleasure to meet you, cadet." She says, court and composed.

"No, the pleasure was mine, Captain." Slowly walking towards her, I had started to offer a hand for her to shake.

Yet, she begins to close the door, forcing me to quickly step aside and outside. Standing in the opening left, she nods at me, "Thanks for your aid, and best of luck in your training, cadet. Good night."

"Yes, good night, ma'am," Standing in attention, I give her a salute.

Which she doesn't return, closing the door slowly instead. So I simply stare at it for a while, hunching over.

Did she get mad at my words? Well, I kind of got carried away there. And I again rebuked her approach, and even her motto. After having done that as the Viking, and besting the Valkyries in the game, I should have known better.

Dragging my feet towards the elevator, I can't help but to sigh. Feel again all cold, and heavy.

"Did she really get so upset? I don't think I said anything weird." Sure, it kind of clashes with the absolute obedience soldiers must display to their orders and duty, but go and tell that to the pigs that let us all die instead of deploying the G-Bombs in Iceberg.

Maybe she's also different, like the girls were at first. Maybe she, too, is kind of a nationalistic and hides it under her duty as a UN captain. Or maybe I just struck a wrong nerve, I mean, she did lose two squadmates during Niigata. But really, I'm just following Marimo-chan's advice, the one she gave after I fainted and the poem, so she should understand. Eh, I'm sure Cpt Isumi will see what I mean, either by herself or when I get the chance to work with her again. Yeah! Think positive! Unlike that little boy, I have my squadmates here. Sure, they're not as likable as they were before, but I can still rely on them.

And there's also Kasumi, my psydekick of a bunny doesn't need to see me more down than she has already seen me.

"Cadet Shirogane!"

Turning around, an operator was approaching me, folder under her arm.

"Yes, what do you need?"

"XO Kouzuki is calling for you, to the meeting room, it seems."

Sigh… It's almost 2100 hours, Yuuko. What the fuck? On the plus side, I can make sure she actually eats dinner.

"Understood, I've received my orders." Sharing a salute with the operator, I then pick up my pace towards the elevator, since I'm sure you must be waiting already.

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*A/N: So, originally, this was going to be only the opening scene of this chapter. However, as you can see, it got way too long. I didn't feel like cutting much, despite there being silly moments that could be seen as unnecessary. The other half of this chapter will come later, delaying the mock battle by one chapter.*

*That's all, thanks for reading. Stay safe.*

*Zuoriel*

# One Last Night in Peace (II)

*A/N: I recommend you all to read this chapter while listening to the song 'Heroine' from Shin Megami Tensei II.*

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*Chapter 66:*

**One Last Night in Peace (II)**

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*December 2nd, some minutes after 9 PM.*

*(Tokyo, in a hotel near Hibiya Station.)*

**[Raiko]**

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Relenting a sigh, relaxing and stretching my legs, I rest the papers onto the desk. I am loath to admit, this report of possible BETA stragglers in the main land is far more severe than I previously anticipated. The area that has been scoured is very large, yet not a trace has been located as of now.

This scouting will take me at least a week of leave, perhaps until the twelfth. Even with the secondary mechanic crew, we might face unexpected setbacks since Kazama is no longer with us for the moment. I cannot believe Yuuhi-sama took her from us without notice, and without notifying me of the motive. To think she'd lease the Type-00C to the UN, unacceptable.

Leaning back onto my seat, crossing my legs and looking at the yellowish tint that illuminates my studio, my lips part on their own to sigh yet again. Slow and tense, as if once more showering with cold water, is the shiver which courses through my back, from my nape to the tip of my toes.

"Once more, back to the battlefield. And now of all times, as well." Gently pressing a side of my neck with a few fingers, delving into the knot formed in my muscles, I again slowly sigh and gasp as the massage continues. And yet… it is but a lacking replica, a foul imitation of what once graced my skin, such careful and precise pressure.

Standing up from my seat, returning the papers to the folder, I then place it back inside the suitcase that I was given during my visit to the Shogun's chambers. Leaving the dark metallic rectangle dangling from a hook on the wall, my sight directs itself towards the windows. Towards the distant shape of the hall where the UN's High Council is located, shimmering amidst the dusk.

Obstructed reports, empty message logs. Cut wires, strange footprints. Distant echoes, blurred letters. Secrecy, and deafening silence.

Is there truly someone in the HC plotting against our wishes? Yuuhi-sama seemed to agree on this notion, yet it is hard to believe. For if such is the case, we are surrounded by hostiles. Camp Kitanomaru, the HC and the Diet, all of them surrounding our outposts and Yuuhi-sama's residence. Not to mention, there's that vixen fox as well behind the board. Moving the pieces, perhaps.

"I can only hope nothing occurs in my absence. It may be time for action and not words, yet it does bring me pause. To leave milady's side at such a crucial juncture."

However, at the very least what which once shone within her eyes seems to have been reignited as of now. A small consolation amidst all these setbacks.

Licking my lips, again tracing my neck with my fingertips to then run a hand over my hair as the touch was insufficient in comparison, I lean towards the glass. Closer, until my forehead is touching its cold surface, and my eyes return their reflection's stare. Where she once was solid metal sinking into the undercurrents as she desperately

clung onto an olive branch, now that quiet yet burning impulse once more shines in milady's very being. It is far more moderated, modest and composed than the prominence she once was during the invasion. Scorching, defiant, undaunted light uncovering a darkened map. Now, however, it is but candlelight. Yet, that is how it starts. Slowly, so slowly, just as dawn. A small kindling foretells the rise of the sun every day, and this rediscovered mental fortitude might as well be that for my Regent.

Gulping the sigh I was about to release, nibbling at my bottom lip, my sight decides to veil itself. And feeling the breaths I take, the current into my lungs, the pressure on my underbelly, only to then release it all and begin again. The cold of the glass grows, expands on my scalp and forehead, the minute twitching of my neck as I massage it, the turn and curves as my fingers reach my nape. Drifting off as if suspended in lukewarm water, my inhaling calmer with each repetition, I then open my eyes.

And my reflection returns my stare. And the suitcase is still as I left it. So, this truly is no dream.

Allowing myself a small smile, trapping a few fingers under my chin as it lowers, my other hand reaching for my shoulder to counter the slow descent of cold shivers on me, merely sway a bit is all I can muster in this tranquility.

"You truly… are still alive? Sigh. If only I had been notified sooner." Mana better handle this mock battle tactfully, otherwise she should ready herself for quite the retaliation. Still, how are you as of now?

Alone in that base, under the UN Farces' clutches, commanded by that vixen fox of all people. If as Tsuhi said you're still calm and collected, perhaps there is no reason for me to ruminate in this manner over the state of affairs in such negative a light. However, if you do grow adusted, if that calmness is but a facade…

" *U-Um… So, what do you think of today's dinner, Captain?"*

Static, ashes. A jolt on my nape, further embers on my ears.

" *It's nothing. I just… I just tripped as I was patrolling. It's just a scratch, Raiko-san."*

I look back, despite knowing you're not there. So I can only sigh.

" *We're going to… No, we already lost the war, didn't we?"*

No shelter to release my anger to, the rope of a well teared and stranding the water away. No sounds echoing behind my steps, the silence that has become a cloak ingrained to my back for over two years, since that August 5th of treason.

" *You don't have to apologize, for real. You were right, I should have been the one who died that day."*

Nothing lingering in the shadows, no spark to light up a fire in this so confusing board, this so lonesome night.

The torn pages, crossed out words. The wreckage after a typhoon, or BETA corpses after a bombardment. Cold, no, frozen. No, freezing into stillness, sinking into the depths. Just three words after the tattered visage, the lines of ink quivering as if he had written them during an earthquake. Three blurred words, assaulted by pouring teardrops perhaps, I'll never know.

*Please help me*

I choke, moving away from the window. Constricting and coiling upon itself, no air can filter through my throat for a moment. Ringing far away, echoing, that accursed beeping reaches my ears. I know there is no way that is the case, so my hands clamp on both of them, pressing softly the palms onto the ears, my fingertips massaging the start of my neck. Softly pressing, slowly massaging, fifty times in total as you had taught me. No ringing is left in my ears as I remove my hands from them. Yet, once again, the wound has been

reopened. And knowing you're out there, somewhere, I cannot help but to scratch the glass, a frown engraved in my reflection.

I have grown used to your absence. Yet, I am loath to disappoint you, Takeru. For I am unable to truly rein in my displeasure at this turn of events, after all.

"… Mother?"

Twitching at the intrusion, quickly turning around, Fujikagi slowly squeezed himself into the room as he opens the door, eyes fixated on me.

"Fujikagi, what are you doing here? It's past nine in the night, you should be sleeping." Going up to him, I ruffle his hair, perhaps a bit too strongly. He groans and pouts as he raises both hands upwards. Relenting to his demand with a smile, I embrace him and take him off the floor. "So, what happened?"

"I can't sleep."

"But you have to."

"But you left the lights off. Then I saw you were still up."

"You need to get accustomed to it, dear. There is nothing in the dark, you don't have to be afraid."

"Uh," Resting his head on my shoulder, his protesting continues, "can you stay with me until I fall asleep?"

"Sigh. Fine, however, you have to stay in your room at night, Fujikagi. Otherwise, if you keep doing this, I will have to scold you," Smiling at his wide eyes, my fingers pincer the tip of his nose gently for a moment.

"Are people that don't sleep early bad?"

"Yes, for real. Boys that do not fall sound asleep and stay awake until late are very, very naughty," I say, slowly and distorting my voice, faking a small combustion in my eyes. His squeal, the strengthened hold on my shoulder only causes me to giggle. "So, let's go back." Exiting my office, closing the door with my free hand as I lift him slightly, shifting his weight, to then go towards his room.

Walking past the small living room of our apartment, opening the door, the sheets barely even moved, the light now turned on despite how I had switched it off before leaving him here. Having him sit on his bed, before tucking him under the sheets, I crouch by Fujikagi's side, playing with his bangs as he grabs the blue shirt you had always used to halt his wailing. Almost like a mirage, it feels as if it was yesterday that you were such a small thing that was still learning to speak properly.

Turning under the sheets, Fujikagi looks at me, "Am I truly bad for not going to sleep?" Clutching the blue close to his face, brows slightly furrowed, he keeps staring.

"I was merely jesting, Fujikagi. However, you do need to get used to falling asleep on your own."

"… I don't like it."

"I am aware. However, as I told you, I will have to leave for work. You need to start behaving well while I'm away," I remind, tapping his brows, running a finger over them. "You promise me you'll be good?"

Groaning for a moment, he then nods, "I will. But, why do you have so much work today?"

"It's just how it is, that's why we visited Her Highness."

"But if you stay up until late, you're going to be bad, Mother," He counters, eyes sharpening as he rustles behind the blue shirt.

"It's alright, I was almost done in fact." Caressing his hair a few times, simply looking into his eyes, I allow myself to rest onto the bed, our foreheads touching. "So you be a good boy and close your eyes. It's very, very late after all."

Trying and failing to restrain a yawn, he edges closer, "You won't stay up?"

"No, I promise." Smiling his way, my hands go down to his cheek, tickling him with a finger.

Slowly, he turns around some more, trying to find a position he's comfortable in. Once he does find it, one hand reaches for my sleeve while the other hugs the shirt to his chest. And for a moment, I allow my eyes to close and enjoy the silence, the small and tender warmth by my side, and the scent of vanilla that lingers in Fujikagi's resting place. I swear, how much do I miss the days when enveloping you in that same shirt, in this sweet perfume was enough to douse your cries. Simply having you feel that company was enough to lull you back to slumber. Now that you're properly aware of your surroundings, however, attempting to deceive you is proving to be quite futile.

Furthermore, if you do rise up at night, I alone have to look after you. At least you're no longer wailing loudly when you do wake up at late hours, even if I sometimes find you snuck into my bed somehow. Opening my eyes, his breathing now looks steady. His face relaxed, slow and calm like a lake fish swimming to its leisure. Yet, upon my arm retracting, his fingers dive into my sleeve, his brows furrow in complain. Little choice do I have but to remain by you then, until you're deeper into sleep. Perhaps I should have left the lights on when bringing you here earlier.

After a few minutes, his fingers slip from my sleeve on their own. Ruffling his hair softly, kissing his forehead, and slowly standing up to ensure I made as little noise as possible, I turn off the lights and leave his room, taking one last good look at him by the door.

"Sigh… At least he's sound asleep now." Pacing to the kitchen, I serve myself a glass of water. I then return to my office.

Placing everything in its proper place in the shelves, the folders, the books, my desk is left in proper form. Now, the suitcase is already filled with all the docs I require, the mails to the maintenance crew have already been sent, so that they could start the preparations for our machines to be readied for the sortie. The reports of the day have been reviewed, the necessary paperwork for my House's affairs has also been handled already.

"I believe no pending duties are eluding me at the moment." So, having confirmed that, I open my drawer and take out the small transparent foil out. The papers within having the small notes I was bestowed after Mana's call, the papers that have the intel we possess about your situation.

Inhaling sharply, for a moment my hands stall a reaction. My eyes merely scan the first page over and over, despite it being only a fake title in case anyone placed their eyes on it before I read and dispose of it. Almost as if I had been buried in sand up to my waist, my limbs and joints stuck and rusted, despite a deep exhalation which reaches my hands I cannot stop pursing my lips, shifting my legs as I stare. As if someone was pulling my hair downwards, my nape tickles. Resisting the urge to look back again, to bring my hands to my neck in an attempt to subdue the illusory tickling, two fingers drag the papers out. Leaving them on the desk as I barely rise from my seat to bring it as close to the wood as possible, I again sigh as I send the first page away.

…

So he arrived on the 22nd, right before all of these… 'advancements' were announced. Merely a coincidence? No, I think not. If Mana's words about a secret mock battle between Gekishins at late night is to be believed, it's almost as if Takeru was the perfect subject for these testings. To further improve the potency of our boosters and to

favor such finesse in dodging is something only his eccentric mind would concoct.

"To be honest, if this is you, I cannot help but to feel a bit dejected. All these years and you have not tamed your liking towards those flamboyant maneuvers. Sigh…" I cannot help but to smile, picturing him folding his arms as he would then rise his brows, ballooning his cheeks much. "It truly is very much like you, to axe all of their records as you did to ours."

Still, moderation is a concept you should already have apprehended. Perhaps, the lakes in his memory are impeding his skills from truly flourishing? If so, it is a blessing. Otherwise, he would have been found out as a commissioned pilot by now.

However, I cannot deny it is odd. I had thought Mana was merely jesting, but I can now see why Tsuhi looked so distressed. To think Meiya-sama would be hostile to you, how regrettable. Perhaps, I have overvalued her intelligence. I certainly hope she saw reason and has begun to treat you with the deference you deserve, after you saved her from these chasers despite her betrayal. Which, conveniently enough, have been shielded by the UN going by what my sources in the HC have told me, which has been granted credit due to Mana's own words about the affairs in that base. Apparently, Yokohama will pay for their… silence, I suppose.

"How convenient, isn't it vixen fox?" Fuming a bit of air through my nose, I rest my chin on a fist.

Frowning as I continue to read, finishing my water, the remainder of the report is not as auspicious as I would have desired. Not only Takeru is under the surveillance of this Takamura, who belongs to the Takatsukasa fellowship, but also has been made to remain in the detention cells and enduring some sort of punishment despite him safeguarding both Meiya-sama and the Prime Minister's daughter. I had thought milady was being melodramatic on purpose, to not have me act then after the shock of the news, but to think she was being

serious about all that has transpired. It's almost as if this scenario was crafted only to have him lose his temper.

"And yet, you seem to be oddly calm, for some reason." You even were willing to face off against your 'squadmates', in what Mana referred to as a window to his own graduation battle.

… Just remembering how you began to make your Zuikaku spin on me, while you were singing might I add, is enough to cause a void on my lungs, the ground to quiver under my feet as I stomp it lightly. Those young women have my sympathy, if they are now the recipient of his long essays about 'frames' and 'spacing'. From where did those eccentric terms come from, I don't have the faintest. However, in the end, you were most certainly right, Takeru.

Coldness, contrasting with the humid heat. Stillness, where once overflowing cheer made nest. And then… pain, screams, thrashing and rabid insults. Only to fade, fade to tears.

If only I had listened to his advice before it was too late… perhaps you'd still be alive with us, brother. Perhaps, Takeru wouldn't have fallen to those nightmares, he wouldn't have maimed himself in his struggle to be a spark upon my disdain, my indifference. Hellfire wouldn't have seared through the cracks of the broken iceberg his heart had become.

Yet, it was his insistence, his pull what effectively gave us a new road forward in our investigations. A soft whisper at first, right by my ear, then a firm declaration as the fire met my gaze. Before I knew it, we were working in synchrony towards our goal. And I don't even know how you did it, how you managed to stage it so well, for it all to burst open like popcorn above the fire.

I can't help but to wince, bend the papers as I grip them. How they called you, how you were erased, the anxiety you were made to endure, which only further bolstered your own adusted wrath. Not to mention, my own failings to notice your pain. If only I had actually looked at you, if I hadn't refused to listen…

"Sigh… No, this is not what I should be doing." Pounding my stomach, filling it with air, I rest my nape on my seat, lock my eyes upon the cream-colored ceiling. "Focus on how to attain victory, to cleave a path towards future peace. Our endeavors are arduous enough, there is no need to clog my mind any further. Dread must not make nest, does not belong with the living. So, I shall despair after I perish. Siiigh…" The exhalation again reaches my hands, making the papers flutter momentarily.

Yet, I find myself slumping onto my desk, onto the wood falls all of my weight. Try as I might, I suppose today I cannot deceive myself with mere wording. To work more would be futile, to continue to ruminate would only serve to unnerve me further. Remembering your words only serves to bring much disquiet to my breathing, and now I cannot help but to frown as I crush imaginary rocks with my tightening hands.

"… I cannot remain like this." Rising to my feet, shooting away towards a bookshelf, my heels hit hard and in a rhythm, for what little this march lasted. "Just as Tsuhi said, there is something we can still employ to our favor. To show you undeniable proof of our link, while not risking any ill nightmares to impair your judgment again."

And if it's a letter what is required, perhaps employing your own eccentric wording might aid in showing you we are being truthful. Slowly, as a tender and isolated rain, my hand rose towards a book. Merely touching it for a moment, becoming aware of my breathing and heartbeats, my arms stalled the action. My fingers grip the top of the book, softly pulling at it until it came off the shelve, into my hands. An unassuming green notebook, a normal office notebook issued all across the Empire.

Opening it, taking my time to tread each sentence over as I walked back to my seat, a small smile rose in me, all those clouds which mired my mind vanishing, parting open like a sky after a storm. Once I was back at my desk, I procured a pen and a few empty pages. Rubbing my legs together for a moment, taking a brief glance towards the report of your condition and what it told me, my hand

starts its nightly duty while my eyes scour the dictionary I once made, to explain to our fellows the supposed meaning of your odd words.

---

*Around the same time.*

*(Yokohama Base. Yuuko's office.)*

**[Takeru]**

---

"-and then I told her you were behind the whole plotting of that mode, to avoid any more questions."

Sitting down as she drinks some more coffee, despite how there's no food anywhere nearby, Yuuko then rests the mug on the desk as she looks my way, "I see. I'll think something up to cover that small detail, don't worry. However, why does that unit have different missions?"

"You know, since it is a continuation of the bad end of the first game. Tango isn't completely defeated during that ending, so the remains are sought after by all the armies of the setting."

"… Tango? You mean that dance thing from South America?"

"No, no. Tango is the name of the quantum supercomputer of the game that-"

"Cough!" Hiccuping for a second, coffee again dirtying her lab coat, a blaze of a gaze drills into me. I feel like I've been here before. "What was that?"

"Uh, I was saying, that since Tango is a supercomputer like no other, all the armies in the game are after its remnants, trying to scavenge anything from the wreckage," I say, scratching my head and looking up.

"Shirogane, why did you not tell me about this?" Leaning forward, she slowly rests her chin on a hand, unblinking.

"I mean, didn't you modify the game yourself? You should have seen the cutscenes and the voice acting, right?"

"Do you think I have so much free time on my hands?"

"Considering you once stole my Game Guy to play in my first loops, yeah, kind of."

Grumbling for a second, a wild frown appears in her face. "Well, I simply saw the first few missions, dismissed it as unimportant dialogue and just limited myself to remove everything. So," Inhaling slowly, arms folding, her mug rises to her lips yet her eyes still do not leave mine, "what is this about a quantum supercomputer, and why didn't you speak of it until now?"

"I mean, it's just a game. It didn't really help you much in my first loops, to play the Game Guy port of Valgern-On, so I didn't say anything because of that."

"So, I did play that weird looking game? Despite how fast it moves?"

"Yeah, for real. Your eye bags were as marked as you have them now, and somehow you cleared the game faster than my squadmates." It was a surprise, and she did it without any of my tips to boot. Still, to binge the entire campaign in one sitting… I know that once you get rolling there's no stopping you, and that the original story wasn't that long to begin with, but still that was overkill as fuck.

Spinning for a moment, eyes almost closed, Yuuko then simply sighs. "I see. So, is there anything you believe is valuable in this special campaign of this 'Skull Kaizer' of yours?"

"Well, not really. It is revealed that Tango wasn't actually an omnipotent machine capable of distorting reality, but that it needed help to properly fix the world. That's why the makers gave it that

name in the first place." Don't you love it when foreshadowing is right there in your face and you get trolled by a red herring instead? I still remember how much Mom laughed at me, since she loved that music genre.

"What do you mean?" Staring frontally, fully focused, Yuuko holds my gaze. That glint, the hand bumping on her chin, she's way too serious for some reason.

"Because it takes two to tango, Yuuko," I say with a shrug, putting both hands behind my head as I lean onto the sofa, smiling as I recall those last peaceful days I had back home. "There were limitations to what the machine could see from the future, since its cold analytical mind didn't take human emotions into account and it was, like, restricted in what it could do. But when it was paired with a human, seeing the future through the possible actions of that person, Tango's real abilities start to shine. In the Skull Kaizer's story mode it's revealed that during the first game the AI was convinced humanity was done for, since the only human it could link with was the tyrannical leader of the Earth Fed. But when meeting the main character, as they do battle Tango can see the motives of their fight, and what the world would look like if they won. That's why the hero is spared from the explosion in the good ending of the first game," I nod to myself, smiling a bit as I recall my days of playing through the updates of Valgern-On with Mikoto in the arcade, the days of theorizing during lunch break.

"And, what happens on the software we have here?" Yuuko says, tapping her desk with a finger non-stop, eyes narrow as they remain staring.

"Well, the main character kind of tries to help the world, but by choosing to awaken the Skull Kaizer he becomes a target. By that point, Tango only wanted a human vessel to finish the purge and the main character only was seeking power to end the struggles. But when they meet, if you don't screw up your choices, the hope the hero still has will echo in Tango, letting the machine see a solution to save the war-torn world. That's why they put the remnants of the

core unit into the Skull Kaizer for the final level, and why you can use Pain's Gainer for thirteen minutes instead of seconds according to the lore." And if you add up all the timers of the boss rush battles of the ending, you end up with literally thirteen minutes. Those little details are what I like the most out of the series. "There isn't much technobabble, so I didn't think I'd be worth your time to bring this up."

One of her eyebrows twitches, she says nothing for a moment, then another. Leaning on the desk, her eyes don't move from me. "There wouldn't be any other 'secrets' you're keeping from me, Shirogane?"

"Huh? It's not a secret, it's just the lore from a game."

"Lore that, quite conveniently, deals with what my research is handling."

"I mean, does what I told you help in any way?" I ask, raising a brow at her, casting a side glance.

Her lips twist in, "Any idea, no matter how small, may be useful at some point. If you are to stay in this world, I expect you to report everything to me, Shirogane. No matter how small and unimportant a detail might be."

"Sigh. Fine, I know. Didn't think you'd have the time for the game, considering how you looked when I got here."

"So long as you understand. And while we're talking of your reports," Resting her mug on the desk, she crosses her arms again, eyes lightly blazing. Now what? "could you kindly explain to me what the papers you wrote today are about?"

"The weapon designs and the plans to mount the Vulcan on my Type-00C. Why, is something wrong in them?" Don't tell me I forgot to draw a graph, or that I did it in the opposite way again.

"Why, is something wrong, you ask," She shrugs, rolling her eyes. "Shirogane, what does this mean?"

Grabbing the page she hands me, scanning it slowly, my brows curve as do my lips. Uh, I don't see anything wrong here. The graphs are as they should, the calcs should be right, otherwise she would have crossed them. "What's the problem with this?"

Simply staring in silence, she sighs, "Shirogane, what are these signs supposed to be?" She throws an accusing finger to the markings in the graph and the text, almost puffing a cheek.

"Oh, those are just the shortcuts."

"Shortcuts for what?"

"For the equations and calcs. What, you want me to write everything every single time I have to check the numbers? So, I use those signs as shortcuts to know which equation goes where. You know, the heat test, the endurance of the barrel, the weight distribution and the possible impact on the frame as it flies. Stuff like that. I also have the shortcuts in the PC you gave me, so that I can automate the calcs instead of doing them manually."

I love my scientific calculators as much as anyone else, but redoing all the equations gets tiring real fast. Thankfully, now all I gotta do is put the numbers in the brackets, hit enter, and I get both the result and the progression of the calcs. Blessed be the bunny, I needed a program like that while I was studying. Just thinking on all the writing I would have saved myself from is enough to make my wrists cry a bit. Maybe I should have bought myself a laptop while I was in college in my world.

"And, why is that not mentioned anywhere?" Again tapping the desk, she shakes her head. Why is she fuming over something as small as this?

"I mean, I thought it'd be obvious, since there are some references to stuff with the same sign across the report."

"Is that so. So, and what of the eccentric words you used?"

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

Frowning a bit, she points to the bottom of the page I'm holding, sharp as an arrow, "Could you kindly explain to me what 'more dakka' even means?"

"Oh, shit. I actually wrote that down?" Yeah, I did. It's in the notes, sure, but it's there. Well, in my defense, it's easier than explaining why the machineguns are a good addition to the Takemikazuchi in complex terms. It just has More Dakka, and that is never a bad thing. "Sorry, I was kinda stumped by the end of the thing, before Kasumi came to visit."

"That is not the sole problem, Shirogane. There are other terms used throughout the report, like this consecutive three m letters you wrote here," She complains, waving a page about. "What's the point of you handing me reports with words and signs only you can understand? What is this even supposed to be?"

"People tend to refer to this as 'karma', Yuuko." Come on, you do the same all the time. And I never complained once.

"Ha, ha, ha. Very funny," Tying her arms into a sailor's knot, her gaze blazes away. "I expect you to cease using these eccentric words from now on. You didn't happen to employ them in the papers Isumi asked of you, right?"

"Of course not, I was focused back there," Returning her gaze, a few embers towards her blaze, I nod as I sober up. "Don't worry, that went well enough. Though, the Cpt seemed to get a bit pissed off by the end."

"Can you blame her? Not only you almost bested her tactic this morning with a vastly inferior TSF, not only you surpassed the efforts they obtained in their trainings with the consoles, but you then proceed to, in Isumi's words, decimate them without mercy in the sparring." Standing up to leave her mug in a shelve, she turns back to look my way as she wipes it clean, "By the by, I do not recall

asking you to send the Valkyries' confidence to the gallows, Shirogane. Why did you crush them so thoroughly? Some sort of repressed anger, perhaps?" She asks, eyes again unmoving from me.

Yet, I smirk a bit as I chuckle, which curves her brows down in confusion. "Nah, I just did my best, as I told you I would. I was having fun and played as I would normally would. The training was a fucking disaster, and I loved every second of it."

"… You were 'playing'?"

"Yeah. I told this to the Captain too, that their moves were a bit rough. Looks like they hadn't gone through the tutorial of Valgern-On, so they weren't teching or comboing at all," I shrug again, one eye closed. "That's why even Kasumi could stand up to Akane and her squadmates, despite not having much practice with the game at all. By merely following my advice, she got a huge advantage in her matches." Which made her smile a lot, and I'm glad she could enjoy our session despite losing a few fights.

Yuuko merely nods, eyes back to the mug. "Is that so. Do you have any ideas to have them adapt faster to the XM3?"

"Maybe I can write a manual or something. It doesn't matter if my data is in the system if they don't think to use it, after all." I don't think they'll get to my level of crazy stunts, but once they see what moves they can pull off I'm sure Cpt Isumi will change her mind about my ideas.

Then, instead of them being a gamble of a lone soldier, they could become polished tactics of an entire squad. Imagine if all the Valkyries had been near my level during last loop, instead of only me eviscerating all those Forts it would have been the entire squad doing that. Maybe Kashiwagi's unit wouldn't have ended up damaged, maybe we could have held out to allow the Captain to escape the XG.

Sigh…

"Sounds like a plan. Make sure none of those odd words are in it when you write it," She says as she sits down, looking at her laptop's screen.

"Roger," Moving my neck in circles for a moment, I then stand up. Eyes focused on the floor, my feet cruise through the papers and books. Looks like she's holding up alright, so let's peace out.

"Shirogane?"

"Hm? What is it?" I look back, balancing my weight as I stop in the middle of the rows of papers.

Yuuko's brows were making a small V, she was again bumping a hand on her chin. Then, a single finger hurriedly shoots out like an arrow, pointing to the sofa, "I do not recall giving you the order to leave yet."

Sighing as I again walk back to the sofa, I rest my arms on my knees once I sit down. "So, what else do you need? I already told you of both the training and what I helped Cpt Isumi with."

Ruffling her hair for a moment, she starts to spin. Playing with a strand, coiling it around a finger as her eyes wander to nowhere in particular, she speaks up, "Can you tell me who was the one who wrote you the poem you mentioned before?"

"… Why?"

"Just a thought, could be important," She says, barely audible, as she stops spinning and folds her arms, eyes closed.

"It won't be important, believe me."

"So, you refuse to tell me," Then, her eyes open. Fire, all over again.

"Sigh. There's little to tell. Don't worry, it really has nothing to do with either Alt IV or the issues with the Guard," I nod, returning her stare, enduring the silence.

After a moment, she looks away, "Is that so. Well, it is rather late and you have a mock battle tomorrow. On that regard, how are you feeling now?"

"Fine, better than in the rest of the day, to be honest. The cold feeling hasn't left me entirely, but I can keep it in check."

"Do you think you're in form to face off against the Royal Guards?"

"It won't be a real battle, and I'll try to keep myself in check. And as you said, if worst comes to worst, I'll slip up and get knocked out before anything happens. Do you think things will be ready to intercept the guards if they try anything after the battle?" I ask, leaning a bit forward.

She immediately nods, spinning again. "Of course, all the preparations for this are ready. Just remember that you'll be responsible for your actions during the battle, Shirogane. I cannot shield you if you lash out against them," She says, a localized blizzard.

"I won't."

"Good. Now, off you go. It is late already," She then grabs a few stacks of papers, dropping them to the floor to make room in the desk.

She does this very slowly, her lips curving as she lifted the stack off the wood. Tired, almost strained. Looking at her well, the pink under her eyes is stronger than it was at morning, lines clearly visible in the skin. And pale, her face is getting pale too. Well, Yuuko doesn't come out to the ground level too much, that's for sure. But, was she like this lately? How was she during last loop? Now that I think about

it… I don't see any dishes or trays nearby. Chances are, she hasn't eaten since… since when?

Softly biting my lower lip, I can't help but to sigh with my nose. Her habits haven't changed at all. I know she says it gets easier to spill her ideas on paper, but the amount of babel towers of papers that are here is just staggering. And if she's making room in the desk, it means she plans to revise some more stuff tonight. She's braving through everything again. Should I really leave her alone?

"What are you looking at?" She says with a frown, realizing I was staring.

Tugging at my pants for a second, I looked down. Standing up, shaking my head, my eyes scanned the gaze she was giving me. You're truly a bit too pale right now.

"Just thinking that you could organize the room a bit, maybe take a short break to eat something."

"I already took a break, while talking with you. Take your leave, Shirogane. I have work to do."

"… You're not planning on staying awake all night, are you?"

One of her brows twitches, "And what if I am? My research requires me to finish this, now," She shoots out, narrowing her eyes.

"A small nap won't hurt you, Yuuko. Forcing yourself to keep working, on an empty stomach, when you look this tired won't-"

Force palming the desk, her voice blasts away, sparks flying off her clenched teeth, "I gave you an order, cadet. As you should know, there are many matters I must tackle as of now." Words zooming like a race car, short of stopping to take a breath she instead folds her arms and looks at the whiteboard, at the jungle of calcs she had there. "Many preparations and negotiations are in the timetable, there is little time left to idle. I cannot waste any more time in

explaining something you should already know, Shirogane. Thus, as the veteran you are, abide by your orders and return to your cell for the night. You are required to rise early tomorrow, after all."

"That's true, but you don't have to do everything in one sitting."

"I ordered you to leave," Glaring at me for a moment, she the hurries to the shelves to pick up some books. "You are no longer required in my presence, so return to your cell."

"But why can't you- Hey!"

Her heels caught in the papers, Yuuko staggers and almost stumbles to the ground. Yet, bracing for the impact of her falling on my arm, instead a soft sensation hits me as she falls, as I rush to help her. She's… light. Way too light.

"Let me go," Clawing at my arm, trying to stand straight again, she shoves me away, again reaching for the books. As she grasps at an encyclopedia, her wrist bends, the book falls.

Reacting as I did when Kasumi dropped her joystick, I catch the book in midair. Fuck, this is a heavy one, too. Despite my training, I do feel the weight, the tensing of my forearm as I lift the thing in a single hand. As Yuuko sighs heavily while squinting her eyes, extending a hand for me to pass her the book, all I can give her is a frown.

"Shirogane, hand me the book."

"… Yuuko, did you have dinner today?"

"What? I told you- Sigh. Give me the book, cadet. Now."

"Answer the question, *Vice Commander.* "

Lunging at the thing like a cat after a mouse, her fingers meet empty air as I sidestep away. "Shirogane, stop this stupidity. Hand me the book, I don't have the time to waste on this stupid pouty act of

yours!" And again, her words fire off faster than our bullets. Almost as if she had forgotten oxygen was a thing.

"All you have to do is answer the question. Did, you, have, dinner today?"

Crossing her arms as she heaves a sigh, another blaze in her gaze as she spits fire, "No, I didn't. Happy now?"

"When was the last time you slept?"

"Wha- Shirogane, if you don't stop this-"

Throwing the damn book onto her desk, making a few papers fall off, a few small gadgets to bounce up and quiver, I shave the distance between us, returning the fire. "It ain't normal, to not have an appetite this late into the night. Much less with the kind of stuff you gotta tackle."

"Leave, now. I'll call security if you don't."

"And you also seem to not be sleepy. Looks to me like you got sluggish, but that's all."

"God, what are you getting at?! Out with it already!"

"By the by, what's up with your voice, Yuuko?"

"My voice?" The fire cut down, she flinches in confusion.

"Yeah, you're talking real fast. Like, what? Are you the new Enimen?"

"Eni-what?"

"You know, the American rapper. The one with that catchy song, 'Now this looks like a job for me!'," I say, waving both hands as the guy does in the music video. "Have you heard that one?"

Pinching her nose, she inhales sharply as she shakes her head. "Sigh. Are you making fun of me?"

I shake my head, grimacing as I rise a hand to count, ants marching on my back, biting and scorching. "No. I'm not messing around here. Lack of appetite, distorted sleep cycles, hastened speech, and the ill mood you've been in the last few days." Hands shake, I inhale through clenched teeth. Because it's the same, the same as she was when I met her for the first time in Sendai. "You wouldn't be abusing some… 'powder milk'-like substance, would you Yuuko?"

She doesn't return my gaze, she doesn't shake her head.

Instead, the cold blizzard of the XO comes from her lips, "My duty to humanity takes precedence over whatever small concerns you may have. I have plans to tend to, deadlines to meet. What small side effects I have to endure for now are nothing compared to what I'll gain from my efforts. There's nothing to be done, I just have to power through this until it's over. It's for the sake of the Project, you'd understand."

…

As if a wire had been cut off, something screeches in the back of my head. Feels as if I were under the downpour of a storm, the water hitting me like paint rounds, the wind blowing against me, my eyes closing in pain. My feet heavy, everything getting colder and colder.

The paper towers in my sight started to double, to multiplicate.

"Oh, really now? There's nothing to do about it, huh?"

"Hm?"

A small ringing started sounding on my ears.

"Then, next thing you know, there's Sadogashima and other shit coming our way. And you're going to, again, continue this way of

doing things. Because you never have enough time, according to you."

"S-Shirogane?"

Jaw's quivering as if I were in a pool at night. A small black dot appeared in my vision for a second.

"But you ain't gonna stop. Fuck no, you won't. Because then there's the XM3's test, the development of the tech, the coming operations, and who knows what other shit else."

"And what do you expect me to do? This is my duty, my responsibility. As the leader of the Project, humanity's fate rests on my shoulders. I am bound to-"

" *No!"*

"W-What?" She takes a step back, eyes widening.

" *You are **not** pulling this shit on me again! I am **not** going to stand by and let you destroy your own health just because you refuse to take a fucking break.* "

"Who do you think you are to- Eek!" Deciding to not listen anymore, I shave the distance and crouch by her side. Grabbing her legs under her knees, another hand supporting her back, I lift her off the ground, carrying her and storming off towards her room. "S-Shirogane, let me down! I'm going to call security if you don't!"

" *I don't give a fuck. You are going to rest, Vice Commander.* " Closing an eye as she started to thrash in my hold, having to restrain her right arm with mine, wrapping in under her armpit. Still leaves her left punching at my chest, bumping her elbow into my jaw.

But unlike what I thought, she isn't entirely light. There is weight to her body, beyond the bones. And her hits do hurt a bit, there's impulse behind them. Phew… She didn't get to that point yet, thank

God. But if I let her keep walking down this path, I know what's gonna happen. And I did nothing to actually help her last loop, I ain't gonna stand watching a second time. So, I pick up my pace, ignoring her threats and punches.

"I told you to let me down! I need to finish reviewing the equations of the 00 Unit before the final tests! Are you even listening?!"

" *Again, you're going to rest. You cannot keep compromising your health, much less if you've been forcing yourself to stay awake for who knows how many days now.* " I look into her eyes, her own features distorting and doubling for a second. Yuuko stalls her thrashing for but a second.

She frowns, her left hand grabbing, clawing at my chin, "Let me go now, and I won't hold this against you, Shirogane. My research also has ties to how to stabilize you and your world. You'd rather have me finding a solution for that quickly, wouldn't you? How to balance the tachyons you mentioned before?"

" *Yeah, that's true. But I refuse.* " Again closing an eye as she tries to break free, I keep walking.

"You should know how important this is, Kagami's digitization is also on the line! Stop walking, dammit!" Her legs start kicking up and down, as if she were making the butterfly in the water, as she sees we're almost to her room. "Shirogane, this is my last- Don't kick the door!"

Once the way is cleared, I enter the room in stride. Quickly moving to the bed, I drop Yuuko towards it. A small bounce of her weight on them, the sheets flutter and bend. Walking backwards to block the exit, I stand there, receiving her blazing gaze.

"I don't know what exactly you're planning to do here, but I will not stand by it!" Rising to her feet, I don't even have to move to stop her. Her own feet staggers as she tried to rush, one eye tightly closed as

she holds that leg, sitting down again, groaning through clenched teeth.

Sighing hard, the screeching of fire subsides, the heat in my chest recedes. So, I simply grimace, looking into her eyes, "… That's my line, Yuuko. You have to rest properly." She groans as our eyes met, bloody murder oozing from her glare, from the tightened expression. "No matter how dear your project is to you, no matter how much is riding on your shoulders, you know you need to take a break. Otherwise, *you* are going to break."

"Do you think I don't know this? With what authority are you-"

"What's that, by the way?" I say, pointing to a small white plastic cylinder in a corner, near her bed.

Squinting her eyes, she sighs, "It's just a trash bin."

"The most advanced base in the world has a half cut plastic thing as a trash bin? In the room of the XO?" I roll my eyes, raising both hands in fake surprise. She again stares murder into my eyes, the veins now visible in the whiteness that surrounds the fire. Just like back then. "Did you know that I'm very good at guessing random stuff, Yuuko?"

"What is this about now?"

"I dunno. That small cylinder there wouldn't be in your room for when you… can't take it anymore and end up puking your insides out?"

Flinching, slack-jawed for a second, her hands coil and shake. Slowly standing up, step by step she shaves the distance. "That has nothing to do with you. Move aside, or I will call security on you. If you do not obey, our partnership is as good as finished!"

" *And what happens if you end up fainting at a crucial time, Vice Commander? Do you think you can tend to your duties in this shape?* "

"Since when do you have the agency to tell *me* what to do?" Grabbing my collar, still frowning, "I could erase you for being this stupid, you know?"

My hand rests atop the one that grabbed my collar, she tried to pull it away hastily. Yet, I don't put any pressure on it. Taking it off my shirt softly, running my fingers on her palm, her dry and pale skin. Cracks marked at some places, reddening at others. She stalls a reaction, her hand doesn't release itself from mine, nor does her gaze.

"You cannot help anyone if you cannot take care of yourself first. You taught me that, Yuuko. And I told you before, I'm not your pawn. So, as your partner in the our shared goals, I'm going to have you resting, for both of our sakes."

"You have no power over me, Shirogane. I am your boss, and the one with the knowledge to save both your and this world. Knowledge I could be polishing as of now, if you weren't wasting our time."

"I don't think it's a waste myself. Any time you get to rest is worth more for humanity than anything else. Just because you can endure the grind doesn't mean you have to commit to it every time," I say, low, looking down to her hand, which I still hold as if a tender glass of porcelain it were. From how pale she looks, Yuuko might actually be made out of porcelain at the moment. "What you wish to accomplish with these hands won't vanish if you take a short nap. I'm not even saying you should actually sleep like the rest, just take a short rest. That's all."

"My time awake is too valuable. Who would do what I do, then?"

Smiling, I nod towards her, "I can help you out."

She raises a brow, "You? What could you possibly-"

"I cannot operate a machine like you do, no. I cannot understand the calcs you do, either." Then, I grasp her hand a bit tighter. "But I do know how to sort your reports, how you choose to automate your

tasks. I can arrange your papers so that you can tackle everything else once you're all rested up."

"Heh, do you think you're able to actually be useful to me? That I can rely on your 'help'?" The same frown, the same venom that leashed out back then. That night, that accursed Christmas of defeat.

So, chuckling, I remaining smiling, "At the least, I don't believe I'm completely useless, no. I'll be enough, to let you rest for a moment."

Yuuko's face sobers up, expressionless as she scans me. Saying nothing, not moving her hand away from mine.

"You're operating on an assumption, nothing else," She whispers. "Your concern is noted," She looks down for a second, slowly pulling her hand off mine, "and appreciated, however I am fine for the moment. I do not need to rest."

Shrugging, I chuckle at the dry ice wall she mounts in defense. "Yeah, just overload yourself and faint in the middle of work, why don't you."

Which of course makes her frown. "Are you insinuating I'm-"

"Why have you not being eating your dinner? What was up with your speech? Why were you wobbling so badly when grabbing the book? You must have been taking *something* that's not exactly helping you out. Oh, and 'powder milk' is not a valid answer, by the way."

"And why not?"

"I know you only drink your coffee black, and the only thing you add to it is liquor." I affirm, arms folded and nodding.

"… I may be different to the other Yuukos you met."

"Oh, really? Want a cup with cream and sugar, then?" I ask, smirking at her twitch, the slight purse of her lips she does when repulsed by something.

"Ugh… Why are you being this bothersome today of all days? I don't have time for this." She places a hand on my shoulder, trying to force me to move away. I don't, she doesn't have the strength to push me away, so we're again staring at each other.

"You need to rest, Yuuko. Even if only a little."

Rolling her eyes, ruffling her hair, she takes a step back. "Convince me, then. What is the pressing matter that has you being this obnoxious?"

Giving her a side glance, I lean on the door frame. "Besides the fact that I need you to look over the guards tomorrow if the mock battle goes wrong, you mean? Besides the fact that if I hadn't been there you'd have given quite the smooch to the ground or getting an encyclopedia to the head?" She frowns, fire arrows seeking the ground. Yet, she says nothing. Sigh… "Yuuko, you need to start taking proper care of yourself. One thing is min-maxing your schedule and staying up to finish something urgent, but you have to delegate some projects and reports. What's half an hour at first is then one full hour, then it turns to two, then you're not sleeping, and then we have today. Is a short nap that much to ask out of you? Don't you deserve that little?"

Eyes close, her voice again freezes over. "I believe you should know there's much only I can handle in this base."

"Yeah. And what happens if you're out cold? You do know that if you pass out, it will only hurt you more? Come on, I'm not asking you to sleep four hours or six. Just a little nap and that's it."

"And why, again, should I listen to your suggestion?"

"It's for your own good, as well as for the future of the children that will come."

Raising a brow, she then smirks for some reason. Then starts leaning a bit closer, tapping her lips with a finger. "So, we're having

kids now? Because last time I checked, we aren't fucking each other."

"Wh- It was a turn of phrase!" In the second I flinched, she moved forward. Almost squeezing past me, I had to throw myself against the door to block the exit.

"Tch… Aren't your reflexes top notch, Shirogane?"

"Sigh… Damn it all, Yuuko. *Do you have a death wish or what?!"*

"You're literally keeping me here against my will."

" *Because you can't neglect your health* !" Shaking my head, I sigh. Emptying everything, a void in the pit of my stomach, in my heart. As it did when I had to leave, despite how you were as you are now, barely hanging together, forcing your strings to move. "You can't do your best in your work to save humanity if you're constantly relying on coffee and… those substances to keep you awake through the day. And I know part of your extra duties are because of me this time. Because of that, I'm not leaving this office until you do go to sleep." I then nod, planting myself on the door frame again.

She takes a step back, arms folding. "And what if I call security?"

"What if you fall on your head due to a lack of sleep?"

"What if *you* fail the mock battle due to a lack of sleep?"

"Then, you can go to sleep now, so that I can also go to sleep later."

"… I could go back to work as soon as you leave the office. I still have much work to do, you'd understand."

"And I can help you with some of that, even if it's only the simple stuff. Two hours you sleep are worth more for humanity's future than two hours I lose of sleep today, right?"

"And, again, why should I listen to you?"

"I dunno, to ensure you tackle the 00 Unit's matters when you're properly rested. What if you miss something due to a headache, and that ends up spiraling out of control like in my last loop? Are you at the top of your game to handle humanity's salvation? Because the 00 Unit needs you at one fucking hundred percent, you know. If there's any leaking of data, the base is going to get thrashed again, let me remind you."

I know Yuuko wouldn't normally drop her game, but if she's this tired and so focused, almost desperate, to reach her goals, she might just force herself to stay awake until she sees it all bear fruit with her own eyes. Fuck, that might have been why the data leak happened last loop. Maybe Sensei didn't review everything as thoroughly as she would have if she had enough sleep, and that's why she missed something in the equations I brought from my world.

"Are you… saying I could… Oh." Her eyes again widen as she brings a hand to her face. Shortly after, her eyes fall down like an avalanche, it's as if she were about to erupt alive. "That's… true, I suppose."

"Can you at least rest for a while, just a short while? Please, Yuuko?"

Staring at each other, feeling water trickling down my nape as she says nothing for a long while, I gulp and hide my hands on my pockets. Eventually, she sighs, shrugs and ruffles her hair.

"You think you're able to be of use to my research, then?"

Sigh… Thank God, she didn't refuse. "Again, I don't believe I'm completely useless. I can cover your back while you take a short rest. It's… the only thing I can do to repay you for all the trouble my presence is making." That, too, is taking its toll on your shoulders. And in this more radical world, too. She did once say… that me being here made her life hell, when she snapped and threw her papers at me. There's little I can actually do for you, but I'm enough to give you a few hours of rest.

Holding my gaze again, she then rolls her eyes. "Fine. But if you make any stupid mistakes-"

"I won't, XO. I'll limit myself to do what little Yuuko taught me in the other loops."

One of her brows twitches, "I… taught you stuff?"

"Well, just how to help you with the reports and other stuff. Nothing too complex, some simple assistant training is all it was. I'm no Kasumi, but I can defend myself." Puffing my chest a bit, I nod to myself.

Her eyes narrow as do her lips, which also quiver a bit. "And why didn't you mention that until now, Shirogane?"

"Because you never asked me to help you." I eye her sideways as she groans.

Slowly walking away, she takes off her lab coat, leaving it in a hook on the wall. "I want a report on what you learned then, also coffee when I wake up."

"… And something to eat with it, *right?"*

Recoiling a bit, she pats one hand into her waist, eyes blazing again. "Shut up. Just do… I will accept your offer, this time. If you don't handle this well, I swear I'm-"

Speaking from my stomach, I take a step forward and stand in attention. "I'll simply arrange the reports for you and note down anything that might happen while you rest. I'm not stupid, I won't mess with the programs you're leaving in the background."

"… Fair enough. Don't make me regret this decision, Shirogane. Now, off you go."

"Sigh. Fine… Just rest well, okay?" Can't help but to wince a bit, turning around slowly as if I had an iron ball tied to my feet.

"Why are you upset, again?" She asks, sounding sour. I turn back, she's sporting a small frown and her arms are once more folded, "I don't recall since when I gave you permission to look after me, so you should be grateful I'm accepting your offer instead of calling for security. Clean that expression off your face." Fierce as always, despite the minute quiver in her lower legs. Trying too hard to stay strong, despite how she must be far beyond exhaustion.

"I just-" No, don't be stupid. *She isn't who you remember her as, it's obvious she'd only have scorn to return your worry . Just take the loss.* "Sigh. Whatever. See you in a few hours, XO."

"Why are you so upset, again? I am going to be resting." She says, pacing towards the bed, starting to unbutton the uniform.

"… A simple thanks was enough, you know. Just thanks, and then I leave the room." I shrug, shaking my head.

"It's your fault for placing such expectations on me." Then, she again taps her chin, chuckling for some reason with a smirk. "Oh, you wouldn't happen to miss that other me you 'took care' of? Don't tell me… Is that why you're so antsy and worried now?"

Standing by the door, not facing her, the door frame might have scars when I lift my hand. Head keeps lowering, as if I again were under the cold shower. So, I can only whisper back, " *If I said yes… Would you laugh at me?* "

"… Huh? W-What did you-"

"Nothing, forget it. Later." Stepping away, I grab the knob and start to close the door.

"Shirogane," She calls back from within the room, out of sight.

"What?" I answer, standing still a few feet outside the room, not closing the door fully, not looking back.

"… Thanks. Look after the paperwork, and direct any calls to a later hour. You're too tired to handle anything else properly."

"I know, I won't put your research at risk, XO. Anything else?"

"Feel free to order some food if you want, put it on my name."

"Ha! That's rich, coming from you at this time," Chuckling, I look back with a smirk.

"Wh- You have some nerve…" She says, choking the tie as she frowns, her skirt falling on its own.

Nodding her way, I rise a hand to salute her lazily, "I'll be fine, XO. I still do have some leftovers from my rations."

"I see. That's all, wake me up in one… two hours."

"Got it. Sweet dreams, Yuuko."

"Shut up!"

Smiling at rising lava, I simply close the door before she chooses to throw something at me. Turning around, I slowly walk away back to the office.

Dragging my feet, my gaze. Opening and closing a hand, the one that grasped hers. Feeling the lingering warmth on the fingertips, the faintness of her touch. How pale she was, and she still was willing to keep on hacking at it. Were you always doing this, Yuuko? Was that routine in Sendai your usual life all this time?

At least she accepted to rest. Hopefully, she won't keep punishing herself in this way. Sigh… Again, on the things that matter the most, I can't really help. Just sort some papers, do small things. I guess I should be thankful she gave me the benefit of the doubt, even if it was only because she knew how exhausted she really is.

"Well, I've work to do, I guess." Cracking my neck and knuckles, rolling up my shoulders and taking a deep breath, the cold blanket falls off me. Let's get cracking.

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*Around two hours later.*

*(Yuuko's room.)*

**[Yuuko]**

---

"Yuuko, can you hear me?"

Mmgh… Rustling under the sheets, something grabs my shoulders. Who the hell is bothering me now? Ugh… What hour is it, even?

"Yuuko. Earth to Yuuko. It's been two hours."

Slowly, a circle is drawn on my shoulders, reaching for my neck. Mmh… Feels nice. When was the last time I got a massage again?

"Come on. Vice Commander, don't blame me if you don't wake up, okay? It's been two hours."

Why did the hand stop? Ugh… Right, work. What was I doing before sleeping? There was the mock battle, the papers of the research… and then, Isumi's call. And…

Shirogane.

Blinking fast, stretching my legs, feeling the stiffness in my ankles, something reaches me as I yawn. The smell of coffee, close by.

"You awake now?" Shirogane asks, at the edge of my vision.

"… Yes. What hour is it?"

"2339. Oh, scratch that, it's forty." He says as he looks towards the clock. Taking a few steps towards the door, he looks back at me with a smile. "I'll be cleaning up my work."

"Wait."

"Hm? What is it?"

The smell, the color… He made the coffee just as I prefer it. There is a slight problem with that, though.

"Shirogane, did you use liquor in the coffee?"

"Yeah, the one that's in your safe."

"Wh- How did you open it?"

"You told me the code. Well, not you, but, you know what I mean," He says, shrugging. "I thought you'd like that after the nap."

"… Thanks. And," Looking by, there's a tray with toast, a fried egg, some rice, and diced chicken, "you had this done?"

"I called the PX, told them you wanted something simple to eat, and had them bring it here. Told them I was helping out due to the punishment when they asked why I received it, so don't worry, they won't ask any questions."

"I see."

"Anything else?"

"No, go back to the office." He nods, turning around and closing the door.

Now that I'm alone, I rise both hands upwards. Loose and stiff at the same time, I yawn strongly enough to move part of the sheets for a brief moment. Simply laying on the bed as I drink the coffee, as the slightly bitter taste fills me and a tender fire burns my throat, is like

floating along the clouds. Rubbing my eyelids as I eat what he left me, my ankles do circles onto themselves, the small knots still hurting a bit as I do. Yawning again, slipping off the bed, I fill my lungs with air. And as I dress up, leaving a hand on the base of my neck, I no longer feel my heartbeats echoing and echoing. It is rather…

"Refreshing." I conclude, running a hand on the back of my head. The heaviness that lingered there is no more, and at the mere thought I can recall what I was doing before going to sleep, throughout the evening.

There's nothing clogging my throat, no cold sweat, nothing sounding in the back of my hearing. Yawning one last time, cleaning a tear that comes out, my neck moves in circles, in circles. Calmness, focus. Merely bringing a thought back causes the numbers to surge forth. Clear as the sky, still as a lake. No counterweight attached to my back, I'm… calm, I suppose.

"I suppose, you were right, Shirogane. Sigh… I should be over this kind of mistakes."

Despite not noticing it myself, the more tired I grow the worse I'll perform. I may be a genius, but I have my limits. Perhaps, his idea of how tachyons are also affecting me does hold some water. And, he did ready a meal I'd favor despite my words towards him. I had thought he merely admired that other me he gave a pass to, yet those reactions tell an entirely different story.

*I suppose I should start taking into account his emotions and how could he react to my own actions.* I'd be a bother if he tries something like what he did before a second time. Plus, it's for my own benefit, to appease him so that the Nucleus stays undisturbed. Considering what's ahead, I shouldn't have lashed out so much. Sigh… Proof enough that I was in need of rest.

Putting on my lab coat, walking back to the office, something echoes in the distance. Is he… humming? There is some rhythm to the

noises, he is humming a song. Don't tell me he isn't taking this seriously. Speeding up, reaching the door that connects to the office, I find Shirogane tidying up a few stacks of papers.

And the rest of the office is also now tidied up. The books organized by the walls, the papers on the opposite end in stacks of different heights, which are divided by small walls of cardboard. Even my desk has half the amounts of papers I left in it.

"Baa bariras… latititi rastis…" And he's still singing, slightly swaying as his hair flutters. When did his hair grow so much, though?

"Shirogane?"

"Oh, hey." Giving a pat to the stack, he nods my way. "Feeling better?"

"Yes, thanks. However, I'd like you to never again pull something like that, Shirogane." I remind, low, glaring his way.

He merely gives me a side glance. "Start taking care of yourself and I won't have to."

All I'm willing to do is roll my eyes. Sitting back, noticing the papers I was going to start reading are right besides me, that the supplementary material is also close by, and that the right books are right where I would place them, I simply blink at the state he left my desk in. It's almost as if I had cleaned it myself.

"Uh, is something wrong?" He asks, brows curving, a hand rising to the back of his hair. *As he always does when he's nervous.*

"No, I was merely seeing you tidied up my desk well enough." Straightening myself, interlocking my hands, I then look his way. "Shirogane, report your work thus far."

Standing in attention, he looks to the shelves nearby. "I prepared all the reports that you had lying around. They're all in a proper folder,

with the right sticker and destination. Those who were for you, I stashed them in the upmost rows of the shelves. Is that alright with you?" He asks, lowering his head a bit, making his fringe flutter alongside him.

"Yes, it's fine." It's where I always leave them.

"Also, as you can see, I rearranged all the papers you had lying about."

"And, what did you do with them? Some of those papers hold key intel for my research, you know."

"Yeah. I just filtered them with the signs and called it a day, didn't have the time for anything else."

"The signs?"

"You know, those odd doodles you make."

"Wh- Those are not doodles! They're symbols of my-"

"Yeah, whatever. I put them all in order, there's a mark in the cardboard to show you which stacks are from what." He takes a step back, letting me see the markings he put in the cardboard walls that separate the papers. He even nailed my signs, too. "Really, why are those things so weird? Even my world's Yuuko did those doodles."

"She did?"

"Yeah, for real. She once had me print her thesis, and those odd things were everywhere in the pages. That's how I actually recognized the theory during last loop."

"Huh? Why?"

"Because only you would use those doodles alongside the equations."

Inhaling sharply, I lean back onto the seat, clamping my lips. "Fair enough. Did anyone call while I was asleep?"

"Yeah, your other sister did."

"Motoko-nee? What did she say?" If it's from her, then it means it's tied to the 00 Unit. I… I needed to answer that call!

"Don't worry, Yuuko. I told her to send you a mail with all the details since you were resting." He says, waving his hands down as if trying to put out a fire.

"Is that so?" Quickly restarting my laptop, a few clicks open my inbox. And there it is, after some scrolling down. *'Take care of yourself, Yuu-chan'* is written on the mail. Siiigh… This is the last thing I needed. Wait, if it was she the one who called… Looking at Shirogane, he stands there, returning my gaze. Furrowing his brows when I say nothing. "Did she ask you anything, by the way?"

"Huh?"

"Motoko-nee, did she ask you anything?"

"Oh, yeah. Why was I answering the phone, she then chuckled when I told her you were tired and needed a second to rest."

"And nothing else?"

"No, I told her you forbid me from speaking of anything not related to work and she dropped the questions," He says, nodding to himself, puffing his chest out. *How silly of you, to feel proud for that.*

Still, you made the right call. Motoko-nee wouldn't have stopped the questions if she had the chance. "I see. Is there anything else you want to report?"

"Actually, there is." He says, folding his arms, the prior cheer melting into a serious expression. "I took a look at the Valkyries' trainings in

Valgern-On while I was tidying up the papers and the books, and I think I know why they're having so much trouble in the Stallion."

"You do? What is it?" Leaning my chin on my interlocked fingers, I stare at him. Shirogane then points to my PC, to something that was running. Bringing it to the front, a few lines with some sort of letters fill the screen. "What is this supposed to be?"

"The inputs of the games. See, these are the button presses they made during the course of the trainings. Took me a while to get them from the shared files on multiplayer mode, thank God the controllers are made in image of the TSF's ones."

"So, what is the issue?"

"What I just told you." He shrugs, sighing heavily for a moment. "When I compared 'em to my own control logs, I found that there was actually not much of a difference between some of my movements with theirs. But, for some reason, the joystick I brought from my world is more sensitive than the controllers we made here."

"And this means… you can perform more movements than them?"

"Not only that, but faster as well. There might be even some moves I can pull off, thanks to the config of the Stallion's original joystick, that they cannot execute. That's why their techs are slower than mines, why I could dodge and attack better. The small difference was giving me an edge." He concludes, covering his mouth as he seems to yawn.

"I see. Is there something you believe can be done to mitigate this?"

"Why not abuse this, instead?" He smirks, slightly leaning forward, fired up.

"What did you have in mind?"

"Well, if the sensitivity of the controller is what allowed me to best the Valkyries despite being playing around, what if we replicated this with the TSF?"

"… So you'd like to have the liberty to customize the sensibility of the controls, to grant you more freedom of movement?"

"Something like that. The XM3 does this through software by reworking how the inputs are taken, but what if we also made a control scheme that would benefit from the XM3 to its fullest?" He asks, raising a fist, shining eyes. "And you don't even need to rework much, we can implement this through the feedback interface by having the machine adapt to the pilot's quirks and adjusting the controls' sensitivity during training. All we'd need is hardware that can support that function. Of course, we'd have to rework the inner motherboards of the controls, and make sure the extra sensitivity doesn't send anyone flying away into a building, but-"

"It's not that hard to achieve, what you speak of." Quickly typing on my keyboard, the files appear in my monitor. He remains gaping for a second, surprised into stillness. "Take a look at this unit."

"That's just a Shiranui with different paint, Yuuko." He says, low, arms folding as she gives me another side glance.

"No, this is a Type-1C. It's the latest Shiranui model available."

"The latest? Are the ones we have on the base older?"

"Yes, the ones we have are from the fist batch, Shiranui-1A. The rest of the Empire probably has B models by this point. There aren't great differences between the first and second batches, only fixing some minor design flaws, polishing the connectors or the jump units. But the 1C is different, it has an OS that sort of does what you have in mind now. It allowed the pilot to regulate the output of the craft, even during live battle."

"Huh?! For real? Why haven't I heard of this?"

"You haven't? Truly?"

"No, not even on my other loops." He then groans for a moment, scratching the lower end of an ear. "I think… there were talks of another TSF from the Empire at times, which I guess is the Shiranui Second you mentioned before, and how they didn't want to lease it to the UN. But I haven't heard of the 1C or this special OS. Why isn't it the standard unit?"

"Because the quirk was too hard to adapt to. Only a few veteran units managed to tame it. Disabling the shifting made it easier to control, but at that point it was better to just build B models, since they were cheaper. It was a test bed for the technology, and due to bad reception it got canned." Kicking the floor, I start to spin. Slowly, a smile rises in me. "However, perhaps there is a way in which we can gain access to one of these."

"Really?"

"Yes. After all, the 1C is the basis from which the Shiranui Second is built upon. The leader of the XJF Project is already here, working on the railgun. Maybe, we could convince the Empire to fork over the 1C as well."

"So, you think we can feasibly have adaptable hardware options like the ones in the 1C?"

"In time, yes. We do possess many things which the original dev team of the 1C lacked. An OS with the processing power required to make the spec shift shine in the XM3, many test beds to bring the controls up to modern standards thanks to the ongoing developments we have going thanks to the intel you brought. And, most importantly," I stop spinning, smirking his way as I place a finger on my chin, "we have a fitting test pilot that not only understands the quirks but can bring them to life with ease."

"You really do like to send me on hard missions, do you?" He scratches the back of his head, looking up. Hesitant or

embarrassed? Matter not, *I only spoke the truth about your skills, ace pilot.*

"Well, you are a veteran, after all. Is the man who bested all of my Valkyries scared of his own ideas?" I ask, giggling as he closes his eyes.

"Sigh… No, it's just, you know, kind of daunting after this morning," He says, or rather whispers, as he leans on the sofa.

No, he's supporting himself onto it. Eyes half open, only now do I notice the redness below them. Of course, he also must be exhausted. He did plenty while I rested, let's send him to sleep.

"It's just an idea for the moment. Don't think about it too much. You did enough today, Shirogane. You may return to your cell."

"Yeah… I think I'll do just that." He then yawns widely, letting me see the end of his throat as he stretches his arms up. *Was he this tired all this time? Then, why did you insist on letting me rest? You idiot.* Saluting me halfheartedly, he turns around and waves, "Well, I'll be taking my- Oof!" Instead of walking straight, he drifted left, hitting his feet on the shelf.

"Hey, are you alright?"

"Y-Yeah. Don't worry, just- *Yawn.* Just a bit tired." He nods my way, yet when he begins to walk, he drags his feet. Wobbling, holding his head, slower than a snail or Yashiro when carrots are on the menu.

He's the one exhausted now, huh. Perhaps, having to use his pull to recall what that other me taught him caused such tiredness in him? No, I had him going from one place to the other all day long. A mock battle first thing in the morning, the recovery session, the meeting, then his work in his office to later be sent to the Valkyries. No wonder he's ready to faint.

*And despite that, he insisted I slept first.*

… That aside, he looks truly out of energy. Well, nothing he can't shake off with proper sleep.

*What if he runs into the guards on his way back to the cell?* That might be a problem, but then again, it is late already. I don't think they'd be up and about at this hour considering there's a mock battle tomorrow. *On the other hand, some spiteful idiotic soldiers could ambush him.*

Siiigh… He's in no shape to do anything, that's true. And considering what's coming up tomorrow…

"Uh, Yuuko, could you unlock the door?" He asks, scratching his head as he looks back at me.

… A small mercy, as thanks for letting me sleep and handling his work nicely.

Standing up, I point to the sofa. "You're sleeping there tonight."

"Huh?"

"You heard me. You're clearly exhausted as of now, and if the guards or any hostile soldiers run into you, it could get you into quite the problem. So, I'll have you rest here."

"Um, you can just call an MP to escort me back to the cells, right?" He says, looking up, away from my eyes.

"It's too late, and I don't want to deal with any explanations right now. I have work to do, so shut up and lay on that sofa."

"Are you sure?"

"What did I tell you to do?" Grasping my chin, squinting my eyes, I take a few steps towards him.

"Fine, fine," He shrugs, sighing. "Sorry, I'll try to wake up as soon as possible."

"Don't worry, I'll have you up early enough. Now, lay there. I'll be back in a second."

"Wait, where are you going?"

"To get you some sheets, of course."

"Huh."

"… What is it with that reaction?" Can't help but to frown, taking a step towards him.

"No, it's that during last loop you had me sleep here once, but you didn't give me a sheet or anything." He says, nodding, rubbing one of his eyes.

"As I've been telling you, I am not those other versions of me you met before. Remember that well." Holding his gaze for a moment, once he nods back I go towards my room.

The nerve of him, to try and refuse my offer. He's been nothing but help to me, despite a few moments of annoyance. Giving him some cover is not even a grand gesture. And, I need you in full focus tomorrow. Otherwise, all the preparations will be for nothing. If you stood your ground against me, despite also being exhausted, then all the more reason to have you well rested for tomorrow. *Plus, he deserves the reward. Shirogane did a fine work while I slept.*

Twisting my lips at the foot marked on the door as I open it, my hands reach for the switch. Opening the closet, crouching and rustling the things a bit, my hands bring out a simple standard issue sheet. Well, this should be enough. It isn't particularly cold, after all. Yes, I suppose this shall suffice.

…

*But perhaps a second one would be welcomed, considering he's been sleeping in the cells for a while now. Also, do I have a spare*

*pillow?* Standing on the tip of my feet, I do find one in the back of the top row. Alright, this should prevent any odd cramps in his neck or anything of the sort.

Slapping the doors closed, once I turn off the light I return to the office, carrying the three things.

"Shirogane, I brought- Huh?"

As soon as I sat foot back in the place, I heard a small, drowned sound. Snoring, quiet yet constant. Walking up to him, tapping his shoulder, Shirogane doesn't react. Slumped on the sofa, one hand dangling to the floor, he was already asleep.

"Sigh… And then you have the gall to tell me to rest when I'm exhausted. You didn't even take your boots off." Seriously, you were planning on walking back to the cell like this?

Shaking my head, I slowly place a hand on his chin, lifting his head. Pushing the pillow under him, he barely even moves. Crouching by his side, untying his boots, I grab both feet and tuck them into the sofa. Standing up, the sheets envelop him whole, and my hands press on his side to ensure they won't fall off. Bringing that runaway hand under the sheets, making sure his feet were well covered, I finally sigh, seeing that he was made into a comfortable cocoon.

His breathing steady, his face relaxed, Shirogane sleeps without a care in the world. I wonder, will you also dream of memories from days past? *I hope not, at least enjoy one night in peace. You did enough today.*

Twirling his hair, coiling his bangs on one of my fingers, I hadn't noticed yet how much his hair had grown. He isn't even taking care to maintain a proper hairstyle, I bet. Such a powerful performance, to endure the toll of an ESPer in the Mindseeker. Such resilience, to have kept your cool during the meeting despite what you remembered. Even in front of me, since you saw parts of that mission. And looking around, you truly did a good job in so little time.

Even managed to present me a better breakfast than I've had in quite some time. *Maybe, I should have you doing my coffee from now on.* Heh, there are more important things to handle, however.

And yet, you're sleeping soundly. I thought he was going to snap at me, perhaps demand something ridiculous, yet you keep on surprising me despite the change you made me do to my schedule.

"I swear, you're such a high maintenance unit," I let go of his hair, smiling. Tapping one of his cheeks with a finger, I lean over to whisper to his ear, "Have a good night's rest, Shirogane. You're gonna need it. Hehehe…"

# Nicks in the Edge

*A/N: Instead of following the end of the prior entry, this chapter starts back with the rest of the cadet squad, whose last appearance was in chapter 47. Don't worry, I won't take twenty chapters just to detail the events of a single day again, in the short term.*

*That's all for now, so I bid you welcome to the Mock Battle Mini-Arc™. Hopefully, both old and new readers will find things to look forward in this rewritten version of this part of the story.*

*Also, thanks to all those who commented on last chapter! I was really on the fence on Yuuko's part in it, on how to have her rest well while not having her react OOC, so it was a relief to see I didn't mess that up. I've been busy IRL, so I couldn't reply to anyone yet. Also, to that one commenter who said Cannonball might play in the fic at one point… (͡° ͜ʖ ͡°).*

*As always, thanks for reading. Stay safe.*

*Zuoriel*

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*Chapter 67:*

**Nicks in the Edge**

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*December 2nd. Around 07:30 PM.*

*(Yokohama Base. Library.)*

**[Meiya]**

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"Then, you'd prefer us to engage in suppression efforts?" I ask, leaning onto the table.

Tamase nods, her shoulders compacting slightly as she points to a book, "If Takeru-san starts moving too erratically, I won't be able to shoot him down. His constant changes of direction and speed make it hard for the auto-lock to pinpoint his position accurately, after all."

"And missing your shot will expose you to the other team, huh," Yoroi then sighs, placing both hands behind her head. "Do you really think we could hold him down for even a second?"

"Just tumble him down," Ayamine nods to herself, not lifting her sight from the book she and Sakaki were reviewing. "Special-kun is terribad when it comes to regaining his footing, so use that to screw with his moves."

"Terribad?" I can't help but to fold my arms, stare at her firmly. Why would Ayamine be using such odd wording?

"I guess it means being horrible at something, I dunno," she then shrugs.

"Sigh… We really need to tell Shirogane-kun to tone down those odd words he always uses," she says, tapping her glasses as she frowns ever so slightly. "In any case, we won't know which formation the Instructor will decide to employ until the last moment. Regardless of our own individual progress, the match will be decided by which team can support or neutralize Tamase and Shirogane-kun the best. So, why don't we reread the notes we took during our prior session?" She asserts as she runs a hand over the book, looking at all of us in the eye for a moment.

Of course, I return a smile as I nod back, as does everybody else. Thus, once more bringing books and lone pages to the center of the table while we huddle and lean closer to it, we start rereading the notes we have been taking so far.

Yet, my sight veils itself momentarily and I have to take a deep breath. The talk I had with Master and Tsukuyomi a few days ago had revealed that this coming mock battle won't have us pitted

against each other, after all. Knowing that I shall be facing mine own old retainers tomorrow is enough to cause delays in my breathing, it makes my knees quiver in anticipation yet it also brings forth stillness and doubt. If all of us are to spar against Tsukuyomi and the trio, then Tamase might become a target, Sakaki herself also might. My lips simply shrink and twist inwards, merely pondering the outcome of any grave unpleasantries being hurled to them is plenty enough for my stomach to shudder. Almost as if I had stepped outside barefooted, running my feet onto the cold soil of the track field. Not only my presence will impair our training, but also place my squadmates in quite the precarious position. But, above all else…

Slowly moving the pages, where what he had imparted to us after his bout with Sakaki and Ayamine laid written, I can merely stare at the words. Not reading them, not even trying to, I only look at the paper, running my fingertips over the ink amidst the silence of the library. Crossing a leg, resting my chin on a hand, it does little to ease the minute, faint numbness on my back and neck.

What will be of you, Takeru? Despite your aid to Tamase, despite your efforts to bridge the rift that separated Sakaki and Ayamine, there are still whispers speaking ill of you. Yesterday, you were most certainly absent during the lecture despite being physically present. He does tend to lose his gaze towards the clouds at times, yet I've never seen Takeru absorbed into his inner thoughts to such extent. Whatever this punishment is forcing upon your shoulders is starting to show its mark, I'm certain.

However, Tsukuyomi did warn me. You may not be an ally, but a spy instead. Yet, that tired smile as you referred to Ayamine by name, the focused gaze on the floor as your steps didn't wane upon the whispers that followed us to the hangar, and even Tamase's words about how you tried to aid her overcome her fear, all of that tells a different story.

Reaching out for a pencil, gripping it too tightly, my strokes are too strong, too thick, and I have to erase them and sigh, start over again

on my notes as we debate lightly while reading the manuals and control logs.

Tsukuyomi would never lie to me. Daizaburou-sifu would never try and deceive me over some petty misunderstanding. Then, what has made their gazes lock onto Takeru's back? Tsukuyomi did admit she was not aware he possessed a Minaru Kamui, and that she only acted as she did when she found me and Takeru arguing because she thought he had earned the favor of a member of the Guard. Apparently, she was not aware of the fact that his databases were lacking so much data then.

Hands stopping short, I rest the pencil and stand up. Excusing myself, I pace to a corner, grab a plastic cup and serve myself some water. Slowly drinking, leaving it in my mouth for a second before gulping it, feeling the coldness seeping through my throat, then I start taking a few deep breaths. Holding the air, counting the amount of inhalations, trying to move my neck and fingers, try as I might the distant shiver refuses to leave me. A small sound of static far in the background, a faint moment of blankness, an answer does not come forth. Dragging my feet back to the table, again I try and continue my notes despite Yoroi's concerned comment about the slowness of my movements. Which wanes as I say I am fine, replaced by her habitual smile as she asks me something about Takeru's jumping patterns.

Sigh…

If he's a spy passing as someone else then, what causes that glint in his eyes when speaking of his past? Could he be lying? *No, how could I think such a thing of Takeru? If I agree on th e s e view s , wouldn't I be the same as those who would hurl defamation behind his back?* He has had the temperance to forgive my misgivings, my shameful attitude. Certainly, he must have been very upset at my words after our first flying run, yet Takeru still was willing to let it slide. Unless, of course, he does so due to a mission as a spy.

Again constricting the pencil, again having to erase and redo my notes, answering Tamase's questions as her eyes couldn't fully meet mine, despite how she had the right answers all along, does not facilitate the pondering in the slightest. Even as Sakaki leans closer to ask me some pointers about CQC, even as I remind her to use the flat side of the blades when parrying, even then the shiver does not vanish from my nape.

*It is my duty to the Empire, to remain ever vigilant. UN attire might I endow as of now, yet my heart has not forgotten who I must serve. I am forsworn to Her Highness, above all else. So, if Takeru truly is an enemy to my people, then little choice do I have but to strike him down. I have a duty and an obligation to fulfill, regardless of my personal views of him.* Takeru has not yet shown any aggressive signs towards the Empire, even if he did murder those soldiers. Tsukuyomi, Mion and Shion went to have a talk with him when he was resting on the track field, yet he didn't seem tense in the slightest when I inquired about it. Concerned would be fitting to his complexion at the time, perhaps. And if he were a spy, would he truly be so relaxed around my person or Sakaki? Despite all that transpired during the CCSE, he's still being as friendly as when he had just arrived, even the odd chain of jokes he shares with Yoroi have not diminished at all.

… Uh, I'm going in circles all over again.

They might have asked me to keep an eye on him, yet I cannot find an answer. *If he were to display signs of aggression towards the Guard, towards our values, then I'd have to notify his wrongdoings.* Yet, he has maintained a composed attitude thus far. Tamase's relaxed and bright complexion, how Sakaki and Ayamine are studying together is proof of that. *That we are discussing a possible mock battle in itself is a reminder that, had it not been for Takeru's actions, me and Sakaki would not have passed our test. Have I repaid him for that gesture? No, I have done nothing to that end, to truly pay back the debt I owe him.* Even when he is suffering an unjust punishment I'm still thinking Takeru might be an enemy. I

should be ashamed, I do not deserve Takeru's trust. As if what he asked of me was sufficient in any way to truly forgive what I did, what my weakness forced his hands to do.

" *It's a beautiful name, that's all. I just think it suits you well."*

Ugh, not again. Why did you have to ask such a thing of me? I cannot comprehend the reasoning, nor why is he still as composed as usual in my presence after all that has transpired. Do you possess nerves of steel or are you just oblivious?

… *But, what if he were a spy? What if all this as just a ruse? Even if I am indebted to him, I cannot compromise my duties as someone who is supposed to safeguard Her Highness.* The fact that he might have stolen a Minaru Kamui should be enough to have him executed. However, how does Takeru know of the Mugen Kidou? Then again, if Tsukuyomi says he isn't worthy of the blade, can he explain that himself? What could possibly have him refusing to speak of the matter? If Takeru indeed was… infatuated with the member of the Guard that gave him the blade, why is he showing such reticence towards Tsukuyomi and the cousins? He did mention that he had remembered something about his past, and was quick to smile and forgive my doubts. And… he also allowed me to refer to him by name, as well. Yet, I cannot deny that this could all be just a castle of lies.

And yet, were it not for him… I look up, at the calm exchange of whispers, at the pleasant string of scribbles. When was the last time we all could sit down and study together in this way?

"Just look at the radar. The battlefield doesn't follow a script," Ayamine says, sighing.

A finger makes rounds on the air as she leans back on the chair. "However, breaking formation would be even more dangerous. Especially against Shirogane-kun's acrobatics. Our radars can scan different distances and sounds for a reason."

"We're just gonna be sitting ducks against Special-kun's air jousting, better to be on the move just in case," she insists, pointing a finger to the control logs Yoroi had on her hands, where Takeru's sky diving maneuver was detailed. "And it prevents Tamase from locking onto us, too."

Tapping her glasses, she sighs, "I know that, Ayamine. But not all of us can move as nimbly as you do, and we have to stick together to keep him down. Also, we need to account for Tamase's marksmanship if we fight with Shirogane-kun. If we scatter, we could be easily fall to a pincer tactic." Shaking her head, she then lightly pats a small stack of papers, "I don't want any of us getting shot down carelessly during this mock battle. As the squad leader, I have to ensure our tactics of choice can let all of you perform at your best."

"Well, that's a first, alright," Ayamine says, smirking as she gradually brings a hand to a cheek, as if flabbergasted.

"Wh-Why, you-"

"Sakaki-san, she was just joking!" Tamase quickly speaks up and waves her hands frantically for a second, dropping her pencil in the process.

"No, but Chizuru-san has a point," Yoroi comments, still reading the pages she has monopolized. "If we don't take this seriously enough, our scores might suffer, right?" She then looks at us, Tamase nodding as she bends over to pick up her pencil, Sakaki brushing her hair as she calms down, Ayamine and me merely nodding slowly. Yoroi's eyes dive down into the page, scratching one cheek. "So uh, well, considering Takeru's score during the CCSE, maybe we could let him, Meiya-san and Chizuru-san take center stage?" She says, voice lowering with each word, elbows and shoulders growing closer to her person. "Of course, it' just an idea…"

"Nah, I think that's fine," Ayamine smiles, giving a thumbs up.

"Yes, I agree," Tamase also nods.

"Not like we can do much to actually neutralize Shirogane-kun in the first place," Sighing, she raises both hands in defeat.

I can't help but to chuckle along Yoroi at our squad leader's dejection. Nodding her way, I rest my hands on the table. "Well, while I do agree to some extent, are you certain of this? You three also must tend to your own scores," I ask, delving into their eyes. "Also, I do not wish you to hold back against me nor give me any advantages."

"W-Well… Sorry, it was just a thought," Yoroi whispers back, hiding her chin and mouth behind the papers.

"No, I was not faulting your proposition. It is just, purposefully lowering your own performance won't truly benefit us, in my opinion."

"We triumph and fail as a unit, right?" Ayamine says, low, as she folds her arms and nods. "Everybody has to do their share, but we can push you to show off what you do best. Plus, I'd be boring to have you three lagging behind in the scoreboard. What would that say of our squad leader?" She then smirks again, Tamase's and Yoroi's eyes widen as they flinch, wordlessly screaming once more, while I simply sigh.

"… Exactly, we must prioritize the victory of the squad," Sakaki nods, inhaling sharply through her nose despite how one of her brows seems to be twitching for a moment. "If you're all willing to let us show off a bit, I don't have any complains. But don't miss obvious shots just because you want us to get good scores. The Instructor will certainly notice that." And again, her finger draws a nebula on the air.

The others nod, and we go back to reviewing everything together, bringing our own notebooks to the center of the table this time while Tamase and Ayamine stand up to bring some water to the others.

But, Sakaki's words do right true. We must prioritize the squad as a whole, the good of the team above all else. *In my case, that equals the Empire. So, if Takeru shows signs of being an enemy as Tsukuyomi said…* Again, my fingers slowly veer away. Again, my strokes are mistaken and I have to erase and restart, sighing as I do.

"Are you alright, Mitsurugi?" Sakaki asks.

"Yes, pay me no mind. My fingers are prey to… anxiety for the moment, it would seem."

"Yeah, I can totally get what you mean," Yoroi also sighs, finally releasing the papers as she accepts a cup of water from Tamase. "I can't believe it's finally time for us to fight our first real mock battle."

"Doesn't feel real, right?" Ayamine smirks as she hands Sakaki a cup.

"Yes, I suppose that's true," Brushing her hair behind her ears and the glasses, she nods.

"D-Don't worry!" Tamase loudly says, braving a smile despite the shaking of her hands. "This is just the first practice run, right? We have time to mend any mistakes we do tomorrow."

"I agree," I nod with a smile towards her, her shoulders lower and relax as she nods back. "We shall be making many beginner mistakes, I'm certain. Still, that does little to assuage the anticipation."

"Yeah, same here," Sakaki nods, and all the others follow suit. "Well, let's not focus on that too much, alright?" She orders, arms folding. We again nod and resume our studying.

It is almost surreal, to think we can now share a table in this manner. That we can debate over what we fear might happen tomorrow, that I myself can be honest with them now. All thanks to you, Takeru. To how you always tried to support us, how you never bragged or

ridiculed our efforts. Always smiling, only trying to fit in and aid us with what he had already learned. And yet… all of that might have been a lie. It makes my heart feel parched, my mouth dries up at the thought and my pencil again stops and once more Yoroi asks me if I'm tired. Shaking my head and inhaling sharply, I blink a few times before refocusing on the papers we're sharing.

Or at least, I try to.

… Did I not see Takeru's own pained face during the CCSE with my own eyes? He was clearly crying when speaking of whoever that 'someone' is. Whoever gave him the Minaru Kamui, whoever imparted him with such lessons, who has kept his gaze captive to this very day. Lips twist in, my feet entangle for the moment, and I support my chin on a hand as I explain to the others how I prefer to parry and counter while employing the melee halberds.

And yet, the shiver does not leave my nape in peace. What if he grows distant due to this doubtful attitude? Takeru did ask me and Ayamine to ignore him once before as I again grew suspicious of him. *He has trusted in me, confided in me… Why am I hoisting such reticence towards Takeru when he has always been accommodating to my inquiries? Never has he looked at me differently, never has he tried to take advantage of me.* All the contrary, he refused my aid when we met again after the CCSE, and he didn't take as much offense as he should have when I barged into his privacy and then confronted him over the Minaru Kamui. Perhaps, he only wanted to avoid any tensions by having me of all people defending him after the CCSE's incidents. Yet, that only shows his awareness, his determination to shoulder the blame on his own. *I should be praising, supporting him, then.*

But, Tsukuyomi and my own master in the art of the sword harbor doubts towards him. I suppose, despite my own afflictions towards it, this coming mock battle shall be a fitting test of character for Takeru. Under the pressure of the fighting, of their words, your true self will shine through.

Once we had all shared our own thoughts on the notes and discussed some more about possible tactics, we start tidying up our table. The manuals returned to their shelves, our notes safeguarded under our arms, we bow down and thank the clerk before taking our leave. The hallways are as quiet as the library, since it is almost time for the usual curfew to end. Yoroi stretches her arms up, her shoulders crack as she does, Ayamine yawns as she massages her nape while her steps slow down, and Tamase and Sakaki remain debating on some tactic to bait Takeru that they couldn't finish. We already had dinner, there is little left for us to do save rest. Eventually, we arrive at the barracks as per usual, giving our parting words when we do, Sakaki reminding us not to stay up too late before entering her room, again waving a finger in circles. We all nod to the others, and with one last word I open the door and enter my room.

And in it, in the silence of my privacy, I finally sigh and grimace as I flick the lights on.

I suppose, everyone is going to review the notes regarding Tamase's sniping and Takeru's eccentric maneuvers. Yet, as my boots drag themselves on the floor, as I lower my books onto my desk, my lips part to sigh once more. I cannot possibly sit to study in the shape I am now.

"And it is far too late for me to go for a jog outside." Not to mention, I might exhaust myself if I do. I couldn't even meet with Takeru today, Yoroi also said she wasn't allowed to visit his cell before we started our study session.

Still, to continue to repine over this matter overlong will certainly give me a headache. If I trust in Takeru, then I simply have to stand and watch. He can certainly clear all these misconceptions on his own accord. And I have to focus on my own trial, depending on how this battle plays out Daizaburou-sifu might choose to bequeath me with an opportunity to cross strikes with him and earn the title of Mugen Kidou Master.

Sigh… Inhale, deeply. Feel the air filtering into your stomach, feel it enlarge as you do. Do not tense your abdomen, let the air leave gently through your mouth.

Running my hands over my ankles, I sit on the floor. Crossing my legs, resting my hands on my lap, I look upwards while closing my eyes, while inhaling deeply once more. A small shiver, a stiff twinge of pain, a sign of tension on my shoulders as I move them up and down for some seconds. Tranquility, silence, peace as I breathe in, relaxed lips as I exhale.

"Within the warrior, only two roads are seen…" And while surrounded by this stillness, I chant our code.

For I must nurture my honor, to be able to distinguish which path I must take.

For I must nurture my valor, to bring luster to my mind for the trials that lay in wait.

For I must nurture my compassion, to safeguard Tamase and Sakaki should an issue arise.

For I must nurture my poise, to not lose myself to emotion were something happen regarding Takeru amidst the battle.

For I must nurture my honesty, to be truthful with myself should I be required to take action to shield my squadmates. Or face Takeru in these doubts my retainers hold.

For I must nurture my judgmental mind, for I am a blade and a shield, for I am to be Her Highness' guarding shadow.

"Pheeew…"

All that distorted my hearing, all that crawled on the background is no more. No ripples in my breathing, nothing interrupting the breeze as I exhale, no quiver anywhere in me. I am at peace, at least for the

moment. I've done all I could, so I suppose I should be taking a shower and retiring to sleep soon.

As I begin standing up, my gaze wanders to my desk. A small hesitation, an infestation of doubt on my fingertips as they grab the small knob of a drawer and pull at it.

"Sigh… There is still one oath I must honor before I rest for the night," I take out the envelope, smiling as I do, as I sit down and bring the chair closer to the desk.

The vanilla scent it once had is no more, the pristine white now succumbing to a yellowish tint, and rugged edges meet my fingers as I run them over the envelope, where perfect flatness once was. I've treasured this letter with all of my soul, yet time has found its way to harm it. Again sighing, the air reaches my hands that barely hold the edges of the paper. My heartbeats echo within as I gulp, as my fingers gently part open the envelope, gently remove from within it the lone page, all I have left.

"… Two years, huh. Time certainly has passed quickly." And yet, here I am. Still unable to do anything substantial, to truly contribute to my nation and people.

However, rereading this letter once again, my legs rub against one another on their own accord. Smiling as I read, the words echo in me. While taking my time to traverse each paragraph, walking the terrain as opposed to taking a train, the turns of phrase and what they rekindle in me makes my heart leap momentarily, my stomach tenses on its own. Folding it slowly, as carefully as if I were sheathing my blade, once the letter has been safeguarded inside the envelope I bring it to my chest, holding it with both hands as I simply close my eyes and sigh once more.

"You were most certainly right. Even if it is time for action and not words, one must always be on the lookout for any small glimmer of hope that shines through. For those who aim to become a sword that smites evil from its root, our own veneer must remain undaunted.

Clear and sturdy as truth itself, as the light that always shines up above."

Smiling at it one last time, I safeguard the envelope in the drawer and seal the wood slowly. Sighing while standing up, I then rise both arms up as I start removing my jacket. No lingering shivers nor static is left in me as I continue to undress or as I walk into the bathroom, under the shower. It is not that a fair amount of sorrow hasn't returned with those memories, yet I refuse to allow that caustic venom to mire one of the few treasures I've been bequeathed with.

"Because it always made so, so happy to receive your presents and letters." So, I refuse to lose you to this poison.

Enjoying the relaxation that pours from above, I massage the back of my head, now free of the ponytail, as I rise my face to meet the shower. And so I stand, simply basking into the lukewarmness as I smile, as I repeat the words of my code, and that personal oath I made so many nights, so long ago when this letter, this last letter of yours reached my hands after that accursed August 5th. That faint light you gave me, when everything looked so very grim.

"… After all, if I am to safeguard Her Highness, if I wish to bestow a smile upon our future, I myself must be ready to do what's necessary, come what may."

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*Next Day. Around 7:30 AM.*

*(Yokohama Base, Ground Level. Changing Room.)*

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"So with that in mind, would you be willing to follow my plan? I know I'm imposing, however-"

Sakaki raises a hand, sighing, "It's alright, you don't have to explain anything else. And don't take this too hard, I don't think you're the only cause for this arrangement."

"What do you mean, Chizuru-san?" Yoroi asks as she sits down, starting to untie her boots yet not looking at either me or Sakaki in the eye.

"That it's clear our training course is meant to be harder, so I don't think it's odd to place us against commissioned pilots on our first mock battle," she notes, again tracing circles in the air. "Anyways, don't start thinking this decision was made solely because of you, Mitsurugi."

"I shall not," I answer, nodding back as I remove my jacket and open my locker. "However, please do let me take the vanguard. It's the least I can do to shield you from any… strong worded opinions the Imperial Guards might harbor."

"I'll be leaving that to you, then," Sakaki shrugs, taking off her glasses before unbuttoning her own jacket.

"So, um," Tamase asks, her gaze veering from me to the ground to a wall in quick succession, her fingers delaying the untying of her boots, "what should we do during the fight? All of our tactics were based for elements of two or three units."

"Can we split in two elements?" Ayamine asks, throwing her tank top into the locker, taking out parts of her suit. "Mitsurugi can act as bait for the Guards, to let another team strike at them from a blank point."

"I do not believe they'd be so easily deceived by such a simple tactic," I say with quite a dejected nod as I take off my own tank top. Not only we will have the trio, but Tsukuyomi and both cousins to contend with. They might be using Zuikakus for the most part, yet the experience they have will give them a clear advantage against us, even if we pilot Fubukis.

"We do have Tamase to keep them busy, until Special-kun can whack them with that air jousting thing he does," Ayamine asserts with a smirk, giving Tamase a thumbs up.

"Eh?! Ah, well…" And she again looks down, gently folding her clothing into her locker, lethargically taking off her suit as if a snail she had become. "I don't know if my skills are up to par with Royal Guards."

"Worry not, we shall be by your side, Tamase," I smile her way, nodding. "Why don't you cover my back during the battle?"

"Huh? B-But… But, you know, being who I am, they might take offense if you choose me as your partner."

"I assure you, there is nothing you should worry about. I shan't allow them to hurl any unpleasantries towards any of you."

"And if they do anything against you, we have the recordings to back our words up this time," Sakaki says, sitting down and putting the thin cover over her legs.

"I do not believe they'd try anything, yet I concur there is nothing we should concern ourselves with regarding them acting in a foul manner. So Sakaki, may I have Tamase as my backup?"

"Yeah, let's go with that. Yoroi, you're with Mitsurugi as well."

"Eh? Me?" Yoroi's hands freeze as she was pulling her arms into the suit, eyes widening. "But, you know, uh, wouldn't it be better if you cover her, Chizuru-san?"

"What are you saying? Your mid-range is more apt to cover Mitsurugi's charges. And if I go with her, then Shirogane-kun and Ayamine will lack a deterrent," She says, nodding to herself as she again spins a finger, then bends over to place her leg guards on.

"Sakaki, I do believe Yoroi's concerns are valid. Why don't you… place Takeru alongside me? I can ensure he does not employ any of those reckless maneuvers while keeping the guards silent, if need be."

As soon as she returns herself upright, Sakaki shakes her head. "Considering how they reacted against Yoroi when she touched… that unit, I don't think it's a good idea to put Shirogane-kun besides you. While all of us are Japanese, remember that he comes from America. After how those two were towards him during the CCSE, I think placing him with you will only serve to make him into a target."

"How can you ascertain that?" I ask, a small frown on me as the arm guards click into place, as each finger locks under the armor.

"I… do think Sakaki-san is right," Tamase notes, hunching over as she puts her shoulder pads in place. "Remember how those two were back in the island?"

"Yeah, they did come asking for Takeru, now that you mention it," Yoroi nods, running her hands over her body as she checks for anything out of place.

"Looked really pissed off, for some reason," Ayamine comments as she locks her shoulder pads firmly, then also checks all her joints and pieces.

I do the same, yet find nothing wrong with my setup. So, pushing the trigger, the suit tightens on me, the small startup sign projected into my eyes. Yet, I sigh and fold my arms. "That was only due to what transpired back then, nothing else. Still, if you deem it as an issue, I shan't object your decision, Sakaki."

"Thanks, really," smiling, she nods my way. Tapping her own trigger, her suit constricts onto her figure and she puts her glasses on once more. "So, since Ayamine is the only one who can match Shirogane-kun's antics, she'll be in his team alongside me. Is that okay with you?" She asks, tapping the rim of her glasses.

And receives a smirk and a thumbs up. "Don't worry, I'll keep watch over Special-kun's ass so that he doesn't get in trouble."

W-What? What did she say? *Has she no shame?! To even hint that she'd be…* No, focus on the battle. It is no time to be embarrassed by these petty discussions.

Turning around, closing the locker, I sigh one last time, then start inhaling deeply, slowly, until my stomach is full and I have to release all the air, the tension in me. "So Sakaki, you'll form a team with Ayamine and Takeru, while I lead Yoroi and Tamase?"

"Yes, sounds like a plan. Let's discuss this in more detail in the hangar with Shirogane-kun, though. Is everyone ready?" She asks, we all nod.

Closing the last lockers, we exit the changing room. Yet, the Instructor is nowhere to be found nearby. Instead, a slim woman with long hair, garbed in a formal dress with the insignia of a 1st Lt was platicating with Takeru, who had finished preparing before us as usual.

"Um, excuse me," Sakaki slowly says, taking a step towards the woman. Then, she seems to flinch. "Haruka-san?"

"Oh my, Chizuru! It has been so long!" The woman smiles widely, brightly, as she joins her hands and nods. Soft as silk is her voice, and her complexion is also most welcoming unlike most other soldiers I've seen. "How are you all? Faring well, I hope?" She asks, tilting her head.

"Yes, we're fine. But, uh, Haruka-san… No, 1st Lt Suzumiya, where is our Instructor?"

Did… she just say-

"Suzumiya?!" Yoroi shouts, blinking quickly, then rubbing her eyes, then again gaping at the furrowed brows of the woman. "Um, Ma'am, are you a relative of Akane Suzumiya, by any chance?"

The 1st Lt then giggles as she nods. "Yes, I am her older sister, actually. Thanks for having kept Akane company since the start of the year," she then gives us a small bow, still smiling.

"… Doesn't look like her, at all," Ayamine comments, arms folding.

"Yes, the Suzumiya we knew was far more…" My tongue traces the back of my teeth as I search for a proper word, "assertive and intense, one could say."

"Hehe, yes, Akane does tend to be a bit too energetic for her own good." Placing both hands behind her back, she then looks at us in the eye, one at a time. "Now then, are you all ready to depart for the hangar?"

"Uh, 1st Lt, where is the Instructor?" Sakaki asks again.

And 1st Lt Suzumiya flinches, then scratches one of her cheeks. "You see, I wasn't told that. It seems Sgt Jinguuji was called suddenly to a meeting, my captain had to come and take her personally. So she ordered me to guide you to your machines in the Instructor's stead. I was supposed to be reviewing some reports of some long trainings my squad did yesterday, so I'm honestly as lost as you are."

Sharing a gaze with the rest, the arched brows and twisting lips, the tension in their arms tells they too believe this is too odd.

"Well, are you all ready?" She asks, smiling bright once more.

"Yes, we are. Shirogane-kun, how about you?"

"As ready as I'll ever be, I guess," Takeru shrugs with one eye closed, leaving the wall.

"Then, please follow me," 1st Lt Suzumiya says, turning around and starting to walk.

We follow behind, silent. Tamase's gaze is locked onto the ground, Ayamine's straight ahead. Sakaki seems to be answering some questions from Suzumiya. In just some mere moments… my first true battle…

"Kinda feels like a dream, to finally have a real test on our Fubukis," Yoroi says, running a hand into her hair, sighing.

"Don't sweat it, Mikoto. It's just the first step on the stairs," Takeru comments, low, his gaze lost upwards.

"Yeah, I guess. But they sure chose to pit us against an impossible enemy," She forces a giggle, quivering as a tree in front of wild winds.

"I do agree. Facing off against the Imperial Guards in our very first fight does seem inappropriate," I say, arms folding. Time is of essence, I know, yet I believe they could have waited a few days to spar with me and my squadmates. Or they could have requested for a one-on-one with me, to avoid any eyes from noticing.

"It's how the dice rolled, can't do much 'bout that," He then sighs, lips contracting into a small circle. "Let's just do our worst, and whatever happens, happens."

Yoroi nods, yet the hands that caresses an elbow tells me she is still distraught. Even as she takes a few steps forward when Sakaki calls for her, Yoroi is still as stiff as the rest. I cannot blame them, considering how my retainers conducted themselves when unveiling the Takemikazuchi. However, unlike the others, whose fingers find no serenity, whose gazes remain almost vacant, lost in their inner currents, Takeru walks with strong steps instead. He seems to be again gazing upwards as he always does, yet as I come to his side I find brows molten near the quiet kindling within his eyes, causing markings to appear on his forehead. Redness under both eyes, the relaxed smile, the minute sway of his head is gone. Frozen as he walks, serious and tight is his posture. As he was during the CCSE,

when we were about to face off against the cousins. Almost as if he again were enduring the pouring rain, his eyelids are almost closing.

Yet, his eyes… something in them… that glint… it's the same look he had, when he almost began weeping upon my questions after he had rescued us when we talked by ourselves.

Slightly, I take a step closer as we walk, tapping his shoulder, whispering, "Takeru?"

"Hm?" He merely moves his eyes to acknowledge my voice.

"How are you faring? Are you feeling well?"

"I'm fine, thanks for asking."

"Is that so."

… And yet, he keeps looking forward, saying nothing.

"Right, we had debated our formation while we were changing. Sakaki proposed for you and Ayamine to fight alongside her, while Tamase and Yoroi shall be with me. Are you in agreement with the arrangement?"

"Yeah." Again, merely nodding, still looking elsewhere.

"I see. Are you truly alright, Takeru? You look, well, rather worn down today." Half a step closer, half a step forward, I look at his face.

Yet, his eyes do not meet mine as he shrugs once again. "Yeah, I'm just a bit tired, is all."

"Were you overworked yesterday, perhaps?"

"No, nothing like that."

"Lack of sleep, then?"

"Nah, I slept enough."

"So then, is something the matter? You did manage to eat your morning rations, right?"

"Yes, yes, don't worry. It's nothing."

"Truly?" I stare, he looks at me for a moment.

Sighing as he scratches the back of his head, he again looks up. Yet, his eyes squint, constrict as he holds his breath. "Yeah, for real. It's nothing you should worry about."

Nothing *I* should worry about, hmm. Obvious it is that you're conflicted over something, yet you had no negative reaction when the Instructor informed us that we'd be facing Tsukuyomi and the rest before. Could he be concerned that he'd be made into a target? Or, exposed as a spy?

"Takeru," taking a step closer, again tapping his shoulder, I look into his eyes, "if there is anything you'd like to speak about before the battle, feel free to do so."

His gaze meets mine for some seconds, his nose move and twitches, as if inhaling, smelling something carefully. Yet, his bottom lips recedes inwards, as if he were biting it, while his upper body seems to grow stiff, solidifying into pure stone. "I'm fine, really. I'm just a bit tired since I had to rush out of my cell and hurry the breakfast, that's all." He then shakes my hand off his shoulder, his steps growing in speed, his heels crashing against the floor.

"… Was it something I said? Why are you upset now, Takeru?"

"I'm not. We should be focusing on the mock battle, Meiya." He looks back, that glint, that creaking light encrusted deep into his eyes once more. "Don't sweat it, I'm well enough to do my share."

… Why? Where is your usual cheer, Takeru? Why do you wince when I grow closer to you? Why do you refuse to talk? Is he simply nervous the Guard might believe he's using me as a shield? No, I said I'd believe in him and let Takeru prove his worth on his own if anything does happen.

Looking up again, the entrance of the hangar was already visible at the distance. Once we reached the open space, 1st Lt Suzumiya informed us we'd be riding our TSFs now, and we'd remain in them as they're taken to the ruins of the city in the support vehicles. It seems it's done in this way to acclimate cadets to the feeling of the rumbling and shaking, since that is how we'll move out for future missions on the sea by using a carrier, by remaining in standby within our own units right before an operation begins. She then tried to give us a small rundown of the mock battle's goals, the time limit we'll face, as well as the restrictions on the area we can move in. It makes sense, since once we're commissioned we'd be assigned to cover specific areas during a mission. Being aware of your surroundings and the limits of your task is crucial during battle.

Yet, no matter how slow she took the explanation, how she included other details or gave us some moments to debate our strategies, the Instructor did not return to the hangar.

"Well, the time is coming up. I suppose you should be boarding your units now," she says, giving us a salute. "Best of luck in your first skirmish, cadets."

"No, thank you for your time, ma'am!" Sakaki says, all of us saluting in unison. "Alright, squad! Let's get in the cockpits and start up the preparations."

"Roger!"

We all nod to one another, and everyone is quick to move to their Fubuki. Yet, again, my eyes veer away to the other end of the hangar. Where he stood, merely gazing at his Gekishin. Gripping the edges my unit, gazing into the cockpit, my heartbeats again clang

against the base of my neck. I sigh, shortly and strongly, before hopping back onto the railway. As I walk towards him, Takeru doesn't even react. He's merely there, arms folded as he stares at his Gekishin, which seems to now be painted in a stronger hue of blue. Striking and imposing, as your aggressive stride.

"Are you feeling nervous?" I ask, once I'm close enough.

"… You could say that, yes."

"Takeru, are you truly fine?" Taking a step closer, turning to face him frontally, I stare.

"… Yeah." He answers slowly, barely moving his lips.

"Please, you do not look well in the slightest. What is the matter? Is it… related to how we're facing the Guard?"

"Huh?"

"Well, it would not be odd for you to, well, hold some anxiety as of now since we're going to be sparring against 1st Lt Tsukuyomi, after all that has happened."

"… Yeah, I guess." He shrugs, scratching the back of his head. "I ain't saying that doesn't worry me, it is a concern for real. But…" His arms fall, slow and apathetic as the last leaf of a tree, signaling the start of winter. Fitting, since his complexion seems to have frozen over. "I'm just feeling a bit down, is all."

"Why? Are you exhausted, perhaps?" Yet, he then looks my way, straight into my eyes. Holding my gaze, not even blinking, simply staring at me in silence, as if observing my every feature. Such fixation is frankly… a bit embarrassing.

"Sigh…" He then grimaces, hunching over. "I just had a weird dream, that's all. Don't worry, Meiya. I'll be fine."

"Is… that so?"

What is it with that reaction? Why was he looking so intently at me, only to then sigh in such manner? What does this even mean?

Slowly, he steps towards his machine. Tapping the button to open the cockpit, he steps back as the whirring echos and the compartment rotates until it's fully open. Yet, he doesn't enter immediately, he seems to be taking a deep breath now.

"Takeru?"

"Hm?" He looks back, raising a brow.

So I take a step forward, raising a hand and a smile towards him, "I shall be relying on your support today. I know not what plagues your heart, but know that you're no stranger here, Takeru. Let us do our best effort together, my fellow!"

He simply stares, in silence.

At my hand, then to the floor.

And as a frown appears in his face, he turns his back on me.

" *Yeah, some fellow I am. They didn't care about him, imagine what I am to their eyes."*

"Huh?"

It was only a whisper, words uttered under his breath. They weren't all that clear to my ears, yet… I've rarely heard him this upset. No, it isn't some meager animosity. It feels as that moment when he gripped my face as I had just awoken, when he reprimanded me. But, I heard it clearly. He referred to 'him'.

"Takeru, what is the matter? I… I do not remember doing anything to upset you."

He puts a feet on his cockpit, supporting his weight onto the steel with a hand. Refusing to turn back and face me. "Thanks for

reaching out, Meiya. But I don't think the rest would agree on you calling me a fellow, and I rather not get in trouble with the Guard. Can you just let this be?"

"Why? You've done me enough favors to deserve the words."

"… Please, drop it. Let's not force any altercations today, alright?"

"If you so wish, I suppose. But, well, in any case, I shall be relying on you so do not hesitate to rely on me, Takeru."

Merely nodding, he enters his unit. Closing it without even sitting down, he does not turn back to look my way, or wave at me, or smile, or… anything. Vacant as a new moon night, dejected as he was during our first day together in the CCSE, after I reacted aggressively when we argued about the blade in the track field. What made him show such cracks?

I sigh and jog back to my Fubuki, to begin the preparations before the order for us to be ready arrives. He was fine, it seems. Takeru is only concerned with giving the guards any wrong signs, is all. Yes, that's all there is to this.

Entering my unit, bolting myself to the seat, the habitual checkups appear in my view.

Yet, I lean back onto my seat, folding my arms. Gripping my arm guards, crossing my legs, squinting my eyes tightly, so tightly my vision grows blurry and a warning comes into my sight. A reminder to keep my eyes open so that the laser projection remains visible during the startup sequence of my TSF.

Sighing, I can only allow myself to choke and bind my controls.

" *Why did you refuse my handshake of fellowship, Takeru? Why were you so distraught at my presence? Don't tell me…"*

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*Same Day. Some moments before.*

*(Yuuko's Office.)*

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"XO, I demand an explanation!" Sgt Jinguuji shouts with quite the searing frown hewn into her face, slicing the air with a wave of an arm.

"I just told you," Yuuko messes with her hair, shrugging. "I need those reports right now, and you have yet to present the detailed papers on what transpired when the HSST fell down."

"Why now of all times?" She takes a step forward, eyes blazing. "Not only you notified me of the Guard's involvement minutes ago, you plan to have me away during the battle? The reports can certainly wait."

Yuuko folds her arms, freezing a frown into her face. Firmly forwarding an icy blaze into her friend's gaze, she speaks from her stomach as she stands, "I am the one who decides whether they can wait or not. Thus, I reiterate my order to you, Sergeant. I want those reports in my desk by the 1000 hours mark."

"Then, who tends to the cadets during the fight?" She retaliates immediately, backhanding the air once more as a windmill hitting a small pigeon. Quite upset she is, you'd understand.

"Cpt Isumi here will take your place, don't worry. I've arranged everything beforehand, there is nothing you should concern yourself with," Yuuko asserts, simply and immutable upon the unchanging, unmoving frown in her friend's complexion.

"Yuuko, be serious! You can't simply take me off the training, much less when they'll be facing the Guards!"

"It's an order from your superior, Sergeant. Are you casting doubts on my judgment?" She asks, interlocking her fingers, her own small

blaze meeting Sgt Jinguuji's.

"Guh… Come on, at least give me two hours to finish the reports. I can deliver them myself here if you want, there's no-"

"Marimo, can you please stop this?" She stands up, shrugging as she rolls her eyes. "I have deemed that Isumi should be in the mobile command post today for a reason. So, could you go tend to the reports? Thank you, I'll be waiting for them." She then grabs her mug and goes to the coffee machine, without waiting for her friend's answer or grabbing anything to eat. *"Your unusual overprotectiveness is not required today. There is much riding on this battle reaching the port I desire it sails to, and your binding worry is only a deterrent to that end, Marimo. I do wonder how you'll handle this arrangement on your own, Shirogane,"* she muses within as she takes a sip of coffee, the smallest hint of a smile in a corner of her lips.

Jinguuji shares a look with Isumi, who simply sighs and shakes her head, standing still and expressionless as a mannequin. The Instructor then merely sighs while still frowning, standing upright and saluting her friend before stomping her way out of the room, arms knotting together into quite the tight lock. Once the door slides close, Isumi herself heaves a sigh as she walks up to the desk of the scientist.

"XO, is this truly for the best?"

"Are you going to start a speech, too?"

"No, it's just…" Isumi's starts coiling her hands, her brows begin to cross, "I believe both of us could have been present in the command post, ma'am. My presence will incite questions from the Guard."

"I'll simply say Sgt Jinguuji had to tend to some urgent matters, and that I requested you to take over. I already briefed you on what I expect you to do if things don't turn out well, so be on your way. The

Fubukis are about to leave the hangar, after all." Yuuko sits down, drinking more coffee, focusing on her monitor.

Yet, Isumi remains in position. Her legs cramping up, tense and alert, almost as if she were about to fall onto a pit filled with spikes. Something tugs at her nape, makes her coiled hands tighten further. It is quite fair to affirm that in those eyes, that sober expression lays something that the Captain hadn't truly felt in many moons. The shrugged lips, the hesitation in the step forward, I believe you'd allow the conclusion that the woman was afraid, fearful. Of both asking the question she harbors and of the possible answer the scientist might give.

Still, she takes a deep breath, and with it summons the impulse to walk up to the desk, meet Yuuko's eyes.

"XO, there is something I must report to you." She says, speaking from her stomach, standing upright with both arms folded behind her back.

"It can wait. Depart for the vehicles now, Isumi," Yuuko waves to the door, not even looking at the captain.

"It is an urgent matter, ma'am. There is something I… need to know before departing."

"Oh, you *need* to know?" Yuuko narrows her eyes, focusing the fire upon her subordinate as she leans forward, resting her chin on a hand. "If I haven't notified you of it, what makes you think you have to know whatever this is, Isumi?"

"You have ordered me to monitor Shirogane's condition throughout the battle, so I believe I should notify you of… what occurred when he was aiding me last night," She says, looking down, voice and face cracking down like unguarded stone in a desert.

"He already reported that, be on your way."

"However, there is something that occurred while he was with me which I believe I must inform you of, ma'am."

"What, did you fuck with him?"

"Wh- Of course not!"

"Then, what's all the fuss about? Shirogane already told me he lent you a hand on some paperwork, and I don't see how anything could be grave enough to warrant you wasting our time as of now." Shrugging once more, Yuuko then ruffles her hair as she does a lazy spin.

Isumi chokes on acid, bending her nails as her hands tighten even more. It takes her quite the deep breath to quench the impulse to fall to emotion and unpleasantries. "It's not about the aid itself. The cadet used some… eccentric words during our talk."

"Hmm. And? He does tend to do that, quite often actually."

Slowly, she gulps. Even slower she breathes in, recalling the words as her eyelids begin to cascade down. And what comes out is but a sliver, a whisper of her usual voice, "I had thought to be mistaken at first, that it was just my mind playing tricks on me, but I couldn't get the feeling out of my head. So I checked on my old notebooks, and it wasn't just a hunch. The phrases he used, and how he pronounced them most importantly, make me believe that… perhaps, I know of the cadet's situation before he supposedly lost his memories." Yuuko simply holds her gaze in silence, never releasing Isumi from her piercing stare. So the captain coughs, bolting her composure in place despite how her knees were wishing to bend and crack. "After all, the words Shirogane employed were the same the members of that squadron of the IRG we mingled with during the invasion frequently used. I am of the opinion that Shirogane is either a relative of a member of that unit, or perhaps… one of them himself."

"… And?" Yuuko answers, almost forcing the words out in boredom.

So Isumi simply gapes for a second, lost as a penguin in a desert. "Huh? What do you mean, *and* ? XO, I'm telling you he-"

"Yes, I am aware of that already. So, what of it?"

"What… You… You knew?!"

"And why do you think I'm sending you to watch over Shirogane, Isumi?" She then starts spinning, eyes almost closed.

"However, if you know and have confirmed this intel, then we should report this and-"

"Captain Isumi." Stopping the spinning, Yuuko glares in full force towards her subordinate. Quite angered yet composed, the surface of the sea where dangers swirl deep in the trenches, if you'd allow the comparison. "You were not notified of this for a reason. As the leader of my personal task force, I expect you to not start spreading any ill rumors about my protegee or to treat him any differently from now on. Was I clear?"

"Your protegee?" Hands, knees, teeth, all of her trembles like a glass would when a stampede approaches. Only instead of water, sparks and acids filled Isumi to the brim. "If Shirogane is related to that squadron in any shape or form then-"

"Then, shouldn't you be happy, Captain?" Yuuko asks, chuckling before taking another sip of coffee. "You should be glad, that we regained one of our old allies."

"How… How can you say that, XO? Ally? Those damn extremists were nothing short of a-"

Hitting a book, she then stares straight ahead into Isumi's eyes, blazing and combusting. "You've seen how Shirogane is yourself, I don't believe he deserves your… strong emotions. Furthermore," Yuuko stands up, a finger tapping her chin as she slowly approaches Isumi, never releasing her gaze nor blinking, "if you do or say

anything that might bring harm to Shirogane either directly or indirectly, his past will be the last of your immediate concerns. Are we clear, captain?"

Biting her lips, her hands shake as she looks down, as the hail which hit the back of her head forced her to look down. Still, Isumi sighs and nods, slow, resigned. "Yes, ma'am."

"Good. Now, off you go. You have a mock battle to oversee."

"However… Why are you sending me to watch over Shirogane?"

"Let's just say I want a small bumper, to send this battle into the right direction. You already have the codes and your orders, if things stray from the outlook I briefed you on, apply the sedatives immediately."

"Even if he is operating his machine?"

"Yes, there should be no risks since their jump units are still locked down, them being cadets. So… I shall be leaving my protegee in your hands, captain." Yuuko then smirks, resting her chin on interlocked hands. "I hope you do not disappoint me."

Inhaling deeply, exhaling the venom, Isumi once more stood upright and salutes. "I shall do just as you ordered, ma'am."

And without any more words, she turns around and also stomps her way out of the office. Her feelings were in stark contrast with those of the Instructor, as I'm sure you know. Yet, within the office, spinning in the chair, chuckling to herself, Yuuko again smiles. Smiles and spins, chuckling for a moment more.

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*Near 9 AM.*

*(Ruins of the City, inside a Fubuki.)*

**[Meiya]**

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The initial shaking faintly disappears, the visor activates and the crumbled edifications fill my view. Gently moving the controllers makes the head gyrate, granting me the sight of what surrounds me. Tumbled buildings, a lone tilted bridge in the distance, the paleness of our soil after the war. A few more taps makes the arms move, grab my shield and sword. Another beeping in my ears, another light in my vision signals the pylons and jump units have also been safely connected. A small test shows they're operational at perfect condition, no errors come up in their test or in any other checks I run.

So, I tap the button to our frequency, "02, all green."

Sakaki's face quickly appears in a corned of my vision, nodding, "01, roger that. My unit is also at the ready. Everybody, report your status."

The rest also report that everything's fine, their respective ID bumping up in my vision as they do. Sakaki then sighs, taking a moment of silence before gazing forward once more.

"Alright everyone, let's review our plan one last time. 02, 03, 05, you'll take the vanguard and move out to meet the first force of the aggressors. Me, 04 and 06 will circle around your position as you fight. We'll scout the enemy's formation and react according to the development of the battle."

A small marking then appears on my radar as Sakaki fiddled with her controls, a location to our Ten, seemingly in the middle of the city.

"This location seems to have multiple buildings tumbled down close to one another. If we manage to drive the Guards to this area, they won't be able to use their full speed to escape it. Then, 05 can snipe them as we keep them down. In the worst case, 06 can perform a high altitude maneuver to strike some of them down, but that shall be our last resort. Did you hear that, 06?"

Takeru's face comes into view, one eye closed as he shrugs. "Yeah, loud and clear, squad leader. I'll keep myself in check, don't worry."

"Good. Now, if anything comes up or we're countered immediately, please report your ideas before acting. 04, 06, that goes for both of you."

"Roger that." Ayamine's face appears on my view as she replies, staring blades at the screen.

Hm? Takeru hasn't responded yet.

"06, can you hear us?" After Sakaki called out to him, his face appears on the screen again.

"Yeah, sorry about that. I was double checking the systems. What was it?" Takeru looks odd. Tense, serious, none of the glee he usually displays when we train on our machines.

Sakaki sighs, again spinning a finger. "I was telling you to not act on your own during this battle. I know that you usually are right, but please notify us of your plans before you rush ahead."

And I can only nod in agreement with her wishes, her worry of how this will turn out. Chances are we'll lose terribly against them, we are mere novices against the elite of the Empire. However, I did ask them to let me challenge Tsukuyomi. I swore I'd took the vanguard and safeguard their advance. My comrades shall be covering me so that I can measure up to this trial, so I shan't let their trust down.

"Then, I'll tell you what I'm gonna do now." He says, shrugging with an eye closed again. Again, as if he were in pain, shifting in his seat.

Takeru, what's wrong with you? Why are you so tense? You wouldn't be… truly a spy, would you?

"06, what do you wish to do?" I address him, sending my image to his visor. Takeru, I believe in you. So, please.

Again sighing, he nods as he once more endows a cold, composed expression. "I'll follow the plan you guys came up with, I've nothing against it. But, if things go south, I'll take action on my own to distract and nullify the enemy if I can. I'm sure they're gonna freak out when they see my acrobatics, so you can use that to snipe 'em away." He gives me a smile, yet it is small, forced, fake. As all the ones I've seen in many meetings, as if he was merely saying the words.

"Then, with all the more reason, notify us when you choose to do that. I concur we need a distraction, something to break the mold if we hope to do anything during this battle, but keep us posted on your plans, 06." Sakaki tells him, tapping her glasses, frontal as an arrow.

Takeru then returns the nod, the poker face. "Of course, 01. Anything else?"

"No, anyone else have anything to say?" Nobody answers Sakaki's question. "Alright then, I'll notify the command post we're ready to begin." She then takes a short pause, breathing in. And once she rises her chin once more, she smiles. "Squad 207, let's show them what we're made of!"

"Roger!"

And thus, once more I'm alone in my cockpit. Thankfully, Sakaki seems composed enough to measure up to the trials. Perhaps, she's somewhat resigned to the outcome and has decided to make the most out of it regardless. Ayamine and Yoroi are understandably nervous, but I believe they shall do well. Takeru… I said I would stop.

However, there is someone else who might need some words. Looking at my controls, passing a finger over them as I try to recall, nodding to myself as I remember my fingers click on the right command, opening a private channel with Tamase's unit.

"05, do you copy?"

"Y-Yes, loud and clear. What is it, 02?" Look at those quivering eyes of yours. You won't be able to fight properly in this state.

"Please, do not be so tense. This is just a mock battle, you're not truly fighting against the Royal Guard. All of us are here by your side." I say, smiling. Then, inhaling slowly, I nod and raise my tone slightly. "And I shall be there, so no one will treat you unfairly."

Like charcoal creaking under the fire, her tension crumbles away. A small smile she gives me, a nod as she tries to bow down. "Thank you, Mitsurugi-san. Sigh… I can't stop thinking that they'll target me, and start saying hurtful things like when they smacked Yoroi-san the other day."

"I see. It is a fair concern, but you've no reason to worry so. I'll be there with you, I won't let them insult you. Can I count on you to cover my back, Tamase?" I stare at her, unblinking, waiting for her reply. And she gives me a nod, despite the obvious nervousness in her not fading, the trembling of her hands as she raises both for a moment.

"Y-Yes, I'll do my best. I will cover you as best as I'm able, 02." Forging a resolute stare, her veneer does not bend upon a moment of silence. On the contrary, the luster of her inner steel shines through again, despite the small quiver of her retracting lips.

"Thank you kindly, Tamase. Let us do our best effort together," I nod at her and, unlike Takeru, she does nod back with quite the light in her eyes. So, I cut the connection. And I sigh in relief, for she truly will be fine, I believe. "I only hope no one does hurl unpleasantries her way, however."

A moment of silence passes me by, until a small beeping reaches my ear. Shortly after, a woman's face quickly appears in my sight. Crimson hair and eyes, I believe we had met this woman during our first simulation run?

"Here, CP. Squad 207, do you all copy?"

"01, we're all in standby. Ma'am, may I ask where is our Instructor?" Sakaki inquires, curving her brows.

The woman sighs, her own brows cascading down quite heavily. "Sgt Jinguuji had some urgent matters to take care of. I was then tasked with overseeing your training in her stead. Now then, are you all ready in position?" She asks, Sakaki replies an affirmation while sending our data, I assume. The woman nods, a small green message surging into my view. "The countdown has already started. I'll explain this in a summarized way, you're all free to move out once the timer reaches zero. I don't think you'll run out of time, but do remember not to stray too far away from your designated area. Best of luck, cadets!" She says, igniting some resolve in her own voice.

And so, for the last time, silence in my cockpit. Silence as the timer runs down, down into the start of my trial.

My first mock battle, and my last test under Tsukuyomi. After this, I may finally be allowed to spar with Daizaburou-sifu. One step at a time, let's not get ahead of myself. Inhale, exhale… Peace, all in due time.

Though… I can only wonder what must be going on in his heart. An odd dream, he said. He mentioned a male, even if I failed to distinguish the rest of the words clearly. Takeru will be face to face with the Guards once again, after the CCSE. Are you truly a spy? Or, perhaps, you're truly who you claim to be? He did say he was recovering his memories, and I'd be overjoyed to truly welcome you as my fellow.

However, his own complexion today, what Tsukuyomi told me… I suppose, he also must be mulling over the matter. I should focus on my own battle for the moment. Five Zuikakus, a Takemikazuchi piloted by Tsukuyomi, amidst the ruins of this city. This city that once was my home, back when I lived with Grandfather in the mansion. These skies are the same ones I watched for so long, this land is what I wished to traverse back then. To see it restored to its former glory, no, to bring it to further heights, to have the greenery reclaim

its rightful ownership over this wasteland, to bestow a smile upon the future of my ruined hometown… This battle is just the first step towards my goal.

A beeping in my ears appears as the timer grows closer and closer to single digits. Sakaki's ID bumped up, her voice barely audible.

"01 to all units. Are you all ready?"

"02, I'm more than prepared. Leave the vanguard to me."

"03, all good on my end. My trigger finger is ready to go."

"04, fully prepped up to cross some real strikes."

"05, I'm all set as well. Guns and sensors ready to cover you all."

"06, ready to rumble."

"Heh, didn't expect anything else." Sakaki chuckles dryly. "Squad 207," and thus, the beeping starts again as the timer reaches zero, "march forward!"

"Roger!" We all reply in unison, our machines blasting off towards our arranged formation.

I dash ahead, running through the broken streets, the abandoned cars and fallen stoplights. Gritting my teeth and tensing my abs, I gradually increase the speed of the running. My arms are jerked around by the shaking despite the bolts, I can feel the impulse coursing through my entire body with every step. And again, Takeru was right. The shaking is truly far more intense than in a sim, it has a certain, how to say it, strength is all I can find to describe it. Luckily, I'm sort of used to such shaking thanks to my endeavors to keep up with his eccentric maneuvers, but still.

Slowing down, I bring my machine to merely tender steps as I walk closer to the buildings. Nothing in sight, nothing in the sonar, nothing in the radar. Yoroi is to my Four some meters behind, Tamase is

some more meters behind. The other three are already out of my reach, so I suppose they must be laying low in order to detect any sudden movements.

I do wonder how will they approach us, knowing Tsukuyomi I wouldn't put it past them to simply come meet us frontally. Yet, it would be quite odd for them to-

"01 to 02, heat signatures detected to your twelve!" Sakaki says, startling me.

No sooner does her warning end, that a loud beeping bursts into my ears. Three heat signatures in an arrowhead, slowly moving towards our position.

"02, hostiles detected. 01, did you find the others?"

"Guh, yes, they're coming our way."

"What?!" I see, so they aim to split us up. "We'll proceed to face our aggressors, do you think you can hold out?"

"Yes, don't worry. We're still simply exchanging long range volleys with two Zuikakus. Proceed as we planned!"

"Roger! 02 to 03 and 05, hostiles detected! Get ready to intercept!"

"Understood," Yoroi says, her unit quickly dashing closer to mine, in a street that runs parallel to the one I'm on.

"Got it. I'll stand some meters behind you two, try to line them up on a street or make them jump high," Tamase requests, her voice fading by the tail end.

"Copy that. 03, onward!" Readying my blade and bringing the shield closer to the cockpit, I dash further into the city, Yoroi following close by.

Circling to our two, we move towards the few tall buildings left standing. From this position, their fire lines should be obstructed. If Sakaki's facing off against Zuikakus, then by seeing who we're up against here will tell me where Tsukuyomi is located. My visor moves, Yoroi's Fubuki enters my view. The machine nods, gently waving both rifles up and down a few times. Smiling, I make my Fubuki return the nod.

Now then… Inhaling deep, testing the pedals with my heels, in one simple and strong motion I step on them while thrusting the controls forward. As my machine moved from my cover to another, fire opened onto it. Two gray Zuikakus spotted, both using a single rifle and a blade. The current distance with them, the angle of fire they should have available, the reaction time of my unit… Hmm… You called this a boost dash, to run and use the rockets at the same time. Instead of short jumps or merely backboosting or doing so barely above the ground for some seconds, to continue to boost away and use a single foot, or both, to change directions. Can I safely perform that maneuver in a real machine?

…

You're out here, fighting as well. If this is enough to halt my steps, then I will never get anywhere.

"03, cover me. I'll dash into their range, and try to force them to move out of cover."

"Roger, leave it to me!" She says, almost giving out a creaking laugh.

In a simple jump, Yoroi's Fubuki flies away. Looking her way from behind cover, our aggressors were about to step our way, before her suppression fire forced them to hide once again, to not be soaked in paint as the buildings were as of now. Now's my chance!

Again stepping on the pedals, the force of the boosters courses through me. Remember the timing, just barely activate the booster, release it to reposition it later and then-

One jerk on the controls, a soft pressing of the pedals with my feet, and I'm seeing the buildings pass by in a blur. More shaking tosses me around, yet my Fubuki manages to continue dashing. The alarm beeps, I bring my shield up to block the shots, groaning as the impact eventually sends a tremble through the feedback. Yoroi lands to my Nine, almost tumbling down, yet she managed to buy me enough time. Their hiding spot exposed, they're just a short boost away!

Repositioning my rifle under my arm to shoot, my first volleys meet the concrete as my enemy dances away, almost as translucent as a curtain by dawn. Yet, thanks to forcing them to move, I noticed there are three heat signatures here. But, all I could see were Zuikakus.

"03, did you spot the Takemikazuchi?"

"Negative, only Zuikakus." She immediately replies before groaning, more echoes of gunshots echo nearby.

"What is it?! Is that all you've got?" I hear Kamiyo's voice on the common channel as the Zuikakus' dots turn and charge towards our location.

Yoroi crouches near a building, firing off at them while I rest my blade on the ground to join in the suppression. Yet, the twists, the turns, the way to circle upon oneself, the finesse of their patterns is that of… It's the Mugen Kidou. Of course, they're facing me in earnest. I could expect nothing else of my retainers. Yet, when it comes to evasive maneuvers, I do not think we could best them.

"03, can you use some 120mm on them?"

"Do you think we can get them with it?"

"No, I want you to delay their movements for a moment. I may be no match for them in long range, but in CQC… I believe I can stand up to them, with you covering my back."

"Okay, I'll give it a spin!"

"Thanks. 05, do you have us in your sights?"

"Yes, I've a lock on both of you, but the buildings don't let me get a good view on the enemy. Try to make them jump or move to your eleven, I should be able to land some shots from here, I think."

"Copy that. By the by, have you spotted the Takemikazuchi nearby?"

"No, there's no sight of it and no other heat signatures. 01 hasn't called back, so I suppose they might be dealing with it as of now."

I see… So you went after him personally, Tsukuyomi. And alongside Mion and Shion, I assume.

A blast brings me back to the fight, a nearby building had its few remaining windows blasted apart. If this is what stands between me and my retainer, then there is no need to hesitate.

"03, on the count of five."

"Copy that."

I lock my rifle on the pylon once more, grabbing my blade, sighing and gripping my controls. As soon as Yoroi's Fubuki rushes out of cover to send a volley towards our aggressors, I dash towards the Zuikakus, drawing my blade. Just before they were able to reposition, I twist the controls, my Fubuki doing a sidestep like Takeru taught me, allowing me to avoid the aim of their rifles. Raising my blade, it falls like an avalanche upon the closest enemy. I feel the shock coursing through the arms, the rumbling on my controls, the confirmation of the hit. Having disabled one of their hands, a rifle starts dropping cold to the ground.

I quickly push the controls backwards, performing a backboost as Yoroi's cover forces the other two Zuikakus to retreat more and more. As one opted to boost jump my way, raising its sword in

midair, my own surges forth to meet it in a parry. Circling the controls, my Fubuki slides away on the ground, and the Zuikaku has to immediately improvise a boost to not tumble down. The place where it stood was soon drenched in paint as Yoroi opened fire indiscriminately, forcing the machine to jump away in a rush.

However, I can only chuckle as a small beep fades into my ears. Shortly after, the jumping Zuikaku was submerged into a vast ocean of yellow, falling deep into the ground, knocked out by Tamase's expert sniping.

"You hit the mark, 05. Well done!" And from such a distance, in between so many buildings to boot. It took only a second for her to lock on and dispose of the aggressor.

"You pest! Do no interfere in our fight!" Tomoe's voice lashed out in the common channel, hoarse and truly acidic.

My throat again is constricting itself, a twister of dryness where joy had just been. Why must they act in this way? Do they also hold some ill will towards her?

"Hmph, that one was the daughter of that coward, right? Ebisu, let's take care of the bothers first." Kamiyo says, as the two machines nearby turn away from me, doing a sudden boost jump.

"Roger!" Ebisu replies, and quickly both shifted their movements, boost dashing away from me after landing to my six.

A quick turn and a press, my volleys fired from the pylon all miss their target. Their dots grow close to Yoroi's. "03, be carefu-"

In a split second, a violent wave of paint fell onto Yoroi's cockpit. Her Fubuki falls backwards onto a building, drenched in orange, as the muzzles of her rifles was still leaking some smoke and heat. They avoided all of Yoroi's shots, at such a short range? Is this how good a commissioned surface pilot truly is? No, Tamase!

With a sudden jerk of my controls and a stomping on the pedals, my jump units flare to life unchained and my Fubuki rushes behind them. One Zuikaku gradually loses speed, turning around and preparing to engage. As our paths cross, so do our blades. A faint, a riposte, we cannot outmaneuver the other. Still rushing as we cross strikes, my volleys find no target yet my shield becomes the recipient of most of my aggressor's heat. She's moving quite nimble, however… compared to Takeru, you're nothing I can't handle!

How was it? Crouch cancel, he had called it. Briefly gazing at the altimeter, at the speed I'm moving at, and at the map ahead, I quickly pull the controls back, turning off the boosters. Landing with a single feet, sending me into another direction as he had advised, the Zuikaku has to reposition itself to follow my trail. Yet, I took another street, so the buildings are my shield as of now. And now that the boosters have cooled off, once more my feet sink and remain sunken onto the pedals, sending my machine into quite the charge.

And I cannot help but to smile as the dot in my radar shows that my rival has taken the bait, the heat signature also rushing to find me and block my path. So, again, I let go of the controls, decelerating quickly. And tensing my abs, retracting my tongue, my Fubuki sidesteps into the turn, into the curve I must take, crouching while boosting after the window of cool down expires. Paint scatters above me, fluttering like a rain of shooting stars, as I slid just below the aggro. And in this juncture, without being able to use your boosters-

"You're wide open!" One firm extension of the controls sends my already damaged shield to crash against the cockpit of the machine, the fake reactive armor exploding and showering more paint all around us.

The Zuikaku collapses, falling to its knees. The dot vanishes from my radar yet my heartbeats are still echoing, blasting on my chest as I gasp with my mouth open. I did it… I bested my first opponent. Sigh… Peace, this is far from over. Even if I am proud of my maneuver just now. Now, how are the rest? Wait, what about-

A loud beep makes me look at my radar. Three enemy signals are attacking another three, which are forced to retreat further away. Tsukuyomi… Why are you targeting him instead of me? Did you confirm he's a spy?

"02, I need help!" Tamase's shout returned me to my sense.

As soon as I move out, her dot reappears in the radar. She is not that far away, nor are there many buildings obstructing her moves. However, why didn't she shot the Zuikaku down? She shouldn't have much problem with a single enemy, I believe.

"What is it?!" Kamiyo's voice roars on the common channel as I grow closer, almost as if she were a wild animal defending its turf. "Is this all traitor can do?! You don't deserve to be Meiya-sama's comrade!"

And again, how dare they. Even if you're my retainers, I shan't allow these actions to go unpunished.

"05, retreat to my position this instant!"

"I can't lose her! I'm…" Her voice cracks, letting out a pained whimper.

The two dots continue to circle and avoid each other for a moment, until I can bypass the streets to cut down the distance. Once they enter my view, Tamase's unit was shooting in erratic intervals while taking short backboosts, and had managed to hit one of the arms of her rival despite the Zuikakus tight maneuvering around the different toppled buildings. However, the gray Zuikaku continued to press her escape routes, all the while Kamiyo keeps taunting and badmouthing Tamase, daring her to answer back.

Inhaling sharply, I ready my gun and blade, do a boost jump, and shoot one 120mm at Kamiyo, forcing her to retreat. I shoot another one as I land to make her move even farther away, away behind a building. Once the dust settles and we gain a second of calm, I quickly take a step back, opening our frequency.

"05, report your status."

"I'm fine. Still have enough ammo." She looks completely apprehensive right now, her eyelids imitating a rock slide, her tone lacerated by a thousand blades. I know she must have taken those insults very, very badly.

"Do not worry. Let's regroup with the other two while we-"

"Aren't you a little overconfident, Meiya-sama?" Kamiyo taunts me on the common channel as I have to hide behind a building to avoid the bullets she sends my way.

"I believe you're the one who's underestimating us. 05, can you snipe her?" I know she can, she took down that HSST so a single TSF should pose no problems for her, much less with my support.

"I… I'll try." Yet, it's as if her eyes had frozen over, void of light and vacant, as the whisper barely makes it out of her quivering lips.

"What was that? Why don't you speak up, coward?! You're nothing more than dead weight!"

"Kamiyo, I will not tolerate such behavior towards my squadmates." Why do they resent her so much? Did they knew her when she was still a servant of Sister?

"Meiya-sama, that sewer rat doesn't deserve to fight by your side. She'll run away like the coward she is when you need her most. Traitors such as they should not be forgiven!"

Her unit quickly shoots out towards us, a few loud explosion of the 120mm drizzling the area in paint. I move backwards to avoid the heat, clenching my teeth and tensing my arms while I have to take a turn, however Tamase is slightly lagging in her response. Wobbling, her Fubuki is almost unable to follow behind me.

"05, you have to shoot!"

"I-I know!"

Kamiyo catches up to Tamase, who starts shooting at her. The crane dives into the blizzard, ice dust scatters in the air. Both TSFs start painting the street with green and yellow splurges as they spray their shots, as I halt my boost to send some of my own volleys in support. However Kamiyo was already too close, she had Tamase cornered against a toppled bridge. And I could only look back as both raise their rifles at one another, as Kamiyo shrieks and insult, as Tamase simply yells out, as the crane's wings are clipped and its feathers flutter about and burn to ashes, as the blizzard is cut short and silenced, turned into just a tender breeze. Both cockpits receive an unending shower of an unreasonable amount of paint, the chaotic bursts of the muzzles filling the air for a second. And when everything calms down back into silence, the Fubuki and the Zuikaku are frozen in place, drenched in a new paint job from head to toe.

"… Tamase, are you alright?"

"… Y-Yes, I'm alright. But don't worry about me, you have to go help the others." She's holding back tears, hugging herself with both eyes tightly closed. Forgive me Tamase. I promise I'll have a talk with these three later.

"Copy that. 05, you did great today. Thank you kindly for your support, Tamase. 02, out."

Cutting my connection with Tamase's unit, I dash towards the heat signatures. Taking care to always stay behind large buildings, to not enter the range of what I assume are the enemy dots, my ears pick up on the beep of the common channel once a few clouds of dust appear in my view. And as my finger presses the activation of the connection, pure noise floods my ears.

"Damn it all! Ayamine!" Sakaki shouts as one dot vanishes from my radar. "How did they even-"

"01, calm down!" Takeru shouts back, hoarse and almost upset. "They're expecting you to lose your cool! Get out of the common channel right now!" He says, or rather orders, as his dot stands its ground, forcing two other dots to retreat for a moment.

I see… So Ayamine fell prey to the cousins, huh. All the more reason for me to rejoin their element, as soon as I'm able. So, quickly activating our frequency now that I'm close enough, I bring my Fubuki to the ground and continue to distance running.

"01, 06, do you copy? I'm approaching your position, from your Four."

Sakaki's face appears on my view shortly after, her brows arching as her lips twist inwards, allowing me to see part of her teeth. "01, receiving you loud and clear. 02, how's your status?"

"Almost unscathed, still have enough ammo and my blade, however I have lost my shield. No damaged or disabled parts. How are you two holding up?"

"06 and me are somewhat still standing, but we're being driven to the corner of the ruins. They're not letting us move at all, except to retreat." I see, so they just wanted to take them out of the match by forcing them to go out of bounds. "04 was just pincered a moment ago as the Takemikazuchi blocked her escape route, so be on the lookout as you approach."

"Understood. I'll be arriving shortly. 06, how are you holding up?"

…

Why isn't he answering me? Takeru, did I upset you somehow? Or, are you…

"06, answer 02's question! Did your comms get damaged?"

"I'm done." Takeru's face appears on my view, he's sulking.

"Shirogane, what are you saying?"

"That we're just wasting our time. The Zuikakus have always focused on me so far, and only attacked 04 because she covered me a moment before." He says, expression tight, eyes squinted and quite… adusted, for some reason. "If I charge at them on my own, that should give you a window to strike alongside 02. At the very least, we have to take one of them down with us."

Sakaki's eyes waver as she looks down, taking a few breaths in quick succession. "H-However, we cannot risk it all in a frontal charge. Mitsurugi is just about to-"

"Even if she comes to us, we're going out of bounds at this rate. And the only way for us to break this lock is by separating the Zuikakus from the Takemikazuchi, even if only for a second. Otherwise, we might as well surrender now." He nods to himself, shrugging.

Sakaki you will have to forgive me, for I agree with Takeru. Again. "01, I believe 06 speaks the truth. Also, I did told you I wishes to face off against the Takemikazuchi, so I welcome the opportunity. Would you allow us to employ this idea?"

She then sighs, heavily. "Fine, I'll cover you both. This is your day, so if you agree to it I'll follow you. 06, do you think you can rush in and avoid their heat?"

"Leave it to me, I ain't going down so easily," He snarls, frowning slightly.

"06, I shall be counting on you to distract them long enough," I say, sobering up as I send my image to him, as I can hear the gunshots in the distance as I run through the streets.

"Don't worry, dodging is what I do best after all," And then, a small smirk. "So, the one in the vanguard is the Takemikazuchi as of now. Can you distract it from afar, 02?"

"I believe so, yes." I am no Tamase, but I can gain Tsukuyomi's attention easily enough. "01, if you rush towards it as I shoot, that will give 06 enough time to charge at the other two."

"Copy that. So, on the count of three?" We both nod to her suggestion, my hands gripping the controls as my rifle aims upwards, as I gulp when the red frame comes into view. "Three, two, one… Fire!"

A recoil runs through my arm as a 120mm shell flies away towards the elegant shape of the Takemikazuchi, which again gracefully glides away from the shower of paint that would soil its paint. Yet, before it could land, as the visor turned to meet mine, it had to raise a shield in defense, to take shelter from Sakaki's retaliation. Tsukuyomi can only jump back, before I take another shot at her machine.

"06, now's your chance to-"

Without waiting for Sakaki to finish speaking, Takeru's dot blasts away. I see his Gekishin as it draws an arc in the sky, rebounding off the concrete as nimbly as in every simulation we had thus far. And with a giant smirk etched into his face, Takeru roars as both Zuikakus seem to start frantically running away from his oppressive assault, going by the radar's account.

"Come to Papa, you pair of pickles!" He then shouts right before his face vanishes from the connection.

What did he just say? What does 'Come to Papa' even means? Takeru, you're not old enough to be a parent. And, he's still referring to them as pickles, to boot. I swear, if that gets him in trouble with the cousins, I shan't be shielding him for it.

I see the frames boosting through the streets on my view and the paint flying about as I rush to aid Sakaki. A Takemikazuchi appears nearby, piercing through a cloud of dust along the daylight. In a quick reaction, it jumps while veering to a side, shooting at Sakaki's Fubuki

as she tries to take cover. Futile it was, her attempt to escape. And as the Fubuki falls into stillness as the paint drips from the cockpit into the ground, as a cloud passes up above while the dust was settling, Tsukuyomi's unit then stops and, after looking in my direction, the red Takemikazuchi starts coming towards me.

First in slow steps, then readying the blade above its shoulder, and finally marching forward, straight as an arrow, as a ray of light piercing stormclouds. My lips tense and twist as my tongue begins to rebel against the back of my teeth, as it feels as if my stomach was being compressed by an industrial press. Backboosting while shooting non stop, I see how she easily dodges all of my shots gracefully, barely making any dust raise, almost without wasted momentum. Dashing at me, the red machine raises its blade. Mine own blade departs from its silent hold, raising to meet the challenge, and thus we start trading blows as we dance on the ruins.

Our strong steps blast the few windows to pieces, poles and offices are soon crushed on a few missed swings, sparks fly off as we parry each other's slashes, continuing our bout as if we were sparring on a bridge, my visor not moving away from hers, as hers remains locked onto mine.

A small signal appears in my view, a request for a private channel, as the Takemikazuchi gives me some space, deciding not to chase after my unit when I backboost. Once I bring my Fubuki to a halt and heave a sigh, I tap and accept the connection. Her face does not appear, but her unit is linked to mine for the moment.

"Your technique is very good, Meiya-sama." Tsukuyomi says, completely calm and still as a frozen lake.

"Thanks, however, this isn't the full extent of my abilities."

"As I expected. Let us continue our battle, then." So, she once more raises her blade.

"It'll be my pleasure." Thus, my own sword is put into place as I make my machine take the stance I was taught under.

And after a single second of silence, once more the boosters flare to life and our swords cross paths and parries.

Under her precise swings I decide I pick up my pace, doing the zig zags Takeru taught me. I can't move like he does, yet I am absolutely certain now that this style of his is without a doubt the Mugen Kidou, even if it is different than how I learned it. I'm nowhere near as nimble as him, that is true, yet thanks to his teaching I believe I can adapt parts of his patterns to my own style.

And yet, despite the sidesteps, the crouch-cancel maneuvers I employ, my slashes can only graze the candlelight. Make it flutter, bend away, but never extinguish it entirely. It's as if Tsukuyomi wasn't surprised by my methods, unlike the trio. And yet, I can tell. She's going easy on me, she isn't pushing her advantage nor trying to overpower me. Licking my lips, it brings a fair foul taste to me, to see her holding back. As I pounce around her, stomping the pedals, bending and jerking the controls, I cannot find an opening in her defense. It's almost as if… as if she could read all of my movements. Nonsense! I can do this!

I boost dash towards her, veering to my left. As she dodges, I hit the ground with my feet and try to do what Takeru does, and somewhat manage to use the impulse to jump off the ground towards her again, despite the ringing in my ears and how my everything seems to lose color for but a moment.

The Takemikazuchi turns around swiftly, our blades are locked in a struggle as she halts my advance. I never thought a Fubuki could overpower a Takemikazuchi, but this feeling… I don't like it. Only one person made me feel like this during a battle. And he… he's right here, fighting with all he has. Spy or not, what he has taught me is not void of meaning for me.

Tsukuyomi leans back, my hands panic and pull at the controls to avoid falling down. In that attempt, as my Fubuki crouched and took a step back, Tsukuyomi's unit had raised a leg. And my sight went black as everything started to shake again, as if everything in me was a liquid within a crumbling glass.

"Ugh. I did not think she'd actually employ a kick."

Yet, what can I do? I've done all I can, I can no longer think of anything else to gain an advantage over Tsukuyomi. My heartbeats again make themselves known on my neck as I gasp, as I wipe the sweat off my face. How can I possibly best her now? Even when successfully using his maneuvers I fail to land a hit, just how can I…

… Huh?

I blink, the sight does not change.

Then, I rub my eyes. But the sight does not change.

I move the controls, making my Fubuki stand up. Everything is still functional, but the sight does not change.

A broken swing, a collapsed slide, a half-filled sandbox. The broken sign, the half torn bulletin board in the far end. Could it be… Is it that park? The damaged state notwithstanding, it does line up with my memories of the place.

"I see… So it's still rather intact, is it?" Smiling, I simply sigh as I look at it.

To think I had refused to search for it, dreading to find it collapsed, crushed under the BETA's assault. And now of all times-

A sharp sound echoes close, the dot of the Takemikazuchi grows closer. "Well Meiya-sama, it has been a pleasant bout. I believe it is time for me to put an end to it, however."

"W-Wait a moment, Tsukuyomi! Not here, we're-"

"Cease your words, cadet! Draw your blade, and come at me!"

Quickly raising my sword, I barely fend off the first slash. My Fubuki's feet plant themselves onto the ground, yet I can tell my unit is being pushed back.

" *Meiya-sama, from today onward I shall be returning to Yuuhi-sama's side. Due to Raiden-sama's health, you shall be sent to some other distant relatives for the time being."*

" *So… Will we see each other once more, Tsukuyomi?"*

" *Not for the time being, I'm afraid."*

If I fall here… the park will be destroyed. It will crumble under the weight of my machine, my failure.

" *Am I being discarded, perhaps?"*

" *Nothing of the sort, Meiya-sama. I am merely required back at the Main House, and Raiden-sama is too old to safeguard you."*

" *Yet, I'm still being sent away from you all."*

This place, the memory of my hometown, of you… gone, forever.

" *However, not all news are bad ones, Meiya-sama."*

" *How do you mean?"*

" *Well, you are now allowed some measure of freedom. And if you perform as you're expected to, perhaps… you'll be able to meet them one day."*

And I can clearly see it, the small box she produced. The small gift, the aroma of the food, the letter that with it came.

"I've already lost plenty of treasures. I won't let this park to be destroyed, and I won't fall in this test, either!"

A quick volley shoots out from under my arm, forcing Tsukuyomi to retreat. Yet, I charge forward, meeting her warding slash, sidestepping after the contact and countering once more. Breathing in through my nose, I hold the air prisoner within. I cannot let my temper flare up, or else that park will be no more. Tsukuyomi may have the edge on a technological level, but still, I should be able to at the least knock her sword away, like Takeru always does in our bouts.

Only then I'll be able to make her retreat. Remember her words, the words of our style. Closing my eyes for a second, the days we spent in the dojo return, the days when we sparred just like we are doing now, under these same skies. The scent of the violets' incense, the faint creaking of the wood under our steps, and the words that laid in a scripture on the wall. The words Tsukuyomi taught me, when she began to instruct me in the proper form to be worthy of learning the Mugen Kidou.

*Be as serene as the moon.*

*Like a leaf slowly dancing atop a lake.*

*Let your feet be guided by the winds,*

*as your blade becomes another part of you.*

*Sharpen thy mind. Freeze thy heart.*

*Body and Soul. Moving as one.*

*To cleave a path forward, with your own hands.*

*Like the moonlight that pierces the clouded skies!*

I know I can do it. I will best Tsukuyomi today, without a shred of doubt!

Opening my eyes again, I readjust my grip on my controls as an exhalation reaches my hands, as the rumbling of the march forward

once again envelopes me whole. She's slowly coming towards me from my left, sword at the ready as her boosters light up.

Sister, I will not disappoint you anymore.

One… Two…

I boost dash towards her just as she does towards me, yet I don't linger in the parry. Quickly backboosting, Tsukuyomi now finds herself chasing after me, having to take a turn. My grip my controls eases up, merely gyrating them softly as I release the pedals from my stomping pressure. My Fubuki gradually loses speed as it dashes through a street, I look back and find the Takemikazuchi readying its blade. A valiant crimson rain of arrows, all of them gravitating towards myself.

And then, just as our blades were about to clash, I backboost away. Tsukuyomi's slash met the air, giving me the few seconds I needed. I deactivate one jump unit while fully forcing one to full output, making me spin in place. I may not be strong enough yet to brave through the storm that you are, but I can certainly stand my ground against your gale!

"Have at you, Tsukuyomi!" And with the force of the spin, I strike at her hands. The recoil reaches my body, just as I see her blade flying away into the sky.

I remain still after that, gasping. The Takemikazuchi also remains quiet as the sound of the sword hitting a building reverberates through the air.

I… I did it. I managed to-

**BOOM!**

"Augh!"

"Looks like you dropped your guard, Meiya-sama." Tsukuyomi notes, again cold and composed as when we met after the invasion for the first time.

My cockpit went red, my sight is off for the moment. She must have shot at me with her gun at point blank, I suppose.

"Tsukuyomi, I had already knocked your sword away! The duel was-"

"This was no duel, the mock battle won't end until the enemy is defeated. Knocking my blade away was not one of the victory conditions, Meiya-sama." She says, and I can't help but to gape and shiver. Did I… Did I ruin it? I got so engrossed in our fight, in protecting the park that I forgot my goal. Did I fail? I… Sister, I-
"However, even if that is the case, our fight has proved me that you have the necessary skill to face Daizaburou-sama. Congratulations, Meiya-sama. Your training is over."

"… Huh? Are you speaking the truth, Tsukuyomi?"

She then giggles, as I haven't heard her do in many moons. "Indeed. You have passed this test. You've grown strong in the time you've been here. Not only in skill, but in mind as well. It was a fine bout, Meiya-sama."

I thought I would feel happy or that I would cry upon these words. Yet, I'm feeling eerily calm, almost empty. Turning the visor on once more, the park is still safe in the distance. Sigh… I slump into the seat, easing all my muscles, my throat relaxes and opens wide as I breath a long breath of relief. Sister… I did it. I finally can proudly say that I am being useful. And, I did manage to both safeguard the park and strike Tsukuyomi's blade away. Had I not lost focus, I could have taken her down.

"Thanks for this duel, 1st Lt. Tsukuyomi. It has been an honor to cross strikes with you," I bow down, despite knowing she cannot see me.

"Please, there is no need for such words. Well, I shall- What is it?" Tsukuyomi's tone changes, growing harsh and severe as her slashes, as she is whenever she scolds me. She must be talking through their own frequency. Without waiting another second, Tsukuyomi cuts the connection with my own unit, and I can tell by the shaking nearby that she just boost jumped away in quite the hurry.

Right, Takeru! How is him? Can I still check my radar? Now, let me see… Only two dots remain on the map. Takeru and Tsukuyomi, I suppose. He… He bested Mion and Shion, at the same time?! Just when I thought I could be proud of my result, you have to go and surpass my efforts once more.

"You truly are special, a peak I can only observe from afar. And yet," Who are you? Are you my fellow or my enemy? Tsukuyomi… She went after you first. And she did take me out when she saw the chance, without hesitation, despite how she acknowledged I passed her trial.

… So that she could face you alone, perhaps? Still, for him to have bested both cousins… He didn't seem particularly upset, and I believe he wasn't looking for a fight with them, either. Sakaki did not repine about his attitude, so I assume Takeru kept himself in check thus far.

… Then, why am I feeling another shiver down my back?

I can't help but to grab my arms tightly as my mouth clamps on itself again. My legs again slowly rub against each other, my forehead is tense even without me noticing it. I try to slowly calm my breath, placing a hand on the base of my neck as the air comes through my nose, squeezing itself down to my lungs. And yet, my heartbeats refuse to douse down, my eyes remain fixated on my radar as the two dots grow closer and closer.

"Takeru… Please…"

# Dancing in the Masquerade

*Chapter 68:*

**Dancing in the Masquerade**

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*Some minutes before.*

**[Takeru]**

---

"Come to Papa, you pair of pickles!"

One good yanking of the controls sends the Gekishin to the air, drawing an arc above the buildings as if launched by a trebuchet. With a quick flicker of the button, an erratic volley aims at the ground. Both Zuikakus have to jump away to avoid the barrage, to not have their legs disabled. Short of stopping, more yanking of the controls and stomping on the pedals sends my Geki after the escaping duo, shooting non-stop.

Chizuru's face still is in a corner of my sight, she groans as her brows tense down. "06, stay low! The Takemikazuchi is-"

"Distract it and take it to Meiya. I'll try and keep these two out of your hair, so keep it pinned down for as long as you can." I say giving her a short nod, a firm gaze, Chizuru was about to protest, going by how her lips twisted, but she gives a tense nod and cuts the connection.

Her dot approaches Tsukuyomi-san's, delaying its movements for a little while, but in the end she's taken out as well. Thankfully, Meiya is already close enough to engage. Now then, what to do?

I could just lose on purpose, but Sensei told me to keep it real. Good scores are something I'm gonna need to justify my inclusion into the Valkyries after the CCSE fiasco, and my defeat against Chizuru and

Kei the other day. We're using similar models, so we might be evenly matched in an individual perspective.

A small sidestep behind a building, a lightpost gets tumbled by a paint downpour. Crouching, doing half a tilt on the joystick, my unit peeks from behind the wall, sending a minimal barrage with just a tender press of the button. Paint, paint everywhere. You know, sometimes I wonder how the hell do we clean the mess we leave behind in the city. It ain't as if we were doing some minimal ammo challenge or anything, we're soaking the concrete as if there were a typhoon of paint closing into the bay.

Sliding the tip of my heels on the pedals, simple and unidirectional boosts through the street followed by sidesteps in erratic patterns, we play cat and mouse in between the rubble. Unlike our encounter in the island, I've more than enough ammo to take care of both of you if it comes to that. And even if you try to overpower me-

One of them moves towards my right, shooting through the buildings, forcing me to crouch and slide into another street. As I did, a small shadow blocks the light from my visor. One of 'em thought it'd be a good idea to try and jump over me, to move past me, perhaps to go fight Meiya, perhaps to pincer me.

However.

Paint arrows fly off towards the sun, forcing the crane to evade and change the direction of the jump. As it lands to my Six, my finger keeps button mashing the trigger. The gun that's on my back keeps on firing at random intervals, my bullets wanting to do a close up inspection of their craft. So, retreat is all they can do, again. If they don't come out and face me head on, I can keep 'em at bay with my suppression.

"I learned from Mikoto and Tama how to do this best, after all. You're not getting past me so easily. Heh… *You could say the Pickles are in quite the pickle.* Pfft…" I'm such an idiot, to laugh with what's at stake.

A minute beeping makes me flinch, a message appears on my sight, in neon red and blue. Huh… So the pickles want to talk in a private line? Seems like you were right, Sensei. So, what do I do? Is this bait to distract me or are they for real? There must be a reason why you sent Cpt Isumi as the overseer today, Sensei. I bet these two already know of how I reacted during yesterday's meeting, and going by what little I saw of Shura's Dance then-

Ugh! Khhg… Fuck, no. Screwdrivers rotate inside my ears, an acid knot constricts my stomach. "Haa… Haa… Deep breaths, man. Calm down. I gotta do what I gotta do."

Sensei needs more time to fix the equations and find a way to mend the ripples, without exhausting herself or ruining her health. I dunno what they want to talk about, but they haven't attacked yet. Here goes nothing, I suppose. With a few taps on my chin mic and the arm controls, the recording settings start up, so that I can later inform Sensei of this, and with a large sigh I accept the connection. A few windows pop up, registering the frequency, before the ID of both of them appears on my sight, Blood 5 and 6.

Not a second passes that 5's ID bumps up, Mion's voice reaches my ears. "Aren't you confident, Cadet Shirogane? To come face us all on your own." The same cold, shaving voice of the CCSE.

"I just wanna try myself against real pilots. And my squadmate needs the cover, since she wants to face off against the 1st Lieutenant," I say, shrugging and taking another deep breath with my nose.

"So you're being considerate towards Meiya-sama?" She asks, the blizzard still kicking in.

"Just returning the favors she's done to me, is all. So, what did you need?"

"Why, are you inconvenienced by having to speak with us?"

I feel like we've been here before, have we been here before? "We're in the middle of a battle so, what is the matter?"

"Quite formal, are you not?" Shion comments, a short echo of a strong exhalation coming up a sec later. "It is impressive you've actually succeeded in restraining our movements. One would think," then, she giggles dryly, "you truly are a commissioned pilot."

"Sorry to disappoint you, but I'm just a cadet."

"Oh, is that so? Could it be not because of your training thus far?"

"Huh?" What is she on about now?

"Indeed, while your shooting skills truly would seem polished… elsewhere, your CQC stance and patterns truly do belong to our Imperial traditions."

I shake my head, sighing, seeing their dots were not moving one bit. "This again? I am Japanese, you know."

"Oh, my cousin was not referring to that," Mion says, a small ember within the dry ice. "If your movements do resemble ours, then it would mean you received some training in the Empire. It is most odd, that you can fend off two commissioned pilots of the Guard on your own."

"Sigh… Look, I already told all I could to your sister. I don't know anything else about my past, so there's nothing I can tell you. Got it?" I again sigh, giving the controls a slow squeeze.

"Then, why would you not try and visit the Capital? I am certain you could find many answers to your queries."

… Again with this? I'm pretty sure we had this same conversation a few chapters ago, Pickles. And Tsukuyomi-san wasn't entirely pleased when she arrived back then. And, jokes aside, I don't think

I'd receive any pleasant answers. *All that awaits for me in the Capital is disdain and dejection, after all.*

"My personal matters are none of your concern. Could you kindly leave this rest already? We're in the middle of a battle, for fuck's sake."

"And why would you not want to rectify your situation?" Mion presses, one dot starts moving in the radar. "Certainly, dispelling this uncertainty is in your best interests?"

"… Again, this is a personal matter, 2nd Lt Tsukuyomi," Forcing the reply out, air fills my lungs as I grip the controls, feel some sweat trickling down my forehead.

A beep in my ears, a stomp to my pedals, a burst of paint where I was a second ago, and the recoil coming through my legs and up as I retaliate. A blur of buildings and beepings after, my Gekishin is crouch dashing through the street to meet the cousins' aggro, firing off a 120mm before backboosting, then zap to the other way while showering the 36mm muffins in an upward arc. Yet, it only scratches the antenna of the Zuikakus at most, nothing but a gentle headpat. And doing zigzags again, we share a few volleys and shots.

"Would you truly not reconsider?" Mion asks, her voice almost drowned by all the beeping and jet noises as I power slide behind a collapsed building, what few windows remained breaking apart.

"Is this all you're gonna say? I already told your sister all I could. What else do you want?!"

"One could reach the wrong assumption should you refuse to visit the Capital or answer some simple questions, cadet," Shion says, as what I presume is her unit rushes through the jungle of concrete and ruin, thrashing against the vines and wilderness, breaking the a few steel trunks as her slash meets nothingness when I pull back. "Furthermore, we could grant you both support and protection should you choose to accept our offer."

Deja Vu! I've just been in this place before!

Higher on the street, on an elevation, my shots force her to retreat as she rises a shield. Now I know it's my time to go! Hitting the ground with the heels of my machine while my boosters gain heat, my Geki then shoots off, its speed straight into the Red Zone, as I raise my sword. Parried by the shield, my strike forces Shion backwards, descending on the small hill under my pressure. Now I gotta aim my other arm to her legs and she's as good as-

A flicker on the edge of my view, a circle of my controls lets me side step at the last second, avoiding the blade that wanted to cuddle my head visor. More muffins I send their way as I retreat on a street, dashing backwards. Unable to give chase immediately, the Pickles have to remain stationary and I can sigh for a sec.

So, I wipe the sweat off my forehead as I leave my machine walking backwards on auto. "Standing on my feet, it's so hard when I try to be me."

"Hm? What did you say?" Mion asks, losing the cold as she unlocks the shock.

Fuck, I forgot the private line was still on. Well, I rather them hear one of my dumb jokes or songs instead of having to actually deal with their words. *Your obnoxious insistence is getting on my nerves, Pickles. Can't you take a fucking hint and see that I'm in no mood to talk?*

"… You seemed to be singing, cadet," Mion softly says, the warning of the radar coming up right after. "Do you not deem us as a threat, perhaps?"

"… I'm doing all I can as of now." To keep you both away from Meiya and Tsukuyomi-san, to make a decent enough impression, to not snap despite the acid raising in my throat and the needles falling right on top.

"Looks like that, indeed," Shion then chuckles, and groans a sec later as my shots embrace her shield. "Your sidesteps look quite nimble and precise, cadet. May I ask where you learned such a maneuver?"

Crouching and diving away, a kick I send to Mion's unit, tumbling it down, before I jump away from Shion's paint hose. "I just move as I think it's best, is all. What, is there something you have against my piloting?" If they did find a difference with his and my way of moving, that'll only work to blow my cover, dammit.

Both focus their fire on me, leaving a sticky mess that resembles a murky bog more than a street. Yet, instead of doing so in a straight line, they sway and spray their shots, as if the road were full of small curves. Inhaling sharply, retracting my tongue, once more I stomp the pedals and start to spin and rebound. Erratic zigzags on the ground, I draw sharp triangles with my jumps, firing off one of my few remaining 120mm shells before taking the next street In-In-In, taking shelter behind a few skyscrapers. Thank God Chizuru left the location of the central district marked in our radars, if I can take them there I should be able to at least take one down without showing off too much.

Yet, their dots don't have any hurry in chasing after me. A small chuckle reaches my ears, amused for real. "You truly are very skilled, cadet," Mion says, normal and without anything covering her words. "Almost as if you were trained by true elites, one could say."

"… Thanks, I guess." And I was trained by some of the best soldiers one could find, many times over.

Taking cover in between the buildings, I scan the radar and sonars. Yet, they're barely emitting a sound. From the looks of it, they're walking really slow. As if they had no hurry… as if…

As if their goal was to get me away from the rest, I see. Yeah, just as I thought. They should have more accurate data of Tsukuyomi-san's position, she must still be dealing with Meiya. So, they're playing

along with my 'diversion'. Should I take the chance and get shot down? No, they'll just be free to do whatever they want with me until Tsukuyomi-san ends the fight with Meiya. They might try to open my cockpit and have a close and personal talk. *I can't simply expect them to play by the rules anymore, there's no guarantee that they won't do something drastic now.* I think Tsukuyomi-san was bothered by my answers during the meeting, but I can't deny that they might choose to do something crazy to see whether I'm him or not.

"It would be a crying shame if you were to be placed in court over this error in the databases," Mion says, slow and tender, as careful as if she were sewing.

"Indeed, cousin of mine," Shion replies immediately, low and sober as she does. "Would you truly not welcome our offer, cadet? Regardless of these issues, you might be able to find what was of your relatives during your absence."

"I'd have to agree," The other retorts. "It would be most unfortunate if you were convicted over this contrarian attitude you're endowing. All it takes are a few days, and you could perhaps find some of your relatives still live."

…

In my ears zooms in the static, a rock is cracking. The edges of my eyes hurt, as if something were sinking them into my skull. *For even if I know I should not react, I still find my knuckles bending, my teeth tensing. My skin crawls, shaving against a wall, the paint over the steel fading to the crudity that rests below. Rolling over and over, letting out quite the smoke like a tire kept in place, merely sigh and repine within is all I should do.* However, I don't feel like staying silent anymore.

"… What do you even know of my family?"

"Huh?"

All that happened in my world, having failed to protect them, not even knowing if mom and dad are safe back there. How she died in this world, how dad was probably forced to keep slaving at the Guard just to keep him safe, how he died and you nobles threw little me away without any care…

"While I can understand your duty as public servants to survey the error in my data banks, you two are crossing a line you should not even be tapping. You know jack shit about my life, *you don't even know me, you've no right to say anything about my family, my decisions, or my future.* So, if this is all you wanna say, kindly fuck off and shut up."

"Excuse me, well," Mion coughs, dispelling the shock and stutter that almost surfaced, "we meant no offense, cadet. However, employing such hostility shan't give you no boons. I wonder, why are you showing such aggressiveness towards us?"

"You were rather welcoming during our talk in the track field, after all," Shion complains, sour and low.

"Because I already told you enough, yet you keep on pushing. *You're not related to me, so if you don't mind…"*

Pushing the controls forward, once the boosters regained their fire I blast away into the sky, using a roof as trampoline. In just a few seconds, their frames enter my view and radar, and like moth towards a fire do my bullets chase the Zuikakus.

"I rather continue the battle." So just drop it. I already talked enough, I already asked you to stop.

One of them stands its ground, and with a quick step forward it reflects my aggro back at me. Deactivating a jump unit, I spin away from the Zuikaku, which slams its shield against a poor buildings. The windows sink in, the steel glued to the concrete as all the paint exploded into the deserted offices. Yet, the Zuikaku quickly procures

its blade and once more charges at me like a bull seeing red, forcing a parry, starting another dance.

"Quite rude of you, cadet," Shion says, I can practically see the frown through her voice, dry as if she only had lemonade to drink all day long. "We are only extending a fair helping hand towards you."

"And I already asked you to leave it be."

"It is only right for us to do so," she insists as she tumbles a few lightposts, crushes a few cars when chasing after me. "Perhaps, could we teach you how to juggle all these issues you're dealing with?"

Hopping against a crumbled TSF, I evade her slash. Opening fire on her, all I manage to do is fill the torn cockpit with paint. "I'm very good at juggling my own problems, thank you very much." A beep in the radar, a crouch and a dash, the broken remains are filled with more paint while I retaliate with the rifle mounted on my pylon.

Which forces Mion to jump away, circling my surrounding area as she closes the distance. "Why must you refuse us so strongly? It isn't as if we were going to place a voodoo curse on you."

And while I rush out of the street, Shion tails my steps as if it were part of my shadow. Her ID again bumping in my vision, a small chuckle fades in slowly, "You truly would benefit much from listening to us. It's for the greater good that you mend the data banks as soon as possible, otherwise your efforts thus far shall be pointless if you're taken to court."

Deep breaths, stay cool. Zig to the right, zag to the left, crouch and try to stand up immediately after, keep on swaying, keep on running. So long as my machine keeps on wobbling so slightly, they won't be able to lock onto it. I just gotta drag the fight out until Meiya gets shot down, so that the CP takes over once I'm down.

Giving the controls a light rest from the choking and yanking, I sigh and breath with my mouth open. Feeling my heartbeats as I do, feeling the cold shiver on my head, my feet remain set on their rhythm, my Gekishin keeps changing lanes and streets, taking some sharp corners and trading paint with the walls as I manage to keep the Pickles at bay for the moment.

A dot starts to close the distance, another takes a different street. A choke point, huh. Let's take a shot!

Moving my feet up causes the boosters to gradually stop, and with a hop on the ground my unit circles on itself before going back the way I came. Shortly after, the Zuikaku enters my sight, having little time to avoid the blade aimed at its head, sparks flying off when steel meets steel.

"Bold of you to face me head on," Shion grunts, her unit bends its knees for a low strike, which I evade. Her boosters ignite and my own slash meets a building, she chuckles again. "Sadly for you cadet, I doubt you're a fair match for me," She keeps on chuckling as our small strikes keep on missing their target in the cramped space of the ruins.

Dust and pieces of concrete gently fall on the broken street as sparks fly off when we parry each other again. And I suppose she must be as low on ammo as me, if she isn't using her guns now.

"I dunno, I'm keeping up well enough against you two here."

"And that is worth quite the praise. But, you see…" her voice slows down, fades down as her unit remains still, before taking the Mugen stance of Maya-sensei's style, "someone once told me I was awesome with a blade, and I endeavor to be worthy of those words. Do you think you can best me now, Takeru?"

Charging like a rhino, the quick stream of slashes blur in my sight, yet the recoil and shaking runs all over my TSF when I parry. It's like a whirlwind, paired with the polished control of her boosters she's

keeping me on my toes well enough, not letting me escape her lock. Pulling the lever and inputting the command, my pylon bends under my arm to rain pain on her. Yet, Shion had ample time to boost jump away from my firing line.

Guh… Closing an eye, I can feel the air seep through my teeth. For a second I almost dozed out of it, a small dojo coming into view. And a small and super pissed Shion also was in sight, pushing me back for some reason. I see… I guess that's how you were when you met him. As I run away from her paint, small images and distorted sounds come into my ears. A pair of hands raising, offering a pouting Shion a slice of strawberry cake. She and Mion laughing at a rather desolate shogi board on his end. And then, as he was drawing a graph in a page, both Pickles were bickering over something in the table.

And then, when I blink, the gray skies extend, looming over me. The smell of gunpowder, the sirens blaring nonstop, the agitation clanging on my chest. And both of them, frowning my way with those lightless, cruel eyes they endowed during the CCSE.

" *It is a waste of resources, they shall perish either way. It is more beneficial for the IRG, and the Empire, that the available supplies are used to tend to those who can still make themselves useful." Mion states, with a brush of her hair she then glares at me, eyes blazing.*

"… *Have some empathy? Do you think these people can protect others? They cannot even tend to themselves as it is. We are only safeguarding the supplies and the correct defense lines to protect those who still would offer flesh and blood for our nation. It is all for the greater good, for the future of our Empire." Shion asserts, slicing the air with the finger which she raises, her lips and cheeks contorting backwards as if smelling rot she were.*

*Cold, uncaring, dismissive, grayed out. Lightless, ruthless, echoing the same words over and over. Are they even alive anymore?*

…

*They're not who I once saw them as, I already should know that. Lying and backstabbing those who they don't deem valuable is not beyond them. Why am I even giving heed to their words, again?*

I want to build a decent future. I want to hear laughter echo through me, feel the smell of the gardens rush into me. *A life of only servitude sucks, there's no happiness to be found there. To discard others when you deem them unusable, to forsake their potential when you yourselves are who send them to the wolves…*

Why am I holding back again? Why am I being patient with these two?

I already had to deal with quite the issues regarding my identity in my first loops. If I could make myself useful, invaluable back then without Sensei, then there's little to fear now. I ain't snapping, but I also won't simply let them make fun of me, and him.

Breathing in, moving my controls as I do, my Gekishin jumps sky high. And crashing onto a building, I rebound off it and fire away at the Zuikaku that was tailing me. Shion has next to no time to step back, and my feet come down hard onto the ground in front of her. Never letting the pedals go, using the momentum and weight to my advantage, my slash buries her gun onto a building.

"Aren't you really nimble?" Shion says, grunting again when she retaliates and I met the parry. "I wonder, did you also have an awesome role model to follow after in your sword lessons?"

"I'm done with your questions, 2nd Lieutenant."

"Oh? What is it?" She asks, some delay in her words. "I'm merely curious about-"

"Take a fucking hint already. If this is all you'll say, I'll drop the connection." Taking a step back, I threaten to use my gun, which causes her to jump. Heh, fell for it.

Yet, when I rush forward with a crouch to dice at her legs, the boosters extend their impulse and she lands further away. Instead, my low stance ends up countering an avalanche of a strike as we again dance in between collapsed buildings.

"You're being quite rude, Takeru."

"Sigh. Is that all?"

"Look, we're only trying to help you out, is all. What will you do if you are taken to court? Don't you see how much danger you're in?!" She lashes out, both voice and strikes.

"I know, but that ain't gonna stop me. I'll despair after I'm dead."

"Huh? What did you…" She freezes in her tracks, sword in midair.

"What you heard. No matter what comes my way, I'll face it head on as best as I can. And you're no exception!" Swinging my blade repeatedly at her, I take my Mugen rhythm. Shion's movements are starting to become unfocused the more she parries my swings.

"W-Wait a second, Takeru! We're not your enemies!"

"Yeah, right. Check the radar and give it another go."

"Mmgh… You know what I'm talking about!"

"Can't say I do, no. I'm lost as a penguin in a desert, to be honest."

Her voice chokes on itself, as if water had gone into her lungs, while the parries regain their sturdiness, while I can't press her unit to retreat anymore.

"Aren't you a little too confident. Maybe you need a few hit to that head of yours, to remember who you're dealing with!" She screams, some of her hits grazing my shoulders and outer leg armor. I parry her attacks, also hitting the end of her shoulders, then force her

blade to descend. Yet, before I could raise my gun at her cockpit, she boosts away.

Fuck, I thought I'd be able to finish her off by now. I don't wanna risk any of my aerial charges, if I miss my timing I either break my Gekishin or end up skewering them in half. It'd be easy if I bait her and boost backflip behind her unit, but the Gekishin is too heavy. I don't know if I can pull that off on the move well enough. Also, Mion is getting closer again. I have to finish this quickly.

Yet, she's using the Mugen Kidou as well, and a similar style to mine at that, so I can't find an opening in her flow despite me being somewhat serious right now. I'm sure Shion finished her training with Maya-san, so I'm not sure I can actually overpower her in CQC either. I may have some good experience with the Gekishin, but if I keep on duking it out for real my cover will be blown to bits. Sigh… If only I was allowed to use a small grenade…

A high guard she takes, then Shion once more comes towards me. "Is this your limit, Takeru?! At this rate you're gonna bite the dust!"

"Says the one who can't beat a mere Cadet." I roll my eyes, rechecking the map and the sonar. Huh, Meiya's still going at it? Wow.

"Oho? Look at you, being all brave," Shion then chuckles a bit. "Do you really think you can stop my unending waterfall of attacks?" She says as she dashes backwards, raising her blade above her shoulder.

Recalling those days in the dojo, I can only sigh and hunch over.

"Hm? What is it?" She asks, not coming after me.

Inhaling sharply, a small grasp and circling on the controls makes my Gekishin endow my own stance. Shion gasps, but her Zuikaku seems to lower its stance further, as if preparing to counter. Feeling

the shiver on the back of my head, I don't bite it down now. Let me see how she fights, lend me your strength.

…

Slowly letting the air go with my nose, slowly pushing the pedals, everything but the Zuikaku in front of me blurs away. My lips move, counting, waiting, and my hands remain quiet even when her machine starts approaching me. Meeting the blade, a step back to repel the follow up, force into the counter to freeze her advance. *And now, she should take her step back. And once she does-*

The impulse molds my back to the seat, my jump units igniting both modes straight into the overload warning. Carnage and dust fall upon the buildings nearby as my sword runs through them, before hitting the Zuikaku right on the side of the cockpit.

The machine falls down on the ground, one arm then also crumbling in defeat as the rest of the body causes cracks on the street. Dust and pieces of glass shower down the area, and a bit of concrete falls off the top of the poor building I eviscerated, hitting the Zuikaku's horn and bouncing off it.

Sigh… I won.

"Ugh…" Shion grunts, as if running her tongue in between her teeth. "How on Heavens did you… Ugh. Damn it all…" A small sound reaches my ears, she seems to have just hit the controls quite hard.

"Well, I guess this is my win. Thanks for the fight, 2nd Lt," I say, low, as I turn around and start closing off the connection with her unit.

"Wait a moment! How did you anticipate my movement just now?"

"I just read your patterns, is all. Not my fault you always attack in the same way, *you dumb pickle.* "

"Huh? W-What… What did you-"

Hm? Why is she stuttering now? Oh, shit. Right, I'm not supposed to call them like that. Guess using his knowledge now had a bit of a side effect. Eh, not much to worry about, I guess.

"Hey Takeru! What did you call me just now?!" Shion sounds agitated, and she's again hitting her cockpit.

"You lost, Shion Tsukuyomi. So you should remain quiet. Dead people don't talk." Except me, I guess.

"Screw that! Why did you call me-

"Because your hair is all green and long, and you sound a bit bitter. That's why, you're a pickle."

"What… But…"

"And I guess you could say your cousin is now in quite the pickle, too."

"Takeru, do you-"

"Guess you were no match for my sickle."

"Wait, did you just-"

"Shion, remain silent," Mion joins in, her dot now visible in my radar. "You're no longer part of the exercise, so you cannot talk any further."

"But Mion, those words… Takeru, explain yourself!" She sounds absolutely livid. I better get outta here.

"I refuse."

"What?!"

"I already said all I wanted to."

"Wait, I'm-" Her voice cuts off as I drop the connection.

Simply by moving my head visor, I could distinguish the frame closing in on me. I shoot at Mion, she moves to the left and retreats into a street, then returns the pleasantry of paint from afar. Well, if it's a chase you want, a chase you shall get!

We play chase for a while, trying to get an opening, to disable the other's hands. I try to catch her off-guard with my zigzags, but she managed to avoid most of my shots. Her paint sticks to the edges of my Gekishin as her rounds explode close, too close, as I zigzag and backboost at random. My own ammo is running low, so she can be more aggressive with her long range assaults. So, I dash towards the spot Chizuru had mentioned, using the skyscrapers and apartment buildings as shelter from the paint downpour.

So, after a few seconds of chasing each other in this part of the city, Mion opens the private channel again and her calm and cold voice reaches my ears.

"Your maneuvering is very good, cadet. You have my respect for your dexterity," she does sound commanding like Tsukuyomi-san, but she lacks that… edge? Depth? I dunno, but she's still not at Tsukuyomi-san's level.

"Thanks. Everyone seems to think I'm too reckless, though."

Doing another boost jump, a spiral of paint rushes behind me, yet her Zuikaku merely stops out of range, taking aim and trying to snipe me. A single feet dives into the concrete, the bullet misses me by a hair, as the shaking lets me know. *Heh, looks like this pickle has quite the sickle in her hands.*

"Hmm, perhaps they are correct," Mion notes, still slow and tranquil. "And what of your technique with a sword? I cannot believe you've bested my cousin, truth be told."

"I think I told you I'm done doing the answering." She rushes forward and so I do, yet I again spin, breaking more windows and lunging for the head.

Crouching, she avoids the hit. Boosting, she evades the follow up. Standing up, she parries the downwards slash. "And why would you hoist such animosity towards us? If this is about the CCSE, I apologize for my behavior then."

"Oh, for trying to make me disappear on the mud, you mean?"

"Uh, well… I was only concerned of an unknown being near the one we watch over. I don't hold any desire to antagonize you, cadet."

"… Yet, you guys keep on bringing up how I could be taken to court. Despite how I already did all I could and asked you to back off."

"There is a clear risk for you with the error in the databases! I know I am reiterating myself, yet I insist you visit the Capital."

"Sigh… You really can't just let this go? Didn't your sister tell you? I'm dealing with this on my own terms, if you guards start mingling in my affairs it'll only bring me trouble later."

"I do not believe that is true," Mion says, losing the coolness and turning acidic, as her machine stops the strikes, takes a few steps back and merely remains in position. "We of the Royal Guard only act to safeguard our fellows, all we do is for the greater good of the Empire."

"… All you do is justified, huh."

"Eh?

Is abandoning a little kid also for the greater good? Exploiting his trust just to have his father keep serving you until his death? Leaving him without dinner, trapped with no choice but to either be erased or

become your servant? Were those memories of Shura's Dance also for the greater good?

For the new world that would rise by dawn? For the sake of humanity? It's so easy to justify yourself when you use noble causes to explain your actions. You're not sending your soldiers towards endless BETA hordes with less than optimal supplies while refusing to deploy the G-Bombs, you're safeguarding humanity's victory. You didn't use them as meat shield, they made a valiant sacrifice for the future. You didn't release the aliens in the middle of a training exercise when they had no weapons, you only put the base to the test so that they gained the proper mindset for the battles that would come. It was for the greater good, there was abso-fucking-lutely no other way forward, was it now?

"It must be nice, to have a monopoly on the moral high ground."

"Excuse me?"

"I can understand you being suspicious of someone who comes from out of nowhere, someone with odd intel in his profiles. I get that, and it's reasonable. But the moment you demand to arrange and take control of my private matters, that's when you cross a line you never should be tapping, *Royal Guard."*

"Uh, ah… I was only expressing my concern towards your situation, and extending a hand if-"

"What's next, then? If I say no again, what comes afterwards? You're gonna call me a dead man? You're gonna threaten to have me die again?"

"Wait a moment, please. I never said anything of the sort!"

"Do you think I'm dumb, *Tsukuyomi?* You people seem to know who I was, going by how much you're insisting. Yet," I take a breath slowly, trying and failing to douse the heartbeats, the drill that keeps on pounding my neck and head, "instead of accepting my answers, you

grow more and more incisive. And ever since I came back to the Empire, you people have been treating me like shit. Calling me names behind my back, spitting on my face despite my best efforts to try to fit in, looking at me as if I were a criminal. You Royal Guards in particular have been real dicks with me, both in the CCSE and back at the base, too. You all act nice and proper in front of the common folk, but you're all nothing but hypocrites who prefer to do things by force!"

"What… did you-"

"My data was wiped clean from *your* databases while I wasn't here, and you all are accusing *me* of being some sort of criminal. And despite my best efforts at explaining my situation to your sister, you're still gunning at me to do what *you* want me to do. Ain't that a bit suspicious?"

"Wait, cadet! Please don't misunderstand our intentions. I do relent that we acted out of place during the CCSE, and that your situation is very delicate, but precisely because of that we are offering you our hand. I apologize for my attitude then," Mion lowers her blade, both the real one and the one in her words, "however, let me clarify something. We are not after your life nor is there any ploy regarding the missing data. We of the Royal Guard are merely suspicious of you due to the state of your profiles, which was only caused by an unfortunate error. If you could come to the Capital to deal with this matter, no further inquiries would be needed."

"The Guard isn't the government, and I already explained to your General what I wish to do. Why do you keep insisting so much on this, to the point of using a private frequency?"

"Your standing should be clarified, Cadet Shirogane. If you refuse us so firmly, we could reach the conclusion that you are hiding something. If you have nothing to hide and wish to mend this error, why not accept our aid? Do you not wish to know who you were before you lost your memories?" She asks, and while Mion's tone is still as imposing as a mountain, now there's also a slight soft

undertone in them. Slowly spoken, as if concerned, like a teacher or a friend giving true advice.

And yet, her words only burn my ears, cause my stomach to turn as the small girl choking on cake and the ruthless soldier overlay in my mind's eye. Sighing, I shake my head and lick my lips. "I already told your sister what I plan to do if it comes to that, and I think I'll be fine. Can you all really not simply accept I wanna, I dunno, have a clean slate?"

"… It would be unproper of a Royal Guard to look away when a fellow would require aid."

"Then, if you insist so much, tell me, Tsukuyomi. What do you know about me that makes you insist so much?"

"It's only natural for a Royal Guard such as me."

"Really? Why did you refer to me as 'fellow' right now, though?"

"… I do not know what you're talking about." She's clamping up, freezing over again. "All I know is, you should refrain from making any hasty decisions before seeing what data might remain in the Capital's data banks. So, I once again suggest you pay a visit to Tokyo when you can."

"Then there is no reason for us to talk."

I go at her with my blade and we start to trade blows, destroying some of the buildings to our sides. Dust and cars fly away, I cannot break the ice of her defense.

"You're truly good. I didn't knew Americans were so adept in the use of a blade." She says in a slow, soft tone.

"Sorry to inform you, but I'm Japanese."

"I was not implying anything foul, cadet," She repines, fuming a bit. Our swords locked again in a struggle, two opposite currents

crashing against one another. "I was only complimenting your dexterity, and mentioning how it is clear you must have received some tutoring while on the Empire to possess such skill with a blade," Mion says, again soft and slow, composed, as her machine gives me some respite, taking a low guard stance.

Wait, that stance… Right, Tsukuyomi-san's own stance. Think, how can I best her? No, shouldn't I just end this battle here?

"And I can see you have indeed learned in this nation of ours," she says, firmly.

"Why?"

"Your patterns, and your targets. Dazzling and fast, flickering as a candle's fire, yet focused and restrained. I concur that many might deem you reckless, yet I believe you resemble… a chained fire blast, a reveling flare in protection."

"… Huh?"

"You do not fight with killing intent, you haven't truly tried to aim at my cockpit or engines nor have resorted to foul play. And during the early stages of the fight, you safeguarded your comrades instead of chasing after possible vantage points," she tells, softly and rousing, as if she were smiling. "After all, we fight not to further our own interests, but to protect the powerless."

Nibbling at my bottom lip, an image of Meiya, my Meiya, appears in a dojo. When she taught that odd stance on the mountain, before she announced our engagement to the rest of the Group in an official manner. And it was the same for the other, the one from my loops, that still tried to remain with me despite the troubles it must have given her. Yet, his memories tell a different story. You and Shion didn't even spare a gaze his way, didn't even care about the state of that madness so long as you got your way.

Are they guilty now? Is that why they insist so much on having me go to the Capital? But then, what's this void that fills my chest now? This stab on my heart as if I were out of breath, as if I had literal threads of steel going down my throat?

"So, lets us end this duel in a fitting manner," Mion says, firm and sturdy, bringing me back to Earth. And her Zuikaku was again employing the Mugen stance.

… If I refuse, she'll assume I really have something against them. It's either they thinking I'm not him or that Yuuko is influencing me. But, if this is how she chooses to do things… Taking a deep breath, placing a hand over my chest, feeling my heartbeats again, the cold hands again poke my sides. And behind all that mess, behind the gray skies and the war… there's one simple wish, the one wish that I suppose is what we share, what allows me to remember his memories. The one thing we have in common, despite our lives being so different.

Remembering what happened to my world, the feelings I felt when seeing your memories, letting the anger seep out, drain off me. I gulp, grabbing once more the joysticks tightly. Holding my breath, I then point my blade at the Zuikaku.

"Fine. But let me make something clear to you," I say while taking my Mugen stance, prepping up the jump units.

"What are you talking about?" I can feel the nervousness in her, the edge in her voice.

Let's drive the last nail into you, Mion. If you truly were a friend of him, if you truly are as concerned as you claim to be, then you should react to these words. Maybe this will let you believe I'm not a faker, or if you're the enemy it'll only cause me more problems. Still, if I am to stay here, I do plan on keeping my word, on following after that desperate wish I heard during the CCSE.

*Because when I cried out for help after light's out, no one was there. So I shall shoulder this task on my own, I'll be the spark they need me to be.*

So, taking a deep breath, letting go of the act, and allowing me to be honest for just a second, the fire of those days, those days before Iceberg, those hours before Ouka, and that moment by the reactor right before the transfer.

"Hear me well, Tsukuyomi. I fight not because of some greater goal or some vain motive. To give a smile to our future, to put a stop to all this suffering is all I really want."

"Huh?"

"I am Takeru Shirogane, and what want the most is to have my fucking peace back!" Pushing, crushing the buttons, my jump units flare up and slowly turn into a pair of flamethrowers, ready to send me to high five the sky.

"Cadet Shirogane, please wait! I was just-"

Heel on the pedals, a quick push of the stick, I charge at her. "And if you get in my way," raising my blade, letting it ride the gale that will guide it to Mion's cockpit, I endure the sudden boost and push onward, *"I'm going to crush your fangs!"*

Mion didn't try to block or dodge, even as I grew closer and closer. Biting my lips, I have to let go of the controls at the last second to not crash into her frozen machine. The sudden shaking tosses me around for a second, yet my training sword still hits her Zuikaku on the head, sending it to crash against the ground, making concrete fly off and dust to spread around. Unable to simply stop, my Gekishin starts to fall over, so I yank the controls in a panic to stop it. So, I end up using my sword to support my weight.

… And the dummy blade ends up resting on the Zuikaku's cockpit, the signal from Mion vanishing from my radar. Did I just defeat her?

Wait, is she alright? I suppose she should, since I did avoid a direct hit at full speed. Sigh… Why did she got so tilted? Maybe Maya-san also wrote a poem for her style in this world? Hmm… I didn't think of that in the heat of moment. Did… I fuck this up?

"Tsukuyomi, can you hear me?"

"Yes," Mion spoke up with a hushed, timid tone. Quiet, like a child trying to not wake up its parents. "I suppose this is your victory, cadet."

"I guess…" So much for getting shot down before things got bad. "I'll be on my way."

Hopefully, they'll lay off for a while. I'm real tired of having to be on my guard all the time. Sometimes, I can't help but feel this is all pointless, sometimes I find myself thinking on how to go to the other world in the Betaverse, to the people I know are my friends. But then, I see Kasumi doing her best to carry all those babel towers of papers, I see Yuuko braving her exhaustion, I see the captain trying all she can to train the Valkyries despite the constant losses of her unit.

And then I dream of my world, like I did today. So I know I can only move forward, but it gets tiring. Especially when his sadness creeps up, like during my fights with you two pickles, and it also spurs the echos if Iceberg in the distance. Sigh…

"Wait, cadet! Where did you hear that last phrase? How do you-"

"I'm done here. Farewell, 2nd Lieutenant," I cut the connection and block her ID, exiting the private frequency they had linked.

I guess Yuuhi must not have taken my words very well. I'd like to think she wouldn't try and erase me, but his memories point elsewhere. Yuuko did say she thought you and her were in good terms somehow, and if you remained in the IRG there must have been something worth protecting there. Maybe Yuuhi and the Pickles

changed after the invasion, maybe he had something to do with that. Maybe his death fucked them up real bad, and that's why they're insisting so much.

But that might be only wishful thinking on my end. They kept on pressuring me about the risk of me getting called to court, so that's their biggest concern. That his existence is exposed. Under normal circumstances, I wouldn't mind to go to the Capital and deal with this stuff myself. But my life isn't solely mine anymore, my world is on the line too. Until the ripples are stabilized, I can't take any chances. So, I can only hope and wait, see if my words do their job or end up raising more fire my way.

Now, let's check the radar… Meiya's signal is gone. Tsukuyomi-san is the only one remaining on the field, and she's getting closer. And quick at that. Thankfully, it seems we're gonna cross path right where Chizuru wanted to ambush them. Maybe with the narrow space we'll have I could actually try and fake a fight before getting shot down on purpose.

Running a hand over my face, I move my neck in circles and roll my shoulders up and down. Entwining my fingers and extending my arms forward, I do the same with my legs. Once the stiffness leaves me, I slowly start walking forward.

"Sigh… No use in standing around or running away. Let's go finish this."

# Despair After Death

*A/N: This chapter contains scenes of blood and violence, graphic descriptions of gore, and death of the brutal variety.*

***Reader discretion is advised***

***I repeat.***

***Reader discretion is advised.***

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*"It's always pale and hopeless*

*The emptiness draws walls on me*

*They come in and reel me along*

*It's you who feels the light's goin'*

*To feel the past you left on me,*

*just like the stuck goodbye*

*It's you who d ies, in hundreds*

*The emptiness inside of me*

*k eep s you out from my mind*

*You' re always wrong and rest less*

*Incessant words draw on me,*

*' c ause I know what you'll find*

*Have you heard of ' full-on denial'?*

*Have you heard that 'one night can change her'?*

*And, you had the chance to become me?*

*Ever heard that chances can probe at you?*

*Take it in, you know you could stop it*

*Take it in, and you' ll have to stop it*

*Scream it out, you have to do it*

*Shout it out, "I have to do it!"*

*Emptiness strikes you out of nowhere*

*Emptiness don't need any Heavens*

*F r ee the longing that's fading out of me!*

*Emptiness takes you to the silence*

*Emptiness makes me wanna cry*

*F r ee the strange you that's holding your heart down !*

*Emptiness strikes you out of nowhere*

*Emptiness don't need any Heavens*

*F r ee the fire that's burning all through me!*

*Emptiness takes you to the silence*

*Emptiness makes me wanna cry*

*F r ee the darkness that's falling down right now!*

***Stronger Desire!*** *"*

*Emptiness and, by Takeharu Ishimoto. The World Ends with You, Nintendo DS and Switch .*

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*Chapter 69:*

***Da'at - Despair After Death***

---

*December 3 rd . Almost 10 AM.*

*(Ruin ed Battleground .)*

**[Takeru]**

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A small trembling shakes my legs as my Gekishin treads through the street, the tumbled and half-broken supply crates, the blasted remains of other TSFs, the general abandonment that's a staple of these ruins filling the view. A few shadows cast on me as I walk, a few threads of light squeeze through the tall skyscrapers, some wind roars through the street and makes smallest things flutter. All the while the last remaining dot continues to approach my position, never losing speed.

I'm almost out of ammo, on a Gekishin, and walking towards a Takemikazuchi. How am I not losing it is a mystery to me. I took some damage fighting the Pickles, so, if she wants to, Tsukuyomi-san can easily dispose of me in a matter of seconds. Pulling some insane dodging isn't out of my options, but I rather not expose any more of my skills if I can help it.

"Something tells me she won't do that, though." Licking over my drying lips, the odd taste of the skin and the cracks in it send a shiver down my spine. Short of helping me chill, it's making me more nervous. The silence, the repetition of the shaking as I walk onward, the echoes in the back of my head, I can only sigh while scratching an ear.

As the red frame appears on my view when it took a turn, I stop the motions and take a fighting stance. She also stops some distance away from me yet doesn't assume a battle position, her Take merely stands there under the daylight as if it were posing for a photo session or some shit. A beep in my ears, the same confirmation screen pops up in my view. The lines of neon red and blue, the request for a private line. Sigh… Say no, make them paranoid. Say yes, have to deal with their words. I again tap the controls, activating the recording, as I shake my head and also accept the encrypted connection. I do wonder if Cpt Isumi will do anything about this, even if she can't hear everything they tell me, my answers and the formation of the private connection should be coming up in my status. Maybe she's just keeping watch in case they do something stupid?

The icon of Blood 1 enters my frequency, immediately bumping up as a noise reaches my ears, a bit of coughing. "I never thought you'd be able to best both cousins, cadet Shirogane. Aren't you a gifted one?" Her sharp yet calm tone tells me all I needed to know, she's not gonna let me off easily.

"I merely did my best, 1st Lt. They sought a challenge, and I retaliated in kind. Them pickles were no match for my sickle, their attacks didn't even tickle."

"I see," composed and still as an ice waterfall, she remains serious. "I assume they both have tried to platicate with you already. Have you given some more thought to our previous offer?"

"Sigh… The answer hasn't changed, 1st Lt Tsukuyomi." There go my attempts to keep this light and peaceful, any more puns will be wasted on her ears.

"Is that so?" Small sparks fly off, sharpening her voice. "May I inquire on the reasoning?"

"Look, can you please just drop it? I… I can understand the concerns you must have, to find someone like me in this base, on

Mitsurugi's squad no less. But, that ain't reason enough for you to pressure me on how should I deal with my own personal matters. I already told you all I could, please stop insisting."

A small puff of air she releases, groaning softly. "Yet, it is most foolish on your part to refuse our aid. It would not sit well with me, to turn my eyes away from the woes of a son of a fellow Royal Guard. If you have recalled anything about your father, then you already have enough intel to make a solid defense. If your recollections match with the intel in our profile banks, then this whole matter can be resolved at once. Wouldn't that be on your best interests, cadet?"

"That's assuming many things, and ignoring all the risks. Please, stop it." Again raising my blade, my boosters start to heat up.

"I know not of what you speak of, could you kindly enlighten me?" She asks, a whirlwind of dry ice meets my initial strike.

"Well, if you insist," I take a deep breath, giving the controls a few squeezes, licking and nibbling at my lips as we share a few slow slashes, as if testing the other's speed. "There is no guarantee that my claims will be accepted in the first place. In this nation, the second someone is branded as a criminal they're sent to prison for a month, and the only easy way out is for the accused to plead guilty. No way in hell the authorities will simply shrug and accept my words."

I know that's true, there was one time Uncle Koetsu told me of how he had to go bail out dad when he visited a shopping mall for the first time. You have to pay for everything you buy in its respective floor instead of taking everything to a single cashier, and since Uncle thought that to be common knowledge he didn't tell dad about it. Which caused the alarms to beep when he tried to leave a floor, and despite him apologizing and trying to go back to the cashier they called the cops on him.

Of course, no one was actually going to accuse him of theft since the cameras recorded how he instantly bowed down and all, but… dad

told me he never looked the same way at cops and the guys at the posts on the roads the same, since those cops he met that day kept pushing him into admitting he was planning to steal something, to force a conviction. They didn't let him leave for a few days, until Uncle went with a representative of the shopping mall to clear things up. That fear is why he and mom always reminded me to not grab anything without telling them and why they asked Sumika to tag along with me, since when I was little I didn't have a particularly sharp attention span, and I was kind of a jerk too.

And that's only for something minor, and with dad apologizing and all, and with him being 'one of them'. I've heard more serious stories of false accusations or people getting detained for almost a month over something they didn't do simply because someone else dragged them into a fight and later accused them of starting it. There's always lots of that kind of stuff echoing on the road, me and Mikoto heard some nasty rumors when we lazed about in the arcade or the shopping district. But it was kind of a taboo to speak about that back home, so I only ever brought it up if the news boasted about the 'perfect security system' we had going on. It's always the same though, everybody simply says that you should plead guilty, accept that you made a miss, bow down and take the blame. And while that is well and good for small mistakes like not knowing how things are sold in a shopping mart…

I ain't planning to find out what they do in this extremely nationalist Empire to people who fake their identity, and 'come from America' to boot. Honestly, if I ever have to restart this loop, I'm telling Yuuko to put I'm actually from the moon or some shit. I think I'd get less nasty looks if I said I'm a BETA or if I openly tell people I'm a time looper.

Small parries, dust kicks up. Fluid currents of slashes come my way, deflected as I stand my ground and recall Meiya's defensive advise, the nine points of contention. "And second, I find it quite odd that you're all insisting so much. One would think you have an ulterior motive." Pressure on the pedals, pressure on the sticks, pressure on my back as the rockets flicker and flare up.

"Excuse me?" Fire within the ice, cracks in the veil, delays in her counters.

"1st Lt Maya Tsukuyomi accused me of being a dead man when we met in this base, you yourself said to Mitsurugi that she should not involve herself with the likes of me and that you also would not do so."

Her Take jumps away, yet the cramped space of the street doesn't allow it to move far away enough. Having more speed is moot in the narrowness of all this rubble, and my slashes keep finding her blade, the simplicity of the Gekishin's patterns allow me to circumvent the limitations swiftly as opposed to her careful piloting. While her Take lightly steps on the road, gliding as if dancing a ballet of destruction when attacking, I simply keep moving forward, kicking cars, lightposts and whatever the hell those rusted metal parts are supposed to be as I frontally charge at Tsukuyomi-san, spinning and spinning, changing the place I strike with every swing.

"Then, the cousins tried to 'make me disappear in the mud' but received no punishment for their assassination attempt on my head. And despite me handing over the sword in good faith, despite how I protected Mitsurugi, you and the General have kept pushing for answers you do not deserve, since you're not the government and have not come with any documents that explains the inquiries."

Reaching the end of the street, she has to take a curve, decelerating to not eat bricks. Yet, I again manage to take it In-In-In with no loss of momentum and again lunge at her. She's easily parrying all of my attacks, but with so little space available Tsukuyomi-san has only a few choices left. She either keeps defending or she attacks me frontally. If she attacks, I lose on purpose, or not since I doubt I could measure up to a Type-00 with a Gekishin, modified or not. Yet, she merely matches my stride, a mirror in perfect reflection. Only that instead of the graceful and precise movement, I simply endow sharper and faster dodges on the curves. My fuel is running low and my leg joints are already in orange, but damn, I can't believe I'm

actually crossing strikes with a Takemikazuchi. Isn't as if she wasn't trying entirely, either.

"And, what are you getting at, cadet?" She asks, blazing as my jump units when I boost away from her piercing rush, which instead breaks quite a few windows and rains glass shards all around us, reflecting the light.

"Well, I already spoke with you yesterday and told you my why I'm not reaching out to your organization. Yet, all of you seem to care quite a lot about how I could get taken to court. Is there anything you'd like to reveal to me, 1st Lt? Because I find your actions quite odd."

Choking for a sec, she then coughs again, regaining her chill as she gives me a breather. "You've listed a sequence of unfortunate events, nothing more. All of that was caused by the error that occurred to the databases. And we are trying to mend our mistakes by offering you our aid. While I comprehend your concerns, I can assure you that, if you accept our proposition, no claims will fall on your shoulders."

"And, if I still refuse?"

"… May I ask why would you?"

"I dunno, because something tells me I shouldn't? You already have the blade with you, no one will know of it ever being in my hands. If I get screwed, it's on me. *It's easier for you to turn around and ignore me, isn't it? To let me take the fall on my own?* Hell, if I go to prison, you and your relatives will get lots of praise for *dealing with an outsider in a fitting manner, won't you ?*"

"Insult me no further, cadet Shirogane. We're only acting in this way to guard you from any possible repercussions. I at the very least have no intention to leave your goodwill unrewarded," fast and furious are the flames and frost that she speaks, tone raising in bother and threat as much as her sword does now. "We of the Royal

Guard are the protectors of the people, after all. It is in our honor code, for we are to safeguard our nation and fellows at all times. We are the Empire's vanguard, the Shogun's sword. To deceive you in such manner would be equal to treason towards the ideals we are meant to uphold, after all. By the by, have you heard of the honor code, cadet Shirogane?"

My brows narrow, my lips shrug as a few cold pokes tickle my sides."… Yes, I have."

"Oh?" She then remains silent for a sec, with only the windy howl running through the ruins reaching my ears. "What do you think of it, then? Is it not quite an inspiring mantra to follow?"

It would be easy to lie. Sighing, I roll my neck.

It would be easy to just say yes, or to move and fight again. Almost closing my eyelids, my lips retract.

It would be even easier to just shut up. But I shake my head, the cold hands now resting on my nape, leaning the chilly sensation over my back.

"No, I don't think so."

"Hm? May I ask why? I believe it is very rousing, and it allows our fellows to march on amidst the adversity," Tsukuyomi-san says with much affirmation, bright and warm as the incoming sunlight.

But still, my lips remain shrugged as I slowly take in some air. "If living with a potato sack over your head is what you prefer, by all means keep following that thing."

"Pardon me? Could you kindly explain yourself?"

"Sigh… I've heard similar codes and credos in my time in the military. All of 'em serve the same purpose, to dull the pain and give everyone a reason to keep walking. One could say they're a

necessary part of the lifestyle, maybe of the lives of everyone affected by this long war."

"Then, why would you use such insulting a word as-"

"Because those codes are mistaken."

"… How so?"

"Those codes tell that all you gotta do is to look ahead, to stop looking around. Just move on without thought, until you eventually die. Be it forcing a smile and clamping your woes in the surface pilot code, sealing your troubles away with drugs or hypnotherapy, convincing you and the rest that you can only contribute by making your death count, or taking pride in embracing death as your out to reality."

So that you don't think much of all the casualties, of all the fuck ups the ones high above do, of all the unforced mistakes they make. And it ain't even about the war or the battles, where logistics already give us quite the middle finger on their own. Go and tell me that Yuuko puking her intestines out was justified, that the regime the IRG put her under in Sendai was justified because she was shouldering an honorable burden, because she'd embraced the risks and braved through the pain. Go and tell me my Meiya's struggles were justified, as all the members of the Group dunked on her, had her work deep into the night only to come back and barely manage to hold herself together.

Just because those bastards didn't approve of me they kept on pressuring her, to do what's right and 'make it up to the Group' for choosing 'someone who couldn't immediately contribute' to the business. From bed to work, from work to bed, no time to rest, no time to do anything other then serve and work. Until one fucking day she obviously could not go on, but the fever she had was proof enough it was too late for regrets. Oh, and of course that was *my* and *her* fault, due to all the 'stress' she had to deal with due to having 'an unworthy partner'.

And don't even get me started on all the bitching we had to deal with during my first loops after the shuttles were prepared, or in the horrid planning of Iceberg where most of the troops were sent only as meat shields, despite the G-Bombs we had. There was no need for that carnage, all that we required was to clear the lasers as we did in Operation 21st. And if we managed to hold out against BETA that used our tactics against us during last loop, it means that there was no reason for Iceberg to be the massacre that is was when we had the full support of the MDF and the IRG, plus the presence of the US Army. But guess what? Up until everything gets fuzzy, Iceberg was far worse than our offensive on Sadogashima during last loop.

Sighing again, relaxing the iron maiden my mouth had become, the noose my hands became over the controls, I shake my head as I hunch over. "I get it, I'm also a soldier. Sometimes, you gotta stand up, brush your teeth, get a mask in place and trudge on. Sometimes, it's days on end, week after week of meetings and plans that go wrong. Sometimes life's a bitch and keeps rolling you one after one on the dice. But even so, glorifying death as the ultimate solution should *never* become the standard mantra of any army."

People give their all in the war efforts, they leave their lives wherever it is they're fighting from, from Sensei to the patrolling MPs. So, just a little of empathy isn't such a great trade-off to ask, I believe. A simple small hope, small specks of progress in little details, to deter the constant deteriorating state, the bad news that keep on coming. But what does the system do to prevent all that doom and gloom from taking root? How do those high up protect their pawns? Short answer, they don't give a fuck. Trauma? Get drugs. Too much work? Keep at in even if you puke blood. Lack of supplies? Send a few noobs and bothersome squads as meat shields. Small repairs or little fixes? Deal with them on your own.

And *they* never pay for it. And those who try to help and make things work? They suffer *accidents* . *Convenient* accidents, I dare say.

"I do not believe your judgment to be correct, cadet Shirogane," she says, low and firm, an arrow in warning. "There is much that these

codes do for our soldiers. It tells much about a person, they way in which they choose to perish."

"… And you think they *want* to follow those impositions?"

"Eh?"

"What if they don't get a say in it? I don't think the last seconds of a life can always serve to depict what kind of person one was."

Do you think my squad wanted to die to the Tanks during Iceberg? Do you think Chizuru's death meant anything as the acid dissolved her whole? Do you think Kei exploding to buy us a few seconds meant anything in the end? What did it say about Miki, to die screaming as her refurbished Gekishin failed at the most crucial time? What did the deaths in my world meant? What did it say about them, to die under a lightpost, to be electrocuted to death, to be burned alive, or to disappear in an explosion or in a cold hospital bed? Don't screw me with me, Tsukuyomi-san.

"It is most unproper, to dismiss the sacrifice of your fellows." She retaliates, raising a blade and reflecting some shine, both in real life and in her words.

So I can't help but to frown. "Even if there is no meaning to be honored in their passing?"

"What are you getting at, cadet?"

"Nothing too complex. A squad leader is taught to protect its underlings, and the more you scale the ranks, the more that responsibility grows. Yet, at some point of the chain, those mantras start popping up, people stop looking down, start waving hands dismissively or rolling their eyes. And those codes cannot be the sole answer to every issue we face."

It's always the same. And it ain't as if everyone was just looking elsewhere. Even during my first loops, despite most Americans

being douches with a superiority complex who just wouldn't shut the hell up about how they were tired of being 'the international police', there were some who did try to make a good difference.

O'Connor was kind of a prick to Kasumi, but never did he leave his staff without proper supplies or time to tackle any random problem that popped up. And he did try to get us better units to pilot despite the reiterated negatives of the Empire, and did try to back us up when the food menu was changed. 2nd Lt Ziffer also was always trying to mediate between the American troops and ours during all the trainings, and actually used my squad as a role model for the other UN squads of the base that came in after the protection of the shuttles started. And Major Oliver always insisted to have our squad face off against their guys, to silence all the complains the newly stationed yanks had. He was a good comrade, despite being kind of an eccentric gun lover.

And they weren't alone in their struggles, either. Tama's dad kept on trying to keep things peaceful between the UN and the more intense ones in the MDF and IRG with Marimo-chan's help once she went back to being a Major in the Fuji Corps. And the few guards that lent me a hand in reaching Sensei back in Sendai also wanted to collaborate with us, despite the scorn they surely received. And back then, I think you also remained as our ally, Tsukuyomi-san. That's why-

"I think you could understand, 1st Lieutenant. Forging a new future is something only those who remain alive can do, and one day we will return to normality, despite whatever new troubles come our way. That's why I think it's better to part ways with those codes, all they do is ingrain the notion that to have a 'noble death' is the only card left for us. And that ain't true."

Otherwise, people will end up like the newer cadets of my first loops. Children taken from their homes, only knowing how to wield a gun. Having fun? Projects of their own? Hobbies, pastimes? No, their only dream was to pilot a Shiranui. And yeah, I better than anyone get how inspiring that can be, but if they don't gain anything beyond that

then they're basically done for once the war is over. Not to mention, if all they can do is aim for a noble death then, what do we do with the survivors? Are you telling me there's nothing they can do to regain their own lives beyond being pawns in a chessboard? That they have no choice but to keep on fighting until they either die or keel over?

It makes me retch, want to spit out, it's as if I had something digging, clawing inside me, hollowing me out. And I know you wouldn't accept a future to end up like that, Tsukuyomi-san. Despite your cold facade, I'm sure you still tried to lend a hand so that things worked out during my first loops. I'm sure that same resolute yet almost motherly side you always showed me back home, be it when we lived together or when I married Meiya, has to be somewhere within you. That's why you're insisting so much, right? If you truly regret what caused him so much pain, if you don't want to have me be erased as he was, if you all are truly feeling guilt over his death, then you should know better than anyone what I'm trying to say.

Yet, I hear her sighing, heavily at that. "Those views may hold some value elsewhere, but in this Empire we must all stand together for the future of our nation." Another blizzard blasts off from her lips, the whip of a freezing bite lurking in her words. "Everyone must contribute something, and watering the roots of hope with one's own blood is nothing short of the greatest honor one could aim for. You stand today because someone sacrificed their life to protect this land of ours, we are still standing today because many bravely offered their blood to halt the invasion. To aim for a better future is remarkable, but you should never forget what you are required to do, cadet Shirogane. Otherwise, you… may lose your path if you wrongly assume everyone else to be against you, the only one who can see 'the truth'."

"… Then, all we can do is nod along and ignore the carnage around us?" Again, choking my controls, her words sink in my ears like viper's fangs.

"I never said anything of-"

" *Is that how you operate, Royal Guard? Just discard anyone who isn't useful anymore, just keep sending pawns into the grinder?"*

"Cadet Shirogane, do not mock me. I am merely allowing a conversation on this matter, do not test my patience."

" *You're free to drop the private connection you yourself requested, then."* With a simple jerk of the controls, my Gekishin starts running towards her, blade raising already.

Taking a low guard, she parries the strike. A flurry of slashes, a blurry whirlwind followed by the beeping in my ears, notifying me that my blade is on its last legs. And it's followed by a grunt, a forceful sigh as she fails to hit my legs. "Is this truly how you wish to conduct yourself, cadet? To bite the hand that offers you aid?"

"I already asked you to drop it. And it seems our views don't match, so there's little point for us to keep talking," I say, tensing my abs as I retract a feet of my unit, raising my blade while merely limiting myself to block the strong gale the red beetle sends my way.

"Why must you be this contrarian?" She complains, again sighing. "There is little that can be done at times to athwart dread from one's heart, that is why we hold onto such mantras. I can…" a small grunt as she deflects my strike, our blades locked as our TSFs tightrope on crumbling concrete, "only praise your desire to safeguard your fellows' future, yet there is much left for you to learn. Those who lead us can only do so much, and they too live by example to bolster our spirits. Perhaps, you could learn much by observing your superiors and those who watch over them Empire? I believe that- Ugh!"

Thrusting the controls even more forward, the tip of my blade makes contact with her head visor as my weight topples onto the red frame. As the daggers in the arms come out and meet the light, cutting the air and aiming for my wrists, my feet stomp the pedals, ramming my Gekishin onto her machine. Jumping away is all she can do to break away, to not fall down flat on her ass, yet a quick shot of my gun sends a few cars flying off, a few patches of debris cleared. Landing

on now uneven ground, she has to take a second to stabilize her machine and thus can only parry my incoming hack and slash. The Take's arms rise forth like a geyser, seeking to sink into my armor, yet it was obvious she'd do that. So I let go of the pedals, my sword still up in midair in its full deceit, as my gun now has a clear aim at her cockpit, ready to rain pain.

Shaking, much shaking meets my push as my vision blurs for a sec. Orange numbers on my legs, she shot at them and fucked up my balance. I still hit one of her shoulders, that's now dripping yellow paint.

A few gasps and grunts, she fumes in silence as her Take regains its footing amidst the junkyard, the right arm twitching as the shoulder should be no longer fully operational. "What caused such an outburst towards me, cadet?"

"We're in the middle of a battle, it is not my fault you're not taking me seriously."

"… Is this truly what you wish to do, then? To ignore my words and strike at me while I'm extending a hand your way? You may not have another chance such as this, I do not believe it wise for you to spawn rifts with possible allies, considering your situation."

" *What's next? You're gonna give me fifteen minutes to reach the correct answer?"* Because you're no one to do that, my world's Tsukuyomi-san was someone I knew would give sound advice all the time, except when it came to romance. But, you? *You've shown your words to not be worthy of a second in my ears.*

"Wh-What?" Silenced for a sec, a few small gasps and chortled words come out of her lips, her verbal gun jammed with an invisible gag. "I… Ahem… I do not recall to have threatened you in any way. All I did was point you to a few examples you could follow."

"And do you think it's fair, to place, to impose all of your dreams and expectations on the frail shoulders of a single person?"

"Huh?"

"How do you think they feel? Do you think they're some sort of supernatural being? That they truly favor those mantras you speak of? How do you think it feels, to be made into an Atlas who holds the whole world on its shoulders day and night?"

Do you think Yuuko truly believed in the Guard's code? Of course she didn't, but she had no other allies to lean on. So she simply nodded, accepted their terms, shielded Kasumi, her friends and family, and simply kept pushing forward in Sendai, in the only path she had to keep working on her research in hopes of finding any new allies. Same on last loop, despite how she only built a perfect hell for herself Yuuko just kept pushing on to save the world from the G-Bombs. And the same for my Meiya, who tirelessly did her best efforts to measure up to the expectations of the Group and the rest of the nation. It makes me choke, seeing parts of those worlds. And maybe, just maybe, he felt the same way about Yuuhi, and that's why he remained on the Guard.

*So I cannot agree with your words, to simply discard those who are seen as useless, to drone on while not hesitating on all the sacrifices, to deem them as obvious. To again thro w all of the responsibility onto a single person, without even offering them my shoulder, is a mistake I won't ever repeat. Perhaps I'm being stupid, perhaps there really is no other way than to surrender to this being a cruel, crapsack world and acting in consequence . But even then, I rather be an idiot for the rest of my life if the alternative is to surrender my wish to see change and give others the same happiness I enjoyed growing up. Because our future is crying, and I ain't gonna look aside. It's up to me to make it smile, to endeavor to be part of the solution.*

"Still, such selflessness is truly worthy of praise, cadet," she states, submerging herself in a quiet lake, raising her blade once more. "It is their struggle which spurs people to act and not surrender to despair."

"Why not dare them to live? Why insist on everybody having to die to make any progress?" Taking my pose again, I push the pedals, force her to parry and take a step back.

Yet, the counter comes right after me as if an inevitable shadow it were. "It is better to face reality head on than to wallow in wishful thinking or fall into wrath. Only when you're serene can you truly make the correct choices, take the necessary steps towards the quickest solution."

"Then, if Meiya was your leader, would you surrender to sacrificing her if it was the easiest thing to do?"

"What? I- Ugh!"

Eating another slash, to her arms this time, she parries the follow up, and the next cyclone of her blade again hails glass around us as I backboost. Chasing after me, she cannot connect her attacks as I bounce off the ground into a curve while she has to decelerate.

"You wouldn't, would you? Because you care, because you'd rather die yourself than see her hurt, right?" That's why you asked me to look after her, that's why you trusted in me to take Meiya to Sagiri during the coup, that's why you took me to the hill and waited for me and even confronted Takahashi-san at first, that's why you didn't give up on me when I couldn't bring out results instantly after Meiya chose me.

"… My feelings have nothing to do with my duty," Dry as ice, raging as a typhoon.

Beepings on my ears, crouching to avoid the paint, sliding to take a curve and not end up hollowed out like the buildings that meet her blade. "For real? You mean what makes you who you are has nothing to do with what you choose to do with your life?"

"My duty comes before my own selfish wishes, cadet. What a servant like me feels is unimportant when compared to the fate of

the Empire at large."

"… Do you really believe that?"

"Indeed I do. A small compromise on my end is preferred over seeing those I should protect facing damnation… or losing their way. Where are you going with these questions, cadet?"

"… Nowhere. I was just trying to see who you really are." Sighing, I hunch over, barely even paying mind to the piloting as my eyelids start to close, blurring the cockpit and the projection.

And I can already see you're nothing like the Tsukuyomi-san I met in my other loops, even she held doubts towards their code. That's why she did support me and Meiya being together, instead of shunning me off like others did, like the Three Idiots. And even in my other loops, I think I remember her coming to the base to negotiate. Despite her cold demeanor, I think you still weren't fully absorbed by that mantra to live only to die for the greater good, seeking honor in your grave, only working for the immediate profit of the Shogunate *like a puppet* .

Yet, again, there's this void in my chest, this searing pain in my neck, and my heart kind of shrinks a bit. "And I can see you're not someone I would refer to as an ally. So, I'm going to cut the connection. I've said all I wanted to."

"What? Wait a moment, we haven't-"

"Please, stop. You and me will never see eye to eye, 1st Lt Tsukuyomi. It's clear to me now, *my doubts towards you guards were right on point."*

"Speak no further balderdash!"

She flares up, erupting suddenly into another blizzard. More paint comes my way, the sudden jump I have to make fuses me into the seat, my teeth onto one another. A loud crash tosses me around

some more and the response fades from my controls. Sigh… Stupid shock countermeasures.

"I've already told you we are more than willing to lend you honest support, there is no need for you to surrender to facing a trial, much less to dismiss our aid over semantics." Her blazing voice towers over me as does her machine, which slowly paces my way with the blade resting on the undamaged shoulder, hogging all the daylight again. "Furthermore, do you believe this is what your father would have desired? If he was a fellow and worked day and night for your sake, I am certain that he would not wish for you to isolate yourself in such a manner. You should honor their sacrifices, and ensure you also protect something as valiantly as they did to their last breaths."

"… What?"

"I believe your parents must have sacrificed much to keep you safe. Have you ever thought of that? Of how it must have been for them to stand up every day for you? There was little else they could do, yet they certainly protected your future above all else. Their efforts did not go unrewarded. Do you not want to honor their wishes with your own endeavors, cadet?"

"What was that?"

"I said, I believe you should reflect on all your family must have gone through to keep you safe. Sometimes, such concessions are unavoidable. Thus, shouldn't you follow their example instead of showing such scorn to our traditions?"

"What the fuck was that?" Punching the concrete, widening the cracks, my Gekishin stands up.

"E-Eh? Excuse me, did I say something unproper?"

"Do you know how it feels, to wake up drenched in cold sweat every fucking day?"

"What? Wait, what are you-"

"Do you know how it is to know everything would have been better if you hadn't been there? Do you know how it feels to deal with the silence as the night comes?"

The dread that they might die any day, the fear that no amount of training or exhaustion could shake off me. The dread of waking up back home in silence, hearing no buzzing in the kitchen, no noise from the TV or the radio. What the fuck do *you* know?

Do you even know how he felt when mom was in the hospital, when dad started crying at the graveyard? What worthy sacrifice? You took dad to his death, and then left little me all alone. Almost like what they did in my first loops with our troops, not even appearing to lend a hand when shit hit the fucking turbine.

The IRG wasn't present in Iceberg for the most part, they were reserved 'as a last measure' despite being the ones with the most advanced machines in the Empire. But even then, as my squad died, I saw none of you amidst my memories. It wasn't a sacrifice, it was a premeditated massacre. That's what Iceberg was, and I'm sure that's what Shura's Dance was as well. Yuuko wouldn't have reacted as she did when I brought it up otherwise.

"I… I apologize, cadet Shirogane," Tsukuyomi-san says, sheathing herself, again sinking in the lake, deeper. "Still, I believe you are proof of their endeavors. You are still here, which shows their sacrifice did bear fruit. Certainly, someone worth your father's trust must have ensured you remained in good health, that their efforts truly were not wasted."

"What the hell do you know?" You weren't even there in the memories, you don't know anything. Or you're playing dumb, trying to trip me.

"E-Excuse me?"

"And even then, you don't have to deal with the echoes." The dreams, the memories, and the hope.

The hope that they are still safe over there, that nothing is going wrong back in my world despite me being here now. The hope to try and make everything right in this loop, only to be repeatedly backhanded by a windmill at every corner. The hope he had to make himself useful, to not be a burden, just as I was when I hustled to do anything to lend Meiya a shoulder.

But unlike me, only darkness met his efforts. And unlike me, who chose that path on my own, he was thrust into that and left behind as some useless thing. When that happened to me at the start of the loop, I found people that gave me a reason to stand up every morning besides 'wanting to go home' or 'staying alive'. That's why I'm here, still fighting. But, there was not a single grain of kindness in those memories.

So I punch the seat repeatedly, breathing in and feeling fire on my throat. Failing to calm down, to keep my tongue quiet. "Do you know how frustrating it is? To know you're virtually useless on the important things? To be aware of all that falls alongside you the second you take a wrong step?"

"I… I apologize, I didn't mean to-"

"Everything falls down. Everything can go wrong," so I sigh, rolling my eyes, chuckling for a second. "And it would be easy, you know? To scream and point fingers, to place blames on someone else. It'd be really easy, to just shut up and keep on walking. To take drugs, to drown in a glass of alcohol, to run away." To be a coward, like I was when Marimo-chan died. It'd be so easy, to wallow in self-pity, in how hard I have it.

But then, if I do nothing, who helps my friends, my beloved ones?

No one will.

When will the good times come back?

Never.

If it's just a tomorrow that you want, simply look at the sun rise and fall. But that won't be a happy world, you might as well be dead inside.

But I had people with me every time I stumbled, who helped me see the path forward even by cold and ruthless means.

*That's why I'm done with settling for a sacrifice. I'm no longer a simple pawn, even if there is a lot of stuff I don't get. I ain't here just to score a draw. To reach a true solution, to give others what I enjoyed, to be for those who ask for help the same support I was given when I was about to jump into the abyss.*

*Just because reality is a piece of shit doesn't mean I should be one, too. Just because something is 'impossible' doesn't mean I can't try.*

But I know it very well, the moment when you cannot chose, when you can only grit your teeth and push on. And it fills my mouth with that acid taste, with cold shivers on my back, on my feet, all over me.

"There is no joy to be found in martyrdom. Sure, eventually everyone gets a reality check and meets cruelty for the first time, everyone loses their naivety at some point. *That doesn't mean I'd surrender to that cruelty being the standard, to simply accept there is nothing we can do to change for the better.* And no, I don't think that a father that was sent to a cruel death is something worthy of praise, *Royal Guard.* "

"What?! Kag- Your father was most certainly not sent to a cruel death, cadet."

"Whether he did or not matters little. He had no choice but to lay down his life, to become a sacrifice. And while there is no victory without death in war, I don't believe holding that in such high regard

is doing anyone any favors. After all, when dad died I was left alone, alone in the silence." And I'm just one. How many more lives do you need to ruin to see that sparing just a tiny speck of kindness and empathy towards others can make a huge difference in their future? Just look around at the wasteland that surrounds the base, isn't there enough shit in the world already?

"What are you saying? Honoring our legacy and the sacrifices of our comrades is a given for any soldier! Furthermore, your father's sacrifice, like those of many others, was nothing short of a heroic action worthy of much praise."

"… *Even when you're just sending them to their deaths? Even when you're basically abandoning them to their own luck?"*

Go ahead, tell me my squadmates deaths meant something in Iceberg. Tell me the deaths in the base's defense weren't just part of a carnage. Tell me dad's death was good for little me's future. You know whose deaths mattered? The ones from the carrier fleet as they jumped straight into the lasers to let the XG land safely, the ones from the orbital divers that cleared the way for us to enter Kashgar. Cpt Isumi, Kashiwagi, Hayase and Haruka-san on their respective moments, when throw against the wall they kept struggling to make a positive difference on their own volition. The deaths of my squadmates at the last stretch of the raid on Kashgar, to keep the XG safe and sound. And even then, we didn't have enough support. A single minute that we delayed in reporting our victory, the same shitheads that went through Iceberg would have started Trident instead, dooming us all to death.

… And not all those deaths were necessary. Meiya didn't have to die back then. If she had only kept her cool, but of fucking course not. Having the last S-11, wanting to honor the lives of her comrades, perhaps of her only friends, of course she would charge forward and not listen to me. And if Sensei had kept her desperation for a solution in check, I'm sure she'd have realized something was wrong in the calcs. Maybe the sharing of data would still have happened, but it wouldn't have caught us with the zipper down.

"Perhaps there is little to be done," she says, low, void and gray as the eternal wasteland the BETA leave behind. "Could you kindly consider how little choice we have? If it is a toss between fear and bravery, certainly you'd agree with me that facing death with honor is the better alternative?" Running shortly, our blades meet, more windows crack, more glass hails about.

"Never have you thought about why you see the world in such a black and white tint? Why are the only options available death and more death? How can you ever hope to inspire others if you don't try to generate pluses for the people you wanna protect?" Concrete falls down, cars are compressed under our feet.

A localized typhoon could have struck the place as everything is sent flying at one point, or is scorched by a sudden boost. Small fires remain behind the wreckage, the buildings left torn open like a watermelon on a beach. And despite my best attempts at actually putting up a fight, she keeps me in check at all times, deflecting my strikes as if she had a guarding gale all around her, as if my best attempts were just a frail leaf waddling on the air.

"Not everybody has that choice, cadet. Hoisting such animosity will only poison your mind. If you do refuse to see the good points of what had to be done, how do you plan to move forward?" Tsukuyomi-san says as she chases after me, closing the distance despite my precise power slides on the curves.

"And if the ones who lead others refuse to search for better solutions, thinking of making trades with death, then nothing will ever improve. You always have time to do something else, even if it's only a little."

"In some regards, nothing is better than something. These views, while noble, could create rifts into our ranks. And, they could certainly spawn much animosity towards our rulers, to send impossible impositions onto their shoulders."

"So, all we can do is play along and die?!"

"I did not say such a thing! All I'm saying is, sometimes there is no time to do anything else. Honor the bravery of the fallen, value all that they've left you so that you can also display such fortitude when it is your time to do battle. Do not allow yourself to fall into such a septic hole of anger, sometimes we lack the time to do anything except endure the adversity, to bask in the required tenacity to fight to the last breath."

And, guess what? Why did Sensei have no time, why did she push herself to the point of sicking the BETA on her own troops? Why did Meiya not listen to me, why did she shut her eyes away from other paths and charged at the Superior? Because of these views, that there's only one way forward. That any sacrifice is permitted so long as you reach your goal. After all, they're *valiant concessions from brave souls who strived towards a noble and meaningful death.*

Gripping the controls, my Gekishin starts walking towards the red again. Something starts hitting the back of my head, shivering in cold as we trade strikes, as I shoot my last remaining bullets. And it bangs, and pounds, and slams, and cracks, and hurts, and it hurts. It hurts, to know there was something else I could have done. To hear you all refuse that, to insist that you can only make yourselves useful by dying.

"So their deaths are justified, is that what you're getting at?"

Come on, say it. I fucking dare you.

I dare you to say it, that dad dying could not be avoided.

I dare you to say I had no choice but to kill Meiya, that it was 'right' because it was an 'honorable and valiant death'.

That what was left behind was worth all that was lost, despite Sensei getting sent to prison or worse, despite how the same bastards that had no concern over ruining our future were the ones who remained in power, most likely. And it's even worse in my first loops, since the BETA must have reached the planet of the fleet, assuming they

made it safely of course. My lover, my heart, my everything, they all died too. Kasumi died too, along everyone else. Just think on how they must have felt, to reach their destination, only to try to see how the Earth was faring and see it half submerged and the other half probably killing itself. And you say that's a decent future, a good outcome for all the struggles of this war? Dad died to protect the future of someone you abandoned first chance you got, that was worth it? For a future that'll only lead to more death and hopelessness?

*I dare you to say it, Tsukuyomi-san. That all the cruelty is warranted, that all this tragedy is the only logical conclusion. Come on, now.*

"I can understand your grief, to recall your parents' passing," she begins, slowly and softly, as if whispering to a kid by the bed, while one of her arms threatens lethality upon my blade, "yet, there were few options available at the time. I believe that they lived nobly until the very end. You should be proud, to yet live and remember their shining bravery, to be able to impart such lessons to another."

…

"After all, I believe you must have had someone who looked after you then. Someone who ensured you remained safe and sound, that their sacrifice wasn't-"

"Don't you fuck with me…"

"Huh?"

"How dare you say…"

" *Auugh! It burns, it burns! S-Shirogane… please, kill me!"*

"How can you say… I should be proud of their deaths…"

" *No! I don't wanna be eaten! Takeru-san, help me!"*

"I did not say that you should-"

Inhaling sharply through clenched teeth, I yank and bend the controls, hacking and crashing my rugged blade against her defense. "What the fuck… do you even know?!"

"… *Pull the trigger, Takeru."*

"What the fuck is wrong with you people?! *What the hell could possibly outweigh all the sacrifices you plan to do?!"*

" *I love you, Takeru. I only hope that all I left behind is enough to give you as happy a life as you deserve."*

"Are you saying there's no other way? *That having everyone die for your supposed honorable future is all we can do?!"*

Deflecting my strikes, taking step back after step back, the Takemikazuchi lunges forth, binding my arms. "Cadet Shirogane, please calm down! I never said anything of the sort, nor am I trying to antagonize you. I merely believe your parents did a noble sacrifice for your sake!"

"What noble sacrifice?!"

" *Burden. Trouble. Eyesore. Bother"*

The red alert comes into my view, the overload chime raging on my ears.

"As if you have any right to talk about them!"

" *They're gonna make me go away, or send me to some distant role."*

A beep in an odd rhythm, a pair of crimson eyes zoom into view. And a frown, followed by quite the shaving voice. "Cadet Shirogane, I will have to ask you to regain your composure. Otherwise, I will have to-"

"You stay outta this!"

"W-What? I am your superi-"

"Shut up! You didn't speak up during all this time, despite how the connection to a private frequency should've been coming up in my logs, so do me a solid and go eat some dirt!"

I can let go the rest of Tsukuyomi-san's words, but those last ones are not getting past me. She either retracts them or apologizes this instant! And if she doesn't, *then I want nothing to do with you fuckers!*

"… *I guess they really are not the same anymore. Almost as if they had died, or changed completely. They… are gone, aren't they? They changed because of all this mess, right? We're going to… No, we already lost the war, didn't we?"*

"Cadet, I will not allow another outburst!" Cpt Isumi warns, hitting something, quite the venom spouting from every word.

Followed by a still, frozen voice from the private line. "Please, there is no need for such words, cadet Shirogane. I was merely-"

"Are you going to take back your words, 1st Lt Tsukuyomi?" I ask, once more raising my sword to the sun.

"I merely expressed my honest thoughts to you, I see no reason to-"

"I heard enough, then. *You and your holier-than-thou act of superiority can go to hell. Go and embrace death all you want, you're not even alive anymore.* " You're just another dog of the high pigs, *another faceless mannequin. I expected more, so much more from you.*

Breaking through her guard, my sword again makes contact with the frame. Immediately after, a shock runs through my body, an alarm blasts away. A punch from the dagger on the arm just fucked up my hip block. Tilting, my machine loses balance and wobbles. Change the orientation, use the weight of the blade to regain my footing, and keep moving forward!

"Such an aggressive stance…" She grunts, both arms of the Takemikazuchi again trying to restrain my Geki's wrists, her blade shaving the side of my head visor. "Cadet, this has been more than enough!"

Everything goes blurry as I roll around. Something hits my head as it feels as if a bomb exploded below me. The hiccups of the limbs and engines reach my body as I thrash within the dust, buried into a building. Standing up, repeatedly banging the controls makes my sword rise in protection, deflecting her final blow. I barely parry her strike, that sends me back into the building.

I back boost out of another one as I crush the pedals, making my unit roll and crawl on the ground, hurting the body against the debris left on the street and then go at her seriously. I may not be able to properly cancel, but I can try to do something similar, like I did in my first loop. Like hell I'll just take the blows now, after all you've said.

"Cadet, please allow me to end the battle. I meant no offense with my- Guh!"

My almost broken blade lunges at her after an improvised crouch cancel, she moves back and avoids my attack without problem, and in a fluid motion sends a slash at my head. I barely dash out of the way, again losing my balance and seeing everything in sight spin as the back of my head remains pounding and echoing in pain, my ears ringing as I keep on boosting to avoid the lethal embrace of the dancing blades of the red beetle. But she comes after me with more strikes, and no sidesteps can get me far away enough from the lightning strikes that rain on my shadow.

If that's how you wanna have it, "let's take this seriously, then!"

I dash at her, activating my jump units at the last minute. She parries my strike once more, and manages to hold back the impulse of the attack despite how her Take is bending backwards, cracking the street in twain. Yet, I turn off one blaze, spinning in place, away from her blade. As the inferno from my boosters ceases, a reaping slash

aims right at her back. Yet, there's no recoil coming into me. Tsukuyomi-san activated her boosters, jumping sky high as if predicting my move, and as she lands a flamethrower comes out of her rifles, raining upon me and shaking me all over the cockpit. Again, buried my unit deep into a building.

"Augh! Shit, that hurt for real. Haa… Haa…"

"Cadet, please cease your pointless struggles."

"What was that? My struggles are… not pointless."

"Sigh. I am not implying anything foul. Allow me to end this, then we can continue to platicate once you regained your composure. Certainly, you'll see that-"

"Never."

"Please, cease this foolishness. I am only-"

"Hic… Never… I'll never surrender… *their deaths were not pointless, nor were they justified …"*

"Excuse me? What did-"

Crush the controls, into red alert. Everything flickers, but I'm right in front of the red. Spin, raise the arms and-

My sword flies off towards the Take, hitting its arms. As the red has to glide away, as panic floods her grunts, recoiling in pain, the machine drops its sword. A crouch dash lets me catch it in midair, holding it in a reverse grip. And again, hellfire off my boosters, crashing straight ahead into the Takemikazuchi.

She locks her daggers with the blade in another struggle, with me on the losing side of it as my Gekishin bends backwards under the pressure of the Type-00. I take a step back, the bolts give pursuit and hit my shoulder, making me lose my balance. Another alert, one of my legs is about to blow. It can't move, probably due to the paint.

And as I see the Takemikazuchi raises a second blade from its pylon to strike at me, shrouded in shadows as it carries the sunlight on its back, as a veil of dust speck circles around its frame… A sting drills itself on my heart. A twisting pain sears on my chest, below my ears, on the base of my throat, it makes me fumble with my controls. As the strike sends me into the ground, everything becomes blurry and numb. The cold sensation spreads through me as the slight pain on my chest continues to pike at me as the shaking slowly subsides.

Ugh… What are these images? Everything is blurry, cold and distant. Everything echoes, feeling so far away. Except for a shadow, a shadow that grows closer and looms over me.

" *I know not of who you speak. I am merely safeguarding my nation's interests."*

Who is… Why can't I breath right? What's this… heat in my neck?

" *If you do choose to oppose me, then little choice do I have but to cross strikes with you."*

Why does this hurt so much? Why can't I focus my vision? Why?!

Yet, when I blink, I see something highlighted amidst the twisting shadows and threads of light. A shape shrouded in shadow, a machine I've seen many times.

"Shirogane, desist on your foolish actions! If you do not, I will be forced to fight you with all of my might to subdue you."

Ugh! Khh… Gasping, clutching my chest, the pain doesn't recede. Everything goes double, as my back feels all cold, as my sight grays out, as distant screams reach my ears, as the smell of burnt steel envelopes me whole.

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*A/N: It's recommended to read the following section while listening to 'Murder' from Berserk. Also, remember the content warning. This is*

*the last chance you have to turn back.*

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The graphs take a full dive into a crimson lake, a small chime signals danger. Thus, Isumi sighs and shakes her head. Her stomach feeling heavy, as if something were swirling within, all she could do was place a hand on her head. The words spoken by the soldier had startled her, thrown quite the challenge into her heart.

" *Yet, some of them are truly too similar to the motto of those incognito soldiers from the IRG we had to collaborate with throughout all of the '99,"* she repines within in quite the conflict. It's as if she were balancing a set of scales, if you'd allow the comparison. On one side, the doubts and rancor she holds towards that unit, on the other, her responsibility as the leader of the STF and the general attitude of the soldier she had met.

"-with all of my might to subdue you!" Tsukuyomi so says as she raises her blade, seeing the Gekishin's arms flailing wildly amidst the rubble.

In perfect synchrony, the already dire numbers on Isumi's monitor redden and the screen starts to flash. Flinching at the sudden change, she quickly brings Shirogane's data to the center of her personal monitor, seeing that the soldier was enduring quite some strain as of now as his heartbeats skyrocketed.

"Cadet Shirogane, can you hear me?" She asks, hastily opening a connection, only receiving drowned grunts and muffled whiffs of pain. "Cadet, I repeat, can you hear me?"

The numbers do not stabilize, short of it they start to raise and raise. Another warning appears in the monitor, the screens flickers in yellow and red.

" *Should I truly go through the orders?"* Isumi wonders for a moment, grimacing as she brings a hand to her lips, biting a nail.

"Cadet, if you will not continue to fight, I shall deliver the finishing blow," Tsukuyomi warns, taking a fighting stance, a step closer.

"1st Lt, please wait a moment," Isumi opens the common channel, seeing the Takemikazuchi about to strike at the collapsed machine. "It would seem the cadet is going through some manner of shock, refrain from any actions until I can confirm his safety."

"What?! What do you mean?" Tsukuyomi quickly asks, jolts and bolts running through her arms, lowering the blade.

"You are not required to know, please remain in standby for the moment," Isumi says, eyes almost closing, as she opens the controls for the sedatives.

"That I cannot do." So quite the fierce answer comes from the retainer, as you'd expect. Sending her projection to the command post, a slight frown is engraved in her features. "If the cadet is injured, then I suggest to remove him from the cockpit posthaste. He might have grown nauseous after employing such reckless maneuvers."

"You are not in charge of the mock battle, 1st Lt," Isumi retorts, without even looking at the projection of the retainer. "Simply wait until the sedatives take effect, the battle is as good as finished in any case."

"To use medication on him while he's in such a state could negatively affect the cadet," she asserts with eyes blazing, despite how her obstinacy was what caused such harm to the soldier. "I ask you to reconsider."

"With what authority?" Isumi asks, lifting her chin, imitating the obstinate wall of the emerald glare. "Your words were what caused this, and do not think we haven't noticed the private frequency you set up. Please do not force me to block your ID, 1st Lt Tsukuyomi." And with a simple push of a button, she unleashes the sedatives straight into the soldier's veins.

"I'm merely expressing my suggestions to you, Cpt. I shall not dodge the blame, yet because of it precisely is why I'm asking you to refrain from any hasty decisions. I am close enough to confirm the cadet's state, there is no need-"

And so, they keep debating, debating, crossing semantics and wordplay to avoid a confrontation both were aware would not give either any spoils worth keeping. It is ironic, that due to them both wishing to alleviate the soldier's pain in the quickest manner, they do not notice what's going on as they keep on debating, their words gaining heat, spreading embers.

And right now, at this very moment, a small alarm starts to beep in quick succession in an underground laboratory. Motoko Kouzuki hurries to the monitors, almost tripping with herself as she does while rubbing her eyes under the glasses.

"What now? I thought the tests on the hardware were… Huh?" Her eyes part open as does her mouth, the small cigarette that was bound to her lips falling to the ground and leaving a trail of smoke in its descent.

For all she knew, she may have not even be wearing glasses. So she takes them off, rubs them for a moment with a small cloth, and blinks when she places them again on her person. Still, the sight did not change. Oh no, it not only didn't but it now was growing larger, noticeable on the screen without need to employ any zoom. Part of her froze in numbness as she stood lost as a penguin in a desert, the other forces Motoko to mash the keyboard quite savagely as she runs some quick tests.

Yet, the system shows no errors. And the graph keeps on growing, so I'm certain you can imagine the shock she unlocks as of now.

"Why? Why is the G-Radiation lowering all of a sudden?!" She screams to no one, before blasting towards the phone that was nearby.

The ringing on the receptor of the call, the ringing that filled Yuuko's office caused the scientist to smile for a moment, chuckle lightly at the so awaited news she expected. A bit too lightly she's taking this situation, in my opinion, yet her determination is not easy to disrupt. And in her credit, I hope you understand her predictions were mostly correct. Only mostly, because the scientist could not foresee the cracks that were spawning on her soldier's body. After all, she does not know the sedatives the army employs have quite the negative effect on him. It still does not absolve the blame, nor the truest horror she shall be feeling shortly, you'd agree.

Contorting against the restrains of his seat, as if he were surrounded by needle walls, a hand tore into his scalp, another into his chest. And all the while, as sore screams drown in his throat, as more and more he struggles against the recoil of what flashes in his eyes, a small light sparks up within the cockpit. Cerulean fireflies, that burst and spark up like bubbles. Small will-o-wisps that surge forth from his very being, from the fissures that open up all around the soldier.

A collapsed light post comes to mind, the bloody pink below it. An erratic line in the shape of lightning appears on one arm, splintering a nail in half and almost separate said finger from the hand, the little lights flying away.

Begging screams fill his ears along a melting squelch. Like a nutcracker, his jaw mows up and down as if swallowing raw steel while the cerulean glow runs into his lips, up onto his teeth like a line of gunpowder set on fire.

And a gaze of azure looks up, daring him to shoot. A gaze of red frowns, before revealing in a monotone her tribulations. His eye pupils crack in half as the glass destroyed throughout the battle, distorting his sight even more as the hazy cerulean hue envelops him whole.

Thrashing, screaming, burning, compacting onto himself as the reflex forces him to gag on empty air. Until it all ceases to be, until he starts descending.

Lower and lower, falling down as part of his shoulders seems to dissolve inwards.

Lower and lower, sinking further. Opening his mouth serves only to rain more fireflies on the cockpit, teeth and tongue entangled by the cerulean fissures.

Lower, so lower that pure silence fill his senses. Lower and lower, as eyes and ears, fingertips and nose are fully bound by the lightning.

Until it all stops. And then, there is only silence. And then, there is only cold. And a wound, a wound that should not have been reopened.

"Where… am I?"

Upon opening his eyes, Takeru finds himself staring at a visage he had grown accustomed to. The eternal wasteland, the fire and dark smoke roaring in the vicinity, the gray skies, the smell of gunpowder. Only this time, he can feel them, smell them.

Seeing it all burns his eyes, breathing makes him spit the air out. He only grows more frantic and panicked as he realizes he cannot move on his own, you'd understand.

"A memory? When did I- Is this…" He recognizes the visage, what he saw yesterday morning.

Shards of memories reach his mind, the broken ruins of many towns, the screams begging for help before fading to ashes, the smell of fuel and fire permeating it all. The scornful gazes of both cousins looming over him, fused into the twister in the sky.

" *It's all for the greater good, for the sake of the Empire."* Mion states, with a dismissive shake of her head and a frown.

Drops of hot wax could be falling all over him, or perhaps it is boiling water. Or maybe, the soldier is burning within, about to implode at

the recollection. You'd understand, feeling the haziness, the limping of the little soldier boy sinking into nausea only serves to further ignite his frustration. And each small broken and burnt piece of the puzzle serve to add another cut into his body, his real body. Perhaps you'd allow the comparison, for even if the little soldier boy remains a small spark trudging on its own, even the smallest thing, no, especially the smallest things can spiral into quite the explosion if left near the appropriate fuel. And that darkest mire is already overflowing.

Another gaze, a gaze of strong purple shoots out, sending the walking little soldier into the ground, holding his head with both hands in desperation. *" Do not waste my time! You've done nothing worth of praise, anyone could easily replace you without much effort. Do not ever dare to put up such flimsy excuses in my presence!"*

Unable to identify Raiko's voice, the soldier can only seethe on his own. "Stand up… Come, on. Don't take all this shit."

Crawling on the ground, bending quivering fingers, the little soldier can only march on while dragging his gaze on the ground. Aggravating words hurled at himself, echoes reiterating incessantly, he continues to walk through the memories, the shelters, the surrounding empty glares, the shadowy figures which don't pay any mind to his presence. So the spectating soldier can only shudder at the sensations and echoes of the recollection, as if he had been tied up with barbed wires, gagged with grenade. As tears fall of the eyes of the little soldier, a voice echoes in the back of his head. And turning back, Takeru sees towering ice piercing the clouds.

" *Farewell, Shirogane,"* an imposing and cold voice spat out in full venom, a gaze blazing blue.

Enduring the cutting ice shards that fall from the reminiscence, the constant lashing of the voices, the little soldier boy keeps on marching through the same hallways, the same rooms. Yet, everything starts to lose color, and Takeru himself cannot help but to also feel the twinge of pain on his head. For the little soldier had

become a small scarecrow prey to thunders as his skin blackened, lacerated under the lack of care, the rush to continue to serve. Determined to at least do something to aid another, to not relent on his ideals, you'd understand. And I believe you can already imagine how the cerulean glow conquers the inside of the Gekishin's cockpit, glowing that gains growth when the lone little soldier of the IRG collapses onto the open field, breaking apart into a thousand pieces. *After all, mere effort cannot give birth to opportunity. A lone spark cannot light up these darkest days by itself.*

And so, he mulls and turns, turning and turning in pain like a worm cut in half then throw into a lake.

"I see… So it really was like Iceberg for you," Takeru concludes within himself, biting back the pain, the echoes. Separating from the fading remains, from the freezing body, the soldier stands and watches the area, and what it reminds him of. "A world that forgot what mercy meant. A cold and ruthless reality. Why did things turn out in this way?"

Slowly, the soldiers paces alongside the fallen that still crawls forward, forces himself to do so. Babel towers of papers, night patrols that know no end, cooking duties, the day stretched for the little one. So Takeru can understand the numbness, the dizziness.

"You're not even sleeping anymore, are you?" He says, managing to frown back in reality.

Numbness overflows his body as the images rotate and blur away. Zooming into his ears, a siren blasts away, a sound he recognizes all too well. So both of them watch the punishing rays of light which burn any and all allies ahead, the same hollowness forming on the pit of their stomachs. With every negative from the commanders, a piece of the young boy falls off. With every outburst of those he once confided in, his very being darkens slightly. With every ally struck down by the lasers, more cracks become visible on the little soldier. It is obvious to Takeru, why did he resonate with the plight of the young kid, with the blight that plagues his sight.

And you'd understand if his insides lurch as he reaches the end of his prior recollections, just as the heart of that young soldier was cracking apart. The sweat dropping, his throat bound by an invisible noose, the tight posture. Desperation, anxiety, a wound that remains open.

" *They have to be evacuated! It will only take a single vehicle!"* He shouts from the bottom of his stomach.

" *The orders we were given are absolute, the defense lines must not move,"* A piercing slash burns their ears as a gaze of turquoise taps her glasses, frosting to the hearing. *"Our orders are to stand in protection of the evacuation route of Hakuryo Base. Leave the city's defense to the MDF."*

" *They're being overrun by the BETA! They're not gonna make it in time to all the shelters and hospitals! Please, have some empathy!"*

And so, another gaze of turquoise blazes up, and Shion counters his words with a glare which burns his. Tears well up in the boy within the cockpit, while cuts and wounds reopen in the spectating soldier.

" *That's enough out of you!"* The blaze of strong purple from Raiko's gaze admonishes, coming to the center of the boy's view while endowing draconian anger. *"You've been nothing sort of a hindrance ever since the operation started, Shirogane. Cease your prattling this instant or I'll have you removed from the field!"*

Both frown, quivering concern in the little boy, blazing anger in the spectating soldier. *"But… But we have to help the civilians! The MDF won't-"*

" *The IRG safeguards the honor and future of the Empire, and we are guarding the roads that our nobles and those important to them shall take. If you cannot comprehend that, then you're nothing short of useless filth. We do not mingle with the MDF, it is their duty to tend to city and request our intervention when they find themselves*

*lacking. If they refuse to reach out and admit their inferiority, the blood is on their hands."*

" *But it won't take us anything to-"*

" *Utter one more word and I'll shoot you down myself!"*

" *Sister, that is enough,"* A calm yet firm voice flows into hearing. Startled, the soldier doesn't feel as if he were fading from the memory unlike before. So this time he can see the sharpened glare of gray which zooms into view, and the minute smile that follows towards the young boy. *"A few TSFs and carriers won't deter our efforts. Furthermore, some of our fellows are present in the city. May I request you send some of your men to aid the MDF, Chain One?"*

"… *Understood,"* the strong purple of Raiko's glare relents, gritting her teeth.

" *A moment, Lupine One,"* tapping her glasses once more, Maya interjects with a frown. *"You do not have the orders nor the authorization to send aid to the cities, we have received no request of any kind from the MDF."*

" *And the same occurred during the fall of Kyoto, with the sudden cut in communications,"* Masahide retorts, squinting his eyes in kind. *"Also, I do not recall since when a member of another squadron has the authority to tell me how to manage my units, Horn Three."*

Dizziness setting in, the soldier felt as if he were spinning, his ears full of water. *"* What the hell? So Maya-san really was against them, too?" And only then did he see it, the thorns that had entangled around the little soldier and the motive behind his sadness. "I see… So this is why you felt alone These people… *they don't deserve the air they breathe."*

A few discussions later, blurred in the recollection, the boy and other pilots are allowed to move towards the city. Joining in the rush, in the frantic pace the little soldier endows, it is quite fair to affirm Takeru's

mind is focused entirely on the visions, on the pain in his chest, on the rapids that push his back onward.

Only for another blade to be thrust into the soldier's chest when another voice reaches the boy, an image shown to most pilots within the city. The calm, apathetic and disdainful smile paired with an undisturbed an eerie voice of one garbed in blue.

" *Hear me well, soldiers. The BETA advance has proved to be far mightier than expected. Thus, since the UN has requested more time for their evacuation, we shall be employing the same tactic of Kyoto's farewell. All units, evacuate the city before the explosives detonate. That is all."*

"Ugh! Who was… Why does this voice sound so familiar?" The cracks over his body widen and start to pulsate, to shine brighter the more the tries to recall, the more air that leaves his lungs. "What the hell… They're going to blow up the city when the body of the BETA horde marches into it? But… But…"

" *But there's still people that hasn't evacuated! I'm not leaving!"* The boy mirrored the soldier's wrath, his breathing hiccuping as he boosts further into the city.

" *2nd Lt Shirogane, desist in your disobedience!"* Mion releases her verbal viper as the warning of lock-on appears on the boy's sight. *"Failure to comply to this warning will- Ugh!"*

" *Shut up! Get out of my way!"* Without any hesitation, the pylons on his back fire off against the chasing red Zuikakus, which end up almost eating a building as they had to evade. It's as if the soldier's current indignation were fueling the boy's impulse, both of their hearts shrink, holding the same wish to arrive on time.

" *Takeru, please stop!"* a low voice begs, supplicates, as it gives chase to the little soldier. *"You heard the orders, we have to leave the city posthaste."*

"Yasomaga-san?" the soldier wonders, his adusted infestation brought to a screeching halt at the unexpected voice. "Is she on your squad? But…"

As the little soldier ignores the pleas, the panting pleas of the girl endowed in gray which follows his stride as dutifully as a shadow, tender raindrops fall on the soldier, almost translucent become the fireflies which surround him like a cocoon. Fleeting eyes, always descending as if to avoid gazing into the sun. Slow gestures, a curling of a strand of hair, the minute and almost inaudible voice, the finger pointing to a book, the pointers upon his queries on his efforts. The steps which always followed his, the guarding steps which guided the soldier when he had chosen to share his days with the Mitsurugi of his world. Little, his maid.

Takeru's attention returns to the visions as blankness mires the little soldier's mind. A caravan of evacuation vehicles run on the street, paying no mind to no speed limits. Escorted by a few humvees, the procession went their way in their escape, never stopping, never hesitating. Yet, both of them felt a knife twist in their gut. From their position in the air, they could see that boxes and machinery is what lies within the vehicles. Not people, not a single person was aboard them. A small beeping shortly follows, the radar registering quite many TSF signals ahead of them.

" *This is Horn Two speaking,"* a relaxed voice thus spoke, again eliciting a sharp shaving on the soldier's ears. *"Unidentified craft, report your allegiance."*

*"20th Squadron Chain, Chain Eleven, sir,"* young Tsuhi replies as low as she accustomed.

" *Chain Twelve, here. Sir, what has happened with the evacuation?"* The little soldier asks.

" *You are not required to know, inductee,"* Makabe so answers, clicking his tongue. *"As my lord Regent has ordered, all units must*

*leave the perimeter of the city posthaste. Turn around and commence the evacuation."*

" *Where are the civilians? What happened to the hospitals?"* He insists, his every fiber rumbling in anger at what he thought could have occurred. And sadly, his intuition was not failing him, you'd understand.

The squadron of Zuikakus enter their view, commanded by a singular red unit which was escorted by two yellow ones, the rest were a mixture of gray and black ones. Spreading in threat, they surround the little soldier's machine and Tsuhi's one. Rifles aiming up, a mere gesture from Makabe stopping their trigger fingers from confirming the lethality.

" *Perhaps you didn't hear well, but I ordered you to retreat from this area, just as my lord Regent did."*

" *Forgive us, sir,"* Tsuhi quickly bows down, knees and stomach shaking. *"We shall be-"*

" *I don't belong to your fellowship, so you cannot enforce any 'orders' on us,"* The little soldier counters, despite the cold shivers which claim his back the small match has been lit. And slowly it grows, as if wanting to match the soldier's twisting fire. *"I was tasked with confirming the safety of the civilians sheltered in the closest hospital. D o you know if they've evacuated, sir?"*

" *Do not make me waste my time. Those stationed there have valiantly asked us to evacuate, since they saw they wouldn't make it in time,"* He says while smirking at the matter, heartless and uncaring. *"Do not soil their sacrifice, and evacuate at once."*

" *I don't believe you." Uncle Koetsu should be in the hospital, he wouldn't have given up on the evacuation.*

" *I won't repeat myself. Turn around and evacuate."*

Frowning, contorting in a desire to choke the light out of Makabe's eyes as the spectator was, the little soldier starts to heat up his boosters. *"I've got my orders to ascertain their wellbeing, and you're neither my squad leader nor part of my fellowship."*

"Damn bastard, who the fuck would believe your lies?" He blazes, almost reprimanding the little boy for not opening fire on those sons of an eldritch bitch. A minute shiver he feels, as slow as the scars over his body quiver and distort, encompassing his body as the fireflies do, as if trying to bind and restrain the soldier.

Raging like a storm in open sea then he yells when the little soldier's Zuikaku is tumbled by the incoming fire of the surrounding guards. A moment of disorientation blurs the little soldier's mind, which he quickly replaces with seething anger as he tries to make his machine move, yet the limitation of the system keeps him stranded.

" *I've no time to waste on a filthy baseborn. You, tozama,"* Makabe speaks, low, towards Tsuhi. *"I advise you to follow my suggestion, evacuate this instant."*

" *H-However, my fellow-"*

" *Hmph, he can do what he desires with his worthless life. Do not let a peasant fog your vision, there are certainly better fellows awaiting your trust. Now then, all of you!"* Taking a step forward, his Zuikaku then raises its blade towards the sky. *"We have loitered long enough. We shall rendezvous with the triumphant escape of Takatsugu-sama, the hero of this evacuation. Let us make haste, for we need to catch up with the detachment that's on the road."*

With a loud cheer, all those present revel in the orders as their boosters heat up and they begin to fly away. Without any speck of hesitation or regret, might I add. Yet, delaying his departure, Makabe sends his projection to little Tsuhi, employing a thin smile.

" *Please do not dally in joining us, miss. The detonation is not too far off."*

Tsuhi merely nods silently, quickly looking at the thrashing Zuikaku that struggled to stand up on its damaged legs. The plating burnt and tearing off, its almost as if it had been cuddled by a Destroyer, if you allow. Blinded to the surroundings in the memory, the soldier simply shares the frantic jerk of the controls, the crazed inputs in the system to try and find a way to stand up once more. Yet, where the one spectating finds a void, a moment of silence where he would have clenched his teeth were he corporeal at the moment, the little soldier's eyes watered and slowly shed tears. The one seething red in anger found his eyes sinking in deep blue, in mourning and a continuous collapse of frustration as the cerulean lightning courses through him, the one sinking blue in desperation instead finds his eyes swelling red by the tears, tears that drop with deepest hate. *Fire does not bend the knee against no adversary. On the contrary, this desperation is but fertile soil for it, I'm certain you'd agree .*

" *Takeru, please. We must retreat,"* Tsuhi once more pleads, flinching in the projection at the frown, the glistening venom within the little soldier's eyes.

" *You are free to leave if you want to. I ain't leaving until I get Uncle out of here,"* both echo the same impulse as the machine stands up, once more firing off his jump units to aid in the balance required for the Zuikaku to stand upright again.

" *However, we may not have enough time. Please, we should not linger in the city."*

" *And leave them behind? Do you seriously believe what that bastard said?!"*

" *I… well…"* Her eyes descend for a moment before relenting a sigh and a nod. *"Then, let us make haste. We can carry some survivors in our TSFs' hands, but there won't be room for everyone."*

" *I know that! Come on, let's go!"* Without waiting for his machine to be properly aligned with the street, the little soldier blasts away, closely followed by the watchful fellow.

And despite wishing to fade away, the soldier was unable to return to lucidity. The collapse continued, sinking into darkest depths, everything towering and falling onto him, so does he feel at the moment. For he already knows of the fate of his Uncle and his family, and the tension in the young man's chest, the heartbeats pressing on his neck serve only to unnerve the spectator.

It took only a few minutes of full boosting for the reality of the situation to reach them, for the radar to start flooding red as soon as they adjusted its parameters to scan the surface area. And all three of them felt sick to their stomachs, burning within. While the spectator had already seen his fair share of carnage, plagued sights such as this serve only to have him wish his eyes to be gouged open with a rusted needle. And while the other two already had their trial of fire, Tsuhi couldn't halt the reflex when her stomach grew upset. While the young soldier merely stares, gaping, shocked into silence as he's unable to compute what his eyes see in front of him.

Burning land and concrete, a mountain melting to its own eruption. Munching sounds, chewing sounds, separating joints and cartilage as if their prey were boiled chicken, tearing the skin off the flesh as if it were but an envelope of plastic. Retracting their heads as they tear into the upper parts, removing chucks of it with the jaws as if they were eating an entire serving on their own. Twitching and recoiling as they gag, before puking a mixture of meat, bones and hair, melting along the rolling sight which sinks onto the atrocity. A few were impaled as if a renowned vampire had been the leader of the invaders, some having the small treasure which waited within pierced by the impact, entangled in the inner vines as the rest of its progenitor slides off the charging spears.

The collapsed machines, splintered as its pilots. Each petal off the torsos plucked off crudely. Some perhaps yet live, and whether they're laughing in madness or shrieking in terror is hard to distinguish anymore.

It is then that both soldiers see something in the corner of their vision, within an apartment. Three little ones, and two women

covering them in protection as the entrance succumbs to the pressure. As the wide monsters slowly waddle into the room, waddling like drunkards seeking further red wine, one of the women looks outside, to the Zuikaku.

Her voice could in no way be heard, from within the small room and amidst all this chaos. Yet the soldier could tell, in the hoarseness of the scream, in the contortion of her face, what the woman was begging for. Perhaps, part of the young one also did. A simple volley would have sufficed. Just a flicker of the trigger.

But when the dust finally settles, both the building and the one behind it were crumbling away. Despite having eviscerated the concrete, the young one felt as if he had been on the receiving end of his slash just now. There are no words Tsuhi can think of, and the soldier finds himself recalling those echoes once again.

Hollow, sinking, opening the lips wide to scream, tensing the jaw to crush a rock, and yet no sound comes out. There is only silence, tears, and a wound that remains open. In perfect reflection, the young one wails as his breathing hiccups, as coughing assaults him. And yet, he still stands up, he still moves his controls. Whether there is hope or despair in his heart, I cannot fully tell. Yet, the soldier does find himself frowning, frowning much as the fissures threaten with splintering his jaw in half while the fireflies scatter and regroup, a thin cloud shrouding his body as he groans and wails to the vision, unheard and unseen by the two who still debate, for who only a few seconds have passed.

While a few explosions ring out in the distance, as the MDF tries and fails at restraining the advance of the enemy across the required defense line, the soldier behind the young one screams and thrashes against his ethereal restrains, reminded too much of the fogginess which he could never distinguish, never desired to distinguish of his dreams of Iceberg. As he once did during the cruel trial of the XM3, the younger Takeru rushes forth, gunning at the monstrosities. Yet, more take their place in a manner of seconds. Volley after volley, yet the same shapes return from behind the

smoke and the smear. At some point, the young one wonders if he truly is even shooting anymore since the procession of decay never wanes in their steps.

By the time they made a difference in the horde, by the time they made it to the hospital, there was only more munching to welcome their arrival. Blackened spots in the concrete, lines of fire burning across the street, vehicles and trenches cracked wide open.

The young one quickly put his helmet in place, opening his cockpit without waiting for his Zuikaku to land properly. The older, however, shivers inside, the lights forming a cocoon over him. His heartbeats and only his heartbeats can he feel, the sight of the destroyed and abandoned hospital, of some of the damage being done clearly by TSFs or other armaments causes one of his hands to stretch outwards. Raising up, like a vine seeking the sun's warmth, raising as it trembles and emits that tender glow.

"Why is this port destroyed?" He asks himself, to the images that overlay with the vision of the young royal guard who frantically rushes through the carnage and the fire, seeking his uncle as Tsuhi reprimands and is quick to follow.

For the sight of the hospital brought up certain images, certain words.

" *We ordered them to seek shelter in the mountains. Thus, it is our duty to safeguard the ports from these subversive elements."* A voice similar, perhaps too similar to the one of the red guard that had shot at the young soldier's feet says.

"Don't fuck with me… You just murdered these civilians!" Seething over the rim, the glass begins to crack as the glow does, too.

" *Please, do think on the future. It is imperative that the equipment is shipped posthaste. Furthermore, are you not aware of the Professor's research? As the rulers, it is our duty to safeguard our people. In this case, we're sparing them the pain of this reality that*

*will soon fall upon us. This is nothing but a mercy kill, 1st Lt Shirogane."* The apathetic and stoic battering ram shattered the last rampart of composure of the soldier, whose head began to heat up and feel a vicegrip upon hearing the voice of the trickster garbed in blue.

So his eyes blaze, distortion corroding the lightning lines. "Where's the mercy in that?!"

" *You just left the people to die all on their own!"* The younger finishes the adusted response, both bursting alive at the respective sights.

Only to fall in utter, complete silence.

Under the rubble to their right, there was someone collapsed, a Soldier-class taking some munches out of it. They both immediately recognize the orange hair, and as the BETA's head explodes upon their bullets is their stride towards the rubble. Not listening to Tsuhi, who snipes a pair of Soldiers that had taken an interests in the rushing young guard, they both smack the dead weight of the BETA with a kick.

Frozen into a scream, part of the face was missing, bitten off. Cold to the touch, petrified in its posture forever more.

" *Takeru… Takeru, please. There's no one left,"* Tsuhi gradually closes the distance, equal apprehension when trying to touch his shoulder.

No tears leave the young man's eyes. There is, once more, only silence in his inability to comprehend what meets his eyes.

Standing up slowly, breathing heavily, he dashes to the vehicles, ignoring Tsuhi's arm. Shooting the Soldier-class that were loitering about, using more bullets than he should have, kicking and punching them repeatedly when removing their remains off the transportation, the same massacre meets his eyes. While the spectator can muster

an inner salute to the remains of a single MP who stood in front of the civilians before being brutalized, the young one starts taking steps backwards, laughing dryly as he looks around and about. Small twinges of pain can the young one feel, small echoes that even reach the soldier. On his arms and legs, sudden heat only to then meet a blanketing cold.

"Come on, get out of here," Takeru begs, feeling the creeping coldness on his own being, despite the vision. That same void in his chest, that same crater which still burns at the mere thought, the emptiness which follows after Iceberg for him as he looms over the wasteland ravaged by the G-Bombs. "Turn around, you don't have to see it. Get out, get out, get out, get-"

Too little, too late.

Hanging against a decorative pillar like an old toy left to abandonment, there lays Koetsu's wife. Her lower half is still burning, blood oozing from a purple spot, prey to an inner injury, crushed against the stone.

" *Takeru, we're leaving!"* Tsuhi tries to twist his arm, to drag him back to the TSF. Not even employing her special martial arts can lift his feet off the ground or even move him an inch. So she wraps her arms from behind, tightly, tightly. *"Please… Let's go. There's nothing we can do… please…"*

One step, two steps. He breaks free of her hold, walking as if in a daze. A few Soldiers waddled their way out of the hospital, blood drizzling down their jaws. Unblinking, he shot them dead. In silence he crouches near a trampled vehicle, in silence does the soldier weep along the young guard. Tsuhi slowly follows, yet immediately recoils what at what they are staring. Once more, unable to fight the reflex, bile and saliva, and perhaps some drug residue as well, splash on the ground as she fails to regain her breathing.

Shards of glass had pierced the thin skin of their small bodies, and part of them was also burnt to some degree. For some odd miracle

they were spared from the BETA, perhaps because they faded away before being found. Lifting them both off the puddle of blood and who knows what other tinctures, the minimal weight felt like sand slipping through his fingers. Mere paper, paper above a candle. Cold as bark which cracks away, their smallest hands that once held one of his fingers when they met now are bent inwards at an impossible angle. And where once two shiny and curious lights had been, where the smallest of smiles took root, now the features are sunken in, a result of the vehicle being intercepted by the Warriors.

So, quivering amidst the ashes, the young guard cries, cries and cries as he hugs those two little weights to his chest.

Cold.

Silent.

Stiff.

Dead.

"… So this is why." Takeru concludes, rabid ants feasting on his insides, feeling faint yet furious at the same time. "So this is why you despise them so much. The same as those ports, abandoned to their luck…"

The cries of the young one begin to fade, the vision reaching its end. The swirling visage turns into a twister, a cyclone of fire and ashes, of red and gray as the surroundings fade and mix, the eye of the storm showing a narrow image of the young guard's sight, the lingering feeling of those two weights on his body.

"… almost as how I lost you."

A spark.

A spark in the fissures, a spark from the fireflies.

"… You?"

The fire rises in his sight, the soldier… feels a bolt coursing through his body. His fingers begin to twitch, the lighting lines focusing all over them, chaining them. A spark, then another. Like a ripple in a water surface, only instead of losing impulse it keeps on gaining strength. And for a moment he sinks in that feeling, yet as I think it all will soon cease as every other recollection.

Another spark, and another. And the shock makes him spasm, the weight becomes concise upon his fingertips. His sight descends, and there he finds… a lithe body, resting in his arms. A body garbed in white, a quivering hand struggling to raise to his cheek.

…

And he wraps himself over it, as if shielding it from pouring rain. And the hands run frantically over it, seeking injuries. Yet, they find coldness, stiffness. A mirror, a reflection of old moments, moments of solitude, moments where the stars were the lone solace a seeking gaze could find.

But it will collapse, as all times of reminiscence do. And so it does, the arm falls down as does the full weight of the body onto him. Sparks fly off as the lightning lines close, the cerulean hue fading back into his being. Yet, the collapse continues, the star falls down. Not in actual actions, but… within your heart, as the sparks keep on reverberating, more and more, more and more in that electric blue of yours, the sparks foretell of fire.

"… Why?" You ask, unable to understand. The sand fades from your hands, which soon start to shake and grip. Coursing like a snake through your arms is the engraving fire, the forging fire which makes you frown so.

The fissures all become small lines, mending the damage as if it was never done. Yet, it is still there. The echo in the background, the rumbling in the surface, the wound that remains open in your heart. But once again…

"After getting so far… so far from what? For what? I don't… Failing… again… Another time."

Your senses return to the cockpit, yet that is not what you see. Gritting your teeth, compressing them to the point of pain rushing through their roots, the lingering fireflies continue to spark, to swirl around you. The tachyons refuse to leave you, reaching for your body once again. Your resolve is sturdy indeed, and your own wrath instills fear in many, I know, yet even in front of the oceanic collapse your fire would not be doused. Twitching as if you still were enduring the jolts of the visions, the jolts which burn you as if a soldering torch had been thrust into your abdomen. Yet, even that pain does not dissuade you from recalling, it does not seal the lines which still run through you. The visage grows hazy, distorted, yet your voice still echoes firmly.

"We haven't even… talked? No, nothing. I still know nothing of you…" Crying, your sight grows blurry, still feeling that weight on your body.

Yet as you look up, the gray sky is not what should be there. There is no ruins or Takemikazuchi, but the mirage of another vision. And as more sparks come off you, dazzling enough to make anyone nauseous, that electric blue engulfs you whole. Yet, watching is all I can do as of now.

Upon the ignition of your jump units, those sparks, those lines of light run through the cockpit. Exhausting the stockpiled radiation, forcing the outcome through sheer will to power, yet still recoiling in pain at the burns, at the whipping on your body, both from your current injuries and those you are recalling.

"1st Lt, I already told you, this is UN protocol. You've done enough during this exercise," Isumi sighs, shaking her head.

"Still, it wouldn't take me anything to ascertain his status. I ask you to- Huh?"

The sudden rising of the Gekishin shocks both women who were still debating. Before either can form words, you push both controls forward, enduring the kickback from the shocks, the towers of fire that surround you in your vision.

And in your daze, you still cling to that weight. "There's so much we have to talk about… I ain't failing again… Move! Move, Kusanagi! I ain't done yet!"

A frenzy of roots discharges from your feet, onto the pedals, and the correct alignment of the jump units sends your Gekishin flying off towards the red frame of the retainer. Despite the damage and the lack of fuel, and even how the tachyons' sparks subside, the impulse of your patterns does not halt. Despite the crazed screams you release, the memory does not stop, the wound refuses to close, and so you continue to burn away.

"Cadet, please regain your senses!" The retainer begs as she parries the blurry frenzy, finding it hard to block, to meet the parries. "What's with this recoil? This savage form of piloting…" Her eyes widen, gaping at the answer, correct answer that she arrives at. The composed facade you once endowed, when a shadow you chose to be.

Almost failing to follow the speed of the dots, losing sight of the machines for a moment in her cameras, Cpt Isumi quickly opens a line with your machine. "Cadet Shirogane, cease your attacks this…" Yet, the image feedback comes up empty. Or rather, it is no longer usable after being on the receiving end of the sparks for even a minute. Still, the grunts she can hear as well as the readings on the monitor allow her to reach a conclusion, erroneous in this case. "1st Lt Tsukuyomi, I believe the cadet is having a recoil from the sedatives. Subdue his machine immediately!"

"It isn't as if I weren't trying!" She immediately replies in full blazes, feeling her own stomach sink at the task. *"If I miss my strike, I could harm you even further. And how on the Heavens are you still managing to move so fast with the damage of your unit?!"*

Counters meet the steel, a kick sends the red frame to eat some dirt. Violently as usual, there are no wasted secondsin your stride. However, even when the markings of your machine are flashing red, there is no change in the choking hold over the controls, on the stomping of the pedals.

And within your eyes, that same visage repeats itself. Surrounded by fire, by those shadows, it is only natural you'd remain steadfast in your aggression. Yet, today you've no rapier in your hands, and your heart feels as if it will burst from your chest at any second now. That cold feeling, that cold metal, lurching its way into your heart. That heavy weight, the burden twisting the inside of your chest.

You see no red frame, everything is fading to dark. Lungs begin to shut down, sight starts to black out. Yet, as you trade slashes with the retainer and paint with the bricks, a small jolt echoes still. And I can clearly see it, one tiny little spark shining in your eyes.

*"Rise!"* The fuse is set off in disdain, scorching away all your restrain.

A spinning jump, bouncing off a building. As if trying to high five the sun, only to retract your blade backwards. The retainer shivers, recognizing the start of the dive, taking a defensive stance, shrieking in a panic, begging you to stop.

Yet, your feet still find the pedals. *"Aim!"* Gunpowder and smoke corrupts the skies, obstructing the light from your eyes. *"And… dive, Kusanagi!"*

Descending into spiraling rage, ready to blast away all that lays ahead like a cannon ball, the warped impulse launches you off towards the retainer.

Out of fuel, the Gekishin simply rides the gale of the warped impulse. The impact shatters the street as both blades clash, both flying off their holds. Both TSFs end up toppled on the floor, the Gekishin with both legs heavily damaged and its head visor cracked due to the violent smooch it gave to the concrete. Trails of smoke still come out

of the jump units, and only a screeching sound echoes as the machine loses all tension and completely collapses onto the rubble, in equal fashion as you do, now knocked out cold within the cockpit. The Takemikazuchi still stands, proof of its exquisite engineering, unscathed save for some small damage to the lower end of the legs, which were put to the test under your assault.

"Cadet, can you hear me?!" Tsukuyomi calls out, repeatedly. When nothing comes up, she bites her lips and hits her seat. "Cpt, I'm going to check on the cadet's status."

"Please desist from that course of action, 1st Lt," Another voice, imposing and cold, answers the retainer. And soon, the violet eyes of the scientist enter her sight. "I've already been notified of what has transpired on the mock battle. I'll have to ask you to remain quiet, and not get any closer to my protegee."

"Excuse me?! He could be hurt gravely, we have to-"

"Must I remind you this was your folly? Your words and actions incited this incident, by using a private frequency no less. Let me remind you of what we agreed yesterday, and do not test my patience," So she minutely squints her eyes, brushing her bangs softly.

"A moment, XO," General Daizaburou enters the common channel, despite how he has tried to remain as merely an observer. "I do not believe it wise for you to say such words. From what I can gather, the cadet had an adverse reaction to the sedatives that were used on him without need. There was no need to resort to such methods, so I'd have to ask you not to shift the blame to the members of the IRG which participated on this exercise."

"Oh, that's your angle, General?" Sharpening her eyes, she taps her chin. "First, you were the ones who employed a private frequency. Second, it is clear your interactions caused much distress to my protegee," she highlights the last word, eyes blazing slightly. Tsukuyomi frowns while Daizaburou merely sighs. "And third, after

the meeting we shared yesterday, one could reach the conclusion that you have something against the cadet. Thus, if the 1st Lt moves one inch closer to the cadet's machine, I will consider this incident an aggression against UN personnel, and will act in line with what the protocol suggests for such cases."

"Wait a moment!" Once more, the retainer blazes forth, endowing the menacing frown of the guardian. "We did nothing of the sort, this is only an unfortunate accident and nothing else."

"Then, if that is the case, abide by the request of the XO of the base and remain still. I already sent a team to recover Shirogane's TSF. We will continue this conversation in the base, in a private room fitting for the issue."

Daizaburou flinches slightly, wincing at the prospect. "XO, wait. If you recover the TSF as it is now, the cadet could be hurt. Not to mention, we should try to keep this under wraps. Were you to order the Gekishin to be taken to the hangar then-"

Yuuko then sighs and ruffles her hair. "The sooner we retrieve the Gekishin, the sooner we'll know what transpired. I need to know what caused this outburst my protegee had, and how much of it was caused by the sedatives," she then frowns, biting her lower lips for a second. "Regardless, to retrieve Shirogane alone would raise suspicions, to delay the end of the mission also would, and to have the Gekishin missing by the Fubukis' side would also raise many questions. We have the rest of the cadets awaiting the final call, and considering my protegee should be marked as down, they must be growing quite anxious. Isumi, anything to say about this?"

The woman stood upright, color fading from her features. "Yes, they have attempted communication with the CP a few times already." She then sighs with her nose, her sight still caught on your numbers, which detail how weak your disposition is as of now. Of course, you just endured a forceful inheritance of memories as you haven't felt since that day in the tournament, so it is understandable you'd be lacking any and all energy. Yet, she cannot possibly know that, so I

suppose you'd be able to imagine the pungency of the currents of her thoughts, at the miss she allowed to pass.

"Then, as I said, let's call this mock battle to an end. General, call your members back. I want you and the 1st Lt standing in the medbay in B5F as soon as possible."

"Please reconsider, XO," Daizaburou insisted, hitting the command post where he was, feeling his throat constricting shut. "There was no ill will from us, this truly was only an accident. If you take the Gekishin as it is to the hangar-"

Yuuko then chuckles lightly, masking the venom which brews in her tightened hands at the sight of your numbers. She then smirks, to not bite her lips, such a wide gesture that I am certain you'd agree would freeze hell over. Such a slow, inner cackling, it is quite fair to affirm it could break the sturdiest of facades. Taking a second to see the cracking complexion, the twitching eyes and lips of the retainer, and the sober and sharp glare of the General, the scientist simply taps her chin.

"The end result won't change regardless of what actions we take from now on. I'll have you take responsibility for this incident, both you and Shirogane. The sooner we can discuss the consequences of this, the better. I will not repeat myself, return to the hangar at once," and so, she narrows her eyes, unblinking she stares at the projections.

"… Very well, so shall we do. Just let me remind you, this was nothing but an unfortunate accident," Daizaburou says, sheathing the concern, the wish to remain arguing. *"After all, his safety takes precedence."*

"Fair enough. We'll talk soon, anyways. Isumi, you know what to do," Yuuko orders, receiving a nod from her subordinate.

And with a click, all the projections fade from her monitors. Slowly, she paces to her desk, brings the mug to her lips and finishes the

now cold coffee, still having nothing to eat alongside it nearby.

Slamming it onto the wood, she heaves a sigh, clutches her forehead. "Just what on earth went wrong? I expected some backlash, but you were supposed to fall unconscious assoon as the drugs were injected. Sigh…" Ruffling her hair, she shakes her head and hurries out of her office, to the elevator. "You better be fine, Shirogane. Otherwise, all of these preparations will serve no purpose, for my and your goals," She says as she bites a nail, throwing her back onto the wall as the elevator starts its ascent. And yet, little is the shock she feels for much is what she not yet knows. The sapling of guilt is there, yes, but it has not yet blossomed.

And, seeking you, gasping in your unawareness, there are no further sparks coming out or into you. There is, however, a frown etched onto your features, a twitching on your fingers as if they were struggling to grasp onto something, and the disturbance in your breathing. And the wound, the wound that's open once again. As concerned as Yuuko is, she can not know of what she has unleashed. Chances are, you won't even remember it when you return to full consciousness.

And again, as your machine is taken off the ruins towards the hangar, as the scientist continues to debate within herself, as the guards argue among one another, as the cadets keep on asking about your whereabouts, all I can do is limit myself to watch you, whatever is still left of you, of your echoes within the soldier.

To watch and pray that it isn't yet time for you to burn away, my shooting star.

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*A/N: This chapter was pain. It took me hours of staring at the screen to get the dark parts out. I know it isn't as cursed as Dead End Aegis or Rasen Kairou, but showing the deaths of infants was pure pain. I can only hope it turned out decently enough. Writing this wrecked me, so that's why I put a second warning mid-chapter. Sorry if it broke the immersion.*

*Now, I know this chapter will most likely lose me some readers, what with the "fantasy-like" aspects, the return of the angst and the stuff with the narrator. For the narrator, there are enough hints and breadcrumbs to figure out who it is. The "sparks" are basically Takeru using the causal pull of the Nucleus on his own. just like how the Valkyries can take actions to make the better future, Keru can force the best outcome of his wish in exchange of the aforementioned G-Radiation. And as for the angst, get used to it. The next five or so chapters are going to be heavy.*

*Originally, I was planning to put a flashback arc about Iceberg somewhere around here. But thanks to seeing a story of hartman762, I decided to expand on it, and said story became Before Light's Out. That's why I had to put a flashback here instead. So, this angsty arc is going to last a while, until Komoro for those who read the prior version.*

*If there are things left unclear about this chapter, go read Forgotten Fangs and Waiting. Otherwise, I think there are enough leads to see where this is going to go before the actual reveals happen. That's all for now.*

*Thanks for reading. Stay safe.*

*Zuoriel*

# Rumbling Hearts (I)

*A/N: Seeing the responses last chapter got, I have three things to say.*

*First, thank you all for the honesty. Second, sorry for the confusion of the last scene. I had thought the state of Takeru's Gekishin after the long fights was obvious as well as that he was not fighting with a clear mind would make his self-KOing crash understandable. Same for the switches in the narration and the warning, when I finish this batch of chapters I'll go and revise that closing scene.*

*And third, since I don't wanna string along those who are disappointed or bored with the angst and the flashbacks, I made some additions to the disclaimer at the start of the story. Simply put , I won't change the plot because otherwise I wouldn't enjoy writing it, and this fic won't become a retelling of Alternative. There won't be a carbon copy of the 12/5 Incident, the fights against the BETA won't take the same direction as they did in canon, and I plan on riding the angst to its conclusion so that it, hopefully, reaches a good payoff instead of just solving Takeru's anguish with hypnotherapy as it happened in the VN. As I said before there are a few angst-heavy chapters coming which revolve around the issues of both our Takeru and Native, and without those the story simply wouldn't work for me. If the mix of light fluff and angst the fic has had thus far is not to your liking, know that its overall mood won't change going forward .*

*Thanks for reading, and for the honest comments. S tay safe.*

*Zuoriel*

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*Chapter 70:*

**Rumbling Hearts (I)**

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*December 3 rd . Almost Noon.*

*(Hangar.)*

**[ Meiya ]**

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Deafening whispers overflow the hangar to the rim, only matched by either the befuddlement or consternation found in all the gazes of those present. A jest it is not to affirm that even the most seasoned mechanics are now certainly bereft of all words.

I am merely a cadet, that is true, yet I am no stranger to witnessing the damage battle inflicts on our equipment. Be it when I left my previous residence before enlisting in the UN or when arriving at this base, the metal once bright left scarred, the firm shapes bent and bruised, steel wings forever clipped. All the abandoned machines looked like that to me through the windows as I gazed at the scenery. And now, such an image lies in front of me.

"Look at it," Yoroi whispers, holding both hands close to her body as if it were freezing. "The paint is almost fading from the plating."

"You think he crashed?" Ayamine asks, pointing with a thumb to the Gekishin.

"Either that, or the machine was sent to collide against a skyscraper or a tumbled bridge," 1st Lt Suzumiya says, curling a strand of hair, a few onlookers nodding to her words.

Just what manner of brusque maneuver did he employ to leave his Gekishinwith this level of damage? The more it's lifted to dock into the hangar, the more it screeches as if enduring torture. The joints refuse to move even slightly, which causes the crew to make the docking cease momentarily to avoid damage to the railway or the machine. To have the bare metal showing from under the paint, to have such a sturdy machine bent at places, for the limbs to be stuck

in place, what in the Heavens could have caused this outcome? Why would you abuse your machine so, Takeru?

"1st Lt Suzumiya," Sakaki begins, slowly turning around towards the woman, "can you tell us anything about what happened?"

Her expression sobers up into stillness, only to then shake her head as she rests her back onto the wall. "Sadly, I know as much as you do. I was left waiting here while you battled, yet Sgt Jinguuji did not appear. I frankly have no idea what's going here, either," she then gives us a small nod in sympathy, not breaking eye contact.

"You've heard no word from your captain, either?" I ask, she sighs and shakes her head once again.

"No, nothing at all."

We all share a momentary gaze, left with nothing to do but to stare at the repining mechanics which finally manage to align the TSF with the railway, giving word for the docking to proceed. Yoroi and Ayamine look at each other, as if gauging whether to step towards the machine or not, before Sakaki taps Ayamine's shoulder then shakes her head in silence.

"Let's not, give the crew some space," she orders, and both nod despite looking down, tightening hands in response.

"Shirogane-san isn't injured, right?" Tamase finally speaks up yet low enough for the whirring of gears to almost drown her voice, not moving from the crate she was resting her frame on.

"I do not think we should hoist such concerns," I say, slowly inhaling, slowly opening and closing my hands a few times. "At worst, he has motion sickness and cannot move his machine for the moment."

Tamase looks down, lips retracting, unmoving from her position as if she had become part of the crate itself. Sakaki and Yoroi merely look away, Ayamine sighs as she goes to rest against the wall by 1st Lt

Suzumiya's side. So, once more the silence around us is permeated by all the whispers, by the shouts of the mechanics near the railing.

According to what I saw on the radar, Takeru continued to fight despite having been almost bested at one point. The others also seem to have seen the same patterns. And at blinding speeddid he retaliate, for my radar had quite the issues keeping up with the pace of the last moments of the fight. The only possible explanation for the state the Gekishin is in would be that he failed to connect with one of those aerial charges of his. So, it would be natural for him to be left nauseous after that.

Yet, for him to have resorted to such a method, and for it to have left his machine in such a state… Are you truly a spy, then? Why would you decide to endow such aggression towards Tsukuyomi?

"Come on, move along!" A strong yell, which is followed by hasty footsteps. The crimson haired captain, whose name was Isumi I believe, who was in the command post during the battle enters the hangar, followed by a few nurses who bring a gurney with them. "This is no spectacle. If you've no business here, get out of the way."

"What is going on?" I look around yet the others seem equally shocked at the sight, even 1st Lt Suzumiya.

"Why is the medic crew here?" Yoroi asks, eyes wide and unblinking.

"So he really is hurt?" Tamase says, looking around then down when the rest of us remain silent.

Coughing softly, Sakaki looks towards 1st Lt Suzumiya. "1st Lt, could we approach the Gekishin to ask Cpt Isumi what has happened?"

"I do not think it's a good idea," she affirms, again shaking her head. "If Cpt Isumi brought a gurney, then approaching them now would only have your questions refused."

"So you say that there is something that cannot be disclosed, is that it?" Otherwise, why would a mere question on Takeru's state be refused?

"Eh? No, just that if your comrade was hurt, then asking questions now is-"

"Why would he have been hurt? He was wearing the fortified suit, furthermore our units' boosters are limited so that we cannot injure ourselves in the first place."

It makes no sense, all this secrecy. How they sent us five back on our own before his Gekishin was brought to the hangar, how the battle wasn't declared over as soon as he was marked as down, and now we can't even approach the machine or ask any questions. It makes no sense. Unless, of course, there is something to hide.

"Mitsurugi, come on," Sakaki sighs, grabbing one of her elbows. "Shirogane-kun must have failed one of his charges, and perhaps he's unconscious now. This is just standard emergency protocol, isn't it?"

"To the point of leaving his machine in such a state? Sakaki, do not take me for a fool. Why would have Takeru employed such a risky method when he was the last man standing?"

Why would he choose such a violent end to this battle? Considering how odd his disposition was earlier, and what Tsukuyomi has told me, could he have grown upset at something? I do not believe Tsukuyomi would taunt or press him to such extremes, Takeru did this on his own volition. But, why? Don't tell me… you're truly…

"Stand aside, make way!" A loud bark, a voice I recognize.

Looking to the other end of the hangar, Kamiyo, Tomoe and Ebisu were pushing their way through the crowds and supply crates, all of them still wearing their suits. Severe expressions mire their complexions, as if the alarm was blaring at this very moment. Why

would they be coming in person to this hangar? Now the others are who look at my person, yet I sigh and shake my head in equal surprise at the matter.

"Where the Heavens- Oh, there it is!" Kamiyo quickly stomps her way to the Gekishin, people moving out of her way as the other two follow close. She slows down, taking a short breath before facing the ones near Takeru's machine, cold as ice. "Cpt, has the cadet left the unit yet?"

The nurses and medical staff stiffen, sharing looks and whispers. Those around us also indulge in the same curiosity, as us five and 1st Lt Suzumiya do by the crates near the hallway.

"I do not recall hearing you had the authorization to ask for such questions," Cpt Isumi answers, displaying a frown while she rests a hand onto the Gekishin's cockpit.

"The gall," Kamiyo fumes, taking a step forward, making some of the mechanics that were near the docking port scatter swiftly like leaves to the wind's mercy. "Your cadet lashes out against our squad leader and you refuse to even disclose what's going on?!"

"What did she say?" Sakaki says before I could, we share a gaze yet find the rest of the hangar silenced in equal measure.

Cpt Isumi sighs, brushing some hair to a side, then she takes a few steps forward while leaning closer to the rails, as if blocking Kamiyo from approaching the cockpit of the TSF. "2nd Lt, please do not speak unnecessary words. We do not wish to instigate further hostility."

"Please, do not jest," she retorts, frowning much towards the Gekishin. "Why is Mana-sama being treated as the aggressor when the cadet was the one who performed such a savage charge? You're all just trying to shift the blame to us!"

Endowing an ice cold glare, the captain holds their stares, the most adusted ones from the trio, the yet composed of the cousins, and the befuddled of all those of us who spectate the debate. Firm and relaxed, she crosses her arms slowly without moving an inch. "As I said before, you have no authorization to be in this hangar. Your squad leader was requested to detail the events that lead to the state of this Gekishin, nothing more. And I assume you were told that we requested the IRG to not try anything against cadet Shirogane. Leave this hangar at once, or we'll act in consequence." Slow are her words and the movements of her lips, yet the minute furrowing of her brows, the hand delving into a pocket and the unblinking fixation of her stare tells she is not jesting on her threat.

Yet, what is the meaning of this? Takeru truly attacked Tsukuyomi with one of those savage charges, and the UN is blaming her for it? The trio wouldn't be here otherwise, not without good reason to clash so openly with a UN officer. And I refuse to believe Tsukuyomi would have said or done anything to cause this outcome. All the whispers around us, behind the crowds, the crates, as well as the stare of that captain… They're treating my fellows as if they were the culprits? How dare-

"How dare you speak such balderdash!" Tomoe finishes mine own thoughts, a coiled fist finding her chest. "We fought with honor and you dare throw mud at us?"

"Again, we are not pointing fingers at anyone," Cpt Isumi says, giving the three of them afirm gaze, unfaltering in front of their glares, while waving a hand downwards in a slow fashion.

Ebisu frowns as she steps forward, her teeth visible for a moment as she hits the railway when she sways a hand to the air. "Why should we lower our heads and accept this without question? Furthermore, we are only here to see if the cadet is conscious at the moment. If Mana-sama is being sent to a questioning, then Shirogane also should be."

As the whispers thicken in the air, Cpt Isumi remains still, expression tight and never lifting her gaze from the trio. Seeming to stick her chest out, raising her shoulders, not a single ripple could be seen in the surface of her composure. "And I already gave you an answer. Until this situation has been clarified, you were asked to remain either in your hangar or your quarters. 1st Tsukuyomi agreed to this petition and yet here you are."

"With all due respect," Kamiyo says, still frowning as she waves a hand upwards, "a mere positive or negative answer would suffice. Simply removing the cadet from his machine also would. If you truly want to know what transpired, inspecting his control logs or bringing him along to the questioning should be the most logical course of action."

Yet, Cpt Isumi remains undaunted. "Do you think you can do as you please in this base? I will only repeat myself one last time. Desist on whatever it is you're trying to do, this was nothing but an accident. No one is pointing fingers at you, so do not leash out against the cadet. Also,please take into account how your presence here will be taken," she says, taking a momentary gaze at those around, sending quite a frozen deluge their way which makes some turn hastily leave and stumble with a cable or a crate, others merely look away.

"We are only asking for both parties to be present in the questioning. It is most unfair for Mana-sama to be treated as the sole culprit of this 'accident'," Tomoe retorts immediately, acidic and venomous as she scowls towards the damaged steel.

Yet, the captain frowns, heaving a sigh and shaking her head while pinching her nose. "Do you plan to force me to call security? Is that it? You're just trying to force my hand to make you into the victims?"

"What did she say?" Clenching a fist, I cannot help but to frown at the words.

"Mitsurugi, shh!" Sakaki says, hastily grabbing one of my arms and pulling me back.

"However, how could she say such a thing to an Imperial Guard?"

"And what do you plan to do, speak up against a superior officer?" She asks, tapping her glasses and holding my gaze, making my words lose impulse on my throat.

"As if you were the victims here!" Kamiyo once more shouts, breaking our stares. Slashing the air with a wave, punching a crate, a finger then fires off towards the Gekishin while she snarls in hunting aggression. "It was that damn American who attacked Mana-sama with such savage a maneuver. Yet, we are the ones brought into questioning? It's clear as day, that dastard is nothing but a violent element that revels in such brutal approaches. And you are shielding that foreigner from proper questioning, casting the blame onto our squad leader."

"No one is blaming you for anything," Cpt Isumi says as she again shakes her head, the stillness of her complexion an inverse reflection of what burns in the trio's faces. "Yet, you don't have the authorization to receive this intel or to question the cadet, and 1st Lt Tsukuyomi gave us word this accident would be kept to just that, that none of you would try and turn this into a blame game. For one last time, leave before I have to call for security."

The trio seems intent on not accepting the terms, yet once more affliction mires their complexions as they share a gaze and dull the cascading animosity which permeated their eyes. For them to be this upset, and to have come here in person, it means Tsukuyomi truly is being treated as the cause of whatever has occurred. Yet, for some reason, Takeru is being shielded now. When he should have been the one who forced this outcome with his piloting, when it was completely unnecessary as well, when he should have been aware of the consequences due to the punishment that still lies on his shoulders. It leaves my insides hollow, my lips dry and sinking inwards. Why… Why did you do such a thing?

"… You think the American tried to harm one of 'em?" A whisper asks, from within the crowd.

"Either that, or they went too far against the guy and are now covering their own asses," another whisper answers, and Sakaki again grabs my arm and shakes her head.

So all I can do is bite my lips and look away as further whispers prickle my ears. And if the trio continues to argue with the captain, they too shall bear some manner of punishment for these actions. When they're only safeguarding Tsukuyomi's honor in front of an irrational claim. If Takeru was the one who acted out of line, then he too should be questioned. *And reprimanded, if his action indeed put Tsukuyomi and his TSF at risk.* Yet, if he is injured or unable to leave his unit, then haste is of essence. Only then this will be clarified, whether you truly are at fault or if this was nothing but an accident, as well as the causebehind the state of your unit.

Thus, I sigh and feel a shiver on my nape. To step forward and speak up at this time will only serve to garner all the attention, use my image for my own interests. Dubious it is that Cpt Isumi will simply bow down at my words, yet I must be careful not to cause the trio to flare up further. I still have to share some words with them regarding their treatment towards Tamase during the battle, after all. However, to simply remain watching is not something I should allow myself to do. *After all, you truly might be injured or unconscious within your cockpit due to the G-Forces of your maneuver, and all this discussion is achieving is delay your treatment.*

Licking my lips when taking the first step, releasing my arm from Sakaki's binding hand as she tries to restrain me, I cough when approaching the debating four. "If you'd excuse me, captain?"

Her eyes narrow, merely moving her eyes to gazemy way for a moment. "What is it, cadet?"

"I believe ascertaining the condition of cadet Shirogane should be a priority, which would easily defuse this argument. Even if he is taken to the medbay, he also will certainly be taken to questioning at a latter moment. I do not believe the presence of the guards here puts your orders in-"

"You're speaking out of line, cadet. Stand back," she replies, another frozen downpour aims at my person this time from within her stern frown.

"What?! You think you can dismiss Meiya-sama's words?" Kamiyo's hands twitch as she frowns. "You're nothing but a baseborn, how dare-"

"Kamiyo," Glaring her way, I hold her gaze. She nods in apology along the other two, taking a step back. Inhaling slowly, I then turn to look at my superior once more. "Cpt, ma'am, I am aware I should not be speaking up. Yet, my comrade's safety, and his image, is being jeopardized by this argument. Whether he is to blame or not, that shall be clarified in due time. But first, ascertaining his status should take priority. More so considering the damaged state of his machine."

She then nods, her shoulders sagging for a moment. "Sigh… I do agree with you. However, the guards here have no authorization to be near the cadet. And I cannot deny they'd try to something against him the moment he exits the cockpit."

Waving a hand their way, my eyes briefly meet the trio's as they say no word yet engrave the displeasure in their faces. I then nod, keeping my head low. "I do not believe that to be a concern, an Imperial Guard would not shame their teachings with such crude a conduct. Please, my squadmate might truly be injured." Even if that is nothing but his fault, considering what seems to have happened.

"Did you not hear, cadet Mitsurugi?" She says, once more firm and frosting. "I ordered you to stand back. I understand your concerns, but this is a UN base. We have a protocol to follow, and 1st Lt Tsukuyomi already agreed on this procedure. So," brushing her hair, a slow drizzle of absolute zero leaves her lips, "if you three do not leave this instant, I will be calling security," she then procures a communicator from her pocket, flickering the switch on.

"P-Please wait, ma'am. There is no need to-"

Another set of voices, loud voices reach my ears as they ask for people to move.

Both the captain and the trioseem startled as well, a minuscule twitch and subsequent lost of tension in their forms as their gazes seek the source of the sounds which were coming from two opposite hallways. Mion and Shion, also wearing their suits, hurry towards us from one end of the hangar while the Instructor slowly nudges herself through the people to get to our position, only to halt her steps in utter shock as she sees the state of the Gekishin.

"You three, what do you think you're doing?!" Shion berates them, waving a finger about with quite the adusted expression in her as she rushes the last steps.

Kamiyo stutters, gaze crumbling to a thousand pieces. "W-We only wanted to take the cadet to the questioning. It is unjust, for Mana-sama to be-"

"Silence," Mion says, shaking her head as she rubs her forehead with a finger. "Sister gave us our orders, did she not? And yet, you defied her and came here anyways. It seems you even caused problems for the cadets," she then gives me a fleeting glance, both cousins subtly nodding my way, cascading lips in apology.

"… Mitsurugi, what is going on here?" The Instructor asks as she walks towards us, a sharp glance towards the guards as she takes care to mind her steps and walk a set distance from them.

"I was merely asking Cpt Isumi to retrieve cadet Shirogane from his unit, in case he was injured."

"What? Injured?!" Flinching back, only to gain a towering tint in her eyes. She gazes at the Gekishin, lips shaking for a second, then looks to me, yet I can only lower my gaze, so I can hear her give out a short yet deep sigh. "Just what on earth happened here? Cpt, what is the state of the cadet?"

"We do not yet know. I have orders to take him to medbay, just in case. But as you can see," she then gazes to the guards, sighing with a delayed gesture towards them, "we had some company."

"My apologies, captain," Shion immediately says, bowing down along Mion, then glaring at the trio who then also bow down, despite how they bite their lips as they do. "Forgive the intrusion, there was no ill will from them. Only their duty to their squad leader fueled their actions and words." Her voice composed, her lips pressed into a firm line, nothing but a forced veil which hides the pressure of her fingers upon her palms.

Cpt Isumi nods, finally dispelling the cold aura in her posture. "Apology accepted. Please, take your leave. Let's not make this accident into something larger than it is."

"We are in agreement then," Mion nods as she rises back up, brushing some hair. "Please do look after the cadet, we shall be taking our leave here."

"However, Mion-sama, why should we-"

"Kamiyo," Shion glares at her, one of her eyebrows twitching for a moment, "we are taking our leave. Do not shame the Blood squadron any further."

The trio bows down in apology, then give a minute nod to Cpt Isumi before turning around and stomping their way out, clearly seething to the rim. Both cousins once more apologize to the captain in a formal manner, giving me a faint gaze before they also take their hurried leave, eyes fixated upwards in their perfect march.

"Come on, show's over!" The Instructor shouts, clapping a few times, glaring at the onlookers that start to disperse. "Move along, you've got work to do, I'm sure!" She then hits a crate a few times, making it shake slightly, the echo hastening the departure of the steps.

And with those mere words, most people that had gathered empty the hangar in but a few seconds. I cannot help but to sigh, as those along the captain do. Looking back, the other four were almost petrified on the spot, Tamase with her eyes barely open and the others unable to look my way, while 1st Lt Suzumiya slowly walks towards the captain.

"Isumi, what happened here?" The Instructor asks, arms folding slowly.

Yet, she shakes her head. "I am not at liberty to speak. I suppose you will be notified of this soon enough."

"I see…" she then looks to the Gekishin, eyes squinting and brows arching, a slow yet extended exhalation through her nose once she veils her sight.

1st Lt Suzumiya stops besides me, giving a court bow. "Um, captain, should I go back with the rest or-"

"You stay with the Instructor for now, Suzumiya. Inform her of what you saw, and then go get lunch with the rest," she orders with a nod, to which the 1st Lt salutes in acknowledgment.

"Excuse me, ma'am?" Sakaki takes a few steps towards us, standing in attention. "Could you allow us to at least see how cadet Shirogane is faring?"

Yet, the woman immediately shakes her head. "No, I'm afraid I've orders to take him immediately to the medbay and I already lost plenty of time."

Standing besides Sakaki, giving a deep bow, I ask as I remain in position. "Please, we merely wish to see if he's uninjured, is all. We won't intrude on your orders nor try to speak with him."

"Mitsurugi, Sakaki," the Instructor begins, giving us both an unblinking, fixed stare, "you've heard the state of things. We shall be

taking our leave, and you all have to prepare for the afternoon lectures as well."

"However, we're merely asking to-"

Taking a step closer, further do her eyes narrow upon mine. "Didn't you hear?We're on the captain's way. So, we're taking our leave now. Come on, you'll know what happened to the hotshot later."

Holding my breath and nod is all I'm allowed to do, taking a few steps back, flattening my lips as I gaze at the Gekishin. Why would they even deny us being present? Could it be… *he isn't truly injured and all of this was a jest? All a ploy to force Tsukuyomi to be the culprit?* I would like to believe that is not the case, yet all of this is abundant in suspicion.

"Um…" Tamase speaks up, bows down and tries to hold the Instructor's gaze. "So, we'll know if he's injured or not?"

"We shall know soon," she answers, low and simple. "Let's not loiter around. You five, to the changing room," she orders, gazing into our eyes as we nod. She then turns around, seeming to sigh as she salutes the woman. "My apologies, Isumi. I should have been the one in the command post."

Yet, the captain grimaced for a moment before shaking her head and heaving a short sigh. "It's not your fault, Sergeant. This was nothing but an accident, I'm sure," she says, before saluting all of us and turning around, walking back to the TSF's side.

After looking at it one last time, I turn around and walk into the hallways along the others, following behind the Instructor as 1st Lt Suzumiya details her what had happened before the battle.

Slow steps, slow inhaling. A badly timed word? A too forceful inquiry? What did Tsukuyomi do to have you do such a thing, Takeru? *He has never shown any ill conduct towards us, not even as we kept our distance from him.* No, there was…

The CCSE. That moment when his back was thrust against the wall, and when we spoke the next day. The clear affliction when he spoke of that woman who bestowed him with the Minaru Kamui. He had said that those methods were reserved for when he had no other choice. *Are you saying Tsukuyomi threatened your safety as those chasers did, then? If she is such a danger to your eyes, then… then could you truly be a spy?* All this secrecy would make sense then, to cast a shield over Takeru. The XO must have ordered the captain to come look for him, after all he seems to be deeply linked to her considering he refers to her as 'Sensei'.

Slowly, my arms fold over each other. Falling back, back into the currents of thought leads me to all our talks thus far. I do not see such an aggressive person in Takeru, I do not believe Tsukuyomi would do anything to cause such a reaction in him. Yet, the shining visage he shows might only be the surface, what easily meets the eye. What do I know of the shadows that lay beneath the horizon of his facade?

… Either way, it does not change the fact that Tsukuyomi is being falsely accused of harming him. And as much as I may loath it, waiting is all I can do.

"… See?" A whisper follows us as a few MP pass by our side. "Told you the guy got sent to the medbay."

"Heh, because he tried to attack a guard," another replies, their conversation fading as we march on.

Yet, the whispers and gazes follow us on our way to the changing room. As if their shadow had grown eyes, Yoroi and Tamase start to slow down, to throw gazes around at irregular intervals. Ayamine and Sakaki do not show any signs of inconvenience, yet it is doubtful they are immune to the faint echo that now traces our steps. This, too, is yet another repercussion of Takeru's folly. It is not a triviality for us, to remain with a low profile. Even if he were free of guilt, all the unpleasantry that's brewing around him shall also etch itself onto

our backs as well, even to Tsukuyomi's and her fellows. As if they already weren't facing enough hardships in this base to begin with.

*It's all because of you. You always spoke of how you desired to fit in, yet once again you chose violence.* Perhaps I merely set myself up for disappointment, thinking his words on the CCSE were genuine. However…

"Okay but, what if because everyone says he's a yank he finally snapped at something?" another whisper reaches my ears, causing me to follow those soldiers with my eyes.

A female foreigner shrugs, not caring to lower her voice. "It's his fault for attacking the guards. Even if the guy was right, now everyone is going to assume he's some violent jackass. He fucked up, and now he's gonna have to own up to it."

… I cannot deny that what seems to have transpired does not align for what I know Takeru to be. *No, wordplay means nothing in front of his actions* . However, if he did not have the intention to harm Tsukuyomi and apologizes, then perhaps all these whispers will be vanquished.

Yet, there is nothing to be done at the moment, and while not everyone is speaking of the matter, quite a few are the ones who grow silent when we approach them, their bodies relaxing oddly against a wall or their eyes evading our presence, only to restart the whispers as soon as we pass them by.

Yoroi has been deadly silent all this time, Tamase seems to be walking as if compulsed by some strings and barely paying attention. Sakaki and Ayamine both halt their steps when another aggravation echoed in the whispers, causing Tamase to run into them. Signs of ignition surface in their eyes, as if ready to take immediate action.

"Sakaki, Ayamine," taking a step forward, I shake my head slowly, "do not be foolish. Nothing we could say would aid this situation in the slightest."

"… Ain't that smart," Ayamine clicks her tongue.

"I am only keeping a level head at the moment, is all. Silence is our ally as of now."

"I agree, partially," Sakaki taps her glasses, taking a deep breath. "For now, let's just stay quiet."

"Cadets!" the Instructor shouts, arms folded and staring at us, "do not dally. You can talk at large in the changing room or during lunch."

"Apologies, Instructor," Sakaki quickly says, bowing down first and us following behind. "We were distracted by… a few foul words."

"Don't pay attention to the whispers, you still have the better part of the day ahead of you," she reminds us, never waning in her imposing aura. "We shall be told what transpired by tomorrow, so do not dwell on the matter. I know it might be a hard ask, but clamp your ears and do as you always do. This won't be the last time one of your squadmates becomes the talk of the base, these things happen for both good and ill motives," the Instructor then heaves a short sigh, shaking her head as she turns around. "Come on, we aren't that far from the changing area."

"Uh…" Tamase speaks up, taking a hesitant step forward, "Instructor, what are the chances that Shirogane-san is injured?"

Blinking for a moment, closing her eyes as she sends a hand to her hair, the Instructor's lips seem to retract ever slightly. "It all depends on how his machine got in that state in the first place. I believe he simply lost consciousness due to high G-Forces, possibly during one of those aerial charges of his. So the Gekishin collapsed to the ground then. I do not believe Shirogane is in any danger, he was wearing a fortified suit after all."

"I see…" her head lowers, both arms loosen and lay limp by her side.

"Please, don't be so distraught," 1st Lt Suzumiya says, giving a brief smile to Tamase. "Even if he received some minor injuries, I believe your squadmate will be fine. And don't worry about all the rumors, I'm sure he was not at fault either."

"Eh? How can you affirm that, 1st Lieutenant?"

She taps one of her cheeks as I stare at her and the others do so as well, a minute moment of hesitation before she gazes at the Instructor, who sighs and nods, so 1st Lt Suzumiya looks back towards us with a firm, serious expression. "Well, it's a simple matter. My captain was sent to take your squadmate to the medbay, immediately after the end of the battle. This is proof enough cadet Shirogane is not the cause of this incident. If there was any speck of doubt of this fact, then either the CO or the XO would have had the cadet taken to the questioning, even employing hypnotherapy were it necessary, to avoid any friction with the Royal Guard."

"So, they called the 1st Lt from the Guard just to know what had happened?" Sakaki asks, a finger on her chin as she looks my way, and I nod in thankfulness for having taken the question from me.

"I think so, yes. Of course, I don't know what actually happened, and since I never had the opportunity to even speak with your comrade I can't really give my opinion on all the rumors about him. But if someone was to blame for whatever happened, the cadet would have been taken to the interrogation room regardless of his state or all the guards would have been the ones called by the authorities. That's why," she then smiles, clasping her hands, "please don't worry, this truly seems to not have been anything other than an accident. If this had happened between you all, no one would be batting an eye at this. It's only making this much noise because you faced off against the Royal Guards."

"Which was a mistake to begin with," the Instructor adds in a low tone, a slight frown in her features which makes even 1st Lt Suzumiya twitch. "It was expected one of you would mishandle a TSF during your very first experience with live combat, it always

happens. There was no world in which you were put against the guards and didn't face a total defeat when your actual piloting hours are non-existent. I swear…"

"C-Come on, Instructor," 1st Lt Suzumiya waves both hands down, futilely trying to douse the mood of our teacher, "this was nothing but a chain of unfortunate situations."

She exhales from her nose, giving a nod, which makes the rest of us relax. "Let's just leave it at that, then."

She hastily turns on her heels and resumes her march towards the changing room. 1st Lt Suzumiya sighs while placing a hand on her neck, giving us a minute nod before we all resume our pats Tamase's shoulder, and the rest of us nod at her when she looks back. Me and Sakaki share a sigh, Ayamine simply starts walking with her gaze focused elsewhere. A few more whispers followed us, but the remaining distance wasn't large at all. Saluting 1st Lt Suzumiya before entering the room, as she seems to be finished in telling the Instructor what had transpired, for a moment there is nothing but the rustling of the plastic parts as they come off, of the pressure of the suit fading, the sound of the lockers being opened.

All in all, this battle wasn't entirely a negative experience. I did manage to trade blows with Tsukuyomi, even if she perhaps was holding back on me then. With enough effort, one day I will be worthy of crossing true strikes with her. Although, before I forget…

Barely placing her fingertips on her armor, sitting with her eyes transfixed onto the floor, movements far too slow, far too quiet. As if the smallest shift in posture had her pushing against bindings, as if trapped within a cage. And to an extent that might be right, the cage is merely what lies within her mind as of now.

Sitting besides her as I start to remove my leg armor, I hold her gaze when she seems to quiver. "Are you still mulling over the words they said during the battle?"

"… Yes," the words barely made it out of her lips, once more she compacts upon herself as if sinking into darkest depths. "Sorry, I didn't think they'd take that much offense at my presence."

"Do not apologize, Tamase. You made no miss, the trio simply… have far too much ardor in their hearts towards their duty. You are a fellow regardless of your choice not to chase after your title, and I am grateful for your aid during the battle. It is no jest to say you were splendid today," so I smile in earnest, holding the cracks in her eyes.

After a moment, she gives a minute bow, "Thanks, really."

"No, no. I should be the one thanking you for your covering fire." It is truly a shame this 'accident' took place. Otherwise, we would have been able to celebrate Tamase's performance, which I am loath to admit was superior to mine in the role she played.

"Yeah," Yoroi joins in from a side as she takes off her arm guards. "Miki-san was amazing today! I can't believe you actually shot one of them down."

"Actually, she scored two kills," I say, as I cross a leg over the other and start to remove the heel guard. "While it was a mutual knockout, I believe the fortitude you displayed then was marvelous."

"No… I was so scared," she says, her shoulders sinking as low as her tone. "My hands were shaking so badly, my vision grew blurry, all I could do was spam the trigger."

A firm pat to her shoulder, I nod her way when she looks up. "That means you did not freeze, Tamase. You acted through your fear, and that is an achievement you should be proud of. It was our very first mock battle, after all."

"Yeah, that's right," Yoroi nods, releasing her hand from the gloves, "I thought it'd be easy, to just shoot and all, but when they rushed at me I couldn't fire fast enough." She then looks down, the lone free hand resting on her chest. "It was nothing like when we spar with

Takeru and he comes at us, it was like a cold shiver ran through me and my mind went blank. Next thing I knew everything was shaking and the projection got turned off," she then sighs, raising the other hand to remove the armor. Yet, Yoroi makes a thumbs up with it and smiles at us, "So don't be so hard on yourself, Miki-san. You did great today."

"What did she do?" Ayamine asks, in the middle of releasing her bosom from the suit.

"Tamase managed to snipe one of our adversaries, and did not fall to fear when receiving fire at point blank," I say with a nod.

"Really?" Sakaki asks as she turns around, removing her shoulder guard.

"N-No… I just tried my best," she answers, looking down to resume her changing. As modest as always, I see.

"Still, way to go," Ayamine smiles, placing her arm guards on the locker and sitting down to deal with the lower end of the suit. "We couldn't even graze the ones we faced," she notes, a small purse of her lips.

"It was obvious, being against the Takemikazuchi," Sakaki shrugs, already slipping entirely out of the suit. "That we held out for so many minutes is a success in my eyes," she says as one finger once more spins in the air as her other hand retrieves her undergarments from the locker.

"I agree with Sakaki. While I believe they must have held back, your continued survival is a triumph in and of itself," I nod, removing my leg guards, then raise my feet to start taking off the plastic covering my body.

"… That was more thanks to Shirogane-kun, truth be told," she says, raising her legs to put her clothing on.

"Huh?" Tamase looks up, Yoroi and me also stare at her. "Sakaki-san, what did Shirogane-san do?"

"Kept us both in check," Ayamine says as she hastily puts on her tank top. "When they started shutting down our escape routes, he immediately got us close to each other."

"And then covered our flanks as always when we tried to retaliate," the finger still spinning, she enters a leg into her cargo pants. "Frankly, if they hadn't got Ayamine before you rejoined us, I think we might have had a chance to subdue the Takemikazuchi with all four of us working together."

"Well, it is a shame," I nod in agreement, pulling my arms out of the suit, folding it all and placing the plastic and each part in the right compartment. "By the by Ayamine, how were you shot down?"

"They tumbled me from afar as Special-kun retreated, and the Takemikazuchi got me before the shock countermeasure ceased," she says, shrugging with narrowed brows. "Nothing I could do, really."

"Same here," Sakaki sighs as she unfolds her tank top. "I did my best to try and limit the Takemikazuchi's movements, but it was a wasted effort. There was no way we could do anything against that TSF, piloted by an elite too. It's impressive you managed to snipe one of them, though," she nods towards Tamase, a minute smile as she taps her glasses. "I guess you truly are the ace of our original squad."

"I just did my best effort, and Mitsurugi-san and Yoroi-san also did a good job to facilitate that shot," she says, finally loosening her expression, finally gaining some impulse in her arms, dispelling what nested within even if for a moment.

"Still, you landed the shot. It shall be an honor to try and dodge your sniping in our coming battles, Tamase," I smile at her with vigor, before procuring my own tank top from the locker.

"No, on the contrary, I'll do my best to not disappoint," she says, nodding as her expression tightens, shimmering in resolve for a moment.

"Come on Miki-san," Yoroi gently slaps her shoulder, making Tamase squeal, "you clearly were our lifeline today. You fought very well, despite all the things they told you."

Sporting a smile and in an amicable tone as always, Yoroi nods as she sits down to tie her boots. The small retraction of her lips, how her hands fold towards her body tell Tamase is once more brooding over the matter. All my efforts to clear her mind wasted by Yoroi's unawareness. It is hard to believe she wouldn't have read the air, to go and once more mention that.

"What do you mean?" Ayamine asks, her fingers that were holding the string to tie her boots frozen in midair.

And now we have alerted them of it, to make matters worse. Siiigh… "As it were, the trio hurled some unpleasantries to Tamase while we sparred. They didn't hold their tongues and made mistaken claims, while Tamase kept an admirable composure and didn't retort even once," finishing with a nod her way, Tamase rubs her hands together as she raises towards her locker.

"I see, so that happened," Sakaki taps her glasses, closing her eyes momentarily. She then lightly overlaps her arms, looking at me and Yoroi. "Did anything happen then?"

"No, they just started insulting us a bit," Yoroi says, scratching her head. "I think they got mad because we outsmarted them and Miki-san shot down one of them."

"Perhaps, that is true," quickly nodding as I grab my boots, I cough as I continue. "Being bested by cadets surely was quite the strike to their pride as elites, so they decided to stop holding back for a moment. I do concede their words were most unproper, yet Tamase made the right choice by not reacting to them."

"Yes, even if I wouldn't have been able to retort in any capacity had I been in your shoes," Sakaki says, shrugging as she nods to Tamase, who remains silent as she gets changed.

"… So you say that when they get pissed off, the guards start spewing shit to their rivals?" Ayamine asks, voice rising as she slams her locker shut, a frown engraved into her features as she looks my way.

"I said no such thing," I answer in kind, crossing my arms. "The three we fought were merely… a bit too fervent in their devotion to their houses, so they see anyone turning their back to the IRG as a personal offense. They would have said the same to any Japanese in the UN, not only to Tamase."

"Yoroi, did they also talk shit to Mitsurugi?" She asks, Yoroi takes half a step back before shaking her head as she looks away in silence.

"Ayamine, what are you getting at?" Sakaki asks, taking a step forward despite not having her boots on.

She looks my way, grasping her chin, her lips shrinking as do her eyelids. "So the ones we fought against today would insult anyone who they see as a traitor?"

What is it with her? Why is she not letting this rest? Can't you see that lingering in this topic will only bring further unrest to Tamase? Yet, she does not lift her sight from mine. Her habitual poker face betrays her, lines of kindling lay in her eyes and forehead which foretell a small beginning of anger.

"… If provoked, perhaps. I do concede that they were at fault, Tamase did not deserve such strong worded opinions and we should praise her temperance."

"Yeah, that's true," Ayamine slowly walks up to Tamase, again petting her head as she did while she told us of the letters she sent

to her father. "You were very brave, Tamase."

"No, I just-"

"No ifs or buts," she enforces her petting, smiling briefly. "Good work." Yet, Ayamine turns to face once more, shifting back to the tight expression, to the combusting eyes. "So, do you think that if the guards got upset, they'd start talking shit about us, too?"

"Why are you asking me this, Ayamine?"

"Don't you think something like that happened with Special-kun?"

"Huh? Wait, are you… Are you saying the guards are behind the accident?"

"If he knocked out those two Shinpan we saw in the hanger, wouldn't the 1st Lt have a motive to be cross with him?" She asks, slowing down her tone, back to her usual frozen composure. "If the guards are known to snap towards those they don't like… I think there is no better match for someone like that than Special-kun."

"Ayamine, be serious," Sakaki sighs, sitting down to tie her boots. "They're elites that have saw many nights of battle. Do you really think they'd be so petty as to instigate a fight like that?"

"But they did that to Miki-san and me," Yoroi adds as she puts her jacket on, closing her locket. She immediately looks down as our sights cross, a hand hastily cradling the opposite arm. "I mean, maybe they said the same things to Takeru? Maybe that's why, I dunno, he got upset and tried his best to win?"

"I do not agree with that assessment. Takeru probably lost his composure on his own, proceeded to execute one of those aerial maneuvers of his, and failed to meet his target," I affirm, arms folding as I nod to myself. In no way would Tsukuyomi ever lower herself to such crude a conduct, she is certainly not at fault for whatever it is that transpired.

"And, why do you think this accident happened?" Ayamine asks, holding my gaze.

"… Again, he must have lost his temper in front of the 1st Lieutenant. Regardless of why, this is Takeru's miss."

"I wonder about that," she says, looking away.

"What are you trying to say, Ayamine?" I ask, binding my voice, not lifting my gaze from her as I stand up.

She returns my gaze, in silence for a moment. Before the traces grow roots, before she slowly shifts her posture away from me. "Maybe you're blaming the wrong person, don't you think?"

"What did you just say?"

"Come on, you two," Sakaki claps a few timesas she gets closer. "Let's not start raising our voices."

"My apologies." The last thing I want is to sow further discord in the squad. Let's just leave this be and-

"So you think Special-kun is to blame, is that it?" Ayamine says, shrugging.

"I said nothing of the sort!"

"But you said the guards can snap at those they don't like, and start talking shit about them too."

"1st Lt Tsukuyomi would *never* do something of the sort. The honorable members of the Imperial Royal Guard wouldn't lower themselves to such conduct. Take back those words, or else."

"Do you really believe that?" Ayamine asks, unmoving and unblinking.

"Yes, I do."

"Then, are the insults they said to Tamase part of their 'honorable' conduct?"

"Wha- T-That is not what we're talking about, do not switch the subject."

"Ayamine, Mitsurugi, stop it. Now," Sakaki orders, hitting a locker to try and break our gazes.

Yet, the one in front of me does not veer her eyes for but a second. "What about the mess in the hangar? Coming to badmouth a cadet that could be injured, shouting and trying to trample over a captain is 'honorable' conduct for you?"

"Stop trying to shift the conversation! It is not the same thing in the slightest, Tamase did nothing to deserve those ill words yet we don't know what Takeru did to cause such a reaction."

"Why?" A frail voice asks behind me, turning around I see Tamase's eyes cracking as her hands come together. "Why do you think Shirogane-san deserves what happened to him?"

"I did not say that! Stop putting words in my mouth."

"Enough!" Sakaki shouts, clapping again. "Mitsurugi, explain yourself in clear terms. Ayamine, do not interrupt her." She then holds Ayamine's gaze while tapping her glasses, until she nods and takes a step back.

I cough, clearing my throat and mind, licking my teeth as I ponder on my wording. "Well… First, I am not defending the words those three hurled towards Tamase. However, the source of their anger at the hangar was the unfair treatment to 1st Lt Tsukuyomi. And as I said before, I do not believe an elite like her would soil her honor by uttering similar insults towards Takeru."

"Are you sure about that?" Ayamine asks, rolling her eyes as she places both hands behind her head and leans on the locker.

"What are you insinuating?"

"We know those two Shinpan tried to hurt Special-kun during the CCSE, we saw how that same 1st Lieutenant you're defending reacted when Yoroi merely touched that Takemikazuchi," she notes while raising a few fingers, Yoroi looks down, away from me, as if trying to shrink in place. "And today they insulted Tamase without her provoking them at all. So, maybe, they also said something they shouldn't have to Special-kun and that made him lose his cool."

"How dare you speak such words… Take them back this instant or-"

"Mitsurugi, calm down!" Sakaki says, gripping and pulling at my shoulder.

"However, what has her casting such defamation towards 1st Lt Tsukuyomi? She would never employ crude insults, and even if one were to escape her lips, it is still Takeru's fault for reacting to it. Tamase here kept her composure throughout the battle, and he should have done the same."

"Sigh…" releasing my shoulder, she shakes her head. "Look, it's not that simple, Mitsurugi. We both know what kind of… trials Shirogane-kun had to endure, don't we?"

"Well… I am not saying he couldn't have motives to grow upset, but to the extent to crash his machine? What if his attack had connected? He was not thinking, and that makes this clearly Takeru's miss."

Tapping her glasses as she takes a step back, Sakaki licks her lips, hiding her hands in her pockets as she turns away from me. "I don't think it's fair to place all the blame on his shoulders. True, if he reacted aggressively he will be punished for it. However, if the guards' insults were what drove him to act, then I don't think they're exactly free of guilt. Plus, if they truly held no ill will towards Shirogane-kun and only grew upset in the heat of the moment, they wouldn't have screamed as they did in the hangar."

"I'm telling you, that was only because Tsukuyomi is not being treated fairly. If as you say the blame is shared, then Takeru should also be present in the questioning."

"And what if he's nauseous or unconscious?" Yoroi asks, slowly taking a step forward, stealing glances at us. "If he suffered a recoil from the G-Forces, he needs some rest. Maybe they were planning to question him once they confirmed he was in no danger, but the guards took it as him walking free from the battle?"

"I still believe taking him out of the cockpit would have quelled their questions."

"Mitsurugi, the guards can't do as they please in this base. Be reasonable, regardless of what happened in the mock battle their conduct in the hangar was not justified."

"… I disagree, they merely came seeking for answers and Cpt Isumi withheld them unnecessarily. If there were no culprits to this accident, taking him out of the Gekishin would have solved everything. Surely you're not going to say the guards would have tried to attack an unconscious or weakened cadet now, are you?"

"Dull the frown and tone down the anger, no one is insulting the IRG, Mitsurugi," Sakaki says, taking a step forward, crossing her gaze with mine. I nod in apology, sighing.

"Still, they didn't have to make such a ruckus," Ayamine says, one eye closed. "They started screaming, knowing Special-kun's reputation and using it to pin the blame on him. It's because of them that now we're gonna have to deal with more rumors again," she clicks her tongue, kicking back at the locker as she leaves it.

"Again with that? I find it odd that *you* of all people is saying such things, Ayamine."

One of her brows twitches, shortly after she frowns and coils both hands. "What?"

"M-Mitsurugi-san, please don't fight," Tamase asks, pleads as a hand of hers enters my peripheral vision, yet her feet remain molded to the ground, unable to put herself in between us.

"Kei-san, you too," Yoroi pulls at Ayamine's back, yet is shrugged off roughly as Ayamine takes a few steps towards me.

"What did you mean?" She asks, as low as always, the combustion she once only showed to Sakaki flourishing in my sight.

"It is odd, that you're so quick to ascertain Takeru's innocence when we know nothing of what transpired. Despite how you were the one who held doubts towards him for the longest time. Perhaps, do you hold some… reservations towards the IRG?"

"No, I admire them, actually."

"Eh? You do?"

"Yeah, my…" she looks down, biting her bottom lip as it folds inwards, "family used to look up to the values of the Royal Guard, the honor code they practiced. That's why, I believe the military has to do what it can for the people it protects. A warrior must not waver, for we are the shield which protects our present."

"Then, what has you-"

"They did not act like proper Imperial Guards, and you know it," she shoots out, once more frowning. "Not only today, during the CCSE too. So, all things considered, I don't think we should assume Special-kun is to blame. Since we know nothing, we can't point fingers at the guards, or at him."

"However, I am telling you 1st Lt Tsukuyomi would never resort to such crude approaches. I know she is not to blame for whatever happened. How can we know that Takeru wasn't the cause of this accident?"

Slowly, she looks at me, then at Sakaki. Closing her eyes, massaging her scalp, with a soft sigh the combustion ceases, parted open as the dawn sky. And in its place, narrow lips, sagging shoulders, a quiet whisper as if coming from underwater. "Because when he snapped at me, he didn't crash. He wasn't as aggressive as those guards claimed when we fought, and Shirogane was absolutely livid back then. Not once did he fail those aerial charges, despite how upset he was at me. And I think that… when I asked him if he was okay with what happened in the island, if he really was so aggressive, he was telling the truth." She looks up, straight into my eyes, not a single speck of hesitation or disquiet in her features or breathing. "Shirogane wouldn't resort to a maneuver that might harm someone, not during a mock battle. So I don't think he's the one to blame for this."

"Then, what are you getting at? Are you insinuating the Guards would fall so low as to damage a cadet in that way?" I immediately retort,paying no mind to whatever it is that's pulling my arm.

"Maybe they said something they shouldn't have, something that hit too close to home. Shirogane then got angry and attacked seriously, fighting as well as he did when he faced me and the leader. And these 'honorable' guards took it personally and crashed him into the concrete. And in a panic, maybe he tried to use the aerial move to escape, they shot at him like the leader did in our fight, and he spiraled to the ground and crashed."

"For you to have the gall to spout such defamation towards the IRG…"

"I'm not defaming anyone," she retorts, crossing her arms. "Shirogane was really messed up after our fight, so him getting hit doing one of his aerial acrobatics is the most likely cause of the state of his Gekishin."

"And, how does that equate Tsukuyomi insulting him, spurring him to such reckless methods?"

"Mitsurugi, for the last time, no one is offending-"

"No, she's clearly placing the responsibility on 1st Lt Tsukuyomi's shoulders."

"She was the experienced pilot, though. She should have known what could happen if she landed a hit while he's on the air," shrugging, rolling her eyes, she says.

"Takeru should not have engaged in that maneuver, period. If he did, perhaps he had other motives to grow upset at Tsukuyomi's words, since as I said before, she would never resort to insults." And if this is indeed what happened, if Tsukuyomi's words spurred such an aggressive reaction from you… *then, perhaps you truly were a spy all along.* While she truly is fearsome when angered, using crude insults is beneath Tsukuyomi.

"So it's all his fault, then?" Ayamine frowns, again shrugging off Yoroi as she tried to hold her arm, and now stumbles back at the force of Ayamine's swing. "Anything the 1st Lieutenant said was justified even if it was something personal for Shirogane?"

"Again, Tsukuyomi wouldn't employ insults of any kind. If she thought Takeru deserving of them, she would have swiftly knocked him out. So the one at fault is Takeru for losing his composure, his poise. Whatever it is she might have said, he chose to react aggressively. I believe it is clear this is his miss, as a cadet and as a warrior."

It is shameful, for a student of the Mugen Kidou to fall prey to such hostile impulses. Yet, this in itself is perhaps bountiful proof that he is no fellow of us. A properly trained warrior of our style would never allow such vicious desires to cloud their judgment. Unless, perhaps, his teacher had been insulted to his eyes.

Ayamine remains frowning, raising a brow when her teeth become visible. "And they spouting shit to our squadmate in front of the entire hangar is A-Okay in your eyes? They talking shit about Tamase is okay with you, then?"

"I am not saying anything of the sort, stop putting words in my mouth!"

"So? Answer the questions, Mitsurugi. If Tamase had snapped at the insults, would it also be her fault?"

"T-That's… different." Because she is under no suspicions, because those insults were born out of a too strong sense of duty.

Takeru, on the other hand, might be a spy. *No, this decision he took, how he refused my handshake of fellowship, this is proof enough he wasn't truly trained by a fellow of us. He isn't worthy of the Minaru Kamui, and truly might not be who he claims.* After all this time, after showing yourself to be such a capable warrior, such a wise fighter. Why did you have to hoist such wrath within? I truly… wanted you to become one of us, to show them you had been truthful. Was all you have told me thus far nothing but lies? Those sparking eyes when speaking of that woman… did not seem to be lying, however…

"It isn't different at all," Ayamine says, clicking her lips and looking away. "You're just taking it out on Shirogane because you can't accept that a guard you admire might have acted out of line."

"… Take back those words."

"Make me."

"You two, this is enough!" Sakaki shouts, shoving me back and pushing Ayamine away, placing a hand on her chest. "What the hell do you think you're doing?!"

"She's insulting one of my fellows, I shan't allow such disrespect!"

"Shame you don't get this riled up when one of us gets shitfrom others," she says, slicing the air as she takes a step back from Sakaki's hand.

"What are you saying? Stop comparing Tamase to-"

"And what about me?"

"Huh?"

"Yeah. What about when people talked shit about me? Don't remember you getting this angry."

"I… I already apologized for that. Furthermore, it has little to do with-
"

"It's exactly the same," she scowls, looking away as she thrust both hands in her pockets. "You're choosing to preemptively put the blame on someone who you don't trust, despite what they do to earn your companionship."

"I… That's not what's going on here at all! Tsukuyomi wouldn't allow such an accident to occur, so this was clearly… caused by Takeru's own actions," and because if Tsukuyomi chose to act, it means he is not to be trusted.

"Well, congrats on being an asshole."

"Ayamine, stop it," Sakaki says, giving both of us a sharp gaze. "You two, apologize to the other. You're getting dragged in the heat of the moment, I'm sure."

"I'm not apologizing," Ayamine immediately retorts, causing the other three to flinch, petrified on the spot. "I already gave Shirogane plenty of shit, and I don't believe he's to blame. I know very well how it feels, to be followed by whispers and side glances. And I thought we all had seen who he is, what kind of guy he is after all this time." She then looks at me, then spits on the ground. "I expected more out of you, Mitsurugi."

"What did you say? It is clear all he said thus far wasn't truthful, if he chose to endow in such violence!"

"Even if he was provoked?"

"He was not!"

"You don't know that."

"The Royal Guard would never-"

"They still insulted Tamase, one of your comrades. It's the same thing."

"Kei-san, please stop!" She tries to hold onto Ayamine's arm, who starts struggling to break free.

"I'm just saying what's going on here. Mitsurugi is in denial that the Lieutenant might have screwed up."

"You… take those words back this instant. Say whatever you wish about me, however I shan't allow you to tarnish the name of my teacher!"

"Mitsurugi-san, no!" Tamase steps in front of me, grabbing my sides, as Sakaki holds onto one of my arms. "Calm down, please!"

"You yourself said losing one's composure is a bad trait, so get yourself together," Sakaki pulls at me, groaning for a moment.

"See?" Ayamine smirks, chuckling. "Maybe Special-kun was just as you are now, but no one was there to stop him. You, someone trained to be a warrior, almost lost your cool."

"Eh? N-No… Do not try to justify his actions!"

"And what if they said something that hurt him much, something about someone dear to him, and he got as upset as you?"

"Even then-"

"What if that was someone from America? After all…" she then looks down and sighs, the restrained arm growing limp in Yoroi's hold, "we

also treated Shirogane as if he were a piece of shit solely because he came from abroad, right?"

"That's… however… Even if that was the case," even if the woman he admires so had been insulted from his point of view, "he should not have reacted aggressively."

"Says the one who was about to ram her fist on my face," she then shrugs.

"Ayamine, enough of this!" Sakaki lets go of my arm, and again stands in between us. "Mitsurugi, you too. I don't want to hear anything else from you two. The Instructor is outside the room, what are we gonna tell her if she enters now?"

"That Ayamine should apologize and retract her insults on 1st Lt Tsukuyomi."

"And that Mitsurugi doesn't give a shit about us getting screwed over by royal guards."

"I never said anything-"

"Stop fighting!" Sakaki screams, truly loudly, from the pit of her stomach. Hands shaking for a moment, all the composure she hoisted starts to crumble in slow motion. In a mere second, the combustion and ripples surfaced in her. "Ayamine, I don't want to hear a single word about this for the rest of the day. I understand the particular issues you have with the way Mitsurugi worded her thoughts, but that doesn't mean she doesn't care about Shirogane-kun. Apologize, now."

Shifting her posture, her eyes don't meet mine. Barely moving her lips, she gives me a brief nod. "Sorry, I got carried away."

"Mitsurugi, you too," Sakaki says, tapping her glasses as she stares.

So I sigh, a void now filling me, something constricting my throat. "My apologies, I shouldn't have grown upset at you," I give her a bow, then run a hand into my hair as the air enters and leaves me in short succession, failing to douse the pressure which now is engraved in my chest.

"Listen, all of you," Sakaki says, pacing in front of us, "at some point, this was bound to happen. When we get commissioned, this kind of issues will arise at times. And while I won't add further opinions to this debate now, let me say this. Mitsurugi, for your own good, you shouldn't take a side so openly."

"What? How could I not? Defending my fellows is-"

"Because you're UN as of now," she says, drawing circles in the air. "You can feel however you wish within, but defending the guards like that will make others think you're blaming your squadmates and taking their side, as Ayamine did. Could you bring yourself to trust in someone who chooses someone from another squad over you?"

"However, that is not-"

"It's how it will look. I know you have…" she closes her eyes and sighs heavily, crossing her arms lightly, "particular circumstances, but Ayamine is right to some degree. We don't know what happened, and you assuming that Shirogane-kun was in the wrong solely based on your own ties with the 1st Lieutenant is a mistake. Not only because of the issues that causes in the squad, but think about your own career. UN soldiers cannot take sides, they must stay neutral."

"Tsukuyomi did nothing wrong, I am certain of it. Believe me when I say this, she wouldn't break her honor by causing such an accident."

"But we don't know that, do we?" Ayamine asks, I glare at her in silence. "The honor code says you can't act on emotion, right?"

"Yes, it does. So, it is clear Takeru was the one-"

"And what are you doing now?"

"Kei-san, please stop," Yoroi asks as she frowns for a second, Ayamine simply shrugs.

"She does have a point, Mitsurugi almost fell to Ayamine's taunts," Sakaki notes, tapping her glasses.

"… Only due to her foul wordplay," I say, looking away.

"And, as Ayamine said, what if that's what made Shirogane-kun react badly?"

"Well… but Tsukuyomi wouldn't-"

"That's what you shouldn't do," she shrugs, again drawing circles on the air later. "Even how you spoke up at the hangar, you should know how risky that is. The same goes for your taunts, Ayamine." She nods back, despite how her eyes are fixated away from Sakaki. "In any case, let's believe in what Shirogane-kun has shown himself to be, that this truly was nothing but an accident with no one as the culprit, and wait for whatever we're told about this. And of course, no arguing. As soon as we leave this room, we're going to have a multitude of eyes on us after all."

And whose fault that is? Had he simply surrendered, nothing would have happened. While perhaps there is a chance of him truly not being, well, a spy, I do not believe Tsukuyomi could have fallen to insults or reckless aggression. And perhaps… I can understand how could he have been angered, considering what he told me during the CCSE, and all that he has shown in his features when talking of his blade or that woman. But then, what could Tsukuyomi have said that would cause you to react so?

"Alright, are you two calm again?" Sakaki asks, I nod back while Ayamine shrugs once more. "Well, let's hope the Instructor doesn't demand an explanation for the screams. Come on, let's go," and turning around, she goes to the door.

Tamase hurries to tie her boots, Ayamine quickly walks past me without even looking my way, and Yoroi slowly follows. As we exit, the Instructor was standing in front of the door, silently gazing at us. Her chin raised, eyes narrowed, simply holding her gaze resembles standing bare amidst a storm, enduring the pouring rain.

"… You had a little chat in there, looks like," she says, looking at me, then at Ayamine. Both brows gradually come down as she stands upright, "Mitsurugi, Ayamine, five laps before you go to the PX."

"Yes, ma'am!"

"Now, as you know, you have lectures on the afternoon in the usual classroom. Considering what has happened, you may have an extra hour of rest. I expect you all to be present at 1500 hours."

"Understood!"

"That is all, you're dismissed."

"Salute!" Sakaki orders as usual, and so we do.

Yet, as I turn to leave, the Instructor waves a hand towards me, "You stay here, I have something to speak with you."

"Yes, ma'am."

The others seem to stare for a moment, before I nod their way and all of them start walking towards the PX, save for Ayamine who I suppose will have to go to the track field. Turning back to face her, the Instructor stood as before, scanning my face in the silence of the hallway.

And the seconds pass, her expression remaining immutable as a mountain under hail. Not lifting her stare from my eyes, not parting the thin line her lips have become, it makes me gulp, feel it going down to my stomach, a slow tension on my back, a minute quiver on my ankles.

Placing a hand on her chin, she leans just slightly forward, "Mitsurugi, where are we?"

"Huh?"

"Where are we? What is this building we're in right now?"

"… Yokohama Base, a UN-affiliated military complex stationed in lands once lost to the BETA."

"That's right. This is a base that belongs to the UN's military. You are here as a cadet, being trained under the UN's logo." Her eyes narrow further, as if focusing all her attention, all her volleys upon mine own eyes. "And if I followed the UN code to the letter, you would have to be sent to be Shirogane's new roommate in the detention barracks."

"What? But I haven't done anything to deserve such a thing."

Slowly, a hand raises to my eyes. Slower, she moves her fingers up. "Instigation of discord and unrest in your squadron, repeated declarations in favor of an external party, and your prior disobedience in the hangar by speaking against Cpt Isumi's orders, to defend an external party as well."

"Wait a moment, I wasn't-"

"Silence, I am speaking," she reminds, before shaking her head and sighing again. "Look Mitsurugi, believe me when I tell you 1st Lt Suzumiya was right. This truly was nothing more than a chain of unfortunate events. If I hadn't been given some last minute orders, this wouldn't have happened." She then takes a step back, reverting to her usual stoic but neutral complexion. "I won't comment on your discussion, you're free to believe what you will. However, as much as you'd want to, you cannot openly take the side of the Royal Guard. You're UN now, and we cannot take any political position or say anything that might hint at that being the case."

"However, I was merely stating my opinion. I do not believe 1st Lt Tsukuyomi to be at fault."

"And I'm not reproaching your opinion. However, as your comrades asked you, why do you refuse the chance that Shirogane was angered as Ayamine caused you to be?"

… Because he might be a spy, an enemy to my people. Because he lied to me, because all he told me, all that he has shown himself to be would be nothing but a fabrication atop clouds. And I know Tsukuyomi wouldn't do anything to spur such aggression. And as much as I'd wish to believe he truly is who he claims, I cannot ignore the facts that lay before me. *Wordplay means little in front of one's choices and actions,* and today Takeru chose violence.

So I can only shrink my lips, press my hands and lower my gaze, for I have no answer to give.

"Do you still resent Shirogane for coming from abroad?" She asks, starting to cross her arms.

"No, I do not."

"Then, do you truly believe Shirogane used one of those charges against the guards?"

"… The state of his Gekishin should be proof enough. I know not what transpired, however I am a servant of this nation in my heart. Regardless of the uniform I am made to wear, I cannot simply accept that Takeru holds no responsibility for his actions. Even if he held no hostile intentions, now we shall be followed by further whispers and rumors. Thus, I am of the opinion that to forget that fact is a mistake, and that cadet Shirogane should apologize in public to the guards to vanquish all these rumors."

"And, why should he be the one to apologize?"

"Because he chose to use one of those aerial maneuvers, despite the risk they hold. He should have surrendered instead."

"So, even if he used defensively, to escape from the offense of his rival, he is still at fault?"

"That's assuming he-"

"Oh, and what you're doing is not assuming Shirogane is the sole reason behind this accident?" She asks, leaning forward with a frown.

"I am only…" disappointed. Tsukuyomi wouldn't have pressed her advantage, so the crash his machine had to suffer was due to Takeru's own actions. Even if he isn't a spy, I thought you'd be better than this, to resort to such aggression in front of Tsukuyomi when I myself found another way to face her minutes before you. Because, if neither are to blame, and Tsukuyomi's words caused you to become so upset… the only thing I can think of that would cause such a reaction on you-

"Mitsurugi," she pats my shoulder, expression stoic and firm as the mountain she always resembles, "you can believe in 1st Lt Tsukuyomi as much as you want, but using that to shift the blame onto a comrade is not right. If you… well, weren't you, if anyone else were to voice such opinions in defense of the IRG, they would eat a week in the detention barracks for breaking their oath."

"But I'm not taking a political position in the slightest. I am merely stating my opinion, and during a small debate because I was asked for it. I am not forcing my views on anyone, ma'am."

"Defending the IRG is taking their side, when you should be staying neutral since you know nothing of what transpired. All this accomplishes is either cause people to grow upset at you, and at the guards, or for them to take their side against Shirogane, one of your comrades." She sighs again, shorter and heavier this time, as she plays with her hair for a moment. "Do you remember what happened

at the end of the CCSE, how you had no proof to defend your supposed injuries?" I nod, plucking my lips at the memory. "Well, this is the same. No one has proof to claim what has happened, not you, not me, not that trio of guards. So you should stay quiet and wait for the official resolution. And again, taking actions that could be interpreted as you taking a political position may either get you in the detention barracks, or kicked out of the army if you do so multiple times."

"… I understand, ma'am," I nod, barely moving my lips as they form a small circle, eyelids almost closing and avoiding her eyes.

"Do you? Acting in a way that may suggest you're discriminating Shirogane, or approaching the guards at any time, could be used as an excuse to punish you."

"Yes, I am aware."

"Then, can you explain why do you so vehemently refuse to accept that Shirogane may not deserve any blame?"

…

"Where is your answer, cadet?" Taking a step forward, raising her voice just slightly.

"I already gave you my answer, Instructor, ma'am."

Bringing a hand to her forehead, she shakes her head. Rubbing the space in between her brows, eyes squinting and making the redness under them become rugged, she then, once again, heaves a sigh. "You say that your actions are driven by your vision that you are a servant of the Empire?"

"Yes, ma'am. I know it might be problematic for me, yet I do see me as a servant of this land first and foremost."

"Fair enough. Then, what kind of servant are you, Mitsurugi?"

"… What?"

Gradually, her composed yet stern features turn tight, lips twist and eyes ignite again. "Are you merely upset after seeing someone close to you be accused of this accident? Or, perhaps, are you one of those who views all who don't follow your honor code of conduct as enemies?"

Feeling my own complexion growing rough, I lick my lips to halt the aggravations that almost blasted away from them when in front of Ayamine. Taking a deep breath, dousing the disquiet in my stomach and fists, I merely shake my head as I return her gaze. "I hoist my values close to my heart. The honor code has much worth for us soldiers, so I do expect others to at least follow its core teachings in certain ways. And, yes, perhaps I am… disappointed, slightly upset even, at this turn of events."

"Even if you do not yet know what transpired?"

"I have no confirmation, but neither do I have doubts. While the trio have acted shamefully, 1st Lt Tsukuyomi would never do so. And as a fellow servant of this Empire of ours, I cannot simply look with good eyes at what cadet Shirogane has done. Wordplay means little in front of the facts that are in front of us, in front of the actions Shirogane took instead of surrendering."

"So, you're one of those who would immediately scorn others for straying from your code, I see." She shakes her head, my palms again receive the pike of my nails as I force the silence. "Yet, you're now on the UN. And you swore to uphold the code of the oath you gave. Surely, you can see the issues that would arise if you continue to act in this way?"

"I believe all this friction has been caused by Shirogane's mistake, ma'am. You have nothing to concern yourself with, Instructor. I have no plans to break the oath I took when enlisting here." Nor do I plan to forsake my morals just because I wear another color.

"I see," she holds my gaze, nodding after a moment. "I do expect you to remain composed, even after Shirogane rejoins you all. I don't want a return to the days before the CCSE, are we clear?"

"Yes, ma'am!"

"Good. Now, since we're on the subject…" she looks around, over her shoulder and behind me, and then takes a step closer as she inhales deeply, "I would like to confirm something with you. Mitsurugi, you said you're a servant first and foremost?" I nod immediately. She remains gazing at me, her lips contracting inwards as she grasps her chin. "Is that so. So, are you one of those who treats the honor code as gospel?Will you, if you allow the wording, despair after you perish?"

"… I have a duty and an obligation to dedicate my very being to my people, Instructor. While I do not treat my teachings as unbreakable facts, I do endeavor to practice the lessons imparted to me. Which is why, I cannot condone cadet Shirogane's outburst, justified or not."

Her expression remains neutral, watching me, so I cough and continue.

"He was who acted aggressively first, he fell to anger and emotion. I do not believe the guards would lie on this matter, and it is not a political view but a personal assessment. 1st Lt Tsukuyomi is not the kind of person who would drive a cadet to such a crash. Yet, Shirogane has shown that, at times, he chooses violence as his out regardless of the regret it leaves in him afterwards. Shirogane himself has endangered the UN's relation with the IRG with his choices, when it was time for action and not words, he acted in violence towards his opponent, or in a way that forced her to shoot him down hastily."

"And, could you now elaborate on how could your comrade be innocent?"

"Forgive me if I cannot find motives to defend him, but I expected more from Shirogane. And I am judging him as I would anyone else, especially considering Tamase suffered much from the unpleasantries hurled her way yet did not chose such aggression as the answer."

And again, for a moment she merely looks at me. Sighing heavily, a long exhalation which reaches me despite the distance, she ruffles her hair as she simply stares at me in silence.

"I see," she finally says, almost drowned when compared to her prior tone, That's enough, then. Go do your laps, and do not disclose anything to your… contacts. For your and their own good."

"Understood!" I salute her, standing in attention.

"Also, you'd be wise to not make such rash judgments, Mitsurugi. Sometimes, there is no one to blame for an accident. And looking for a scapegoat to pin the blame on is not a wise thing to do, much less to one of your comrades."

"I stand by my words, Instructor. If Shirogane truly is free of guilt, we shall know shortly. And if he is, I will hold nothing against him provided he can explain, I will endeavor not to let my personal opinions cause the squadron any further setbacks. My apologies for having taken your time, I'll be more tactful from now onward."

"Good. That's all, dismissed," she then waves a hand in the air, almost apathetically, then turns around and starts to leave, in that same slow fashion, as if suddenly out of energy.

"Instructor, if you'd allow me a final word?"

"What is it?" She turns around, brushing some hair aside.

"Regarding your question of what kind of servant I am…"

"Yes?"

I fold my arms, my lips compact, press upon one another, and feel the void in my stomach and the vicegrip on my throat ease up as my voice flows from that pit. "I do believe that despair does not belong with the living. I know not what kind of preconceptions you hold, yet I believe it is a fine mindset to have. To never falter in one's actions is a praiseworthy quality, in my opinion."

As such, for one like me who aims to be a blade of my people, the protective shadow of Her Highness, to despair after I perish ensures every waking second is free of fear and dread. If I aim to be a sword which smites evil from its root, fortifying my mind with such resolve is required. And in any case, anyone who has to take arms against the BETA should endeavor to follow this teaching, to not fall to fear in one's final moments.

The Instructor's eyes narrow for a moment, yet she licks her lips and folds her arms, merely nodding in silence. "I see. It is admirable, if you can bring yourself to follow through that teaching. Just make sure you don't lose your way amidst the words of that code."

"What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said, and nothing more."

"Are you… implying there is a mistake in this view?"

"No, not per se. But it's just as what happened in the changing room, Mitsurugi." Looking back at me, there is no roughness nor imposing tint in her glare. Her features are relaxed, composed yet without that thread of anger that always lurked just below the surface, barely visible but visible nonetheless. "You saw how those three acted in the hangar, and apparently they said some harmful words towards Tamase, right?" I nod, hanging my head. "So, you're free to follow your code so long as you're smart about it. But make sure you don't let it drive others away from you, starting with this issue with Shirogane. Am I clear?"

"Yes, ma'am. However, may I ask why do you think so of that line? Did you have an unpleasant experience with a Royal Guard?"

A sudden frown, a retraction of her lower lip, and in the stillness of her eyes it was as if a shadow created ripples, lurking in the depths. She sighs, and shakes her head again. "Unpleasant doesn't even begin to describe it. All I'm saying is, do not let that code be the sole anchor of your life. I met others who had a code ingrained in their heads, and when that's all you fight for," her gaze falls, for the first time since I've met her, as her fists shake momentarily, "it doesn't take long until you either break or radicalize yourself."

"What… What do you speak of?" I do not understand. How could it be seen as a negative thing, to be brave in front of calamity, to keep one's own inner shadows at bay?

"Just try to not rely too much on any code, starting with not shunning out Shirogane from now on. Go do your laps, or you'll miss lunch in the PX," she orders, giving me a nod which signals she is done, and thus turns around and hurriedly walks away in the opposite direction.

And now, I am alone with the silence. Sighing, I turn around and make my way to the track field. Mulling on her words, on what happened in the hangar, before the battle… and all that transpired between the CCSE and now. Not shunning Takeru out… Yet, is there a way in which he didn't cause this accident? Or, perhaps, did Tsukuyomi truly make a miss?

…

*That is, assuming he truly wasn't injured. He could be in pain at the moment, and here I am casting doubt on his person.* And I cannot ask for immediate answers, and thanks to my prior miss I should not approach Tsukuyomi, lest I give reason to the Instructor to believe I am taking political actions. I would like to believe in you, yet… why did you refuse my handshake? Why did you end up crashing down in such a way? You truly haven't lied to me, right Takeru? You truly are not a spy, a faker, right? You merely grew upset, and you made

mistake, it's true, but so long as you've been truthful there should be nothing you should fear. Ayamine is right to a degree, if Takeru properly apologizes and sees the error of his choice, then we shall support him through these whispers as we have been doing since our return from the island.

But, if he endow in violence towards Tsukuyomi, and he truly is who he says he is… And if you grew upset at one of Tsukuyomi's comment, and she was forced to shoot you down when in front of your eccentric patterns…

"Does that mean she spoke ill of that woman to you?"

I cannot reach any other conclusion. It is true, Takeru hasn't been particularly easy to anger. And even then, Ayamine spoke the truth. He didn't endow in such aggression when dueling her and Sakaki. So to push him even further into anger, all I can think of is Tsukuyomi unknowingly saying something Takeru took as an insult to the one who gave him the Minaru Kamui.

Well, I already knew he cherishes that person much. Yes, his expressions were always quite… radiant whenever recalling whoever she was. So, yes, it is understandable he would lose his temper if he believed Tsukuyomi to be insulting his…

*… His what?*

Light peers through the windows, filling the hallway as I walk through it. Shortly after, I reach the track field's area, seeing Ayamine running from my position.

Grabbing the bars that open the door, my hands merely remain on them without clearing the way. "… So you favor that person to such lengths, to grow so adusted when her name is insulted. For her to have told you of the handguard… Sigh."

At this point, I would prefer you turn out to be an enemy. If only to clearly dispel this pressure on the base of my neck, on my chest, to

clear this awful taste in my mouth. If only, to truly be disappointed in you. To not have to measure up against whoever has your heart captive at the moment, whoever it was that caused you to decide to face off Tsukuyomi with all your might, when even I held doubt and fear in front of her strikes.

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*A/N: I decided to try and separate the would be chapter 70 . Originally, this was going to be the starting PoV of chapter 70 but the word count was again shooting past 4 0k words so I split it up in three parts since I didn't felt like omitting anything from this one .*

*Now, a long optional note for the current chapter. This will turn into a long textwall about Meiya and some personal impressions of canon content , so feel free to skip it if you'd like.*

*Much like how the prior arc dealt with Tama' s , Kei' s and Chizuru's issues while stuff brew up, the following half of the Paranoia Arc after chapter 7 7 will instead focus on the other two members of the team, Meiya and Mikoto. For Mikoto there is not much to say just yet, but I want to explain some things about the blue samurai.*

*If you recall, during her arc in Unlimited, Meiya was not punished for her actions which ended up with the crashe d Fubuki after the eruption . We know from Mana's visit to Takeru while he was in the cell that Meiya was sent to a hospital, but, when he is freed from the punishment, Takeru is the only one getting released from the detention barracks . E veryone then come s to greet him as Marimo brings him to the barracks and later on in the PX the girls do say that they missed him as they idled the time . This implies that Meiya did not suffer the same repercussion s for her actions as Takeru , almost certainly due to her royal blood , and chances are she didn't receive more than a reprimand and he was made to bear the brunt of the blame, her being the twin of the Shogun and all .*

*And we know for a fact that Meiya doesn't change the stance she took during the eruption , in an equal situation she would put her ideals above common sense or reasoning. This is clearly shown in*

*the next talk with Kyozuka-san, and it's just the way she is. And the only time when she doesn't, the only time we ever see BETAverse Meiya waver on her ideals is during the epilogue, where even if she isn't Takeru's lover she still gives him the pass for the migrant fleet instead of safeguarding her traditions by being the Empire's representative in the fleet .*

*In Alternative, the coup is one of her crowning character-defining moments and she remains as a guiding light throughout the rest of the story . But Meiya never grows, nor are her views put to the tes t . All the contrary, in my opinion the coup only strengthens her views. While in Extra, Meiya tries at one point to change herself to suit Takeru's life, when he says she could never understand what it is to have to make dinner from leftovers, and later on she tries to cook something for him, confronts him in the cave, and eventually does accept him in her route's ending as opposed to submitting to the imposition of the arranged marriage. Extra's Meiya does change and defies the rules she was raised to uphold , even if only a bit, by marrying Takeru and not become nothing but another Mitsurugi in charge of the group .*

*Alt!Meiya does not learn much from her interactions with Keru by comparison, she doesn't think twice when trying to impose her own code on Takeru when he was cracked after Marimo's death despite seeing how he was, nor does she face a character-defining choice as she does in Unlimited's epilogue . And while her confession in her last moments is impactful, part of me still believes those feelings were ignited more by causality and the memories Extra Meiya forgot than by genuine feelings born in Alt!Meiya. Otherwise, she'd have given him space after Marimo's death as she did right before the Chomp scene. Though, that just might be my own take on it.*

*So, the point of this wall of text is that I want to give Meiya a challenge. For any surviving readers from the very first rendition of this story , this is the main motive behind the ultra nationalistic themes set in Reversal and why Meiya has been quite obnoxious with her code . To have the twins have their precious honor code*

*challenged and grow from it, or not. Meiya's ideals being put into question, having her do some introspection on her application of her moral code, and eventually acting on her final decision is what her mini-arc will be about leading up to Komoro .*

*After all, as a wise old woman once said, to believe in an ideal is to be willing to betray it. If you wish to understand the values of the code, then you need the contrast.*

*To put it simply, I'm taking inspiration from both Atris and the Handmaiden from Kotor 2 for Meiya's arc. Or at least, that's the idea. I know the story may come out as me bashing the Empire and Meiya, but I'm just using the nationalistic vibes Kouki se t in Alternative and trying to put them into question so that the twins can face conflict and either accept or refuse the contrast.*

*There is a two-hour long video in YT that I always go back to when writing th e s e themes, called ' The Philosophy of Kreia', which I recommend for anyone who would want to put such a conflict in a story focused on the Imperial Royal Guard. The video does spoil the entirety of Kotor 2, and I do recommend to play that GOAT of a game to experience its greatness firsthand instead as it has one of the characters that gives Yuuko a run for her money, in my humble opinion .*

*Well, this has been more than enough of my ramblings. Thanks for reading. Stay safe.*

*Zuoriel*

# Rumbling Hearts (II)

*Chapter 71:*

**Rumb ling Hea rts (II)**

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*December 3rd. 12:28 A M.*

*(Yokohama Base, B5F. Near the infirmary.)*

**[Mana]**

---

"Again, I had ordered them to remain in standby in their rooms. They acted on their own, and I apologize for their actions against you, captain," I give a small bow to the crimson-haired captain, who merely nods to acknowledge the words.

"In the name of the Imperial Royal Guard, I also apologize for my fellows' actions," Daizaburou-sama also gives her a small bow. "We truly are not wishing to clash with any of you."

"That does little to mend the repercussions that the actions of your underlings will cause," Vice Commander Kouzuki says, the immutable ice wall undisturbed. "Under normal circumstances, this would fall into a clear case of aggression towards UN personnel."

"Wait a moment, we aren't-"

"I know, and I'm not planning on going that route," she then narrows her eyes, resting a few fingers on her chin, "if you cooperate with the questions."

All I can do is nod, tighten a fist, briefly gaze at the door to the medbay where Takeru-sama now lays resting. To think they'd go as

far as prevent us from being near when he was brought in, as if we would do anything to an unconscious adversary.

In the silence of the hallway, me and Daizaburou-sama share a gaze, the consternation miring our eyes. Regardless of how this talk is resolved, if nothing is done then Takeru-sama might once more grow as adusted as he was during our darkest days. And as if this wasn't dire enough, those three idiots had to go and cause such an argument in the hangar. I should have had everyone under the cousins' watch.

… To make matters worse, he didn't even listen to me during the last moments of the fight. I had thought Maya to be jesting, that she was exaggerating the matter in her ire. I believed Raiko-sama to be lying when she said she was unable to do little against his true wrath, that she was using your anger at the cruelty of war to further her own interests. And I thought you, the shadow you had become, was simply lashing out against those who you believed were at fault for our repeated defeats.

Yet, it is entirely different. To be the recipient of your strikes than to watch them from afar.

A candlelight burning, crumbling everything around it. Tearing the UV, the sheets, the bindings as if a tornado he had become, shrieking in rage, burning and burning. Only to suffocate, be thrown into a trench, buried deep beyond the sea, away from any and all light. The only remnant of you, a small bubble of your final exhalation which will soon dissipate amidst the waves.

I know not what made you react so aggressively today, despite my careless words towards your feelings about your parents' situation now that you lack context. But if we do nothing, again…

The XO shakes her head, the blonde foreigner that stood behind her whispering something. Which causes the fox to slightly frown, then sigh. "Tell her I've no words at the moment, to proceed with the afternoon lecture as always." After shaking her head, she clears her

throat and faces us once more. "Now then, let's take a moment to note what we know happened. Isumi, if you would."

The captain nods and takes a step forward, another perfect poker face in her complexion. "Throughout the battle, there were signs that your units repeatedly engaged a private frequency that we couldn't tune in. And not just a standard private connection, but a more elaborate one at that. Our recordings do not have the audio of your line, only the answers Shirogane and Mitsurugi gave you as you platicated. That in itself would be enough to suspect something is off with this mock battle," she notes, casting shadows and doubts our way.

"While I admit it is fair for you to cast doubts and punishment of our shoulders for this," Daizaburou-sama slowly begins, folding both hands behind his back, "we were aiming to share some words in private with Mitsurugi during the fight. Regarding Shirogane, we decided to try and offer our aid once more, now that perhaps the high emotion of yesterday's meeting had passed."

The captain seems perplexed, a slow raise of a brow when sending a gaze to the fox. Upon the burning coldness of the stare, the captain coughs as she rummages through her hair. "Still, I believe you'll agree that your interactions with the cadet are what caused him to become unstable to the point of requiring the sedatives."

"If you'll excuse me," narrowing my eyes, my lips and wording, "if you examine his logs, I am certain you will come to the conclusion that it was the sedatives which caused the cadet to go on a nervous rampage. He was pained after our exchanges, I shan't deny it, yet it was the dosage of sedatives applied to him what sent him into shock."

"Oh, really?" Kouzuki shrugs, daring to even chuckle dryly for a moment. "Yet, the sedatives would not have been required should you have followed the standard procedures for this battle. If you hadn't spoken to Shirogane, nothing would have occurred. Which, let me remind you, you did by employing a private frequency, a method

that is forbidden and very much punishable by our code," she threatens, raising her chin as if trying to tower over us.

Daizaburou-sama taps my forearm, shaking his head, so I sigh and inhale deep, deeper until I have to exhale while he clears his throat. "Again, we had no malicious intent, Vice Commander. While I understand inquiries are required, we only employed this method to avoid any sensitive intel from being left in the air. As you know and requested of us yesterday, the cadet's situation is a rather… delicate one."

The captain hints a frown for a moment, as if she were offended, perhaps concerned at the words. Seeing the little care she had when applying the sedatives to you, I believe the woman might not have a particularly positive view of you, Takeru. And while the concerns over us using a private frequency are understandable, there is no denying the one who caused you the most suffering was this crimson haired woman, who isn't even going to receive a reprimand at all, I'm sure.

The fox doesn't even react, merely overlaps her arms, not even a faint ripple in her composure. Truly, frozen to her very heart, frost running through her veins. "I believe both me and my protegee had asked you to keep your distance yesterday," she says, still daring to insist on that wording when referring to you, still steadfast in her opposition. "While I know cadet Shirogane could have come across as being too obstinate during the meeting, you did not respect the agreement we made. I believe you'll agree it was due to his interactions with you Royal Guards that Shirogane ended up suffering a nervous breakdown, sedatives notwithstanding."

"Pardon?" Acid constricts my throat, its base and pit, and I cannot help but to frown. "How could our words be weight the same as the sedatives? Before the dosage of drugs, cadet Shirogane was pained, yes, but in no form would he have fallen into blind violence. It was the application of the sedatives what tipped the scales."

The captain takes half a step forward, her lips beginning to part, yet the XO taps her shoulder and shakes her head. Brushing her hair,

she remains immutable as a perfect wall. "Had you not spoken, the drugs wouldn't have been necessary. It was a chain reaction, from which you're the origin point. And while I won't be as foolish as to threaten you with filing a claim against any of you, I believe we can be honest with each other to reach an agreement."

"What do you speak of?"

"It's simple. If you deem Shirogane so high and issue, allow me to offer to you the option to request to have him deported."

Daizaburou-sama coughs, arms folding, expression sobering, tightening. "I believe we had made ourselves clear yesterday, XO."

"And the first thing that happens the next day is my protegee being sent to medbay," she shrugs, rolling her eyes. Before I could retort, the fox clicks her lips, which then retract inwards as she frowns. "This isn't some jest or a play in a circus. Shirogane is in this room," she fires a finger to the door, almost hitting the captain in the head, "unconscious and weakened, after having one of the strongest nervous breakdowns one could have. And no, I am not amused with this outcome, at all. So tell me 1st Lieutenant, how do you suggest we tackle the consequences this little accident will have for my protegee?" Her cold eyes sink right into me, this time frowning in earnest. "Unless, of course, you rather have me filing a claim of aggression towards UN personnel."

I return the stare, the glare, yet find myself gazing at the door. To make a truce with this fox, to accept to debate over this when the sedatives are what sent you into shock would be a folly. However, more foolish would it be for me to neglect my duties to safeguard you.

Taking a moment to inhale, letting the air go softly, my lips part ways with an answer, lightly burning as they do. "I will not excuse myself from my actions, but I had no intention to bring harm to the cadet with our discussion. If you deem me the cause of this accident, I'm at your disposal for any punishment you desire to give me."

I lower my head slightly, clawing at my fists. Her Highness did many efforts to make the accord with the XO, I cannot let that crumble because of this accident. Even less now that I've confirmed he is indeed our Takeru-sama, and after he has once more almost fallen into rage.

Considering his words as we spoke, it is now clear to me. The pit he's trapped in now is perhaps the same one I left in him when we departed from Hakuryo Base, and perhaps what has always fueled his struggles. After all, he never believed the sacrifices to truly were worth the victories, if we can call them that at this point, they gave us.

"Any punishment, you say? I think you're not seeing what I'm talking about here." She rests one hand on the top of her head, sounding bored. "I'm asking you how do you plan to take responsibility for harming my personnel, and to think on how will this affect Shirogane's career from now on." Taking one step forward, she then gazes at me firmly. "Surely you understand, more so after the show your underlings made in the hangar, how others will begin to spread aggravations about my protegee and how that will affect his training, considering the punishment which still lies on his shoulders. At this point, it truly… would be the wisest choice, to send him back the way he came."

"Wh- Please reconsider! We are not requesting such a thing, and neither do we desire to be seen as those who would demand such from the UN."

"Then, I'm all ears."

"XO, there is perhaps a solution, if you'd be willing to listen," Daizaburou-sama says, giving a small nod. "While I understand the cadet's desire to recall his memories on his own terms, and that this accident will make many assume a mistaken view of him, all it truly would take to silence those voices is to-"

"Have him regain his citizenship, go with you to the Capital?" She frowns, crossing her arms. "I believe he was clear, Shirogane does not wish to go to the Capital. And moreover, we already spoke of the possible claims that may fall on his shoulders should we move carelessly. Furthermore, one could reach a wrong assumption. That you did this in order for the cadet to have no choice *but* to go to the Capital."

"… Excuse me?"

"Mana, it is a fair assessment," he says, holding my gaze, making me heave a sigh. "Yet, we do not have such intentions, XO. If it's not through protection in the Capital or the offering of his father's profile, I loath to affirm we have no solution to propose."

"Well, I appreciate the honesty," she says, reverting to the ice wall. "Yet, I've received many favors from Her Highness the Shogun in the last few months. While Shirogane's situation is a concern, your standing and image in this base is also in jeopardy. I doubt the personnel took it well, to have your underlings trying to force their way to the cadet, or to see the state of his Gekishin."

I bow down, biting my lips. "Again, I assure you neither me or any of the members of the Royal Guard that participated in today's mock battle desired this outcome. Nor do I support the actions of the members of my squadron. If there is no other solution, I will bear the responsibility myself as an individual, for it was my own carelessness which caused this. This was no aggression towards the UN, it was mine own folly." My hands coil and twist, my lips purse as I slightly start biting my tongue within at this turn of events. "Again, I am at your disposal for whatever punishment you wish to place on me. Please do not push this burden of mine onto the Empire."

If nothing is done, the Takeru-sama will be shunned, despised by the more loyal Japanese members of the staff. In the worst case, it might even cause discord between those who see him as a traitor, an American, and those who are against such discrimination. And as the source of the unrest, Takeru-sama himself shall be punished and

removed from this base to preserve the order. Otherwise, if we do not reach an agreement and the fox files a claim, if the UN recognizes this as a hostility, this will make it's way into the media. I must not let this reach public ears, for it would raise questions, it may reveal his role and identity. And given his current mental state…

The static of the comms, the shiver on my nape when I did not dare to look back on the hallways, the pressure on the audience chamber. Every little decoration started to resemble an eye back then, an eye which judged my every movement. A gaze which remained squinted yet vacant. A fissure, a wound between us, our gazes.

I cannot allow any more harm to befall Takeru-sama, nor for him to relieve that pain once again.

"Vice Commander, I believe we all know we need each other in this trying times." Daizaburou-sama says as he returns the stare but the woman sharpens her eyes, clearly not intimidated by him. "While I cannot remain here for much longer, the time I spent here was enough to see that we can place our trust in you. There must be something that can be done to salvage this situation, without resorting to deporting the cadet with such a stain on his records." He sounds composed, still and calm, however, his arms are close to his body, as if bound by chains he were.

Yet, the fox again sighs and ruffles her hair. "Let me tell you two something, in case you forgot. Cadet Shirogane was brought to this base by my personal orders, and I am his legal tutor." Then, as a finger taps her the bottom of her chin, her features gradually begin to tighten. "And ever since he arrived here, people have been very harsh on him. Especially you, Royal Guards. He told me of how the other Tsukuyomi confronted him on a day when you received some spare parts, how you, *General* Daizaburou, didn't seem very welcoming when he introduced himself when you delivered the Type-00C units. And let us not forget, how the younger Tsukuyomis tried to 'make him disappear in the muck' during the CCSE. I believe it is quite fair to affirm that you do have something against Shirogane.

And, if there is no dissuading you, I shall have him removed from this base before dusk."

What?! How could she- No, focus. It is only logical she would draw such a conclusion, when lined up the facts do suggest we hold some sort of animosity towards Takeru-sama. I slowly inhale through my nose, biting my tongue softly again. Little effect does it have against which ails my ears, nor what tears inside.

And for as much as I hold doubts towards her, we also must protect Alt. IV. If the XO decides to deport him, even I cannot tell what that would cause in Yuuhi-sama. Yet, if they refuse the reports on Kageyuki-san's service, if they are understandably concerned over claims of identity theft… Daizaburou-sama narrowed his eyes, the grip of his fingers on his arms intensifying. "I believe we have already told you those were nothing but coincidences. The two younger Tsukuyomis made the same mistake the three Tozamas made today, that is all."

"Pretty unconvincing, when your words do not align with your actions," she retorts, quick to cast a side glance.

I tighten my fists, breathing deeply through my nose to relax my shoulders. The boulders refused to come off them, however. "We are being truthful, XO. I concur that it might look as if we were opposed to the cadet's presence, however that is not the case. We already told you our motives for approaching him yesterday, and why we employed the frequency today. Instead of remaining on this debate, could we instead focus on what can we do to avoid this incident from turning into something larger than it is?"

For some reason, the fox smirks as the captain merely switches gazes from her to us, as if out of the loop. "So you say you have laid out all of your motives?"

"Indeed, that is the case. What other reason could we have?" I say, resting both hands on my sides.

"Oh, I see," the fox dares to remain smirking. "Then, I suppose you won't have anything to say about what's in this folder?" The blonde foreigner that was near passed her a green folder, that she held in front of us. It had Takeru-sama's name written on it. And both us and the captain twitch as we recognize the name.

For a moment, my eyes sharpened at her. I blinked, rested a hand on my chin, and restrained the vile surging in my chest.

"… Vice Commander, could you explain what is that supposed to be?" The captain asks, edging closer to the fox.

Who then shakes her head, leveling a stare at us. "No Isumi, it's the other way around. They are the ones who have to do the explaining," she says, slowly taking a step forward, raising the folder towards Daizaburou-sama.

Is that the report on how he was recovered, perhaps? The key to how he left the Empire… It's just within reach.

Yet, as Daizaburou-sama slowly opens the envelope, his eyes begin to open wide, small brushes of bewilderment betray the stillness of his complexion. Holding the folder a bit too tightly, enough for it to begin to bend, he lets out one loud sigh as wrinkles awaken wide in his face.

"Daizaburou-sama, what is the matter?" Is this about something that happened to him in America?

"Vice Commander…" Sparks, thunders in warning within a sudden storm. "If you possessed this intel, why have you idled so?" He says, low and somber. I've very rarely seen the General willing to openly display such signs of anger, just what is in those pages?

To note, the captain once more seems to be hanging at the end of a rope, lost in either the tension in her features at whatever it is that's in the pages or in questions she desires to ask to the fox. Our gazes

cross, perhaps equal in our ignorance and concerns, for different motives, then we both look towards the XO.

Who remains still and firm, arms lightly overlapped, one hand resting under her chin, under the frozen lake of her features. "I have my reasons. So, now that we can be a bit more honest with each other, could you tell me if there truly is no hidden meaning to your interest in my protegee's affairs?" She says as she ruffles her hair looking away, still daring to use that word.

Daizaburou-sama looks at me, I see him gulp as he slightly narrows his brows, stormclouds receding. I give a subtle nod, understanding he wished me to remain calm, and then he hands me the folder. A moment to exhale, to lick my lips and untie the tension in my hands as I brush my hair, then I begin reading the papers. The sight of the very first sentence was enough to make me clench my fists, a searing yet momentary sting hitting the center of my back.

" *Found on the outskirts of the hill near the Yokohama Hive, an unconscious pilot wearing a damaged fortified suit, believed to belong to the Empire's Royal Guard, was retrieved during our patrols on the area after the G-Bombs' detonation."*

Regardless of how she got this intel… She knows, knew all along that Takeru-sama was one of us.

And the damn fox kept quiet.

When he was clearly in so much pain. When it was her negligence what caused this outcome.

How… How dare she-

A hand rests on my shoulder, he shakes his head. "I believe we should continue this conversation somewhere else. What say you, Kouzuki?" Daizaburou-sama says with stern eyes as he hands the folder back.

"Oh, dropping the rank now? Fine, let's go to my office. But don't think of making any sudden move, I have us being watched by the best soldiers on the base. Come on, let's go." She turns around and briskly makes her way to the elevator.

We follow her closely, switching glances with each other. The captain also observes us as we walk, yet the hints of fire and confrontation which laid in her eyes before are no more. Rather then weapons raised, confusion and inquiries would seem to plague her mind as she marches. I suppose, she was in the dark as much as we were. And even if she was who applied the sedatives, the one who has crafted this scenario… is who walks ahead of us, straight as an arrow.

I cannot believe it, she knew of him being a Royal Guard and she didn't tell him? She didn't consult with us, despite the possible risks? If she assumed he was an exile it makes sense, one could say. Which is why she insists on deporting him, perhaps to avoid his past as an exile from resurfacing. If she so assumes, it becomes understandable why she refuses to send him to the Capital, for the clarification would then have Takeru-sama branded as a recognized traitor. Yet, for her to have withheld the intel, to not have consulted with us in person despite the risks to her project… and to still safeguard Takeru-sama as she does, what could she be aiming to do? For as much frustration as this causes me, the fox did give us a detailed report on his condition before she was notified of the trio's folly at the hangar. She is taking good care of Takeru-sama, perhaps… perhaps truly treating him as her protegee… but, why?

The Kouzuki I know, the cold and analytical leader of Alternative IV wouldn't put her hands over fire for anyone. She wouldn't even allow a situation which caused so much friction with our organization. And if she had been certain of it, there would be no negotiation possible. The fox would send you away, using her power and influence without a care, throwing you away as a mere pawn. But she hasn't, and not only that, she is still vying for your safety.

… It is quite an odd feeling, to be thankful and angered at the same time.

Sigh, had I been more careful this wouldn't have happened. All our efforts to set up that private frequency to be able to talk with him without being listened on, all for him to end up hurt once more. He's remembering, he's coming back. But that also means his shadows are resurfacing once more as well. All my attempts to remind him of our teachings, to calm him down failed just like back when we met again, after Mogami was reduced to ash and blood. I should have disabled his machine faster, or maybe I should have mentioned a book or one of the toys he favored?

"Mana, what do you think about this?" Daizaburou-sama spoke to me in a whisper as we waited for the elevator to arrive.

Covering my mouth, I also endow a whisper. "It all depends on whether she's using him to gain something or not."

"Indeed. I would like to give Her Highness a pleasing report today, however…"

That, too, is a concern. If the Vice Commander refuses to either have Takeru remember his identity or chooses to deport him back to America, I cannot imagine what Yuuhi-sama will do in retaliation. Under normal circumstances perhaps she'd merely compromise in another area, yet according to Maya and Tsuhi she has been more forward in her ways as of late. In no small part, due to the mere mention of your possible survival.

The elevator arrives and all five of us present ride it. No words are spoken on our descent nor on the way to her office. The other two remain outside as the scientist so orders, the blonde assistant sporting a neutral expression unlike the minute displeasure of the captain. Once inside, the fox tells us to sit where we please as she slowly goes to the chair behind a desk and sat down.

After brushing her hair and joining her hands atop the wood, she looks our way. "Now that we're in a secure location, could you tell me why are you so interested in Shirogane?"

I took a glance at Daizaburou-sama, who after closing his eyes for a moment nodded at me. So, I cough and clear my throat. "Before we speak of this, why have you remained silent on the knowledge of the cadet being a member of the Royal Guard until now?"

"Did *you* know he was one, by any chance?"

"Could you kindly answer the query, XO?"

"… Because I haven't known this for long. In all honesty, it wasn't too long ago that I… requested this report to be delivered to my hands, after some words Shirogane told me didn't exactly line up."

"What do you speak of?" Daizaburou-sama asks, resting an arm on the sofa. "Did he remember something… regarding how he was found?"

"You could say that. You see, Shirogane has mentioned a few times a recurring dream he has. A dream of," her lips recede momentarily, breaking eye contact, "an eternal wasteland."

"A… what?" Was it just a coincidence? Or, did he truly have those nightmares once again?

She shrugs, proceeding to talk while barely moving her lips, still not looking at us. "The mention of how he lived before the lakes in his memories led me to believe he was perhaps just a normal person who suffered from an unfortunate accident. Yet, some details do not align. As he mentioned yesterday, he should have been sent to an orphanage but didn't lose his surname. He should have fought in the war, but there were no records of his training or deployment anywhere. So I consulted with his prior location, to ask for a detailed report on how was he recruited as a cadet while in Yukon and if any contacts had been found in the Empire, or if that was tried at all."

"And the answer was this?"

"Indeed," she says, returning our stares, never faltering. "When he arrived here and I noticed how little intel there was on his profile, I asked someone to double check his intel, and to fix the profiles somehow. While Shirogane's public profile was filled with the leftover data he had from Yukon, my contact brought me some intel as a… warning, he said, shortly after I had received this report I showed you," sighing audibly, she leans on the chair. "It seems like his data was erased, and not only that but he was a member of the Royal Guard, one who engaged in unsavory matters it would seem," she says, almost chuckling as she rests her chin on a hand. Deep inhaling and a grip on my knees, that is all which seals my lips. As if *you* could ever judge him, damn fox. "Which meant, Shirogane was either an exile or a traitor. If I can be frank with you, I was considering disposing of Shirogane after the CCSE, to avoid any issues from arising."

"Then, why didn't you?"

"Because when examining all facts, I saw he had made the right call during the CCSE," she says, and dry ice would be warmer than her very being as of now. "So that made me think, what if his prior sentence was done on similar terms? After all, he was found unconscious and hurt, unable to legally defend himself for months. And when he woke up, he didn't have many memories clear on his immediate past. So, while it might have been dangerous to keep him here, on Mitsurugi's squad no less, I saw in Shirogane a decent person and a very valuable asset. That's why I've been keeping a close eye on him, especially since the CCSE, and why I am now showing you this report now." Leaning forward, again resting her arms on the wood, her unblinking stare meets ours. "I would like to reach an agreement to have him stay in this base, without any repercussions to either his career or the project. So, could you tell me what has you delving in my protegee's affairs?"

The clarity of her words is apparent, as is the foul mood she is in at the moment. However, the matter of the databases should have

been informed to her via Chief Yoroi, who also should have suggested to her that sending him to the Capital would be the wisest choice. Yet, she once more is using her body as a shield. Why would this fox of all people go to such lengths to safeguard anyone? Because then, that would mean that she truly does see him as a valuable pawn, that she won't lift her vile paws off him.

I claw at my palms, my bottom lip suffering the hail of my nibbling. Daizaburou-sama and I share a brief glance, he waves a hand down my way. I nod, once more inhaling deeply.

His brows arch, he lets out some air through his nose. The edge of his lips is retreating inwards, he then coughs. "Well, if you had confirmation that a Royal Guard he was, then you should have contacted the authorities to find a solution to this problem at an earlier date. As his current legal tutor, it falls to you to contact the Shogunate for his missing data, or to mention it to us during the meeting we held yesterday." He thus says, slow yet firm. She slowly looks towards a wall, clearly uninterested. He once more coughs, dispelling the minute tension in his features. "Then, would you be willing to share with us some intel about his time in America? Could you allow us to see the full report on how was he found near the hive?"

"We don't really have much data about what was of him in Yukon, since after that terrorist attack the majority of it was lost. And before I show you anything, I want to hear *why* are you so interested in Shirogane's affairs," she then frowns slightly, staring at us. "Because if he really is an exile, I'm willing to deport him tomorrow morning." She says with a slight smile on her face.

"Could you kindly stop taunting us, XO? We've already said we do not wish for the cadet to be exiled," I say, hitting a leg as I do, as I frown.

Daizaburou-sama sends a look at me, his eyes narrowed as he leans back onto his seat. I nod and look towards the woman, who remains still, not revealing a single hint in her posture or gaze.

"As it were, I was a fellow of his father while he was in service of the Royal Guard."

"Is that so."

"… And I met the cadet when he was little, as well. So, that's why I've been insisting on a personal level. As fellows of his father, we cannot turn a blind eye to Shirogane's woes."

"You say that, but he was found near death close to a hive and his data banks were erased."

"What was that?!"

"Mana," Daizaburou-sama gives a few pats to the sofa, holding my gaze, "the XO's concern is valid." He then looks at the damn fox, who seemed to chuckle for a second. "You see, we had thought him dead after that mission. So, whenever it is that the database suffered an error, we didn't notice it until he had returned."

"I see. Then, I suppose you do not have the authorization to see the report, in the end."

"… Excuse me, what?"

She holds my gaze, bumping a hand on her chin. "1st Lt, if you're merely an acquaintance, you've no authorization to delve into my protegee's affairs. Only relatives can request such things."

"Pardon me? I had believed we-"

"Only if you clarified your intentions, and had a motive to delve into his affairs. I can understand why would you be concerned with Shirogane's safety, and we can debate on how to avoid this incident from affecting him negatively, but regarding his identity I shall-"

"We do have a justification to receive the report, XO," Daizaburou-sama says, then exhales heavily when he nods back to me.

"Huh, you do? Enlighten me, by all means," she says, resting her hands back on the desk.

"Mana, you may proceed."

"Huh? Are you… certain?"

"It is this or wasting more time. Now that we know that Kouzuki is aware Shirogane was one of us, there is little reason to withhold the intel."

"Yes, sir." Inhaling deeply, a small shiver on my nape, I then look forward, into the glacier. "XO, to tell the truth, cadet Shirogane was put under my House's protection after Kageyuki-san's passing."

"… Huh?" Raising a brow, blinking in quick succession, she then grasps her chin. "So you're saying that Shirogane became a Tsukuyomi?"

"No, I said he was entrusted to our care. In the nobility, when a fellow passes away, it is not unheard of for the patron house to look after the heirs of said person. Kageyuki Shirogane was a good fellow to my Father and Uncle, and while it was debated whether or not we should tend to a commoner at the time, it was decided that Takeru Shirogane would be taken under our care to join our fellowship."

"So… He became a vassal, then?" She asks, narrowing her eyes, retracting her lips.

"A fellow-in-training. A squire, if you allow. Due to his fascination with his father's work, Shirogane accepted to join the training program of my House back then, going as far as to declare he would become an Imperial Guard instead of choosing another profession from the options then available."

For a moment, I stop and lick my lips. The cakes, the books, the ruckus in the gardens, much noise among the trees of a national park we once visited, where he apparently stole my sister's lips in his

innocence, the incessant smoke coming from the kitchen when he once challenged Yuuhi-sama by saying she wouldn't be able to even boil an egg, and hitting the nail straight on the head with an industrial press. Recalling those days, the days before the war took your heart from us, before we gave up on it more accurately, brings an odd taste to my mouth as I cross a leg, fiddle with a strand of hair.

And looking elsewhere, I continue. "While it would be impossible for a commoner to be admitted into the Royal Guard with ease, his father's service was appreciated and devoted so Shirogane was given the chance to show his worth. Due to the results he obtained in his efforts, he was formally inducted into my House's training program at age twelve to be instructed along other selected young heirs and inductees to become Imperial Guards."

"So what you're saying is that he was smitten with the Guard, and since he had talent and his father had been a loyal vassal, your House inducted him? When he was just twelve years old?"

"… Yes, that is the case. Unlike what he believes, he was not left alone after his father's passing."

"Is this the reason why in his data it says he left his school without moving away from the Hiiragi district?" She holds my gaze, I nod back.

"That is the truth. We cannot tell you of what trainings he did nor where was he trained, yet Shirogane was under my fellowship's care since then," I say that without wavering or looking away, for it is the truth. "And thus, as one of the highest members of my house, Shirogane is also *my* protegee, XO."

She then narrows her eyes and lips, small daggers within the ice. "And why have you not disclosed this until now? I would have welcomed this honesty during yesterday's meeting."

"You'll have to forgive me, but I could ask you the same thing regarding the intel you possessed. If you had reached out to us,

inquiring on whether he was a fellow or an exile, all of this would have been avoided. Quite careless, coming from the leader of Alternative IV."

"Mana, keep your poise," he admonishes, giving a minute bow to the fox. "In any case, all of this was truly nothing but a chain of unfortunate events. Thus, could you hand over the full report on his departure, XO?"

"Before that, I want you to confirm something. You are not going to do anything that would… be detrimental to the project, would you?"

"What are you implying?" I ask, frowning despite the glare Daizaburou-sama gives me.

She smiles, waving a hand in the air. "Oh, I would rather not end up on the black list of the Shogunate for meddling on your 'private businesses', you see. Because when the UN asked the Empire to treat Shirogane's wound before taking him to Alaska, the Imperial forces refused to do so."

"What did you say?!" Daizaburou-sama shouts, eyes parting wide.

I barely held my breath at the words, the certainly false and insulting declaration of this fox. We refused to treat him? That's preposterous! We both glare at her, she remains as calm as a pond.

"Just as you heard. Apparently, a few UN scouts found him close to the area where the G-Bombs were dropped. As the first page should have detailed, Shirogane was wearing a damaged fortified suit with the helmet and all, broken and burnt beyond recognition. However, thanks to the patterns in the section guarding his neck, they could tell the suit was from the IRG. Not to mention, he was holding a bloodied sword tightly on his chest, and despite being unconscious he refused to let go of it."

"A… sword?"

"Yes, that little and troublesome sword Mitsurugi found on his room. The one Shirogane now returned to you, I believe."

"Wait, are you saying-"

"Yes, he defended himself with that blade, it would seem. What little those who rescued him told me suggests that's the reason the sword had to be repaired, and why it's far less sharp than one would expect of one of our armaments," she notes, wiggling a finger up and down. "By the by, might I ask why did he have that katana?"

I grimace on a reflex, of course she would ask about it. But she shouldn't know of it's meaning. "All members of the Guard are given katanas, Vice Commander. Even the fresh recruits."

"So Shirogane had that blade since he was made into an Imperial Guard?"

"As I said, he was given a katana as all other fresh members do, XO. It is a standard practice you can easily confirm with any Instructor from the IRG." Why is she insisting on this point? Could she know what the Minaru Kamui is meant to represent? No, she shouldn't… unless he recalled it and told her.

Tapping some papers, she again looks away as if bored. "Well, back to the point, when they found him, the scouts immediately tried to apply treatment to Shirogane, but after removing his helmet they realized he was Japanese. After giving him some first aid and confirming he could be saved through his suit's signal, they tried to contact the IJA to send him to them, but they refused."

Taking another moment of silence to gauge our reactions, as I was grimacing at the image of him surrounded by BETA, she then stands up to serve herself something. As she was filling her mug, she looks back and sighs.

"The records indicate that those from the IJA claimed Shirogane was probably a Japanese that was on the UN's side and didn't want to

receive him, since the area where they found him was supposed to be covered by international forces." Sitting down, taking a brief sip, the stalwart ice wall without heart resumes her cold monologue. "However, the UN didn't have any data about him on its databases. Since Shirogane's wounds were severe, he was not going to make it without proper treatment. And the UN code forbids any soldier from abandoning a wounded person, if they can be saved. Due to Lucifer ending in a total victory without risk to the scouts, the took him to one of their ships to apply the required treatment."

"And then, why did they not contact the IRG? What athwarted Shirogane from the Shogunate?"

"… Do you truly not remember what transpired after the G-Bombs were dropped during Lucifer, 1st Lt Tsukuyomi? How most of the IRG's men were too busy trying to infiltrate the hive, debating with the American forces and almost starting another bloodbath on the field?"

"T-That's…"

"Look, we hold similar feelings towards the usage of the G-Bombs on that day," she says, nodding our way. "However, as you should know, the state of the UN's relations with the Empire at the time was dire at best. Nobody had the time to lose negotiating for a single soldier, I doubt any person with enough power to speak with the IRG's commanders ever knew Shirogane was receiving treatment at all."

"… Which would make sense," Daizaburou-sama nods, grimacing, darkening as a new moon night. "I myself and Her Highness were in charge of overseeing the operation that day. Anyone who could notify anything to us would have had to do so through our ship and official channels."

"And the officers on the field were all gathered at the hive," I sigh, feeling emptiness setting inside me.

"Simply put, no one wanted to get in trouble over an almost dead soldier," she says, shrugging. "So, since nobody answered the plea that was already forwarded, the officer in charge of the ship decided to bring Shirogane to Alaska since they couldn't just abandon him, waste time negotiating, or at worst get in an argument with the Royal Guard, who was beyond wrath at the usage of the bombs and, as you would recall, blamed both the UN and the US forces for it." Taking a momentary silence to drink, she spins in her chair. "After all, once he regained consciousness, Shirogane could simply contact his fellows and return on his own to the Empire. Maybe it would be a small showing of cooperation with the IRG, how the UN saved one of them amidst the fire of Lucifer's closing moments."

"But when he woke up, he had lost his memory?" I stare at her, she nods back immediately without delay.

"Indeed, 1st Lieutenant. He remembered his name and even how to write it in kanji, it would seem. Despite that, when the UN tried to contact the Empire once more, they said no such person had taken part of Operation Lucifer among the Imperial Troops on August 5th according to their databases, and refused to accept him back. The attempt to contact the IRG went far more poorly, and the report lists it as an utter waste of time," she notes with a nod, once more grabbing her mug to drink.

… Of course, Yuuhi-sama erased his data as soon as she learned of his supposed death. If only we had not tried to enter the Hive, if we hadn't had to deal with those damn Americans that tried to infiltrate the hive, if one of us had been left behind to intercept that call for help… Acids again claw up my throat, lush vines constricting an otherwise sturdy tree. An invisible noose, as the floor feels like giving up on my feet.

Uncaring, the fox continues in her slow telling. "Without relatives, with his nation turning its back to him, the UN made Shirogane sign some papers to request formal asylum so that he could stay in the hospital until he completely recovered. Once he healed, there were two paths available to him. Either become a Cadet on the UN or

become a refugee. The UN, knowing he was a pilot, decided to push for the first in hopes of him recovering his memories and then becoming a sign of their good intentions towards the Empire. I can't show you all the documents, bureaucracy you'd understand, but here are a few of them about his hospitalization in Alaska." She stands up and offers the folders, yet when I grasp them she does not release them. Looking at me, her features tighten, "I hope this is enough to prove my and Shirogane's goodwill to you, Royal Guards."

"Worry not, it is much appreciated," Daizaburou-sama says, nodding my way.

When I do, she releases the folder. Opening it atop the small table between both sofas, we treat each sentence in utmost care.

…

Takeru-sama had a broken arm and many broken ribs as well when he was found. His pulse was also abnormally low, even after receiving treatment, and his heart stopped twice on the way to Alaska despite all the efforts of the paramedics on the UN's ship. It was a nothing short of a miracle that he survived long enough to reach the hospital. It took him two weeks to regain consciousness for the first time, but was unable to form words and couldn't remain awake for more than a few minutes. His condition continued to improve on the following days, and on the third week he could finally remain awake and conscious enough to talk and focus on the people around him, that's when he told the doctors his name.

During the months of his recovery, he told the doctors of what little he remembered about Japan and his life, despite having serious headaches when trying to remember some things, and he was prone to suffering panic attacks when asked too many questions about his past. On reiterated occasions, it seems he would wake up in the middle of the night, plagued by abstract dreams. Recurring words on the subject included 'wasteland', 'black fire', 'coldness'.

" *What do you mean, why did I change? What exactly do you expect me to do, 'Mana-nee'? The fucking nation is on fire and you'd rather have Her Highness blindly remain drinking tea in the veranda?"*

However, what surprised the personnel of the hospital was his demeanor. He was not hostile with them, showing no distrust or anger at the foreigners that approached him. On the contrary, he showed himself to be a peaceful and relaxed person instead.

" *No, you have to take a break, Mana-nee. I'm telling Yohime-san if you stay up working so much again!"*

After the talks with the Empire had failed and his rehabilitation finished, he chose to enlist in the UN army, on the condition that if the chance arose for him to return to the Empire, the authorities would allow it without question. After all, it would serve as a proof of their goodwill to the Empire.

The conditions of his return were different, however, as he was perhaps transferred in a hurry during the aftermath of the Yukon Incident. Yet, this… this is…

Lips retract and I hold the air it, tightly veiling my sight.

Stings and darts would sooner pierce my flesh before I exhale, exhale and allow dampness to reach my eyes.

This is nothing sort of a miracle. For his body and soul to have healed so in these years, despite what he had to got through. For so long we thought him gone, for so many nights we wept for his death, and yet he was struggling for his life. For fate to have given him the chance to survive, for luck to have shielded him from so many risks. Yet there is one very important matter that has to be addressed here.

Kouzuki knew all this time. And she did nothing. While her concerns over supporting an exile could be justified, these papers grant another layer to her refusal. She should have known of his innocence, yet the project could not be jeopardized by an unknown

actor. And even then, she kept him close, safe and sound. Even now, despite her threats of deporting him, she is merely saying that instead of acting on the words, as one would think she would if she deemed this issue such a danger.

So, one question remains. Why?

"This had cleared up many things, Vice Commander. Is it possible for you to give us a copy of this file?" Daizaburou-sama asks as he returns the folder, no longer frowning, his hands relaxed, his voice flowing easily as a downstream river.

"Sadly I can't, since this is a UN document," she shakes her head, resting the folder atop one of the large piles of papers in her desk. "You can consult with the databases or ask for permission if you do not have the authorization. Now then, I believe it's finally time for you to tell me who was Shirogane before this accident happened to him. If he isn't an exile, and you truly were looking after him then, why was he fighting on Lucifer and why is there no records left of him anywhere?" She again entwines her fingers, locking her cold gaze on us.

Daizaburou-sama waves a hand down, nodding to me before facing the fox."As it were, Shirogane had formally joined the ranks of the Imperial Guard after the defeat we suffered on the first night of the Defense of Kyoto. Starved for pilots, his training was hastened and he joined one of the squadrons of my battalion as a 2nd Lieutenant." He affirms, slowly joining his hands. I suppose we can use his former role to deceive her. "He was a most promising member of the Guard, despite his age he was on par with the rest of the new recruits. And it was not an odd occurrence at all, as much as it pains me to admit."

"As you perhaps already know XO, by the time Arashiyama Base fell, the IRG was forced to deploy most of its trainees to the battle, as the MDF did before," I admit, recalling and lowering my gaze.

"Yes, it's reasonable considering the state of our defenses back then. So, you made a sixteen-years old boy a 2nd Lt? Did Shirogane do

anything that warranted the erasure of his data banks during his service?" She asks, leaning slightly forward.

"Of course not," he answers, shaking his head. "Shirogane was a most devoted member of our ranks, despite the, ahem, irreverence he displayed at times."

"What does that mean?"

"I believe you should know how he is by now, XO. Shirogane refuses to stay quiet in front of what he believes to be mistaken," He nods, and while at first his lips seemed to curve upwards, Daizaburou-sama ends up sighing and running a hand on the sides of his head.

Yet, the XO doesn't immediately reply. Leaning back on her chair, she was looking at a bookshelf nearby, at a small tray left by the coffee machine. Lips twisting in, composure piked slowly, slowly, cracks surfacing in the minute tension in her eyes.

"I suppose I know of… that trait of his, yes," she says as she closes her eyes. Sighing as she shifts her posture on her seat, a complete restoration of the mask when she looks back at us. "So, you're saying a child became a respected member of your squadron?"

"Pardon me?"

"Mana," he admonishes with a sigh. "It is unbecoming of you to grow upset so easily."

"… My apologies."

Nodding and clamping my lips, I rest against the sofa's cushioning. Were we not on her personal office, on such a dire situation, I would have demanded the fox to retract the insult. Takeru-sama is by far more skilled than the average person, that boy learns too fast. And he had a knack for piloting, despite how much we dreaded sending him to practice only to hear him start to sing. If there is one thing me, Maya and Raiko-sama agree on, is that none of us know how did he

apprehend such finesse and knowledge, or why would he choose to use it on so offensive methods.

" *But it works! If I spin, people can't lock onto me, the sensors can't keep up with the changes in direction. Then, I can just whack 'em hard from behind or something. What do you mean, I could crash? Heh, just you wait until I manage to pull off a backflip with Watermelon-kun. Now that's gonna be awesome! ATSUKUNARE! YUME MIRU KANATA E-"*

I honestly don't know how he did that, or how he came up with all those odd songs, nor why he would nickname his Zuikaku as watermelon. True, 'Suika-kun' does resemble the name of the craft, but it is distressing to recall he refused to refer to his Zuikaku as anything other than Watermelon-kun. Or to remember his adusted shouts, calling the Tank-class as crimson capybaras that would die starving.

Sighing as I shake my head, recalling his blazing eyes of motivation and his darkening glare of fury only serves to further retract my tongue into my throat when coming back to reality. All I can do now is silence, swallow down my venom, claw at my fists and wait.

"Vice Commander, he had an innate talent like no other. I believe his performance on this base is enough proof of that," Daizaburou-sama says, again patting the sofa's armrest.

"So you're saying he was as good as he is now, despite being just a child soldier?"

Hmph, such insolence… Crude taunts as such might work with most, but not with us, fox. We will not trip so easily.

"Of course not, but he was a natural leader," I nod, crossing my arms. "Despite his tendency to speak up, no one can deny the talent he had to manage a Zuikaku on a level similar to a seasoned warrior."

"I see. Then, did he remain under your care all the way until Lucifer?"

Daizaburou-sama's features tighten for a speck of a second, yet he quickly returns to his usual stoic expression. "Yes, though he did not retreat when we told him to do so. Which is why he ended up on the G-Bomb's area, and we lost his signal then. We assumed he was dead, seeing the overall destruction caused by the detonations. And I am loath to admit, little could I do to rein in my troop's ire in front of that treason."

"Is that so," she nods, not pressing the matter, finishing her drink in silence for a moment. "Then he isn't an exile or a traitor, I suppose? Shirogane was a rightful member of the Royal Guard?"

"Yes, however, you made a little mistake Vice Commander," Daizaburou-sama says, low, as closes his eyes, nodding slowly.

"A mistake? What are you talking about?"

"Shirogane still is a member of the Royal Guard, as far as I'm concerned. His records merely suffered from an error after the digitalization we did when restructuring our offices after Lucifer was confirmed to be successful."

And all pressure to have us send our population as refugees to another land were halted cold, might I add. Which is why, we needed a thorough accounting of all survivors and missing papers. It was time to supervise all that was left behind, to once more set root for good in our rightful land. Even if in this case, it is all a lie. What truly erased his data were the permanently weeping cries of Yuuhi-sama on all following nights after that accursed August 5th, after all.

Coughing, he leans forward, looking straight into her eyes. "Now that you we have told you all we can on his situation, I must ask you to return Shirogane to us, his rightful tutors. I'm sure he'll recover his memory much faster back home with us, and of course the UN will receive the proper thanks for saving his life, and for safeguarding

him thus far since his return." He bows at her, deeply, and I immediately follow.

Yet, the woman laughed quietly. As I look up, I see she endowed another wicked grin and a curvature to her eyes. The sight filled my insides with ice, rough and jagged, piking at my composure.

"Excuse me Vice Commander, but what is causing you to laugh?" I narrow my eyes at her, yet she just looks away with a smile. What is this woman even thinking? What is so entertaining, fox?

"I suppose you didn't notice, but Shirogane isn't a member of the Royal Guard anymore. He's part of the UN now."

…

"XO, I believe we have made ourselves clear," Daizaburou-sama gestures with his hand at me, his eyes slightly narrowing, unsheathing the inner blade. "Shirogane is one of us, a member of both my squadron and the network of 1st Lt Tsukuyomi's House. Such was the reason which fueled our inquiries, to see if he truly was himself. And seeing the proof you presented, our doubts are no more. Thus, I am asking you to return him to the Imperial Royal Guard's care," He asks with a firm pat to the sofa, leaning forward and slightly raising his voice to his usual loudness.

Still, the fox crosses her arms as she shrugs. Not masking the smirk, the combative tint in her glare. "Then, how about you make a formal request for him? As far as the databases go, he's dead here. Bring the papers with the data of his service, the proof that he is indeed a member of the Tsukuyomi House's trainees, and request us to transfer him officially. Assuming you have the papers, that is."

"What did you say?! Are you insinuating we're lying?!" Hitting the sofa, my teeth clench further when he remains smirking.

"Considering your databases lost so much data, it would not be odd for his records to have been lost as well. I won't hand my protegee in

front of mere words, I'd be liking you to present proof that confirms your claims before I allow Shirogane to leave this base. Of course, that's if he agrees to it."

"If he- Are you saying he would oppose the notion of recovering his past?!"

"Mana, please keep your poise," he says, holding my glare with a frown. Then, expression unchanged, his inner sword becomes unchained, its edge brimming through his posture as he looks at the fox. "The same for you, XO. Let's not fall to animosity, we can debate over this reasonably."

"Oh, I'm not doing this to test you or anything," she affirms, sobering up, her brows beginning to cross. "Seeing how he reacted to your talks today, the nervous shock he had to endure, I believe he may not want to return to the Guard. Actually, it might not even be good for his mental health to allow him to return."

"What did you say?! How dare you speak such-"

"Tsukuyomi! Do not say words you'll later regret."

"Daizaburou-sama, how could I remain calm when this situation was clearly caused by the damn sedatives they injected him with? If the sedatives hadn't been forced on him by that-"

"Enough!" He stares at me, unflinching, as he hits the sofa, strongly enough to leave it sunk.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, futilely trying to restrain the shaking present in my hands. How could I remain calm? Isn't it obvious what's going on here?!

"XO, forgive the screams," He gives her a brief, subdued bow. "However, I must ask you again to transfer him back to the Empire. Shirogane wasn't exiled nor is he a traitor. Procuring the reports would be the more formal procedure, yes, yet I would like to take him

with us back to his rightful place in the Royal Guard when we depart tomorrow. At the least, I believe we should tell him the whole truth and let Shirogane himself decide."

"And how do I know you're not lying just to dispose of him?" She says as she again locks her gaze on us, narrowing her eyes.

Such insolence! All I'm allowed to do is grit my teeth, so long as this woman has him under her. To be so close, and yet so far… All because they used who knows what drugs on him, to suggest our presence is harmful to him.

"Please, there is no need for further hostilities. Me and 1st Lt Tsukuyomi have told you all we can within our boundaries." He says relaxing onto the sofa, despite his tightening arms as he crossed them once more. "All we would ask of you is one final talk with Shirogane, to dispel all these misunderstandings that have plagued his return to this land."

"Really? Then, might I ask you another question?"

"Of course."

"Why was he alone on the vicinity of the Yokohama Hive, on an area that was not supposed to be covered by Imperial troops? If you were his leader, why did his squadron not restrict his movements?"

"… Such details are military secrets, XO," he quietly answers.

"Then, can you tell me exactly under which squadron was he stationed? I could easily double check the databases I have available on Lucifer, to see if there is indeed missing data in a team's formation. If Shirogane's data was erased by an error, then even his presence on Lucifer should be missing."

…

There's no way we can tell her the truth. If she knew how important he is, she wouldn't let him out of her grasp. It's the type of person she seems to be. But then…

"Ahem… Have you not checked this data before, XO?" I ask, leaning forward.

She squints her eyes, saying nothing for a moment, before she brushes some hair as she sighs. "There are many holes on Lucifer's ranks, you should know we lost many soldiers to the G-Bombs. And I can't have detailed access to Imperial records, as much as I would like to. Even if I know he was part of Lucifer, I don't know *where* to look in the squadrons from the IRG that took part in the operation. But now," she then smirks, resting her chin on a hand, "you are here to point me in the right direction. If you are telling the truth then, what's stopping you from telling me the name of his squadron?"

"Isn't the knowledge that he was part of the Wolf battalion plentiful?" I ask, eyes narrowing.

"You had three TSF squadrons deployed, I assume. And on the vanguard as well. If you said Shirogane refused his orders to retreat, and seeing he was found alive and alone, I assume the rest of his comrades followed the command and did not die to the G-Bombs. So, it would be easier to confirm that the blank spot on the formation is him by seeing other collaborations with your unit and finding that same spot missing. If there's multiple members missing from the team, it will grow harder to confirm your story from my position. And as I said before," she leans forward, hiding her lips behind interlocked hands, while beginning to frown, "I won't hand over my protegee until I am certain you mean him no harm."

"Yet, we told you all we can at the moment," Daizaburou-sama says, hitting the sofa once more.

"And you cannot confirm anything else as of now, request some documents to be sent to you?" She asks, low, as she stares. We

both share a gaze, I grimace and look down as he sighs and runs a hand into his head.

We cannot, under no circumstances, present the last papers of his service. And the other records have been erased, so to attain what leftovers remain… we would have to request such to Yuuhi-sama herself. And by that point, I might as well have jumped straight into an erupting volcano. Notifying this to her, with how her mood as been lately, would be placing further burdens on her shoulders. Or risk retaliation against Kouzuki, and for as much as I dislike her way of being I cannot deny she has been one of our most important allies. Alt. IV notwithstanding, her favorable reception to Her Highness' requests, her fair treatment to Meiya-sama, and the protection she is extending to Takeru-sama, albeit odd, is enough to earn her my respect. Yet…

"… I doubt we could request such documentation in such short notice," I admit, Daizaburou-sama nods in agreement.

"Is that so? Well, there is nothing to be done then. Shirogane will remain here until you present the proper documentation."

"Wait, you could at least tell him about-"

"I do not believe it wise," she says, a small pursing of her lips as she crosses her arms. "Letting him recall his memories on his own is for the best. It is not unusual, for survivors of wars to lose their memories, to never regain them. Forcing him as he is now would only bring further suffering to Shirogane, so I won't be disclosing anything that he does not ask for."

"True that might be, however-"

"As of now, he is *my* protegee, 1st Lieutenant. And allow me to remind you, you're in my base, as well. If you truly care about Shirogane, allow him to recall on his own."

Hands shaking as they grip and distort my dress, I look down, biting my lips. To just turn around and do nothing? Is this truly all I can do? Yet, even before the sedatives, Takeru-sama did sound pained. It is true, forcing him to remember might backfire…

"Ahem…" Daizaburou-sama nods my way, sighing heavily. "However, if we can procure the documentation or if he comes seeking answers, you won't withhold him from the truth?"

"You have my word, I have no intention to let this become an issue," she nods, holding our gazes, never faltering, never wavering.

So this is all we can get? No, once Takeru-sama recovers his memory I'm sure he'll come to us immediately. Yuuhi-sama may not be particularly pleased at this outcome, but now we possess confirmation of the path forward. Bidding our time to present the papers should allow us to aid Takeru-sama in his recovery. And if Kouzuki were to be lying… I pity her, for she shall become the recipient of Yuuhi-sama's blue fire.

"I suppose we can agree to that." Daizaburou-sama nods slowly at her, I do so too.

"Well then, now that we got that out of the way, it's time to see how we deal with this little incident. 1st Lt, I would like to ask you to reprimand your underlings, where others will see and hear it, to ensure their previous outburst doesn't cause any rumors."

"… Very well, I shall do as you ask. Is there anything else you'd request out of us?"

"No, nothing else. This was nothing but an accident, and if you're being truthful about this, I suppose I can see why did you go as far as you did. There won't be any punishments or claims filed, let's not make this bigger than it is."

I give her a small nod, sighing softly. "Your understanding is appreciated. Then, would you allow us to see Shirogane before we

return to the barracks?"

Narrowing her eyes, quick to she is to shake her head. "No, I do not think it wise. Please give him space, let's not risk any rumors from brewing."

"However, you can't simply-"

"Mana," he shakes his head, grimacing. "Would you be willing to give 1st Lt Tsukuyomi updates on Shirogane's condition, XO?"

"Updates?" She raises a brow, compacting her shoulders. "Look, Shirogane isn't in any danger. He only needs some rest and a detox, a full day at most," she affirms while sounding bored, drawing arcs on the air. "Also, I will limit the movements 1st Lt Tsukuyomi and her squad can do on my base. I know you've been keeping an eye on Shirogane for quite some time, and I think it would be for the best to keep you away from him just in case. You will only be able to be in the vicinity of Mitsurugi's position. If I find you or any of your three partners approaching-"

"They will not act against Shirogane or anyone else from your personnel. I will make sure they understand our position as mutual allies in this base," I say, holding her stare, trying to crack the ice.

Yet, she once more looks away, immutable as a frozen pond. "So long as they do not show any hostile intentions towards the UN, you can proceed with your watch over Mitsurugi as always. Now then, was there anything else?"

"… No, I don't think so," I look at Daizaburou-sama, who shakes his head.

"Well, this shall be all, then. I hope I made my terms clear, and that there is no repeat of today's 'accident'."

"There won't be, XO. I assure you of it," I say, meeting her glare, the seemingly endless dark within the ice.

We give her a small bow, turning to leave and exiting the office. Kouzuki dismisses the blonde foreigner, calling the captain to her presence. So, us two are free to return to the elevator.

Stomping the floor, finally frowning in full force, the myriad of arrows within me are released with each step, each small swing of my arms on the march.

"Mana, please remain composed," he slowly asks, pacing behind me.

"How could I? After revealing so much, after disclosing such intel, she still *dares* to refuse our petition to see how he's faring? It's unacceptable," I turn away, once more storming to the elevator.

"Kouzuki is merely being overly cautious, I'm certain," he says, remaining calm and composed. "And, even if it isn't immediate, now that she has been made aware of his identity it is but a matter of time."

"Do you truly believe so?" I ask as I press the button, calling the machine to our location.

He leans closer, whispering. "Do you believe Yuuhi-sama would remain idle on this board we face?"

"I'm frankly more concerned with her possible retaliation," I whisper back, sighing as I curl a strand of hair. "It is all so puzzling, however. I did not think Kouzuki would… well, defend someone to such lengths."

"She's merely covering her own trails, in case he was an exile or someone who would be in our 'black list', as she put it," he notes, nodding. Yet, he then sighs as his shoulders sag and crumble. "It is all very sad, however. At the very least he isn't badly injured."

The elevator arrives, we enter it and begin our ascent. In the narrow silence, under the monotone of the whirring of gears, of the changing

numbers, I can't help but feel the vibrations spread to my neck, daring to make my shiver on my own, to lose stable footing.

"Daizaburou-sama, do you truly believe my words were what caused him such harm?"

"I believe he was hurt by them, however slightly. Yet, the breakdown was caused by the sedatives, it is clear."

"Then, shouldn't we-"

"Casting blames won't aid us, or him," he says, crossing his arms, a tread of light extending in his otherwise stoic features. "And at the moment, we have a few tasks to tackle. Both the reprimand to your fellows, as well as the report to Yuuhi-sama. We did literally all that was in our reach, Mana. Now, it is time to wait."

"Sigh… Is there truly nothing else to be done?"

"Not us, no. Whether something else occurs today will be in Yuuhi-sama's hands." He then narrows his brows, rubbing his forehead. "I only hope your hunch doesn't prove right and she can keep her composure at the news."

"As unlikely as it seems, I also hope for the same."

Even if that may allow us to reclaim you faster. Sigh… Resting on the cold wall of the elevator, becoming aware of my heartbeats, I can only look up in silence. Look up at nowhere, at all that I recalled, all that we learned just some moments ago.

And in the end, there is only one thing I can think of, one simple wish.

" *Please be alright, Takeru. Please get well, and don't let whatever lies within you obstruct your vision again."*

# Rumbling Hearts (III)

*A/N: Lately, it feels as if the author notes have become some sort of justification corner. So, for one last time, here we go again. This next wall of text is more for those guest commenters that are displeased, or for anyone who is still on the fence about this fic.*

*It'd be easy to shield myself by saying I'm an amateur, that I'm doing this for free on my spare time, or to snap and send people to try and write their own stories. But I won't do that.*

*You see, I do want the plot to move forward and it has been, in subtle ways, despite how long this is taking to take off . While it's hard for me to find a balance in my descriptions and banter, I am happy with the end result of the last few chapters. It sucks seeing a few think my skills are degrading, but I can't please everyone.*

*I won't be doing another full rewrite, because from my eyes the story isn't dragging on. I do concede some bits were unnecessary, rereading last chapter I realized the discussions on the Minaru Kamui and the rejected report had already been tackled on the meeting and were a leftover of the original iteration of the story. So, I will edit those parts when I do a checkup later on. But everything else, the repetitive and stale conversations included, was intentional and won't be changed.*

*Reversal might be a dumpster fire, but it's **my** dumpster fire.*

*As someone pointed out to me, that people are leaving long comments does mean they do care about the story, or cared enough about it to voice their issues with it before taking their leave . But I don't know how to spell it out, I already said this won't be Alternative 2, that the mood won't change. You all have read thus far, and so know what this is about. Takeru coming to terms with what he has lost, and eventually coming to a decision on what he wants to protect. And more importantly, how does he want to do that.*

*All this angst has a reason to be, and while I more or lest wrote myself into a corner where I had to put a detriment for Yuuko to not insta-solve everything while not coming out as OOC, so that Takeru could face what will be coming to him after the events of this chapter, and to have a good reason for the sixteen years old Native to have the power and drive it has been told he possessed, all of that has already been foreshadowed and hinted at enough thus far.*

*We are at the end of the slow middle of this story, as the next half of the Paranoia arc will have Takeru face the differences in this world through the more intense nationalism that Meiya portrays as a mirror . Yes, I know, one million words and it's only halfway through. I like writing long and boring, sorry.*

*The point is, the heavier ' emotional' angst is coming in the next chapters, and the reason behind all the long-winded detours will be revealed, for both new and old readers, in chapter 76. As I said, it all ties into the foggy memories, why I have an omniscient narrator in a story told in first person, and where was I going before the rewrite took place. Chapter 76 was meant to be the next chapter of the original version, and now that I expanded it and took the time to put the hints in place I can only hope it doesn't come out as shock value or an ass pull.*

*But regardless of how it comes out, I like what I'm writing now. So to all those who are done with how much this is taking, maybe this story isn't for you. Thanks to have taken the time to leave your complains, to have read on despite what must have been boring chapters for you, but I won't change my writing again to please complains that will never stop coming.*

*To be honest, one half of me wants the hints to be obvious enough unlike all the previous twists I pulled, while the other wants to go full* ***"You'll never see it comiiiiiing!"*** *at the end of chapter 76. And while I think all the buildup is worth it, in the end every reader can judge this dumpster fire how they see it.*

*So, as always, thanks for reading and commenting . And sorry if you're disappointed at what this story is now , and goodbye if that's the case.*

*Stay safe.*

*Zuoriel*

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*Chapter 72:*

**Rumbling Hearts (II I)**

---

*December 3 rd. Around 02:30 PM.*

*(Tokyo. Imperial Palace.)*

**[Yuuhi]**

---

"Ugh… Kgh…"

Tears course through my jawline, which remains petrified upon what it's told through the speakers of the comms.

First, his exchange with Mion and Shion. Then, his talk with Mana. And at the end, the sounds of his suffering.

No longer are there doubts lingering within, this person is none other than my Takeru. Even down to the more aggressive reactions, to the fissure which cracks his cries in twain.

"… Your Highness?" Raiko-san calls, upon looking upwards I find her offering a handkerchief.

"… Sniff. Thank you kindly," accepting the offering, the silk slowly rests upon my skin. Wiping my tears, a moment of silence passes as I inhale once the recording ceases to play. Thus, with one final sigh I

release the shrapnel which lays within my flesh, the small hint of pain around my neck he left imprinted in me. "It is alright, I am fine now," I say, resting both hands on my lap, nodding to the three present in my chamber.

"Are you certain, Your Highness?" My chamberlain thus asks, consternation miring her features. "I do not believe it wise for your health, to continue to-"

"Such is my duty, as a Shogun and the Head of my House. Furthermore… There no longer is any fog in my mind, this person is Takeru."

"H-However…" she looks down, her already wrinkled complexion tightening further. "It is impossible, the little lad perished such a long time ago."

And you still refer to him in that way, despite everything. Yet, it is enough to ease, relax my shoulders when I nod and Grandma cannot return my stare as pressure falls upon her lips.

"In any case," Maya taps her glasses, up towards her brows, lips and eyelids narrowing, "I advise you to call back General Daizaburou and the cousins posthaste, Your Highness. We need to devise a few countermeasures before we present any documentation to Kouzuki."

Raiko-san scoffs, folding her arms even tighter as she glares at Maya. "What are you even saying? Yuuhi-sama has to pressure Kouzuki right this instant! Takeru-uesama has been sent to the infirmary, after they employed who knows what manner of medication on him, and you rather dally in his recovery? And I thought you couldn't possibly fall lower, *Tsukuyomi* ."

Both frown at each other, Maya's lips shrink further. "We cannot allow any further harm to fall upon Takeru, Raiko-sama. Therefore, we must ensure the presentation of the papers does not cause any more setbacks for us. His identity has to be restored, and much has

to be done to guarantee his safe return," she then taps her glasses, slowly nodding to herself.

"That can be done while he is under our care," Raiko-san counters immediately. "Not to mention, if Takeru-uesama remains as angered as he was while medicated, he could either expose his own identity or put himself in danger by reacting aggressively towards Kouzuki. And as much as I dislike the fox, I am in agreement with Mana. We must take action to safeguard Alt. IV as well." She then looks my way, bowing deeply. "Yuuhi-sama, considering all that has already been disclosed to the woman, there is little reason to keep up with this charade. Please, you should request his transfer to the Vice Commander."

The comm lets out a small whimper of static, before a coughing noise comes through. "If you allow my audacity, I also would request the same to you, Yuuhi-sama," Mana thus says, a sliver of the rampart she usually displays.

"Is that so? Perhaps… it truly is would be for the best."

"Your Highness, do not allow your emotion to hasten your moves," Maya says, kneeling swiftly, a fist on the wooden floor. "There is much yet to be done before we bring Takeru back, we cannot simply improvise a delivery to Yokohama nor can we disclose such intel to Kouzuki without-"

"One would think someone such as you to be in agreement with the notion," Raiko-san interjects, glaring much as the daylight cloaks over her features. "What could possibly have you refusing the notion, *Tsukuyomi* ?"

Inhaling sharply, she taps her glasses. "As I told to Her Highness during yesterday's dinner, many are the eyes which are staring her way as of now, due to the rather… forward demeanor she has endowed lately."

"And rightfully so, it was time Yuuhi-sama began to take cards in actual matters," she nods twice, Grandma also doing so in agreement while Maya groans, lips pursing inwards.

"However, such attention would be counterproductive to our goals," she says, exhaling long, treading her hair. "We need discretion if we aim to reclaim Takeru, and restore his identity without arising suspicions."

"Why would you need to do so?" Another voice asks, right behind me, which makes me flinch. Tsuhi was, once more, standing in attention besides the near pillars, sporting her habitual poker face.

"Because he is," she looks my way, then down, "well, you should know how his position could-"

"For all intent and purposes, Takeru is but another fellow," Tsuhi says, then looks my way. "Yuuhi-sama is only looking after one of her vassals, if questions are forwarded. It isn't as if the records weren't truly lacking intel after Lucifer and the digitalization."

"However, even the smallest risk is too large to ignore," Maya ascertains, finally allowing herself to frown as she raises her head, sunlight reflected off her glasses.

"Maya, let us not raise our voices," I order, she bows down in apology. "I… I believe there is something that has yet to be addressed," running a hand over my neck, a short yet heavy exhalation comes from my lips. "Daizaburou-san?"

"Yes, Your Highness?"

"If that man truly is Takeru then, how did he survive? Were you informed on that supposed report of his discovery? Why was he not taken to us when found on the battlefield?" I ask, all those present once more growing completely silent.

"Yes, Kouzuki finally disclosed that document. Such was the reason why I allowed Mana to disclose part of Takeru's past to Kouzuki. I hope you have not been displeased by my decision, Your Highness," he says, composed yet low.

"It is alright, there is no blame on you. Please, do tell me of what said document detailed."

After a cough and a moment of quietness, Daizaburou-san proceeds to explain what Kouzuki told him, what laid in the pages of the reports.

Of how he was found, at the verge of death in a broken suit, along a broken blade.

Of his treatment, which almost he didn't receive due to the chaos that ensued after Lucifer, the ugly relations the Shogunate had with the UN at the time.

And his enlistment as a cadet, after the absolute loneliness which he found himself in. Without memories, without any documents that would even confirm he had existed, left behind by his nation and fellows.

…

But this means that… it's my fault? All of this is because I immediately gave up, isn't it? Takeru needed me and I left him to die? For he still struggled to keep his vow, yet I looked away, didn't even search for him. Is this a mockery of destiny? I cursed his name that night, that so far away night of August 5th when I had to erase his records. Yet, at the same time he was agonizing, praying for my helping hand to reach him.

"Then, you're telling me… I abandoned him?" I couldn't keep my voice from creaking.

"No, Your Highness, I never said-"

"The Imperial forces didn't tend to him, we refused to even extend a helping hand his way. We left him to die…" What had been dried once more dampens, my throat beginning to constrict and coil down. "And I erased everything as the tradition told me to. And that's why he had to remain abroad." Yet, I do not possess the strength to weep, nor to repine against the wood. All I can afford is this emptiness in my chest, as if my heart had faded away. "I did this, I caused all of this. I left him all alone… when he needed me the most. I… I…" Slowly, the tears fall down again.

Both of my hands claw at my chest, my neck twists itself shut in opposition to my eyes who release the gates of my tears. Weeping in silence, the images of what could have happened to him torment my mind and breathing. What if there were still BETA around? He would have been devoured alive. What if he were captured and tortured for information? What if he had died alone on the vicinity of the hive? And yet, I didn't… It's my fault, I caused him to suffer greatly. Takeru… forgive me… forgive me…

"Your Highness, please do not cry anymore!" Grandma comes to my side and slowly rubs my back, then grips my chin and lifts it so that she can bring another cloth to my eyes.

"Please calm down, Your Highness," Maya asks, and when looking her way she isn't returning my stare. Her own eyes are sharpened, fixated on the ground as her lips keep on narrowing, folding inwards in equal petrification as the rest of her posture. "We know he is safe for the moment. And to ensure no further burdens fall upon Takeru's shoulders, we must tread carefully."

"Yuuhi-sama, please do not listen to her," Raiko-san implores, bowing down and remaining in position. "You must take action as soon as possible. You have to safeguard him from that fox, and her from his possible ire."

"Speak no balderdash," Maya immediately retaliates, frowning, tone frosting over. "His safety has to be-"

"Silence!" I slam a hand against the wood a few times, both of them grimace as they reiterate their bows of apology. "Sigh… Raiko-san, you had promised you were not going to incite an argument."

"Little else can I do in front of *Tsukuyomi's* lack of care towards Takeru-uesama's future."

"And why do you insist so much on your proposal? I… do share you feelings, all of us here present do. Yet, to rush our steps could place him in further danger. I… I cannot allow that to come to pass. I already failed him once, my actions cannot compromise Takeru's safety."

"… You're not the only one who abandoned him."

"Huh?"

A small frown, a small tone. Yet, a large pyre of combustion lays now in her eyes. "I, too, abandoned him, didn't even pay any attention to his wellbeing when he needed me the most, when I could have prevented his ire, protect him from *Tsukuyomi's* claws."

"Again with that?" Maya raises her glare, teeth visible and ready to sink towards Raiko-san. "It was you who-"

"Maya," saying nothing else, I hold her gaze. Wringing her hands, she once more kneels. "Raiko-san, we all… desire the same as you. Yet, there are many eyes, many shadows who could bring harm to him or use his mere presence to our detriment. And as the Shogun, I cannot-"

"If you fold your hand, I myself will bring him back then."

"… Pardon?"

Glaring up towards me, her unchained fire fills my vision. "If you refuse to move, if you would forsake him just to placate the interests of others, I shall bring him back as the Head of the Amato House I

am. He was under my care during the latter half of the invasion, and I myself placed a burgundy lotus on-"

"Excuse me?"

"I am- I said that-"

"Yuuhi-sama," a small noise by me, Tsuhi moved to be in my vision, slowly bowing down when she does. "Perhaps, Raiko-sama brings a fine proposal. If you cannot move as of now, to have another pressure the XO would be our best alternative. And considering our long stay in the Chain squadron, it would be easy to procure-"

"Enough."

"Eh? I was saying-"

"I am bringing Takeru back myself. Even if there are many steps required beforehand, he shall return as who he always was. And this is an order, Cpt Amato, 2nd Lt Yasomaga, 1st Lt Tsukuyomi." I glare their way, who solidify as gargoyles.

"Then," Raiko-san says, lowering her head yet not breaking eye contact, "you shall take immediate action?"

"Daizaburou-san?"

"Y-Yes?" He replies, with some delay.

"What are the possibilities that, despite the reprimand Mana issued to her underlings, Takeru's image will worsen in Yokohama?"

"Very high, Your Highness," Mana answers instead, allowing herself a sigh. "Despite my harsh words, and the apology the trio gave to Meiya-sama's squadmates, prejudice is a vile beast. It is perhaps too late to change Takeru-sama's reputation with mere actions on our end," she admits, fading, and Raiko-san nods to the words, Maya tightening her expression further.

"Tsuhi, what do we know of our available records?"

"That there is a small justification already being prepared," she slowly says, giving a small nod. "Our duties in the shelters and offices can be used to mask our… operations, yet the restoration of the data banks on the IRG's servers is still required."

"Maya, what are the chances such moves will be noticed?"

"Decidedly high, milady," she immediately says, voice still frozen. "Ikaruga-sama has been rather insistent on keeping me in Kitanomaru as of late, and fellows to be trusted are in short supply in the offices which oversee the records."

"Nothing a small diversion cannot break," Raiko-san counters, scoffing once more. "Perhaps you could finally prove your loyalty to Yuuhi-sama in this way, *Tsukuyomi* ."

"What?"

"Could you not use your position in Kitanomaru to divert Ikaruga's attention?" She smirks, despite the sudden shift in disposition. "Of course, one has to wonder. Why is it that their faction is growing so interested in our affairs as of late?"

One of Maya's brows twitches. "What are you implying?"

"Enough," again slamming the wood, both look away and bow down in apology. Sigh…

"Still, Raiko-sama raises a valid point," Tsuhi mentions, her eyes not veering from mine. "Precisely because we are starved for time must we take immediate action. Of course, if Yuuhi-sama could be placed in a compromising position, perhaps Raiko-sama could-"

"Silence," I raise my voice, leaning forward as I bite my lips. Tsuhi returns a smile my way, and I cannot help but to claw at my dress.

"However, whatever would we do should he grow adusted after this battle?" She asks, still smiling. "Mana-sama," then she raises her voice, lifting her face to reach the comms, "you did say his TSF was seen by many in the hangar, correct?"

Another heavy sigh comes through the comms. "Yes, the cousins so told me. And while Kouzuki does seem to be looking after him, I also must mention that all of this occurred due to those sedatives."

"Regardless," Maya looks up, tapping her glasses as she inhales, "you should mind your steps, Your Highness. Patience, milady. Only when serene can you discern the path forward."

"Yet, as much as I would favor discretion…" once more, I tread my neck, pressuring it, holding it, "if Takeru remains upset, or if he is further pushed towards anger, this situation will only worsen." And even then, now that I am aware that Kouzuki knows he is an Imperial Guard, now that I've heard his voice, his frail voice when shrieking in pain, his vigor when once more engaging in those word puns he so much loved… Stillness has no place within me as of now. "Thus," licking my lips, inhaling slowly, my knees, feet and leg quiver. Palpitations rise to my neck, barely below the skin. "Daizaburou-san, please go to the Vice Commander. I shall request the transfer myself."

"Wh- Your Highness, please reconsider!" Maya implores, both hands resting on the wood, eyes beginning to collapse.

"I must agree," he says, low. "Your Highness, there is perhaps an argument to be made in favor of passivity for the moment. You cannot-"

"While I cannot disclose Takeru's full identity to her, it is a simple matter to request the transfer of one of my vassals back to my command. And worry not, I shan't demand an immediate transfer. Yet, I believe Kouzuki could aid us in safeguarding Takeru while we arrange the required preparations. We do need to coordinate with her for his departure from Yokohama, eventually." I will not allow his

life to be put in any more danger. Precisely because we are starved for time we must make the most of every passing second. "Daizaburou-san, please make haste. I wish this matter to be resolved immediately."

"Your Highness, allow me to tell you that she told me she would allow him to return to us only if he himself wanted to. Even if you are willing to present some documents, to act in such haste could backfire. And I believe we shouldn't-"

"Daizaburou-san?"

"Yes?"

"Do you remember who are you speaking about as of now?"

"Eh? But of course, 1st Lt Shirogane is one of our most valued fellows. As a distinguished trainee and pilot he-"

"Are you dodging the issue, *General* ?"

"N-No, I am at a loss on what you're asking, milady."

Nibbling my lips for a moment, gazing at Raiko-san for another, I place a hand on the base of my neck, a finger delving into the triangle as I inhale. "Then, allow me to remind you. Shirogane is not his true surname, General. Takeru Koubuin is my trusted right hand, my irreplaceable shadow, and I aim to have his rightful title restored to him upon his return to my side."

"His rightful… Yuuhi-sama, are you…" Mana's voice fades to dark in the comms, subtle noises indicate the sentences would be stuck on her throat.

"To have him return under your surname… that's…" Maya gapes, eyes wide and unblinking.

"It is quite drastic and daring, yes," Tsuhi nods, not showing any emotion in her features, as clear as they sky is today.

"… Are you being serious, milady?" Raiko-san asks, in equal befuddlement to Maya as she runs a hand over her hair.

"Why, is any of you inconvenienced by my desire to honor the vows I exchanged with my fiancee before those accursed bombs took him from me?" I ask with a tilt of my head, smiling as I interlock my fingers yet squint my eyes.

Tsuhi shakes her head with the habitual apathy, yet places a hand on her shoulder and smiles, then gives me a nod.

Grandma covers her mouth with a hand, bowing down my way without delay.

Maya's hands wring for a moment, dampness surfacing within her eyelids, before she hastily shakes her head and bows, remaining in position.

Raiko-san, however, holds my gaze. In silence, with a neutral expression and relaxed features. Upon a moment of clashing, she swiftly bows down to me without altering her facade.

"So General, do take the communicator to the Vice Commander. Time is of essence."

"E-Even so, given his current mental condition, to further debate with Kouzuki could-"

"Takeru will be coming back to me. That's final. And there is no better place for him to recover than his own house, by my side. We all are in agreement on that regard, I'm certain. So please, let us not waste any more time. If at all possible, I would like to… have a talk with the man, just to be certain. And if he is indeed Takeru… then he belongs to me," *just as I am wholly his.*

"Yes, milady. By your will," he says, heaving a sigh.

---

*Same Day. A few minutes before .*

*(Infirmary, B5F .)*

**[Yuuko]**

---

"So, they then admitted you were part of their fellowship," I say, nodding once then ruffling my hair. "For a second I thought they weren't going to stop insisting on having you leave with them, but for the moment I think everything is going according to plan."

He blinks, and again. Remaining silent, merely looking at me.

"And," I add, now grasping my chin, "they also bought the fake report I had cooked up. Your trails are also covered, so your identity is all but solidified in their minds."

… Still nothing, merely looking, merely staring.

Hiding both hands on my pockets, taking a step forward, "They did refuse to tell me anything of your military training, but I believe they truly are concerned over your health. Yashiro couldn't feel any surface-level thoughts, so whatever was on their minds was something truly personal for them. Don't worry, I'm certain you'll be able to stay here now. It's all a matter of-"

"Why?"

"Eh?"

His brows slowly descend, not into a frown as his tone led me to believe. But into a pained grimacing. "Why didn't you tell me anything? Why did you drug me?"

"I… had to do it in this way, for maximum effect. You had to be in the dark, so that you could shine brighter. I was not expecting the sedatives to have such a side effect on you, I admit. I… apologize for

that." I give him a small nod, his expression doesn't move one bit, nor does his cracking stare from mine. "Ahem… So, how are you feeling?"

"Cough… As if I had jumped out of a plane in the middle of a typhoon with the parachute tied to my dick," he whispers amidst his groans, Yashiro takes a step back and hides behind me.

"Well, you did crash your Gekishin into the ground… In any case, do you recall anything from the outburst? What caused you to go berserk?"

Again, he grimaces. "So you don't even remember, huh?" A weak chuckle as he hangs his head, followed by light coughing.

"I… what?"

"I told you before, right? I have lots of bad… memories, and I lost it during the XM3's test last loop when given the drugs. I… I don't mix well with hypnotherapy, or at least with combat hypnosis."

Now that he brings it up… Shit, he did mention that once. Still, the tests he took, and all his data as well, point to the medicine being effective in him, there should be no side effects.

No, a moment… Oh, fuck. Of course, the leaking. It's not a biological reaction, it's a psychological one. Shirogane's conscious mind, his will to power through the adversity is what keeps him steady most of the time. Remove that, weaken his conscious efforts to remain strong…

… and all that's left is the entanglement of guilt and trauma buried in his subconscious mind. Not to mention, the sharing of data between timelines could cause him to vividly recall certain memories with the appropriate catalyst. I didn't expect the sedatives to have such strong an effect on him, Shirogane was fine this morning after all. Sigh… I should have been more careful with-

*No, if I had rested well as he insisted I do, this wouldn't have happened, I would have thought of this possibility. And now, he is the one shouldering the recoil.*

"Sorry, it slipped my mind."

"… I see."

"In any case, not all news are bad. I believe my plan is going well, if nothing out of the ordinary happens your identity will be cleared shortly."

"I told you I don't want to be near the guards," he then looks at me again, frowning. "And you didn't listen, looks like."

"You need to face this, Shirogane. Didn't you hear? Little you was not abandoned or anything, what you're feeling is the dread of… Shura's Dance latter moments, I believe. The assimilation always starts from the heaviest, character-defining data, let me remind you."

"… For real?"

"Of course, who do you think you're talking to?"

"The person who lied to me, again."

"I… Look Shirogane, we had to do this in this way," I say, placing a hand on his shoulder. His… *completely sagged and stiff shoulder.* "Now, instead of being on the offensive asking questions and raising fingers, the guards are bowing down in apology, answering every inquiry I raise. Don't you see? It hurt you much, I won't deny that, but now we have a proper shield around you. And if you… insist on taking your time on the decision, we have an excuse to buy us some days."

"… Really?"

"What's with that side glance?"

"You wouldn't be deceiving me again now?"

"Wha- Why would I? You're my ally, Shirogane. I did this to give us the upper hand, you'd understand."

"… You didn't trust in me, you drugged me, and keep pushing towards plans you know I don't agree with."

Inhaling sharply, leveling a stare into him, I lean forward, beginning to frown. "Then, tell me, cadet Shirogane. How do you propose we shield you from the guards?"

"We already had enough, they had no motives to come at me. Now, though? After I attacked them like that…"

"They know it was-"

"It's not just them. What will the rest think? I tried so hard… to prove I'm not some psychotic bastard…"

"Once you receive their blessing, it's all the same, right? Or, perhaps, did you see something during your outrage?"

"I…"

"Yes?"

"… I don't know," he barely whispers, slumping back onto the bed. Yashiro peeks from behind me, going up to Shirogane and petting his head.

"What do you mean? Why are you reacting in this way if you don't remember?" I mean, considering the amount of G-Radiation that showed on the monitors, and the, ahem, odd damage in the cockpit, everything points to you regaining some memories.

"I think," he starts, slow, closing his eyes, "that I saw something really sad. Something… someone…" As if trying to make a circle with his hands, as if grasping at sand, his fingers slowly try to close.

Yet, he sighs and apathetically lowers his hands to the sheets, "I don't know, but it felt awful."

"Well, you just take it easy for now." He does look exhausted, mentally more than physically to be honest. "I'll fill some paperwork so that you can take tomorrow off too, if you need it. Anyways, your efforts weren't fruitless today, Shirogane. Not only they revealed that little you wasn't thrown away, but also admitted you were a Royal Guard and-"

"I'm not a Royal Guard!" A sudden shout, eyes wide open, gritting his teeth he tries to rise, but ended up back on the pillow with a more intense pained face as he flops down. Yashiro glares at me, while petting his head again.

"Sorry, I shouldn't have said that." It seems he was right, trying to make him inherit all those memories so fast did a nasty number on him. "You just rest for now. I'll try to find a way to slow down the assimilation so that you can inherit everything more-"

"No."

"Excuse me?"

"I don't want to gain any more memories of him. This…" he sighs, clutching his forehead, "was my limit, Yuuko."

"Then, what do we do with Her Highness? Do you believe for a single second that she'll simply let this slide?"

"I can't be him, Yuuko. Please… What else do you want me to do to have you *listen* to me?" He then looks up at me, holding my gaze, gripping the sheets.

"Your safety needs to be assured, you'd understand." *I am not letting them take you from here, nor will I allow them to reiterate their hostilities towards you.* "And for that, you need to play your part. I understand that you're pained, shocked at the darkest memories of

those days. However, that is not all that you lived through on those days. You yourself said it before, that there must have been something pushing you onward despite all the tragedy."

"But… But…"

"And to back down now? When we finally have the guards on the back foot? Can't you see this is our chance not only to ascertain your safety for the future, but to integrate your self in this world as well?" He says nothing, starting to subtly shake. "Shirogane, do you truly think Her Highness to be the source of the dread you're-"

"And what if I can't take it?"

"Huh?"

"What if I snap?" Again, he clutches his forehead, stuttering. "What if… next time, I really hurt someone?"

"Why would you do something like that? I am not going to force any more sedatives on-"

"And what if a mere memory causes that? I don't know what it was clearly, but…" inhaling slowly, he lifts his face, back to the usual business and serious expression he endows at times, "as I told you before, when I hate something, there's no turning back from that. And-"

"You don't think you can control yourself, in the worst case scenario?"

"… Yeah. I mean, you saw how I was at the end of Iceberg. I couldn't stop this, whatever the hell it was, from screwing me over. I dunno if I'll keep it together next time. At this point," he throws himself to the pillow, sighing heavily, "it might even be better to send me back home."

"Don't say that, Takeru-san!"

"I'm being serious. If there's no dissuading the guards, and these memories can make me lose it, I can't risk absorbing them. As things stand, my presence here is harming the proje-"

"Excuse me, what did you just say?"

"Eh?" He blinks, breaking eye contact as he raises a hand to his hair. "I mean, ain't it for the best, that I leave before shit gets worse? If you send me back, then people will forget I was even here to begin with. The guards won't have a reason to antagonize you, and you already have so much more than last loop. I don't think you need me here, I wasn't of much help in Kashgar anyways."

" *The one who decides your worth is me, Shirogane."*

"But I-I don't know if I can take-"

" *Everything will be fine, so long as you follow my orders. I was tired, as you pointed out yesterday, so I share part of the blame for this.* Yet, this accident served a good purpose, to force the guards to bow down. So long as everything remains under control, and you don't get negative, there's no need to fear any knockback from the memory inheritance. Or, what? *Do you not trust in me? Do you truly want to leave?* "

"That's not it but… I dunno how to describe it well," he says, pursing his lips, caressing his arms as if it were cold. "It was different than when I snapped during the trials last loop, or when I get in the machine, or when Kasumi helps me remember. There was something, like, there." He gestures upwards, clawing at the ceiling. "It hurt, so fucking much, to feel it, like, disappear from my grasp. And if you don't tell me ahead of time what you're going to do, I… can't bring myself to trust in you, Yuuko. Because I might ruin this for both of us, and Sumika, if I have another attack. If you don't even let me trust in you, if I'm so much of a bother… just let me go, and all these inquiries will vanish with me."

…

What on earth did he see? I expected more anger, perhaps some shouts, maybe some more strong reactions like he had yesterday. Yet, he's so… deflated. Saddened, but not overly crushed. Lips relaxed, not closed yet not open either, his breathing remains slow. But his eyes are still elsewhere. *No, Shirogane is understandably exhausted. Such an absorption of G-Radiation was bound to leave its mark. And this is my miss, for not being at the top of my game to ensure he wouldn't suffer such a recoil.*

"Shirogane?"

"What?" Another whisper, without even moving his head.

"If you truly want to leave this world, I will respect your wish. But, I do need you to tune the 00 Unit beforehand."

"I know, I ain't going to abandon you, Yuuko. You… can count on me for that." Trying to sit up, tension comes to his features as his arms shake in effort. "Sigh… I'll do what I have to, you can be sure of that. Just… I don't promise you anything about the guards."

"That is fine by me. However," I step forward, leaning closer, closer, until I see my reflection in his eyes, until he has to move backwards, "while I am your ally, there are certain things I require of you, Shirogane. And you returning to your world might not be a possibility we have available, as you once told me. So, if you are to stay here, I want you to face whatever may come our way head on."

"But-"

"No," lifting a finger, I seal his lips, "no doubts. There is no hesitation to be had. *You once told me you wanted me to treat you as an equal, right?"* He nods, finally holding my gaze. " *Then, if you want me to include you in my plans, face this issue and solve it, show me you can back up your words about wanting to lead this world to a better future than this Ouka mission you spoke of before . Prove me you're enough to stand by my side Shirogane, and there will be no more secrets between you and me. Do we have a deal?"*

"And you're not tripping me, are you?"

"I need you, Shirogane. For the 00 Unit, for the battles that will come. The fact that you're awake, only a few hours after the breakdown you suffered, tells enough." I move back, restoring his personal space, then fold my arms. "So, if you show results and we can ascertain no more issues are left in your identity, *you'll be my right hand in what matters you can tackle.* Does that sound good to you?"

"Sigh… Yeah, it does."

"Of course, we may not have much time left. Yet, the choice is in your hands. For the moment, you simply rest, okay? *And if you want anything to eat, give me a call and I'll have it delivered immediately."*

"Don't worry, I can take some exhaustion. I just… want some silence."

… Why? What's this lack of… everything in him? There's no anger at me, despite what he could have seen of Shura's Dance. There's not even anger at the guards, either. He's… cracked, saddened, disgruntled. Desolated. What on earth did he see that had this effect on him? I suppose, it is not odd that he found himself crushed before when living through this as a Royal Guard, if my hunch on who he was is right, but for it to have such an impact on his current self.

… *Nothing I can do for him, expect for giving him his space.*

"Well, if you need anything, you know my office's number," I nod, turning around and going to the door.

A moment to stretch my arms upwards, another to sigh, I go towards my office with Yashiro following behind.

Let's check my PDA, I have… Wow. Double digits, really Marimo? If I don't pick up one, why couldn't you stop calling? Well, little to be

done. Mad might be the Dog now, but she's the least of my concerns for the moment.

I was hoping to speak with Shirogane about this, but the guards did clearly say he was inducted at age twelve. Yet, Shirogane's father died when he was ten. What happened in those two years? Testings, trials in his education? And they said nothing of his relation with the Shogun, or about how he had his own squad, the Swordbreakers, who I believe were our old and ruthless allies during 1999, or about why that little blade had its hilt colored blue. This only confirms my suspicions, he was someone very important. Very, very close to them, in fact. I'm certain Her Purpleness won't be able to remain still, it won't take long for them to reach out to us, wanting to disclose his identity. Even if it isn't the full picture, unless she truly was cross with Shirogane, or the feelings have dulled and she'll forsake him to not impair her political duties, in which case I win anyways, Her Highness will request me to transfer Shirogane to them.

And by saying he is the one with the last say in the matter, she will definitely want to speak with him herself. And then, hearing her will let Shirogane regain any positive memories about her, I'm sure. While the possibility of it backfiring was possible, this accident removed it out of the board. He is tired, but Shirogane is still as resolute as always despite the sadness. But if he didn't grow angered, then interacting with Her Highness, when she would be filled with worry for his safety, will allow him to finally regain some good memories of their time together. And with that, he'll regain his usual cheer and won't be as doubtful towards the IRG anymore. *Plus, he swore he'd stay, so I don't have to worry about him actually leaving to Her Purpleness' side.*

That being said… I wonder what did he see. No, the question here is, why did he see a traumatic memory at that time? Why did he saw something like that when fighting against 1st Lt Tsukuyomi? Did she say something that triggered it? It is a concern, if Her Highness employs the same words he could, perhaps, have another- No, no, he has no drug residue left in him. It was that concoction what

caused the accident, if Shirogane could will the memories at any given time we wouldn't be in this predicament anyways.

*I wish I could do more to help him, but resting is all he should be doing right now. If what he saw is enough to do this to him, despite all he had to go through on his previous experiences, I cannot push him further. I have to find a way to aid Shirogane's mind, and fast at that. If he cannot bring himself to halt his own negative thoughts, he might-*

**Beep! Beep!**

Pulling out my comms, I quickly press the switch, "Hello?"

"Yuuko, is now alright?"

"Oh, Motoko-nee. Yeah, I'm going to the elevator now. Are you in the office?"

"Outside of it, since you always lock the damn door," she says, chuckling.

"Serves you right for entering without permission and filling it with that damn smoke. So, what is it?"

"I have the report with me," speaking slowly, she sobers up, "there was a giant downwards spike in the radiation. It was localized, though. It only happened in the training field."

"… As I thought."

She sighs, short and heavy. "I don't want to assume anything but, do you think the Shirogane boy was affected by this spike, somehow? The state of the cockpit you showed me would indicate that, I believe."

"I think he caused it."

"Huh?" And she doesn't reply for a moment, long enough to let me reach the end of the hallway and call the elevator, despite pacing calmly along Yashiro. "Yuuko, are you being serious? The boy is the source of the downwards spikes of G-Radiation?"

"So I said."

"But… Just… How? How could it be?"

"I'll fill you in later, I might need your help with something." Motoko-nee is probably the only person who could understand what's going on with Shirogane's psyche, how the G-Radiation is affecting him, and whether or not it's safe to use more sedatives on him from now on.

"Fine, I'll save the questions for later. Guess this means you'll finally introduce me to Shirogane, huh?"

"Don't get your hopes up. This is a serious matter and- Hey, was that a lighter I heard?" She chuckles, I can only groan back.

"Come on, now. You made me drop the one I was smoking before," she takes a small pause, I hear the puff of smoke she releases, and part of that awful, sickening smell comes back to my nose and the back of my teeth. "Well, don't worry, Yuu-chan. I don't know what's going on here, but you can count on me. I can't wait to finally speak with the famous guy after so long, though. Why did Mitsuko get to be introduced first? You can't play favorites, Yuu-chan," she keeps on chuckling, voice light and relaxed as always.

"Shut up. It's how things turned out. And anyways, you already talked with Shirogane yesterday, right?" Or on today's first hours, to be precise. As much as I thank him letting me rest, Motoko-nee is not going to let me live this down, how he picked up the phone on my office as if he were an assistant. Bet that's why she's so joking today.

"Huh? No, I never talked with Shirogane before. Are you still half-asleep? Do you need more rest, Yuu-chan?"

"Ugh, shut it! And stop playing dumb, I'm in no mood for-"

"P-Professor," Yashiro pulls my arm, voice alarmed.

Looking back, Pyatkh was guiding General Daizaburou to my presence. She gives me a small bow in apology when our sights cross. Sigh… Little to be done. Brushing my hair then folding my arms, I step forward as Yashiro hides again behind me.

"General, is something the matter?"

"XO, I am here to continue the talks we had before, regarding the cadet's situation."

"I believe I had already made myself clear enough. And if you're requesting permission to see him now, I must-"

"A moment, please," he says, raising a hand. A hand that has a small communicator in it, the Imperial model. "I am not who shall speak with you. I insist."

…

No… No way. This fast? *Shirogane isn't well enough yet.* But if I refuse, it's two steps back in our plans. Do I go through with this? The second I pick up this communicator… It's Her Highness, I'm sure of it. Even if she is convinced when speaking with him, if she says something that works as a catalyst…

No, think. Normally, I wouldn't be able to refuse a petition from Her Highness. There's nothing *I* can do. But Shirogane? That's another matter entirely. If he refuses, or if he hesitates and becomes weakened, then I'll be able to negotiate for more time. And Yashiro is now here, and I know he isn't high on any emotion. He should have exhausted his causal pull as the Nucleus with the recovery in the

Gekishin. The risks are never zero, but refusing this will place both of us in quite the compromising position. I'll have to trust in Shirogane to handle this well. W *ell, he did seem resolute enough to stay, to be my equal.* Refusing has me becoming the enemy in their eyes, in Her Highness' eyes no less.

… *Be brave for me one last time today, Shirogane.*

"So, who I have the pleasure to be speaking with?"

"Good afternoon, Professor Kouzuki." A silky, but piercing, voice met me from the other side of the line. Just as I expected. "I believe we haven't had the chance to share a word with each other in private yet? I am the current Shogun, Yuuhi Koubuin."

"… I see. And to what do I owe this honor, Your Highness?" But really, who are you supposed to be to have her call in such hurry? Well, considering what he told me of his relation with Mitsurugi…

"I suppose you must already know," she begins, slow and delicate as petals, yet firm and ailing as thorns. "I would be wishing you to speak to this supposed Takeru Shirogane you have on your base. And in the case he is indeed who I believe he is, I will be asking you to authorize his future transfer back to the Royal Guard."

Not even masking her intentions, huh. Short and to the point, and the habitual delicacy she has in most meetings is hiding quite the armory behind the veil.

"… You'll have to forgive me, Your Highness. Cadet Shirogane is exhausted after today's accident, and as I said before to your subordinates, I will only transfer him to the IRG if he wishes to. Furthermore, as his current legal guardian, I would be wishing to receive the formal documentation that proves Shirogane is related to the fellowship of 1st Lt Tsukuyomi, as she claimed."

"Oh, is that so? Worry not, I am planning on sending the proper documents to you, once I confirmed myself the identity of the cadet.

So again I ask, could you kindly allow me to speak with Shirogane?"

"Still… As I said, the cadet is exhausted after the accident he suffered. I hope you are aware of what this means. Even if it's you, I expect you not to bring harm to the cadet with your inquiries. He already has received enough hostility from the nobility, you'd understand."

"Who does she think she-" A momentary yell reaches my ears from the comms, a voice I believe I recognize. Shortly after, the debating ceases.

"Ahem," and the silk seems to be burning as of now, "I have been made aware of the debates that have transpired regarding the cadet's situation, Professor Kouzuki." Also, insisting on that instead of the rank. Showing she doesn't want to clash with the UN, maybe? "Which is why I desire to speak with the cadet myself, as this issue with his profiles is of grave importance. As you should know, 1st Lt Tsukuyomi is also part of my fellowship. So-"

"So Shirogane is also your responsibility, I understand Your Highness. Yet, I'd be foolish of me not to warn you. He was very tired, and not in a particular good mood, either. If you must know, he even talked back to me when we platicated."

"Oh, truly? Is he dissatisfied with the situation?"

Hmm. Quite a change in tone, Your Purpleness. "No, not entirely. He is taking this very hard on himself, however. Which is why I must ask you to be careful, to mind your words. I frankly would like to solve this matter as quickly as possible, *but I cannot disregard Shirogane's concerns.* So, if you'd allow, I would ask you to tell me if you truly have nothing against the cadet. I won't delve into the Shogunate's affair, but if there is ill blood towards Shirogane and you wish him gone-"

"There is no such thing, Professor," she says, once more dry and firm. "I wouldn't be taking this issue into mine own hands otherwise.

We wish Shirogane no harm, on the contrary… all I desire is to bestow upon him the fair reward we denied him at the end of Lucifer. Of course, the UN, and you more than anything, shall be rewarded for safeguarding my vassal until today. I had believed we had a rather amicable relationship with Yokohama, after all. Thus, I know I am imposing, asking this of you behind curtains, yet would you allow me to speak with cadet Shirogane?"

"… Alright, I'll allow it. However, please note that he isn't emotionally stable at the moment, so Shirogane might scream or curse at you. You will have to mind your words, and please refrain from referencing his past if you would be so kind. He'll certainly react negatively if you try and insist to have him return immediately to the Royal Guard, so I advise you do not purse that line. Would that be agreeable to you, Your Highness?"

"Yes, of course. Thank you kindly for your understanding, Professor," and finally, back to the soft as silk tone. Deep and true, as much as the sigh she releases away from the comms, even if I still hear it well enough.

"No, it is nothing. I am merely doing my part, *to safeguard my protegee.* Now, please do wait a moment, Your Highness. I shall go back to the infirmary immediately."

# Inflection Point - Waking the Dragon

" *Curiosity is not a sin, but you should be careful with it. Sometimes, the answers that you seek are not those you would like to hear."*

*Mana Tsukuyomi.*

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*Chapter 73:*

**Inflection Point - Waking the Dragon**

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*Just a few moments later.*

*(Infirmary.)*

**[Takeru]**

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"Cadet Shirogane, someone wishes to speak with you," the XO says while handing me a communicator, a different model than ours, with a completely frozen tone, and an even more freezing stare.

"… Who is it?"

"Someone very, very important. So do keep your manners, if you wouldn't mind."

… And what about my resting time? I just told you I can't take this shit anymore, I can't even move my legs well for fuck's sake. All things considered, if it's not a visit in person from the guards then-

Yuuhi.

Is Yuuko cutting me off to safeguard the project? No, if she were doing that, there would be no call or anything, I'd be dead already.

But she might be washing her hands off this whole business, letting Yuuhi draw her own conclusions. If I deceive her, the XO will still find me useful. If I fuck this up, she'll throw me away.

… And it ain't as if I could refuse. Makes me wanna punch something, makes me wanna puke, but Yuuko's just doing what she has to. It's either this, or maybe risking the coup to happen if Yuuhi gets cross with her.

Inhaling deep, I end up coughing a bit. Rubbing my throat as I look up, into her violet eyes, there is no hint of anything. Perfect poker face, she isn't even looking into my eyes. Not a single movement betrays her posture, her composure, and I can practically hear the bustling of fire and sparks that lay in her eyes. The XO's in business mode, and that spells bad news for me. I knew this day could come…

… but it still hurts to see her like this again. *Guess that's I'll ever be for her in the end, just another pawn.* Don't even deserve some forewarning, she wasn't even telling the truth a fucking minute ago. But, it ain't as if I can't see her angle. I can't receive a call from Yuuhi if I'm nervous or angry, so she was doing damage control. And her words then, about us being equals… She wasn't being serious, it was all to get me motivated for this. Heh, do you think I'm so easy to deceive, Yuuko? You wound me, after all I've told you of my past lives.

… Would be nice to be naive again, to truly believe she was hyping me up for the challenge that is this call from Yuuhi. Guess it's my fault, for even getting my hopes up in the first place.

Raising my hand, I take the small thing from her, nodding slowly. Yuuko, no, *Vice Commander Kouzuki* returns a subtle nod, turning away and hurriedly leaving the room. Not even a whisper, a thumbs up, a small smile, anything.

Sigh… Thanks for the vote of trust, XO.

I always knew something like this could happen, ever since the CCSE. And even if making me disappear erases the memories of my existence here, the other feelings may remain. And that, is what the XO must be concerned about. Would like to actually be able to snap at Yuuko here, maybe the anger would let me deceive Yuuhi a bit better. But there's only lag, heaviness in me.

And I can't, I won't let my weakness be used to screw Yuuko over. Sumika and Kasumi depend on her, and by extension the better half of the planet if we want to avoid the sea from swallowing Eurasia again. I can only hope my help thus far was enough to make her willing to lend my world a hand even if I fail here.

Lips shake as I bring the comms to my chin, tongue lashing back as if I had drank boiling water. While again feeling cold pokes all over me, another sigh leaves my lips as I rest against the pillow.

"… Hello?"

…

"… Salutations," a slow, silky voice says. "Am I speaking with cadet Takeru Shirogane at the moment?"

"Yes, that's me. Who… would you be?"

"Ahem… I am Yuuhi Koubuin, the current Shogun of the Empire. I am pleased to make your acquaintance, cadet Shirogane," she barely whispers, a monotone that reeks formality and bureaucracy in its docile and welcoming echo.

"N-No, the pleasure is mine, Yuu- *cough* Your Highness."

"Is… that so. Thank you kindly for receiving my call, cadet. It is most gracious of you, after what seems to have transpired."

"It's nothing, really. So, uh…"

"Yes?"

Fuck it, I'll just be frontal. "Why are you wanting to speak with me? I mean… The Shogun herself wanting to talk with a lowly cadet such as me, feels like I'm dreaming." Maybe that's the case and I'm still unconscious in my Gekishin.

… Yeah, right.

"You are no such thing," slowly, she so says. Even slower than Yuuko, even colder too. "A mere cadet may your rank indicate you are, yet it is no reason to denigrate yourself, Shirogane."

"Uh… Sorry?" This feels like when we spoke during the coup, it's the same imposing tone. Bet there's a bit of fire coming out of her eyes, too.

"There is no need for apologies. And, I do understand your concerns," going back to normal, she coughs. "For someone such as me to be calling in person, certainly you're perhaps dreading the worst. However, all I would request out of you are some minutes to platicate. Would that be agreeable to you?" Voice creaking, she whispers the question.

Get real Yuuhi, like I can actually refuse. Placing a hand on my chest, inhaling and becoming aware of my heartbeats, the coldness rests on my back. The dream of that graveyard, the voice that follows me there. For a sec, Yuuhi sounded like that just now. When she scolded me, denying I was a 'lowly cadet'. And yet, there's this quiet static on the back of my head.

… Am I scared? Are these his feelings? Or, are *both* of us scared? I mean, if I fuck this up, Yuuhi is going to… to what? The sadness doesn't pierce me as of now, those shaving ice daggers are nowhere to be found yet.

"… I suppose, yes." But I can't back down. And if she is against me, that clarification is more than enough. "What did you wish to talk about?"

"Well then," she says, sounding silky and welcoming again, "how are you faring as of now? I was told you… could have suffered some injuries during a combat exercise?" And again, her voice lowers, delaying the words a bit.

"I am feeling well, Your Highness. Thank you for sparing some worry for me."

"I see. That is good to hear," I think I hear her sighing in the distance, as if she had moved the comms away. After a sec of silence, Yuuhi coughs softly on the other side. "Now then, before anything else, I would like to ask you some questions regarding the blade you possessed."

"… Will a punishment befall me for having a Minaru Kamui on me illegally when I returned to the Empire?"

She laughs briefly, a drowned sound as if she had a hand covering her mouth. "No, that is not my intention. I believe my retainers had already expressed their words of thankfulness towards you for returning to me the Minaru Kamui."

"Then, what would you be liking to ask of me? I had believed to have disclosed all I knew of the sword already," I slowly say, trying to keep my manners in place.

Which seems to make Yuuhi groan softly for a moment, before she coughs. "Could you tell me how you obtained such a treasure?"

"I am not going to-"

"No, I am not asking for the identity of the previous holder of the blade. I am asking of how it came to be in your possession."

"… Why?" Can't help but to raise a brow at the question.

"You see, I believe you said someone at your old base bestowed the blade onto you, but no such person could have existed. I have a well

kept record of who have this swords on them, and none of them were outside of the Empire during these years."

"Um… Was the blade a fake one then, Your Highness?"

"No, the Minaru Kamui you possessed was a true heirloom of this nation," she says, never faltering nor losing speed. "As such, I am curious, if you will, at how were you bequeathed with such a treasure. Regardless of your answer, no burdens shall fall on your shoulders, Shirogane."

The image of Maya-san giving me the blade comes back. My last talk with Meiya comes back. Her smiling face, how she sulked when I called Maya-san by her name. How shining she was in her final moments, how happy she was to see the power plant working… only to die a few seconds later. Running a hand on my neck, the air slowly fills me. Licking my lips, I cough now so that I don't stutter later. But if I lie, I think Yuuhi would see through it. If I'm honest…

"There was someone… who was like a teacher for me."

"Like a teacher?"

"Yes, you see, when I was… facing a hard time someone came to talk with me. I needed to get my mind off things, so I asked that person to train me to learn how to use a sword."

"Was she a comrade of yours?"

"No, she… she doesn't belong to the military." In that world, at the least.

"… *She* ?" Yuuhi suddenly changes her tone, dropping the welcoming silk and giving birth to blue embers flaring to life. "I know of the circumstances which surround the issues of this one Minaru Kamui, yet, would you truly not consider telling me who said *woman* was? Since, according to my records, none of my House's blue blades had left the Empire in recent years."

"It's just… Sigh…" I entwine my fingers together, sitting down on the bed and looking upwards. "She was someone really important to me. And… she isn't in this world, anyways. I brought the Minaru Kamui here and she wasn't planning on ever using its royal purpose. If a punishment must be executed, then I shall bear it."

Man… Now I'm sad all over again. Even if she is similar, I'll never see my Maya-sensei again. Even if I go back to my world, our relationship will be different. Sigh…

"That is not for you to decide, Shirogane," she said, immediately, emanating quite the sparks. "There is no reason for you to-"

"Please, Your Highness!" I bow by reflex, raising my voice a bit. "If someone has to pay for this offense, let me be the one to shoulder the burden."

I remain bowing, enduring the silence. Until she exhales, quite heavily.

"… Very well, I suppose I can grant you that wish," dousing back to her prior politeness, Yuuhi then coughs. "Allow me to tell you my worry was not because the blade was a real Minaru Kamui. Perhaps, I could have extended words of thankfulness towards that *woman* for safeguarding the sword, yet perhaps you're right and we should let this matter rest."

Yeah, no. She's super pissed off for some reason. Well, the Minaru Kamui is a symbol of nobility. She's only doing her job as the Head of her House, and if Meiya got so defensive it stands to reason Yuuhi would be even more protective of the affairs surrounding the blue blades.

…

Wait a sec. She must have a record of the people that have this kind of the blades. Yet the records say not a single sword left… but Yuuhi,

Tsukuyomi-san and the General accepted the one I had as a 'real' one, despite it coming from my world…

How did the missing blade left their grasp? And, if they're not accusing me of stealing it, if they're not asking me if I know any of the previous owners, you know, like asking me if the last owner they have recorded is who gave me the sword or something…

Does it mean that 'Takeru Shirogane' was given a Minaru Kamui here? Like in my world?

"So, I suppose you won't file any claims at me over my possession of the blade?"

"… Well, that depends on your intentions. Did you ever plan to use the Minaru Kamui for its royal purpose?"

"Of course not, Your Highness. I was merely using it to train in my room sometimes, I did not know of its connection to the royalty. Once cadet Mitsurugi told me of it during the CCSE, I decided to hand it over, to prevent any misunderstandings from occurring. That is why I told 1st Lt. Tsukuyomi of it when we met after I returned from the CCSE. I truly had no idea it held such weight in the Empire, and I can only apologize to you for my folly."

And then, silence.

I can hear her breath in, I lick my lips and gulp nothingness.

She exhales softly, yet says nothing. And it makes a shiver run down my spine.

"I see, so that's what occurred," she finally says, composed and polite once more. "If you had no ill intent, I see no reason to punish you for this. You have already returned it to me, and that is what matters most."

Sigh… One bullet dodged.

"Thank you very much, Your Highness." I say, again bowing to her by reflex.

"No, I should be thanking you for your honesty," she says, in a sweet voice. "You could have tried to gain something through the sword, yet you remained composed upon finding such a treasure in your hands. It is an attitude worth praise, Shirogane."

"… Thank you kindly, Your Highness."

"Please, there is no need for you to be so stiff and formal. There is nothing to fear, I am merely wishing to speak with you, that is all."

"I see. So then, was there something else?" Of course there's something else. So, come on Yuuhi. Get your game on.

"Well, allow me to delve into the main topic. I know it might be unproper yet, do you recall what transpired during this accident?" Stalwart and firm like a rampart, clear and strong as sunlight in summer.

"To be honest, no. It's all just a blur."

"Is that so. Before anything else, allow me to clarify that the Royal Guard has no animosity towards you, cadet Shirogane. Your father was one of us, as I believe you already know, thus there was no ill will behind this turn of events," she says in a matter of fact way, as if she were rehearsing a script.

Polished poker, smooth and pleasant to the ears. And yet, there clearly is a raised shield in her wording, in her tone. Politely menacing, is what she sounds like. Reminds me a bit of my world's Meiya when she tried to argue her position in serious matters when we got together.

Without pause or waiting to take in air, Yuuhi continues in her serious monologue.

"1st Lt Tsukuyomi and her fellows were merely doing their work during the training exercise, driven by their duty as public servants, so allow me to extend their words of apology to you. And as the current Shogun, I can only hope you can bring yourself to spare some forgiveness towards them. All that has transpired since your return to the Empire seems to have been trying to you, and I sincerely hope you can one day see this nation as your home and the rest of us as your fellows again." Voice lowering, composure peeling off, Yuuhi takes a moment of silence. "My sincerest apologies, Shirogane. For it was mine own ineptitude and weakness which caused the databases to be missing your data, which in turn robbed you of your citizenship and identity."

"No, Your Highness, it's alright, really. You don't have to apologize, I understand."

And anyways, I can tell she is sorry for real on this matter since she sounds like little wood sticks thrown in a fire. Like she was when we spoke in the cockpit, lamenting the bloodshed, begging me to not decelerate. But still, so it was you who erased him, huh. Either that, or she's taking it all upon herself like Meiya tends to do all the time.

… But she sounds worried. Concerned, guilty. It's nothing like the perfect pond of composure she was during the coup, like the welcoming but still distant aura she irradiated back then. It's like she were reaching out, kind of, but were hesitating on how to tend a wound, whether to hurry or to first survey the skin with a faint touch. But why? I mean, after he felt so pained at the mere thought of her, after she turned her back on him like in those nightmares I saw.

"Shirogane?"

Hmm… These twisting feelings are pulling in the opposite direction. Like, her soft voice reminds me a lot of my Meiya. And it gives me a nice little tickle on my sides, as even during the coup merely being in Yuuhi's presence was enough for me to chill out. But at the same time, there's this shiver on my nape, the ice ants doing an imperial march on my back, running the Shirogane GP at full speed.

"Cadet Shirogane, are you listening?"

"Huh? O-Oh. My apologies, Your Highness!"

"Is something the matter?" Now her tone slows down, the sun setting in a hurry.

"No, I was just lost in thought. I tend to do that a lot. My apologies, I meant no disrespect, Your Highness," and again, I bow down out of reflex.

"I see. Worry not, I have taken no offense," she says, washing the premature sparks off the silk. "Ahem. Would you be feeling well enough for us to platicate of… what issues seem to plague your citizenship and profiles as of now?"

"I guess that's why you're calling in person, huh." Straight to the point, like a certain blue samurai I know and love.

"Yes, it might be. Yet, I was also… concerned over your health."

"Huh? Why?" Trying to lie? Think that'll work on me?

"It would be most regrettable, for you to have suffered injuries during a training. More so considering what I have been made aware of regarding your situation. By the by, were you told of what 1st Lt Tsukuyomi arranged with the XO after this accident?" She asks, slightly louder, a blade in warning, kind of.

"All the Vice Commander told me is they settled for not blaming me for whatever happened. And that the guards also apologized to my squadmates."

"Hmm," she doesn't sound particularly amused. "Then, if you would be feeling well, may I proceed to forward some queries your way?"

"Sigh… I don't mind, no." She won't let this go, she *is* Meiya's twin after all. "But first, I would like to ask you to clarify something. If you'd allow me," I add in a hurry, bowing my head by reflex.

"You may speak freely, Shirogane," Yuuhi says, without a single millisecond of delay.

"Then, let me cut to the point. Your Highness, are you suspecting me of having stolen someone else's identity?"

"Pardon?"… Oh shit, I angered her.

"I, uh, considering all that I know, and that, well, you of all people is speaking with me, maybe you had decided to follow on a claim of identity theft after my outburst towards 1st Lt Tsukuyomi. I… really cannot fault you for making such a choice," or Yuuko for not having shielded me this time. If Yuuhi's planning to erase me as he was, let's not waste time and get this-

"I am not considering anything of the sort," she affirms, almost yelling as I hear a faint slamming sound, wood crying a bit. "Were you not told that the guards present in Yokohama do not doubt your words? I was led to believe 1st Lt Tsukuyomi had even offered to aid you with your father's profile."

"So, if you don't doubt my identity… What do you want to ask of me?"

… How much I remember? How do I see you and the IRG? To pressure me until I go to the Capital? Clutching my chest, I inhale sharply. The small girl she once was held no malice towards little me. I don't think he hated Yuuhi, there is no anger towards her. But she did left him behind, and if I piece together the words of that nightmare and what I know of Shura's Dance, and that Yuuhi would have been appointed as the Shogun during the invasion since Chizuru confirmed that the prior one was still in function during the Defense of Kyoto, it would mean she abandoned him in Yokohama, in Hakuryo. That explains the disappointment, the heartache I've been feeling.

But it doesn't explain the harshness, the absolute zero of the words of the dream in the graveyard. She removed him from her fellowship,

she threw me- him away. And while she could be feeling guilty at everything that happened afterwards… Why are my hands shaking? What's this cold sweat on my neck?

"Well, it is a simple matter, in all honesty," Yuuhi says, almost inaudible through the speaker, then coughs again and raises her voice, regains her poise. "You see, I called for you to clear these misunderstandings. As the Shogun, I will take it upon myself to mend the errors the databases have suffered. And it is only natural I would wish to repay you, for revealing this error to me. It is also my duty as the ruler to ensure you, one of my citizens, is not punished unfairly for this unfortunate situation you have been made to endure. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Then, what exactly do you want?"

"… Ahem. Simply put, I would like to avoid your issues from spiraling out of control. It would be quite troublesome, if a claim was forwarded against you. Not only for your career, but for the impact it could have on the media."

"… Right," I hadn't thought of that. More bad news, and an error in the databases could lead to a huge problem for the Empire. Could make Chizuru's dad image to take a nose dive, maybe incite a certain someone to take arms in his disappointment.

*Or for the wrong people to 'offer their services' to fix the issue, when all they want is unrestricted access to classified documents.*

"Thus, mending your profiles quickly and quietly is of utmost importance," Yuuhi says, composed and calm. Maybe she doesn't even care anymore? Yeah, maybe she just wants to focus on her political career. *And wants to truly cut her ties with the jester she no longer needs.* "Am I right to assume you desire to regain your Japanese citizenship, cadet Shirogane?"

"If I said yes, would you request me to visit the Capital?"

"I would welcome your cooperation, indeed. I shan't demand an immediate departure, yet it would be for the better if you could pay Tokyo a visit."

"However, I believe you should know the risks that has for me. I… I'm an outsider, people won't take kindly to me." Much less now that I went and attacked Tsukuyomi-san like that.

"That is only conjecture on your end, cadet. Not all of us would look at you in disdain for your origins," she says, sighing a bit. "Also, allow me to remind you," and again, fire under the silk, "you are Japanese, one of us. I can confirm to you that you are no exile nor traitor, this was nothing but a mistake, a mistake caused by my ineptitude."

"Still, who would put their trust in me now after this accident?"

"I believe you should have trustworthy comrades in the base?"

"Would they want to put their own reputation at risk by being tied to someone 'violent' like me? No, I don't want that for them. I… don't know if I have it in me to even face them, to be honest."

I can't really expect everyone to turn a blind eye and remain welcoming towards me. They only gave me a chance because they thought I was worth their trust. And I fucked it all up, no way they'll see me the same after this outrage towards Tsukuyomi-san. *I always was a stranger here, anyways.* And I don't want to bring trouble to Yuuko or my squadmates, it was bad enough when there were only a few whispers. Even if they find it in them to give me another chance, if that old distrust from before the CCSE doesn't return for whatever reason, do I really wanna let my presence ruin our trainings? All it takes is someone like the gray haired bastard or that red haired bitch to come looking for shit, to pin my bad rep on my squadmates too.

What if other soldiers also take it out on them like a few tried to do to me when Takamura lent me a hand? What if they also start being

treated as American sympathizers or traitors when they welcome me back?

… I can't do that to them. I won't let my mistakes bring harm to my squadmates. Because I don't know if I can stop those feelings, those feelings he held during whatever it was I saw, that same hatred towards everything I had in the middle of Iceberg when left alone in the carnage against the unending BETA for who knows how long.

"I am grateful for your deference and kindness, Your Highness."

"Then, will you-"

"However, I believe it's for the best that I remain as a stranger here. I should shoulder the repercussions all on my own. Can't exactly push my burdens onto other people, after all." Maybe it really would be for the better to have Yuuko send me back ho-

"Utter no further balderdash!"

"E-Eh?"

"Outsider? You are nothing of the sort," she says, not decelerating nor cooling down at all. "Considering your father was once a vassal of my fellowship, there is no doubt you are a fellow Japanese. Shirogane, you're one of us and deserving of respect. Furthermore," slowing down, sounds like she's taking a deep breath, "whatever it was that caused this error was most assuredly not your fault. Was I clear enough?"

"Eh… A-Ah…" Head hurts, my fingers massage my ears but the light pain only grows.

Ugh… What is this? Eyelids start to twitch, a small dose of heat surging from my throat. The cold etches itself on my back, spreading forward.

" *You said you wished to make me and Yuuhi smile, did you not?"*

Kgh… Gasping, breathing with my mouth open, everything grows blurry, distorted for a second. Except for a face, a face that comes closer.

Is that… Meiya? No, the hair is different. But that sweet gaze looks just like hers. Familiar, for some reason. Feels like a good wind in summer, refreshing, calming, soothing.

… Smells like lavender, as if the wind were wrapping me all up in that perfume.

" *So please rest assured, you are no burden, an I shan't send you away. To me you're someone important, Takeru."*

Hiccuping, it's hard to breathe. Ears ring, a chime echoing and echoing. Quiet sunlight in my sight, despite me being underground. Warm lavender all over me, melting the cold.

" *Of course. I'm truly elated to welcome Takeru as my brother."*

… I could see it, for a second. Like a storm parting open in its eye, sunlight breaking through the cracks in the thunders. It all seeps in, the tender hold over his shoulder, how… large the embrace feels, how pleasant is the aroma of the perfume. It makes his heart leap, as all the ice thorns come off, as he embraces this older woman and gives her a kiss.

As he does the same to Yuuhi… declaring that he loves her after kissing her cheek as well.

And she replies back, returning the words, the embrace, the warmness all over him. The same warmness tickles my sides, heat finding my body as if I were taking in direct sunlight, relaxing like I would on a bathtub filled to the brim with pleasant water and some good salts too. Folded inwards like origami, a tight hold that she returns in kind.

"U-Ugh… Sniff… F-Fuck…" Fumbling about, dropping the comms, I find a tissue and clean my face.

Have to grab another, and another. Can't close my mouth, gotta keep gasping as my eyes just water. It ain't enough to release tears, but everything is blurry. Like a dart to the heart, but of the good kind. Like all the times my feelings were returned, when I spent time with my beloved. Feeling like walking on air, growing wings through the ice, cracking it all away to take flight. Heat surging in my gut, to face anything and everything that might come. Happiness, 'nuff said.

I see… That's why you were so hurt later.

So they actually protected little me? Yes, I think… *Cough.* Someone talked shit about him, and Yuuhi stood up for him. Or at least, the now distant echoes seem to indicate that. And then, that woman who looks like Meiya… welcomed him into their…

"… Family, huh."

So that's why he kept on fighting. That's why I can link with your memories so easily, because our feelings resonate, because we both miss those dear people we lost to time. I guess you and me truly are more similar than I thought.

"… Shirogane? Shirogane, are you there? Can you hear me?!"

Hm? Ah, right. I was… talking with Yuuhi. An older sister, huh. Maybe that's why they gave him a Minaru Kamui? As proof he was someone dear to Yuuhi? But… Is that still the case? Lifting the comms, a small whisper comes through. Hushed yet rushed words, before she calls out again. Who are you as of now? Are you trying to reach out like you did in this memory I just saw? Do you really care?

… It's completely stupid, to believe she's being serious. It's been two years, and after he became part of the Swordbreakers and fell to that anger. Then, why is there a small pain in my heart with every question she asks, calling for me as I keep staring at the comms?

Despite her faults, despite what she had to do, did you manage to understand and separate the duty from the person? Maybe… just like I do with Yuuko and the Vice Commander. Sigh, all that's left is for Yuuhi to also refuse to eat and sleep properly and we got bingo.

Still, now I'm sure of it. You kept fighting on because you wanted to protect… your sister, that precious friend, while still not agreeing with everything Her Highness had to do. I see, that explains the heartache I've been feeling whenever thinking about Yuuhi, and why I can't muster the same wholehearted dejection and anger towards her as I do when thinking on the IRG.

…

No, it's not like that, is it? Pursing my lips, hearing the voice that still calls out, this shiver on my sides, the palpitations that rise… You loved Yuuhi, didn't you? Just like me and Meiya, you and Yuuhi were close and dear to one another. And it looks like they… were living together, as we did since she moved in that October 22nd. Yeah, that's why he was so crushed. Yuuhi leaves him and then Shura's Dance happens. And despite that, running a hand from my neck to my chest, there's some disquiet in my breathing as the cold hands poke me a bit. You still loved her, even after that.

Rubbing my eyes and nose, I cough a bit, clearing my throat, hearing Yuuhi grow silent again. "… Forgive me, Yuu- Your Highness. I needed some time, my coughing got the better of me."

"Oh," stiff, her voice seems to halt then stutter. She then coughs yet again. "What would be the matter? Would you be feeling alright, Shirogane? Perhaps, would you prefer… to speak at another time?"

"No, it's alright. I merely had trouble breathing for a second, I haven't had anything to drink in a while so talking so much is… hard."

"Are you certain?" Yuuhi asks, slowly, holding her breath.

"Yes, thanks for worrying. I'm fine now, you may… ask away."

"Truly? I am not inconveniencing you?"

"No, I'm feeling fine, for real."

Sigh… I can't even be mad or doubt her anymore. Sure, she might have made some mistakes, but we all do. Even if all she wants is to cut her ties with 'Takeru' and prevent how a commoner was once her brother from bringing her setbacks in her current duties, there's no reason to hate her. So long as you don't want to bring me or Yuuko any problems…

"You may ask anything you desire, and I shall try to answer to the best of my abilities, Your Highness."

She sighs, heavily. "Thank you kindly, Shirogane," she says, oh, so sweetly. Yuuhi then seems to catch herself, coughing once more. "So then, would you truly not reconsider regaining your citizenship?"

Licking my lips, feeling a shiver down my back, the smell of lavender and those hands cloaking over me, I sigh as I scratch my head. Feeling my heart on the base of my neck, I look up. Let's roll that damn dice.

"If I wanted to, would you say it is feasible to do without bringing unwanted attention or setbacks to the Vice Commander?"

"… No, no such thing would come to pass. As I said, I am wishing to solve this matter swiftly and quietly. And if you so desire," she leaves the silence hanging for a second, "then I shall ensure no claims ever fall upon the XO," Yuuhi affirms, louder, and blazing a tiny bit.

"I see. Then, I guess I can consider it. What would you need to ask of me, Your Highness?"

"I will need to inquire about some personal matters of yours. Some may take us to… delicate subjects of your past. Would that be alright with you?"

"Yes, it's fine."

Seeming to inhale sharply, leaving silence again lingering for a second, Yuuhi then coughs softly. "Well then…"

She then proceeds to ask me if I remembered my parent's names and where was I living. Piecing parts of the dreams together, I told her what I recalled and she hummed as I talked. As well as all the fabricated report Yuuko crafted should contain, how I was found unconscious and gravely harmed and that the Empire refused to treat me. How UN personnel took it upon themselves to provide me with medical treatment when they found me. And how, since I couldn't find anyone related to me, I was given an offer to enlist in the UN Army in Alaska.

"-and I know Mom died due to some heart disease," even if she never was sick back home for whatever reason. "After that, I… think I spent some time in a neighbor's house while Dad was away." And I better shut up about Sumika, before I talk too much.

"Yes, that does align with what records we have left," Yuuhi says, now sounding a bit more, uh, normal, I guess. "Now then, I assume you not yet remember what was of you after your father's passing?"

"… No, I do not. And I believe it would be for the-"

"Yes, I was told of your opinion on the matter," she immediately counters, solemn and striking. "However, since I aim to not have you facing any claims, the sooner we confirm your memories align with our records, the sooner this issue will be solved. Do you not agree?"

… She's more overwhelming than Meiya, that's for sure.

"Well, I suppose. So, you… know of who took me in after my father passed away?"

"Perhaps. I would have to delve in certain archives beforehand, if you give me your agreement. Then, once you pay the Capital a visit,

we can solve this regretful error in the data banks," she then stops, coughing. "Did the XO not mention anything else regarding this matter?"

"No, she hasn't."

"Hmm, is that so," and again, fire, so quiet yet burning. "Now then, there is something I would wish to ask of you."

"Yes?"

"Before your father's passing, you still were living in the Hiiragi district, as far as the leftover data in the profiles would indicate."

"Well, yes, I suppose that's right."

"However, your father continued to serve in the IRG until his passing," she says, waiting a second before continuing, maybe giving me time to react. "So that would mean someone had to tend to you while he was away, ever since your mother passed away."

"Yes, that… makes sense, yes." So that's your angle of attack now, huh. "But that is my problem, since no records were left you shouldn't worry about it, Your Highness. Thank you very much for your time and the kindness you have showed me." So let's try and have this end here, to see how she-

"Nonsense," she hurries, slashing my words in half faster and harder than Meiya did to me during combat practice in my first loops. And again, I can feel many small embers rise in her voice, as if she herself were about to blaze up. "There is no need for you to thank me, I am only acting on what is expected of me as your ruler. However, to learn of who safeguarded you during that time would be paramount to restore your profiles, wouldn't you agree?"

"Of course. But as I said before, I think I stayed with a neigh-"

"We checked the databases, regarding who your acquaintances could be in your neighborhood," fast counter, raising voice. "It would seem Kageyuki Shirogane had an amicable relationship with the neighbor next to your house, Haruna Kagami was her name I believe, yet there are no records that would indicate she ever took care of you, nor was she hired to look after you."

… It's like walking into a field of mines, except the mines have heat-seeking abilities. Like, what? Does she have a babel tower of papers like Yuuko does at the ready to throw folders and explanations at every turn I take? Yet, if she wanted to erase me, would she go to such lengths? No, focus. The issue at hand here is seeing how much I know of his life. While I… can't deny she might be worried, concerned, she is the Shogun. The chance that she could be considering taking me off the board if I know too much is there.

But if, and that's a big if, she still cares about… him, then she should react negatively if I press on that direction. If she snaps like Meiya sometimes does, she still sees him as family and I can grow to trust in her words. If she gets as cold as I hear her voice in my nightmares, then it'll be proof she means danger for me. Plus, maybe voicing my worries will let me chill out, maybe we could, I dunno, reach some understanding? And, if they were brother and sister, if they lived together just as me and Meiya did, then Yuuhi should know I get really stubborn when something gets in my head.

So, let's roll that dice and start asking the questions here.

"Excuse me, Your Highness, but such an arrangement must have left some papers behind, right? I mean, there has to be some sort of leftover data somewhere of a contract, of someone looking after me."

"Well, as you should have read in the papers," she starts, slow and composed, yet retaining some edge, "your father, Kageyuki Shirogane, was a member of the Royal Guard under *my* fellowship." She takes another brief moment of silence, before continuing. "Thus, part of his duties, schedules, reports and earnings are in charge of

my own vassals. As such, after checking the databases, my subordinates found that not only does the house you lived in still remains to your name, as I believe you were aware of already, but part of your father's reports and expenses seem to indicate he had employed someone to properly tend to you while he was on duty."

"How can you be sure of that?"

"Well, it's a trivial thing, to be honest," she then softly sighs. "It would seem your father did constant transfers at the start of every month to another bank account, to the point that he requested the process to be automated when depositing his monthly wage to an accountant of my fellowship. This would indicate someone was indeed using said money to look after you, and after cross-referencing some data, we did not find none of your neighbors ever interacting with this account."

"… And if you knew this, then why-"

"Because you refused our aid," she says, acid, low, and a bit bothered. "Had you been willing to listen and accept our aid, this intel could have been given to you during the supposed meeting that was hosted yesterday. However, to reveal such intel would be dangerous, so General Daizaburou exercised caution. And yes," she raises her voice as my lips moved, slightly louder as if she had brought the comms closer, "he was already aware you were the son of a fellow, and was endowing caution in case this intel were to be used against you."

"I… see. So, you all were merely looking out for me?"

"Indeed, you are the son of a vassal. Which, let me remind you, makes you a fellow of ours. There is, however, something I must ask."

"Yes?"

She stops, taking in air, "Kageyuki Shirogane was a member of a squadron working under the express orders of my late Father, the Head that came before me," she tells, ice floating in her words now, slowed down to an almost halt. "So, since your father was a guard of the castle, the records seems to indicate you once moved closer to Osaka before your family managed to buy the house in the Hiiragi District. Do you remember anything of your life during those days? Of how your father being a member of the Royal Guard changed your family's life?"

…

"There is… one memory."

"Oh? What would it be about?" She asks, hurriedly as if she were a kid huddling closer in the middle of a story. "If you would wish to speak of the matter, of course," she adds a sec later, tone solemn again, back to her polite and proper mode.

"It was a day, when my mom wasn't home. And I had to pack, since we were leaving."

"I see. Is there anything… you believe is important then?"

"No, it was just… an every day look. Just me putting stuff in place with a friend of my dad." That's all I can clearly remember from his past. The rest, is just a similar feeling to what I had back home before we moved in to our house. I never could find good friends when I was little, since I was kind of a jerk and all. Until I met Sumika and the rest, and Pee Park became our stronghold of fun and games.

… That's why I reached out to Meiya when I saw her all alone. I know how much it sucks, to have no one to play with, to see others have fun at the distance. That's why I liked to mess around with Sumika so much, even if it devolved into us slapping the shit out of the other most of the time once we grew up. In that regard, I can totally get why he likes Yuuhi so much here in this world.

"… And aside from the day he first came in the black dress, when he seemed about to cry, I don't really remember anything else clearly, it's mostly just bits and pieces. To be honest, I think I was a bit too dense growing up, so if there were some issues with dad being in the IRG I probably didn't notice. Well, either that or I got upset and started kicking up a fuss, probably."

"Pfft…"

Hm? Is she… laughing? "Your Highness?"

"O-Oh… Ahem… My apologies, I merely, *cough*, I found the image amusing, is all," she slowly says, a sweet tint in the words, a light cheer in her tone. "So then," Yuuhi clears her throat, reinstating the composure of the Shogun, "you do not recall who was hired to look after you by your father?"

"No, I do not. However, if you know my neighbors didn't use the money, shouldn't you have papers that would say who used the account?"

I mean, joint bank accounts were illegal back home, and if my memory of my first loops is correct then they're also illegal in the Empire. That's why I had my own money, and why a few people made so much noise when Meiya married me back then since it was *outrageous* for them that she would give me, a commoner, a credit card to access her own account once I became Takeru *Mitsurugi* . I never asked for that, and I don't remember ever using the thing, but honey got a bit too insistent and worried in case anything happened so I took it in good faith. Like I would ever need the amount of money the Group could give me access to in the first place. Every time I even tried to buy Meiya a present, be it a painting, a set of clothes, or some Galaxy Wars collectibles, people just straight up bowed down and offered them without hesitation. I didn't even *need* to use anything other than the money I myself made, if my fuzzy recollections of my marriage with Meiya are accurate.

But, if someone was taking care of little me, and dad made a separate account he owned but someone else used, that means Maya-san should have been given a card to her name to take the money out. And those papers, the creation of the account and the request for the card, have to be somewhere, unless they burned them down to mere ashes.

The thing is, why is Yuuhi insisting on this trail? Trying to see if I am not lying? Trying to get me to remember? I mean, it would be real bad for them to openly disclose this intel, right? If anyone starts asking questions and pokes into my eventual files, they will find a link to Maya-san through the usage of this account. Or maybe they're really trying to protect me. I mean, I… would be Yuuhi's stepbrother in this world, I guess. But, considering the political landscape, what my mere existence could cause for her… keeping me erased might be in their best interests, or at least to ensure I don't remember anything that could compromise their standing. And if I ever do, it's off to the depths of Tokyo Bay.

Imagine the fustercluck that would be unleashed in this nationalistic Empire if it's shown in the media that a no-name peasant has such a close relation with the Shogun. G-Bombs? They ain't got nothin' on public outrage.

"… No, there isn't a clear record of this, sadly," she says, back to the cold tone. "It would seem this, too, was lost during the error your profiles suffered. You do not remember who was looking after you at the time?" Frozen silk, air blades slashing my ears.

"As I said, I don't. However, if you allow… I would like to ask something of you, Your Highness. May I?"

"But of course," she immediately says, bright and warm as daylight.

Alright, inhale deep. Time to step on the gas and try to lift this doubt that still lingers on me. Gulping once, I close my eyes as I speak, "Do you have any idea why the databases lost my data? It seems that, despite the digitalization, only my data was wiped from the

servers. My parents still were in there, but they had no data of ever having a son, or of marrying each other. Now there's this matter of whoever took care of me being gone… almost as if I were a traitor or an exile."

You're not the only one who can put pressure on the board, Yuuhi. Let me see what your answer is.

"It is most shameful to see this happened under my rule, and I can do nothing short of apologizing for all the hardships this must have brought you," she quietly says, her politeness as forced as my manners.

"No, please, don't apologize. But, well, do you think I-"

"You were not a traitor, Shirogane," she again cuts me off, sending the blue pyres of flame at me. "Please remember that you were found harmed on a battlefield, you were not exiled."

"But then, why did the Empire refuse to treat me when I was found then?" Immediately asking, arching my brows as I look up, I then hold my breath at the silence.

I need to at least get a clear sign, I need to break through Yuuhi's facade without showing her my hand. Whether I continue to see these memories or not, whether she still thinks of me- him as a brother, whether I can count on her aid to regain my citizenship while not causing ripples that would mess with Yuuko or Yuuhi's own duties… I need to know what I'm getting into.

And you, *my dear purple beauty*, are the only one who can cast light to these matters. So, why don't you start honoring your name, Yuuhi? Come on, *sis* . Do me a solid and show me your cards already.

Sounds like she just exhaled from her nose, real hard, as she grumbles for a sec. "While I do not know why you weren't given the treatment you deserved as a fellow Japanese, if you were a criminal,

much more data would be missing, and were you an exile, not even a basic profile would be left of you. No one can tamper the databases to such extent without leaving trails, cadet."

"And yet, my data is gone."

"That was only an error, as this Empire has always had a rather… precarious relation with machine and computers. Surely you would understand, that in uploading all of what was once done by hand some documents were bound to go missing, to be omitted," she affirms, trying to dull the formality, trying to go back to the pleasant and sweet voice. "I do not think a person deleted your data with ill intent, Shirogane. Please rest assured, you were not a traitor," and then, fire. "The only way for someone to do that would have been to hack the databases, and as your Shogun, I assure you our defenses are not so frail."

Alright, if this is how you wanna play it out, let's roll. All or nothing, one or twenty. Let's fire that bullet. At the very least, I need to clear something up.

"Yet, you cannot blame me for being doubtful, fearful of this state of affairs, Your Highness."

"There is nothing you should fear, cadet. This was only caused by an error, as I been reiterating plentiful times," she says, sounding sour and scolding.

"But there are no clear records of my life after I was ten, right? And even before that, there's no threads that could even hint at someone looking after me."

"Yes, that… is the case." She relents, after a little while.

"And, you are certain I was not a criminal or a traitor?"

"No, you weren't."

"And, as you said before, my house still is under my father's name, right? It wasn't sold or rented at any point in time, if what papers XO Kouzuki could procure are to be believed."

"Yes, that is correct, Shirogane. Your house is still yours, and there are no oddities in its papers."

"And yet, I'm registered as Takeru Shirogane in the databases?"

"… Yes, your leftover data says as much. Where are you going with these questions?" Raising her voice, sharpening her voice, a banner in warning fluttering in the distance.

"Where am I going, indeed," I say, chuckling a bit, then coughing dryly. Yuuhi groans on the other side for a second, yet remains cool and waits for me to speak. "Your Highness, don't you notice something odd in the facts we've laid out?"

"Something odd? I do not see what you speak of."

"I was ten years old when my Dad died. I should have been sent to an orphanage, since whoever was taking care of me at the time might not have met the requirements needed to adopt a children." That was what both Maya-san and Uncle Koetsu said in that dream I saw. "In that case, the question goes to whether or not I was adopted, right?" But if someone had adopted me, my surname would have changed. But it didn't, so that must mean nobody wanted me."

"And…" almost stuttering, she drew in a sharp breath, "how can you ascertain such a thing, Shirogane?"

"It's simple, when you think about it. If the data being erased was nothing but a mistake, why were the profiles of my parents were also tampered? Why is there no data of where I studied at? Or about whoever took care of me? Don't you think this is odd? If only my profile lacked data, it would be one thing. However, if… whoever took me in wound up regretting that at one point…"

" *You shall be stripped off the honor of carrying my House's emblem on your person henceforth."*

"… Then, maybe, they took the chance to send me away when I suffered an accident. So they erased all of my data to-"

"Shirogane, there is no feasible way in which such a scenario came to pass," she affirms, the fire roaring alive in her every word, harsh and sudden like a storm in open sea. "I was the Shogun when this mistake happened. And I am telling you, such a thing cannot be. So, for you to make such a claim… means you are accusing me."

"But you did no such thing, isn't that right, Your Highness?" I say, smiling at the rising lava of her tone.

"Wh- B-But of course, I did no such thing," she says, quite fast and firm. Heh, got her off guard. "Where are you going with these questions, Shirogane?"

I inhale deeply, and eyes closed and leaning on the pillow, feeling my heart clanging, I speak slowly. "Your Highness, if nobody adopted me, I would have been recruited into the IJA during the mass recruitment during the '98, being an orphan that was left with no choice but to keep living in the orphanage until I became an adult. I would have been one of the first to be forced to enlist, and if that was the case, there would have been records of my service in the IJA. Military records cannot be so easily hacked, and there would have been papers and documents left of my enlistment. But there are none that could be found, and those documents are not the responsibility of the Shogunate. While the supervision of Imperial troops does fall to the government at large, the basic papers of my enlistment and training should be somewhere."

"… Then, perhaps you were adopted by someone. Then, it is obvious why no such papers can be found. Because they never existed in the first place, since you never had to be taken to an orphanage."

"So, if that's the case, why is there so much intel missing from my profiles?"

"Perhaps, the data that linked you to your… new family was also erased during this error," the fire doused, she whispers. "I can only apologize for what my mistake is forcing upon your shoulders."

"No, that's-"

"However, if you manage to recall something, anything at all, then perhaps you could try and find whoever was that adopted you. If you'd welcome the proposition, perhaps my vassals could aid you in this quest?"

"… So, it's up to whether or not I recall anything?"

"Well, it would be easier if you could visit the Capital, as I mentioned before. Then, we can ensure such a mistake does not repeat itself," she says, suddenly shining as polished steel, back to the imposing, solemn voice she endowed during the coup.

… The same voice of the nightmare, the voice of the Shogun.

"No… This was enough."

"Eh? What are you-"

"Thank you for your time, Your Highness. I truly am thankful for your honesty, and for extending some kindness to this cadet."

"Ah, yes. As I said, it is only just I do so, for I am your ruler. Do you still feel well for us to platicate?"

"Yes… if you want to."

"Truly? I can tell your voice seems distressed, ever since we began speaking of whoever looked after you. Perhaps, are some memories troubling you? If you'd welcome the notion, I could lend you my ear as an apology of sorts for letting your data be deleted under my

rule," she says, bright and sweet once more, despite it sounding more like an assertion than a suggestion.

Yuuhi isn't even letting me see a crack in her speech. In a way, this reminds me of my talk with my world's Meiya after all that mess. At first she was like this, not letting emotion show up on her complexion until I told her of what happened at the salon. But, can I… No, should I even mention anything to Yuuhi? I mean, she could take it the wrong way. And I still don't know if I can, or want, to request her help and accept going to Tokyo.

"Shirogane? What is troubling you?" She asks upon my silence, voice fading.

"No… It's nothing, Your Highness."

"Do not lie. I can clearly hear how afflicted you are," quick to counter, she then sighs. "There is no reason for you to hold back, if you so wish I can listen to your woes. Much has been piling on your shoulders, and it is understandable you'd be distraught at what we're discussing. After all, these two years you were away must have been very hard for you, I'm sure," she says, molten back into the Shogun's composure. "As equally trying they must have been for anyone who knew you."

Ouch, way to drive a knife into me. She's conflicted like I am. It's as if both of us were walking on a floor littered with spikes, trying to get on top of the other without screwing things up. *Or she could be trying to deceive me, Her Highness has no need for someone like me besides her.* However, if he was to her what I was for Meiya, then Yuuhi probably couldn't be 'Yuuhi' with anyone other than him. All she has been for a long time is the Shogun. Yeah, makes sense. No way she'll slip up in front of me, what little emotion she has shown should be proof enough this is hard as hell for her.

I mean, if Yuuhi spent two years away from the one person she could trust in, someone who was a brother to her, while having to

face all that happened with the fallout of Lucifer with the G-Bombs… and then I suddenly appear out of-

Wait a second. Two years? That's… just like my Meiya. Just like back in my world. Yuuhi and 'Takeru'… were away from each other for two years before meeting again.

N-Nah, must be just a coincidence.

"Shirogane, are you still there?"

"Ah, yes. I was thinking, Your Highness."

"So, would you allow me to be your listener? If only for a brief moment?" She says, almost pleading.

… Yeah, just like back in my world. If anyone were listening in, they wouldn't think it's the Shogun of an Empire talking with a nobody.

"Well, thanks for offering. May I really impose on you, Your Highness? You must be very busy, after all."

"It is no imposition, for I am offering myself to you. My aid, I mean," she corrects herself, almost stuttering.

… How cute, didn't think I'd ever hear Her Highness be so… human, I guess.

"Then," licking my lips, I sigh as start drawing circles on the sheet, rubbing my feet together, "allow me to accept your kindness." I cough, she gives a hum to indicate she's listening, so I lick my teeth once over. "It might sound weird, but I have been having some very vivid nightmares lately. I don't really remember what I dream about that well," necessary bullshit is yada yada yada, "but it always leaves me feeling awful. Forgive the expression, but it makes me want to puke my insides out. It's… a hollow, crushing feeling that envelops me."

"Is that so? Do you believe this to be tied to your past?"

"… Yes. The nightmares do worsen at times, when… I think of my family."

Yuuhi exhales, slow like a leaf after a gust, softly humming to my words. I wonder what she thinks of this. Well, there isn't much else I can do now. I just gotta wrap this talk up and-

"Shirogane, might I ask you something?" She got all serious now.

"Of course Your Highness, what is it?"

"Have you ever felt as if… as if you had cold hands all over you?"

… Wait, what?

"Excuse me?"

"Huh? Did I stutter? I asked you if you ever felt as if cold hands were all over you. Have you ever felt a sensation like that?" Yuuhi repeats the words, in the usual serious and simple tone, sending me into a downwards spiral of confusion.

Why is she asking me that? How… How…

"How do you know that? *Why* do you know that?"

"Eh? Ahem… I didn't knew of it, I was-"

"Why did you ask me that question, Your Highness?" I lean forward and furrow my brows at no one, my hand holding the comms shaking a bit.

What is this shit? Why is she asking me that? The cold hands… How could she know of them?

"You see, someone… close to me once described his pain in such a way," she sharpens her inner blade, returning to a frozen silk tone, making me twitch and grip my sheets. "Going by your reaction, I think you have experienced something similar at the very least."

How could she- There's no way she should- Why would she even- No, calm down. Breath in, hold it, count to ten, let the air go. Pheeew… Remember, me and him are somewhat similar. He might have used a similar term to describe his pain, that's all there is to this.

No, wait. The way she said it, someone close to her, and how she specifically mentioned regarding my nightmares… Did this world's Takeru feel something similar to that? Cold hands all over him when suffering from something, from… foggy memories?

… Just like me back in my world?

Chill out, it's just a similar way of speech. We are similar in that regard, we use similar term to refer to stuff. That's all, that's all. Calm down, you can't screw up in front of Yuuhi.

"Yes, I have felt like something of the sort at times."

"Is that so," a faint, sharp whisper. "I believe you are subject to very high stress levels. I advise you not to ruminate with such oppression over these matters, Shirogane. You are a fellow and, would you welcome my aid, you'll regain your citizenship in but a few weeks."

"That might be, however-"

"You have already suffered enough for this unfortunate situation. Do you happen to possess motives not to wish to reclaim your identity, perhaps?"

"No, I'm merely being cauti-"

"I understand you could be fearful, but I assure you of this. You shall be in no danger, Shirogane. After all, as I said before, I wish to mend the data banks posthaste, and as the one who alerted me of the state of the system, you are deserving of my gratitude."

"T-Thank you, Your Highness. However-"

"And also," she stops her stride for a second, inhaling sharply, "I have a debt to repay to you."

"What do you speak of?"

"Certainly you know what I am talking about. You safeguarded… Mitsurugi during the CCSE, and you have been shouldering the blame for that incident all on your own," she says, quick and piercing like a gunshot. "It is truly worth much praise, the poise you display despite all the setbacks you face, Shirogane."

"Ah, no, it's not really that big of a deal… I'm just taking responsibility for my own actions."

"And still, you safeguarded your squadmates most valiantly. And let us not forget, it was mine own folly what caused your data to be missing for so long. Thus, is it truly such an impossible request, for you to *accept my feelings* with open arms?"

A sudden, brief yet strong, shock runs through my arms, slight pain in the back of my head. "H-Huh? E-Excuse me, Your Highness, what did-"

"As I've been saying, I would be wishing to aid you solve the issues that plague your identity, Shirogane. Would you *take my hand* and accept my offer?"

It courses through it all, down to my nape, lunging for my heart as I can feel it bash itself against my chest. "Ah… Ah… I, uh, I guess?"

"Was that a question or an answer?"

"I mean…" Shit, I can feel my face is on literal fire. She's so, so much more forward than Meiya. And she's already quite frontal herself. Sigh… Calm down, deep breaths. "Will I really be safe if I go to-"

"I shan't allow anyone to bring harm to you," she says, a hail of light and fire blasting me wide open. "As your Shogun and Regent, believe me when I say you shall be safe. Please, would you allow me to help you?"

Heartbeats clang, clang and blast against my neck. Knees quiver, ankles feel a jolt coming through them and my legs.

"It is only fair, after all," she insists, much impulse in her charge, as if it were my aerial acrobatics. "You were denied proper treatment when you were at Death's door, it is but a small show of appreciation for the fortitude you've displayed thus far despite what has come your way."

"I… I guess, but… I'm not- I mean…"

"You've suffered enough on your own, Shirogane. These two years must have been arduous for you, to survive all on your own without memory of your life. Even if it won't be the same as before," losing ardor, her voice lowers to a whisper, "perhaps there are people awaiting news of you. Ever since that accident that took your memories, ever since that August 5th you have been fending for yourself. And I believe it is time for you to receive the helping hand your nation denied you when-"

"… What?"

Static, sudden static on my ears. Emptiness in my stomach, as if someone had given me a sucker punch and I was out of air.

"Huh? I am saying, it is only fair for you to receive our aid, the aid we denied you when we… left you to die, refusing to tend to your wounds."

"Your Highness… you said August fifth a moment ago, didn't you?"

"Hm? Yes, whatever is the matter?

Hands begin to shake, wires cutting off and making me lose balance. Creeping through the back of my head, that coldness once more surrounds, my breathing becoming bound and causing me to cough.

Why that date?

"Shirogane? Whatever is the matter?"

"No, I just… Why August 5th, Your Highness?"

"Huh? Why, you ask? It was the day Operation Lucifer happened, when you were found- Ah!" She suddenly stops, small groans, or squeals, or whimpers leave her mouth, as if she couldn't close it. Yuuhi tries to speak, but can't. She stutters, halts a word in the middle of the syllables, as if her throat was also being constricted shut.

Did Lucifer happen on that day? And the Yokohama Hive was taken out by the G-Bombs deployed that day, then. But that would mean, if we follow what Yuuko has told me, all we know of him…

This world's me died on the same day I recovered my memories back home?

Well, not the same day, since it's four years in the past compared to when I came back to myself during the tournament in my world, but for it to be exactly the same date… It has to be a coincidence. Yeah… It has to be.

I gulp but I can see how my sight is starting to tremble as the static noise returns to my ears, as everything seems to go double.

"Shirogane? What is the matter?"

No, no, wait a fucking second.

The day he died was the day… the conduit would have formed in this world. When the G-Bombs dropped, the exploding energy caused a reaction with the Reactor, that Sumika was connected to.

Her strong desire to see me again allowed her to somehow 'see' in between the rift between space-time that was formed when the G-Bombs dropped and that created the original conductor, the link between our worlds, which eventually made 'me' appear.

That's what Kasumi said at the end of Kashgar. In exchange for a large amount of G-Elements, my body and mind were slowly brought into this world. I became a physical manifestation of the pipeline uniting both worlds.

… So he died on that day, in that specific place. He died where I was 'born' into this world.

Is that merely a coincidence?

… Can I say it's a coincidence when causality has been screwing me up ever since the loops started?

In a way, one could say my 'old' self died when I recalled these memories of my loops. There was one Takeru that entered the arcade machine and another entirely different being came out of it. If I had never seen the BETA, I might have never recovered my memories or physical state. So in a way, the 'Original' Takeru completely fused with the data of the 'Alternative' Takeru at that point, and since my body was the same since I didn't die at the end of the loop I remembered everything and returned to be how I was back then, with the changes that had happened in those two years. And this world's Takeru died when… the conductor began to flow into this world. His existence was… at the place where the conduit formed.

Color drained from my view as Sensei's words come back to me. I felt as if I had just taken a dive in the sea, as if I were looking into a kaleidoscope full of shifting images of exploding shapes and contracting depth.

… He died at the exact place the highway connecting worlds opened up.

I can tell my mouth is hanging wide open, as my jaw clenches and tenses up as if I were crushing ice cubes with my teeth. My hands shake, everything blurs in front of me, I put a hand on the armrest of the bed to not fall to the floor.

No, no, no, no… Remember what Sensei said. Even if the conductor can bring data, it can't link itself to other versions of himself. Right, right. So this is… just… a coincidence…

"Shirogane! Are you alright? Are you feeling dizzy?" I have not the strength to answer Yuuhi's question.

Bringing both hands to the back of my head, as if shielding me from an impact, it does nothing to halt the hammer of cold that clangs, and bangs, and slams, and hurts, and hurts so much. My fingers claw at my scalp, the root of my hairs as one eye waters and twitches.

" *What are you saying? The conductor cannot link itself to other versions of himself. It can replace them I guess, but since it can never receive data from the world it's currently in, there's no way for you to fain any kind of memory from other Shiroganes that existed in that same world, unless you managed to merge yourself with an alive parallel version of yourself. And you definitely cannot have received the data from a parallel version of yourself, you could only receive the memories of parallel worlds you yourself have lived through."*

"Ugh… No, it can't be… It has to be a lie…"

"Shirogane! T-Takeru, please, talk to me!"

Yuuko, my world's Yuuko, had told me about it before all this shit began. I can only see clear memories of other versions of myself that are lives I myself lived at some point. It's not a parallel version of me, it's a road I took on another branch that I forgot due to the loops and the trauma of death blocking my memories. And that as the Nucleus I can only share memories 'unconsciously'. So, at most, I'd inherit a

fear or a sudden trauma like I had back in my first loop, fainting to the threat of BETA despite not being a native to this world or having ever seen one of the fuckers at that point.

But that means… since I've been seeing his memories, vividly, that-

"No, wait a fucking second…"

I haven't been 'seeing' the memories. Yuuko… Yuuko calls them 'recovery' sessions, doesn't she? And Kasumi is 'bringing them to the surface'.

…

"Ahaha…"

"Takeru?"

"Ahahaha… Are you fucking kidding me? Haha… hahaha…"

**You're telling me I'm actually him?**

Clutching my face, gasping for air, I close my eyes. And think, on what we spoke of. At all I know. Yuuko did… seem a bit worried when I told her I had regained some memories when I came back from the CCSE, and at first she was very much against me focusing on them. Now that I think about it, she hasn't referred to the affairs of this world's me as 'his' but… has always been saying 'you' when doing so. Many times she said it, 'you're the only Shirogane in this world'.

But that can't be… How the fuck could I be him?! The leaks… The leaks can't change the past! It's all just a coincidence, we're just similar in some regards… and that's it…

… But, Yuuko, the one from my world, did say the transfer of my data would take time. So the highway would remain active. Even now, my world must still be in some sort of space-time position that has it sharing more data with other parallel worlds. So…

I sit down, holding my head as everything came back with the fierceness of a tsunami. All the little details I was ignoring, all the stuff I thought was weird, for some reason, comes rushing out of the back of my head and into my mind's eye. I feel like the cold shower decided to pay me a visit, just that my whole body is on vibrator mode, shaking under the torrent of freezing water. Because, when you line thing up…

He promised to share his birthday with the one who was the 'heir' of the family. Like in my world.

It's been two years since 'we' saw each other. Like in my world.

We lived together. Like in my world.

He was made to join the high echelons of society. Like when I chose Meiya in my world.

He became family to Yuuhi. Like I was when marrying Meiya in my world.

Going by what I saw of his skill on the memory of the Swordbreakers, he knew the Unending Waterfall style. Like I did in my world.

So that would mean Maya-san was his teacher. Like in my world.

And all points to him being given a Minaru Kamui. Like in my world.

No, no, think, Takeru, think! This is all just a list of coincidences! Just another difference to the… to the…

The list of differences, the list of things that are different from this world to the other BETA worlds I looped in.

Tama has an archery dojo. Like in my world.

Chizuru's mom's shaped her life. Like in my world.

Mikoto is a super fan of technological stuff and mechas. Like in my world.

Tsukuyomi-san seemed to have a thing for young boys, going by a few memories I saw of little me. Like in my world.

Kei knows how to make yakisoba sandwiches. Like in my world, despite she not knowing how to do so in any of my previous loops until I taught her.

But this is… This can't be. But then that means… that means… No, it's impossible! The past cannot be changed! And I… And nobody… Back then, nobody forgot about me! When I was in my world, no one forgot about my existence! Or, was that because I'm a stronger Nucleus? Right, this isn't one of my usual loops. If I were to vanish, for even a second, then people would start forgetting about me, starting from the most simple things until there's nothing left.

…

"Wait… nothing left?" No… This has to be a joke.

Because if it isn't…

According to Sumika's story, the Takeru that's native to the BETA timelines dies protecting her from the BETA. But I already know that's not the case this time around, because he keeps on fighting until Lucifer. He doesn't get captured by the BETA.

One could say… he takes an *alternative* road, disrupting the flow of events. And in that road, he joins the Swordbreakers, which seem to be a top secret unit from the IRG. Almost like… a special task force, one could say.

Like… Like I did last loop, when I joined the Valkyries and changed history.

And then, once everything was over, I disappeared and eventually everybody must have forgotten about me. Maybe Yuuko deleted all of my records in that world to not have to deal with a dead man being in the mission log once Akane and the other survivors forgot I existed.

"Hahaha… It's… the same…" the same that happened to his profiles.

"Takeru! Takeru, pick up the communicator!" Yuuhi begs, the comms lay on the floor, out of sight.

She still remembers. So, that means this world's me didn't 'die' or 'disappear'. If he had been nuked out of the world by the G-Bombs, then I would have absorbed part of him. Had he been another entity altogether, then I wouldn't be able to remember his memories with such clarity. But since I do, that means… a-at the very least he was a strong a Nucleus as me, but no one forgot him in these two years. Because… once the highway opened up, the integration was complete?

…

No, there's something I'm forgetting.

Everybody can be a Causality Nucleus, Yuuko just came up with that term to explain my enhanced ability to sense causality and hold onto my data after all the fuck ups of my loops, after being exposed to G-Elements and the flow of data for who knows how long. So, if my life is being mirrored… when the transfer started… Where did I end up on? And, why would this world mirror mine so much?

Because, on this side of the highway… there was nothing as heavy as my memories for two whole years. While my world had two years of grace while my data tried to flow into me, there was nothing protecting the other side of the highway from sending data from my world to the rest of the multiverse. Scattered, it might have had no

place to go to, no receptor to flow towards. But the second I put myself back on causality's rail during the transfer…

No, hold your fucking horses! Why data related to me? No, this stuff isn't even related to me! Why does Tama have a dojo here?! Why does Chizuru's mom suddenly have such an important role in her life?! Why did Yuuhi became close to him, when we never had anything between us in the other worlds?!

"Haa… Haa…" Biting my lips, I taste blood. My sight comes back to normal as a shiver runs on my back, and I keep on gasping for air.

If everything is mirrored, if this is causality trying to balance some leftover data then…

I made a promise with Meiya because she was sad because she had to become the heir of the Mitsurugi Group. And, due to that connection, I received a Minaru Kamui and I got trained by Maya-san. But it was thanks to her deal with Raiden-san that she was allowed to come live with me in the first place, and he was the one who sent the blade to me in the first place. He was also who gave me the final blessing to properly become Takeru *Mitsurugi* .

In this world, the position of 'heir' is occupied by Yuuhi. So, if a balance has to occur, I'm placed near the heir and everything else follows behind? But why didn't she die? If the data came here… She should have died, to have him make the promise with Meiya! Or is it because I never met Yuuhi, then I couldn't bring her death data here? And anyways, as Yuuko said, the leaks only happen due to an emotional connection we feel. So, Yuuhi felt something similar to what Meiya felt for me in my world despite never having met me, not being affected by causality?

… Then, if his life… if he truly is me, and causality follows me around trying to balance everything, trying to integrate everything into a single timeline…

Why did he became so enraged?

Why did Yuuhi leave him alone?

Does that mean that… Meiya left me… in another…

"Ugh!" Pain, in my chest, in my heart. Shrinking, I bend over while clawing at my chest. My lips part wide open, but I can't bring any air into my lungs.

"Takeru! Takeru, please calm down!" Someone says nearby, I can't hear it well enough.

" *I know not who you speak of. Lower your armaments, otherwise I shall be forced to subdue you in the Empire's name,"* a cold voice says through static, a darkened shadow with eyes of red seeming to stand in the distance.

Calm down… It's all just a mistake, I'm being stupid again. The leaks can't change the past. And I'm nothing like him, I can't be him, there's no fucking way.

… But Shura's Dance was just like Iceberg, right?

No, no, keep it together! How the fuck would- Why would this- I am not him! I… I never had that many clashes with the IRG, I don't hate them as he did. Yeah, I… Ugh…

Crumbled buildings, sinking in a sea of gunpowder. Where once there was a bustling center of a city, now lays a crater filled to the rim with gore and wreckage. A calm voice from far away, a voice ordering everyone to retreat.

One blink, it becomes a port. A port ravished by battle, by battle of TSFs against protesters. And the same calm voice reassures, that it was a fucking mercy kill.

Another blink, a damaged hospital comes to view.

And the corpses, of Uncle, of his wife.

… of his children.

I… I… He lost everything… as I did during Iceberg. But… But I never had to go through his missions, I wasn't some hateful man-hunter in any of my loops. I never had to face losing a little child to the war. I never… I never even…

" *I was always… waiting…"*

"Huh?"

Weight, on my arms. Too thin, to soft. Like sand, slowly slipping out of grasp.

A strong gaze of dark purple, arms folded and imposing in its compact posture. *"Your actions precede you, Shirogane. And whether you favor this or not, you have become a dark armed dragon just as I now that you've tamed the Kusanagi, something no pilot could accomplish. Our views matter little, such is the reality we face. And the war we must wage is not always an honorable one."*

Looking down, around, everything looks dim, dark. Narrow and foggy. But in my arms, there's… someone. Looking up at me, lips shaking when trying to smile. And a hand, a hand with all of its fingers extended in prayer, raising to my face.

A small look of cerulean, a very petite and slim figure, an even smaller voice which quivered in place. *"Thank you very much, for caring after me. Not all of us are, well, treated as fairly by you Naturals. Um, I know I… may not be very useful a unit, but whatever meager service my ESP can offer, it is at your disposal, Shirogane, sir. Just… please do not medicate me, this unit shall make an effort to remain useful and active for as long as it's able with minimal maintenance required. Eh? Don't sweat it and chill out? What does that mean, sir?"*

That hand, that small hand reaches my cheek. The fingertips hold onto it as if it were some old relic or something, despite how it

quivers, how the hold seems to be about to break apart. And yet, a single teardrop leaves one of those eyes, those light brown eyes that keep their sights locked onto mine.

A small nod, from a dead serious expression, a gray hand raising in salutation. *"Allow me to thank you, for shielding me before in front of the Captain despite my prior… allegiance. I know we have had some friction since we met, but I shall repay these favors one day. And don't worry, I've got your back. You need anyone gone, my rifle and lenses are at your disposal. I'll be leaving the Captain to you, however."*

And yet, as I raise my own hand to clasp that frail one clutching my cheek, I find nothing. I find my own cheek, the hand is gone.

" *I was always… waiting… for you…"*

It falls to the ground, dangling loosely in my hold. The eyes that returned my gaze, unfocused. The head, also dangling, falling backwards. The weight, the frail weight which was on my arms suddenly falls completely on me. Lips which were trying to force a smile, which were sealed a moment ago now are relaxed, barely open.

Cold.

Silent.

Stiff.

… Dead?

Bringing it closer, trying to embrace it, I find my sides as I fall onto the sheets. Running my hands, I only find my own body in the bed. There's nothing here.

Why? Why does this hurt… so much? I couldn't, we couldn't… talk, spend time? Why?

*Vanishing from my hands, slipping from my grasp, fading away.*

*All I did… all the effort… I never even knew you…*

*No! Don't close your eyes!*

*I won't accept this!*

*This ain't over yet!*

*I can save you! There's still time!*

*"Guh. Grah…" Yet, no matter how much I claw and twist my arms, I can't move. Stand up… Break all these things that keep me tied, I gotta hurry!*

"Yashiro, are you sure he- Shirogane? H-Hey! Calm down, don't throw the IV, you're still weak!"

" *No! She ain't dying tonight!"*

"Shirogane, calm- Fuck! Why now of all times?!"

*I try to raise, despite my legs not responding, thrashing against what doesn't let me stand up. Something binds my arms, a tall shadow towers over me.*

"Cadet Shirogane, please come to your senses!"

" *Shut the fuck up! Ugh… Let me go!"*

**Whack!**

**Bam!**

"Ugh! From where do you summon such strength? XO, hurry with the sedatives!"

" *Get out of my way!" I can still feel her heartbeats! She's still alive!*

"Homura, quick!" *Another set of hands, another hold twists and bend my arm.*

*I can't fail here! You all can shove your salvation and enlightenment up your asses! I'm burning your garden of EDEN to cinders, you'll fall to Nidhogg's fangs! Move, Kusanagi! Take off, dammit!*

*I thrash and thrash, screaming and bending my fingers, yet I can't break free from whatever is holding me down. It's fading, I can't… I can't hear it anymore, the sound of her heartbeats.*

*I ain't failing… not after finally… getting to see her! We're not falling down, not while I'm h ere! Even if pure darkness is in the horizon, I will brave through it. I'll endure any hardship, if it's to give you the happiness you deserve. Because if your future is crying, it's up to me to make it smile!*

"T-Takeru-san, please calm down!"

"Yashiro, don't get close!"

"No, he's hurting! Takeru-san, look at me!"

*A small, tingly feeling on the back of my head. Huh… That face… But, you shouldn't-*

*Ugh! A sudden pain, in my neck. My throat closes up, I can't breath well. Suddenly losing impulse, everything starts to become blurry, distant, dark.*

"Just what on the Heavens happened here? Kouzuki, did you inject-"

"I did nothing! I told Her Highness to-"

"Takeru-san?" *The small voice, the voice that shouldn't be here whispers.*

Something soft caresses my face, yet I can't see well what it is. The loud sounds keep on echoing, the more they do the more my ears

hurt. That same small kindness grabs my face, lets me down on something soft, covers me with more softness. And again, as I groan against the numbness, that small thing ruffles my hair, a small tingly feeling calming down the pulse on the back of my head.

Can't feel my fingers or my legs, everything's slowly… just fading…

Hm?

In the distance, a small spark. A spark of blue, or cerulean. As if tracing the horizon, not daring to get closer. A small star in the night sky.

The more I look at it, the more it seems to get closer. The more I focus on it, the more it feels like it runs away. And as if swayed by waves, everything fades to black as something keeps on caressing my hair, or my face. All except that little light, which gets closer and runs away, which I follow after, as other lights swirl in my vision, as it feels as if I were floating.

Maybe… for just a little while… I can take a break…

… and follow this light, wherever it takes me.

---

" *As I wonder if I made the right call just now,*

*all that's in front of me are things I do not want to see,*

*but end up doing so anyway*

*Sometimes, I think that it'd be better to just straight up gouge my eyes out…*

*Just like how I used to think I didn't have a single person I could trust in*

*A billion gazes are locked onto me,*

*too complex numbers I cannot hope to decode*

*As I traverse this interconnected world all by my lonesome, I try to wriggle and run from it all*

*However…*

*My limbs flail and fight, thrashing about to wake up from this nightmare,*

*but all I manage is to fall even deeper*

… *And all the while, the devil itself keeps simply smiling my way*

*Screaming beyond the glass, where is my real self wandering to?*

*My fake smile twist and breaks*

*as my tears drizzle the screen, melting it apart*

*My swirling heart is just like a downwards spiral, that can only gather sadness and tragedy deep within*

*So take me somewhere far away,*

*to some distant world and then*

*Please embrace me, and just let me believe…"*

Satirize, by Kotoko. Rasen Kairou 2, by Age.

# Mind's Off Matter

***5th Arc: Black Moon Lilith***

*Chapter 74:*

**Mind's Off Matter**

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*December 3rd. Almost 4 PM.*

*(Outside the Infirmary.)*

**[Yuuko]**

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"I did nothing of the sort, Vice Commander," Her Highness says, unrelenting in the welling animosity she hoists. "We were platicating amicably, until suddenly Shirogane began to whisper to himself, to speak through his teeth, under his breath, before suffering another nervous outbreak. Perhaps, due to some sort of medication given to him beforehand?"

"Your Highness, I will have to remind you no such thing was done to him. You yourself requested to speak with him in such a hasty manner, there was nothing odd conditioning Shirogane towards yet another nervous breakdown," I sigh, short yet heavy, shaking my head at the obnoxious intensity she refuses to douse. "On the contrary, it is because you ignored my warning and decided to speak with him of his past that this turn of events occurred."

"No, that is not the case," she affirms, not altering her clashing tone. "While we spoke of his past, Shirogane remained most composed. Fearful at times, concerned by what could have been of him, yet never did he lose his poise and manners. It is almost as if… you harbored motives to prevent Shirogane from reconnecting with his past."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Your Highness. Please, let us not fall to animosity."

She briefly scoffs, inhaling sharply afterwards. "Then, why have you not told him of how was he recovered in detail? Why have you refused to inform him of what 1st Lt Tsukuyomi and General Daizaburou disclosed to you moments before?"

Lunging straight ahead, almost like he would during a fight. The usually pleasant and docile visage of a clear sky that Her Highness resembles has been completely covered by clouds, an unending arrow rain coming down harshly.

I suppose, my hunch was correct. Perhaps, more correct than I thought. To ignite such a reaction from her, to not have her revert to a polite approach as we speak, maybe he is far more dear to Her Purpleness than I had anticipated. Her not being in his home world made me think that the parallel couldn't be this strong. But what if, somehow… just as Mitsurugi was his lover in other timelines… Could you possibly have been Her Highness' first love? Either way, whether it is that or if she sees you as a trusted fellow, it is odd that she hasn't lowered the venom in her tongue one bit.

"… I did not deem revealing such intel at the moment to be wise," I say, resting against a wall. "As you should have heard, Shirogane was rather exhausted. Disclosing so much information while he was in that state wouldn't have been beneficial in the slightest. I would have welcomed the opportunity to speak more with him, but I believe you spent more time platicating with Shirogane than I did after he regained consciousness."

"Is that so?" And finally, a slight pause in the aggression.

"Indeed. Also, allow me to inform you that I had revealed to Shirogane part of the report that details how was he found and recovered." Or at the least, I did tell him way back when about how he was a Royal Guard here, and how according to Yoroi he perished in Lucifer. It's not like I'm lying, per se. "And while both us were quite

flabbergasted at the findings, he didn't have a particularly negative reaction back then."

"Truly? Was Shirogane… not wishing to delve into what had been of him then, who he was before?"

"He was curious, yes. However, at the time there were other more immediate concerns, such as his training and the coming CCSE, so he didn't press further. Allow me to tell you he was composed when we spoke of the matter, even at the possible prospect of him having been found injured near a battlefield. So," I cough, licking my lips, resting the back of my head on the cold wall, looking up at the illumination for a moment in silence, "I believe it is quite fair to affirm that what has caused this last outburst is directly related to what you chose to mention to him, Your Highness."

"… You wouldn't be thinking on casting blames on my person, would you Vice Commander?"

"No, that is not my intention," even if it is the truth and nothing but the truth. "I want to know what caused him to react in this way since, as I told you, Shirogane has shown much grit during his stay in this base and I find it perplexing that he has suffered two breakdowns in a single day. Certainly, we both wish to avoid this from repeating itself?"

She inhales sharply again, as sharp as her tone remains. "Yes, we are in agreement on that regard."

"Then, do you have any idea what could have caused him such distress to send him into shock once more? Did he say something that you believe is connected to his suffering?"

A moment of silence passes, then another. In the stillness of the hallway, I can only wait.

"There was one particular subject," she begins, voice shattered to pieces, "that brought him much anxiety, it seems."

"And it was?"

"… The date of the accident."

"Huh? The date?"

"Yes, I…" another moment of silence, a heavy and long sigh afterwards, "I made the folly of mentioning Lucifer to him. I had thought he to be aware of that, considering how he spoke of his records. I may have spoken on emotion at the time."

"I see. Was he distraught at the mention of the mission?" Perhaps, another memory recovery? Did he see his final moments and that's what sent him into that rampage?

"No, that was not what caught his attention. It seems… he was concerned more with the date, as I said before. He explicitly asked me why had I mentioned the date of 'August 5th', and that seems to be what brought him much anguish even before my miss of bringing up Lucifer," she says, cracks within the composure she tries to revitalize.

… But what does this mean? Why that date? Shirogane was completely fine when we discussed these subjects. A memory of Lucifer… No, it doesn't look like it. He'd have reacted far, far worse to the recollections of Shura's Dance then, or during our previous talks on the subject of his memories. Am I forgetting something? I do not think so, however. Then, an oversight? *Did he mention something I didn't pay mind to? What could have caused him such grief? And above all else, how can I prevent this from happening again? Anyways, he needs time. Even if it means clashing with Her Purpleness for a moment, even if my image in her eyes suffers slightly, I have to shield Shirogane, buy him time to adapt to whatever it is he saw. I cannot lose…* such an important asset, after all. He still has to tune the 00 Unit before anything, and I require him in good spirits for that task. It's all for the good of Alternative IV, even if there are inherent risks with denying Her Highness the immediate transfer she would wish.

"Sadly, I can't think of a reason why he'd react in such fashion to a mere date," I admit, ruffling my hair. "In any case, I believe it is clear Shirogane is not yet ready to learn of his past. I suggest we wait a few-"

"I wholeheartedly disagree with you assessment, Vice Commander," she says, once more hailing a banner, raining the arrows. "Shirogane was most welcoming of my inquiries, never losing his composure despite being speaking with me, the Shogun. All the contrary, he even endowed in confidence, forwarding bold inquiries my way at times. If not for my careless mention of Lucifer, I am certain he would have welcomed the notion to visit Tokyo and regain his citizenship, under the proposal I detailed to you before."

"… And while I understand and welcome your support to keep this under wraps, it's clear something must have gone wrong during your talk of his past. I cannot have *my protegee* suffering from traumatic flashbacks unnecessarily, you'd understand," I affirm, frowning to the overhead lights. She seems to groan softly in disagreement, pronouncing not a word. "Is giving Shirogane some time such an impossibility, Your Highness?"

"… No, that is a reasonable request," she says, low. "However, it is concerning you insist on this trail that recalling his past is harmful for Shirogane. You truly wouldn't have ulterior motives regarding this arrangement?"

"May I ask what has you believing such things?"

"Oh, please. It is but a simple matter," the premature softness then fades, fades as she seems to exhale quite heavily from her nose, "after all the date of his arrival coincides perfectly with the beginning of all these new developments you've been devising as of late. Quite convenient, isn't it?" Thawing the facade, not dulling the animosity, the sting of the arrows. "More so considering I was notified of a certain… training exercise among Gekishins, where one pilot seemed to possess piloting quirks resembling those of my vassal. What do you have to say to this, Vice Commander?"

Sigh… Now of all times she has to bring this up? "It is nothing you should concern yourself with, Your Highness. It is true, Shirogane was tasked with bringing certain intel to me. I can grant you proof of it, of the morning in which he arrived at the base with a peculiar bag filled with precious intel for my research."

"It is truly gracious of you to offer this intel, XO. Thank you kindly," she says, briefly returning to the frequent polite and sweet demeanor I know her for. "However," it lasts only a second, though, "why would you allow Shirogane to pilot, if he was nothing but a cadet at that point?"

"… I am afraid I cannot disclose the motives behind my decision back then."

"Whatever does that mean?"

"That it is tied to… the experiences he suffered from before arriving to this base."

"Huh?! A-Are you saying-"

"Furthermore, he insisted much on taking part in the developments, I'll have you know."

"… How do you mean? I do not believe he could have made himself useful to your project."

"Sigh… Believe me, as the General said, Shirogane can be quite stubborn when he sets his sights on something. Such is the reason why he's currently doing paperwork under his punishment, solely because he refuses to sit still. I do admit, it would be saddening to lose such a promising recruit. Is there truly no way in which we can reach an agreement, to have him remain in the UN?"

"Do you value his services so much, XO?" She asks, low, burning.

" *Can you at least rest for a while, just a short while? Please, Yuuko?"*

"He has been of much help, and I'm certain you know it were his actions what prevented the CCSE from… taking an ugly turn," I sigh, shoulders sagging. She takes a moment, but gives her agreement in the end. "And despite all the issues that plague him, I do…"

" *If I said yes… Would you laugh at me?"*

A small pressure on my lips, a hand holds an elbow closer to my body as I close my eyes, "… appreciate his work thus far. Also, *to ensure no claims of identity theft fall on Shirogane's shoulders,* nor any unwanted eyes fall upon someone who was supposed to be dead, we require time to facilitate the restoration of his profiles. In the meantime, perhaps we could allow him to relax, to not focus on what has been piling much stress upon his shoulders."

"I suppose, you bring up a fair point," she relents, the poison subsiding. "However, as I said before, I would be wishing for you to return Shirogane to the IRG. And he should learn of his situation, in the short term."

"I agree, I do not want to have this issue lingering for long. If you'd allow, would you welcome a proposition?"

"What would it be about?"

"Perhaps you have already been notified of this, I have requested a meeting with both the UN's HC and the authorities of the Empire."

"Ah, yes. I was told of it briefly. Yet, this meeting is for matters related to your research, is it not? I am not certain if I… favor you entangling Shirogane in these discussions," and once again, the viper does not hide. The morning star seems more than willing to fall down to dark aggression upon me.

"My apologies for not being clear, Your Highness. However, allow me to be frank. Shirogane has already involved himself in these developments." More due to the fact that, without him, there would be no news to speak of, frankly. *And despite all that he has given me, all I can do for Shirogane is parley for some time.*

"XO, I believe I am being clear on my wishes. I do not wish for you to entangle Shirogane to-"

"As I said, I am not entangling him. He insisted on offering his aid, and I merely put him to the test a few times. Honestly, I wasn't expecting him to deliver such results."

Besting the Valkyries with the first prototype of our new parts, and an XM3 that still required much debugging. Then, he finishes the consoles along Yashiro, and later sends the Valkyries to the drawing board while he was merely 'playing' around. All the trial runs for the XM3, his performance in Niigata, his training run with Yashiro, the data that the memory recovery sessions have granted me to both polish the last details of the 00 Unit, to iron out a theory I had almost given up on, and to let me see a theory that I hadn't even thought was possible. And that's still with him not having disclosed what he learned from another me. *As well as his constant worry, as tiresome as it gets, over my health to the point of carrying me to bed and tackling my office's papers despite his exhaustion.*

I cough, grasping my chin. "So, I shall give you a small tidbit of data. Thanks to Shirogane's odd piloting quirks, I devised an improved OS for our TSF."

"Huh? An… improved OS? You speak of something similar to what was attempted with the Shiranui-1c?"

"Oh, no. It is not hardware-bound as that unit's OS, even if it follows a similar purpose. I shall disclose all the important details in the upcoming meeting, where I also plan to push for a trial run to be held, to gain authorization to use this OS in the future deployments that my project will require." I leave the silence hanging for a brief

instant, curling a strand of hair as I look up. "If you support the proposal, then when the trial run is held you could pay a visit to this base under that excuse. And then… you could have a private talk with Shirogane."

"… Is that so? Do I have your word on this arrangement?" She slowly asks, as if holding her breath.

"Of course, Your Highness. You have been most welcoming of my proposals thus far, and I do not wish to sour our relation due to these accidents that have happened today. That is why, I must ask you for time. Allow Shirogane some respite from all the meetings, wait until the trial is held and then you can speak with him face to face." Leaving the wall, pacing in circles, a finger raises my chin as I smile. "Of course, I would be truly grateful if you could give him your blessing to remain serving in the UN. However, in the end, it's his choice. And in this way, we do not have to risk anything with a visit to the Capital."

"… And he can return to Tokyo in our retinue afterwards, hmm," she says, softly yet not sheathing the sword. "An exchange of favors, I see. It is reasonable, I suppose." Sigh, finally got her to- "However, it does not feel appropriate to me. This proposition could be taken as you… abusing Shirogane's condition to have me agree to your petitions in the meeting."

"Excuse me, what?"

"In the first place, Shirogane is an Imperial Guard, a member of my fellowship," back to the storm clouds, back to the venom. Short of stopping, she presses on after a small inhalation. "And while I would normally not waver when it comes to supporting your project, it does not seem proper of you to try and gain something through the pain of my vassal."

…

"… If anything is bringing pain to Shirogane, it is whatever lays in his past, Your Highness," I slowly say, losing the neutrality, endowing a viper of my own. "I am merely looking out for what would be the best way for him to recover his memories without suffering further harm," nodding to myself, my lips curl upwards slightly, " *since I am his current legal tutor* ."

"So, what you're saying is… Shirogane's current condition is dire enough for you to suggest such a long delay in notifying him of his identity?"

"He is weak, yes. I am taking proper care of him, Your Highness. Even more so now that I know… of his ties to the nobility. Yet, due to what eyes linger on him, exercising caution is a must, you'd understand," I say, she seems to groan for a moment. "And this arrangement I proposed is what comes to mind when thinking on how to facilitate a meeting between Shirogane and a possible representatives of your fellowship. Furthermore, I am not asking you to support my developments. I'm merely requesting a chance to show their worth to the rest of the Empire, that is all."

"Thus, I could refuse the adoption of this new OS you've devised?"

"It would be most regrettable, but I would in no way demand such out of you, Your Highness. And, if it would please you, as a show of support to you from Alt. IV… I am willing to take the XFJ Project under my wing."

"Eh? XO, are you being truthful?" Quite the surprise she now feels. As you tend to say, like a penguin in a desert.

"Yes, I am. Takamura has already delivered results with the railgun, even if a preliminary test is yet to be held." I sigh, the silence unnerving, my steps delaying in my circles. "I am aware of the possible repercussions leaving the project under my hands could cause. Yet, if you request such out of me, I am willing to resume the development of the Shiranui Second." And anyways, Shirogane already gave me a good idea to further refine our units, not only the

TSFs, with his revamped control scheme suggestion. If I manage to at least get one Shiranui-1C and have him pilot it, who knows what kind of crazy advancements I'll be able to make?

She remains silent, some hushed whispers coming through the speaker, nothing concise or discernible. So long is the wait that I stop walking, growing dizzy of the circular trail, and again lean on the wall by the door leading to Shirogane's room. Slightly opening it, his breathing is calm again. But it's too slow, and he's paling a bit. Perhaps he only needs some rest, but I cannot risk it. I should notify Marimo that he won't be taking part of the trainings tomorrow.

"Vice Commander?" She calls out.

"I am here, Your Highness. Do you have an answer?"

"Yes, allow me to thank you for your proposition. It is most benevolent of you, to shoulder my nation's developments despite all that you must deal with," she says, finally reverting to the proper and polite tone I know her for.

"It is nothing, I am merely doing my part," *to protect Shirogane, the one who can tune the 00 Unit and aid me the most.*

"Regardless, forgive my prior words if they were abundant in hostility. Now then, while I would welcome your proposition to restart the XFJ Project, I cannot simply hand it over."

"I understand and agree with your concerns, Your Highness. I was thinking on having 1st Lt Takamura lead the development once more, as she had done while in Yukon, and procure some test pilots from my ranks. Would that be agreeable to you?"

"Yes, it is reasonable. However, would you allow me to make a counteroffer and another petition?"

"… I'm listening."

"First, there were some concerns raised about possible volcanic activity," she says, heaving a sigh, collapsing in true concern. "While I would wish for our own troops to tend to the civilians whose lives are endangered, we cannot meet the numbers required to scour the area in its entirety."

Perhaps due to that rumor of BETA stragglers in the mainland? If their forces are split in two, then yes, it would be impossible for them to have enough hands available. This does sound like one of the accidents Shirogane brought up before, a natural disaster we could use to appeal to the Shogunate. Heh, he doesn't know how right he was about that. *Yet another thing to thank him for.*

"Are there inquiries coming to the UN's offices already?"

"There should be, I believe. Would you be willing to spare some of your troops to aid the relief efforts?"

"Yes, it is no problem. I assume, two or three TSF squadrons along the foot soldiers would suffice?"

"Indeed. Thank you kindly, Vice Commander," back to the polite tone, clearing away the arrows in threat.

"It is nothing but a small exchange of favors, considering the deference you've shown my project through the years. There was something else you wished to ask, yes?"

"Indeed, regarding the formation of the crew for the XJF Project," she takes in a small breath, a small brief silence. "Would you welcome the two younger members of the Tsukuyomi family to join the team of pilots?"

"I… suppose I could consider it. Would you wish them to be your eyes, then?" It makes sense, she wouldn't lose the chance to have her own people involved.

"Indeed, if you so allow. I believe their expertise will benefit the project greatly. However, I suggest you include other UN pilots, preferably not related to the nobility, to avoid courting controversy with the other Regent Houses," she says, welcoming yet sharp.

"Hmm. You're correct on the last point, and I suppose I'd welcome the proposal, if only to not have to take pilots from other squads."

"And, if you'd allow a petition?"

"Yes?"

"Could you allow both cousins to oversee Shirogane's activities from now on?"

"… I do not believe it wise, Your Highness. He already has a bad reputation on this base, to be tailed by Royal Guards would-"

"They can be some sort of guardians, if you may," she insists, raising her voice slightly. "Consider it my personal apology to both you and cadet Shirogane for my careless mention of Lucifer. The cousins can officially be assigned to watch over Shirogane as he moves around the base during the duration of his punishment, to ensure no one dares to lay a finger on him. If questions are raised, they can immediately answer that they are the apology the IRG is giving the cadet for harming him during battle, and they themselves can dispel any ill assumptions anyone could have," fast are her words, faster the justifications she employs before I can even retort. While I welcome the fortification of Shirogane's shield…

"Your Highness, might I ask why do you propose this arrangement?"

"Well, as you should be aware of, Shirogane was trained by the Tsukuyomi House. He was a good fellow to both cousins, I can only imagine the dismay they must be feeling at the moment," flickering lights come off as she sighs, the slow and honest dejection she feels coming to the surface for a moment. It lasts little, as she coughs and any ripples in her voice are erased instantly. "If it'll take time for us to

facilitate a meeting, then the cousins can keep Shirogane safe until then. Also, they might be able to aid in the recovery of his memories while interacting with him."

"Yet, I would expect them-"

"Yes, they shall abide by the rules of your base, XO," she immediately counters. "Were you to grant my selfish request, I shall inform them of the arrangement so that you can debrief them at a latter moment with the way in which you'd allow them to safeguard Shirogane."

"Very well, I can agree to those terms. Consider your petition accepted, Your Highness."

"Thank you kindly for your understanding," she says, a minute pause as she coughs. "I suggest we leave the matter of the XFJ Project for after the trial run of this OS, to avoid rushing our moves."

"I agree. I am too busy for the moment, and procuring the 1C units would take time regardless. I shall move some strings from my position to inform the right people I would be willing to hear a proposition for the XFJ Project, so that you do not have to compromise your standing." A small gesture of thankfulness, lowering my neck a bit is not beyond me if it nets me this many benefits.

"That is appreciated," she answers. "If you'd allow a final query before we end this call, how would cadet Shirogane be as of now?"

"I took a look at his room a moment ago, he seems to be resting easy for now. If there are any updates, I suppose I shall relay them through the younger Tsukuyomis at a latter time."

"Is that so? Well then… I shan't take more of your time, I am certain both of us have much to arrange." Taking another pause to breath in, restoring the bright and polite tone, she then coughs once again.

"Thank you kindly for understanding, Vice Commander. I shall do what I'm able from my position to fulfill my part of our accord."

"As will I. However, there's something I must ask," I sigh, grasping my chin as I look at the door to his room. "I know you said he was a fellow already, however, was Shirogane merely another trainee to them, just the son of a prior vassal?"

"… Why would you be asking this?" Once more, coldness and venoms.

"Curiosity, one might say. I understand he might have been a good soldier when in service of the IRG, and that his father also was a worthy vassal, however-"

"Vice Commander," ailing venom, horns to war, "I know not what spurs these inquiries, but allow me to tell you this. If anything were to happen to Shirogane, if even a single hair of his is hurt while under your care, all of what we discussed thus far will be no more."

"Your Highness, with all due respect, I'm merely inquiring on his situation to avoid further damage to his psyche. It is only-"

"No, there is nothing to debate. Do not think yourself capable of beguiling me. What is it that you truly wish to ask of me? Why am I overseeing his safety in person?"

"… If you wish to get to the point, yes, that it is exactly. I am not demanding vast details, I'm merely… surprised, that you would confront me of all people in such forwardness."

"I could say the same of you," she lightly scoffs. "It is most odd you'd shield a mere cadet to such extents, even in front of the General of the IRG, and myself as of now."

"I am merely returning the trust Shirogane placed in me. It is only obvious I would safeguard someone who has given me plentiful satisfactory results since he has arrived."

"Well, I could say the same," she replies, still very much caustic. "Shirogane was a good fellow, to the Tsukuyomi family, to General Guren, and…" a small pause, another second to inhale sharply, "and he also was a good fellow to me."

"What do you mean? Was he-"

"All I'm willing to say is, Shirogane was a personal vassal of mine at one point, as perhaps you have been notified of already. For me, to have learned that he was left to die is nothing but a mockery. I am merely extending to Shirogane the fair helping hand this nation denied him when he needed his fellows the most. It is only obvious a Regent would look after its vassals, and that is what I am doing as of now."

Not a single opening to interject, no hesitation in the wording either. And not even a hint at dousing the caustic poison that crept up from behind the veil of politeness. Just a fellow? Don't make me laugh. Maybe… No, what maybe? It's clear as day, she… she and Shirogane had *something* going on between each other. Either that, or it was a one sided thing. He is kind of dense at the most inappropriate times, for some reason.

"… I see. I believe I understand now, why you chose to act as you did. Your Highness, Shirogane is in good hands. I assure you of that."

"Sigh… I hope you are correct," suddenly losing impulse, where did her previous bravado go to?

"Is something the matter?"

A moment of silence, a few drowned whispers on her end, before she once more sighs. "Vice Commander, allow me to bestow you a word of warning."

"… Huh?"

"I am not only directing this negotiation myself due to my worry over my vassal. To be honest with you, Shirogane wasn't particularly fond of the UN Forces during his time serving me. Beyond my wish to safeguard my fellow, there is also a concern towards your safety and the project," she says, with not an ounce of hesitation, again.

"Are you suggesting Shirogane could… harm me or my research? Forgive me, Your Highness, but I do not believe that to be the case," I state, placing a hand on my hip, speaking firmly from my stomach. "He hasn't shown himself to be such an aggressive person, nor has he displayed any discontent with his position or comrades. *Shirogane has shown an admirable mental fortitude, for all that he has been enduring not once has he acted out of line or lashed out to anyone else, despite having opportunities to do so.* "

"Yes, he is that kind of person, who would shoulder it all on his own," for a brief moment, a slow, sweet tint returned to her voice. "Yet, you must beware his silences."

"His… silences?"

"Yes. Has he ever remained staring at you, saying nothing, for long periods of time?"

"Perhaps, at times."

"Sigh… That was what he did, whenever he was growing anxious, angered. I do not wish to have his presence in your base compromise the project, to have the eyes that might be set on him to use his woes regarding the databases to strike at Alt. IV. It will already be arduous enough to have to restore his data in the first place. Thus, I've no other choice as of now but to leave him to you," she says, once more growing serious. "However, I expect you to handle Shirogane with care, more so if he grows angered or if he comes seeking answers to you. An offense towards him equals an offense against my very person. Am I being clear, Vice Commander?"

"… Of course, Your Highness. Then, I suppose my propositions will receive your blessing?"

"Indeed. I shall do what I'm able from my position to ensure the next meeting is resolved peacefully. You have my word that the required papers are already being prepared to make a reality of what we have agreed on," she says, then sighs. "I shan't take more of your time, for I am sure we both are very busy. I hope our next talk can be held in… more auspicious circumstances."

"As do I, Your Highness. Until the coming meeting."

"Indeed, until the meeting," she says, not lowering the edge until the very end, until the call is ended.

Sigh… Leaning on a wall, I bring a hand to my forehead. Damn it all, this almost got out of control. Well, I suppose I got more than I bargained for now. Shirogane will stay, with enough time to regain his health. The pickles will now work as bodyguards for him, so I don't have to deal with that or any idiotic soldiers trying to pick a fight with him. Her Highness will favor my petition, and perhaps even grant me the XFJ Project so that we can work on that little idea Shirogane had. Now I don't have to negotiate as deeply as I thought I'd have to with Takamura and the Takatsukasa fellowship. And I was already planning on sending Shirogane and his squad to the relief efforts for this supposed accident with the volcano, but now I can use that to prove to Her Highness I am truly on her side for as long as she's in mine. And once Shirogane aids the people in this mission, and takes our troops to victory in the XM3 trials, I'm sure his image will gradually get better and better.

*I still should let him rest tomorrow, without bringing anything up until the afternoon. He needs the rest, so that his mind can recover. I suppose it was obvious, he'd have to take a break from the constant work he's been doing since the CCSE. And now I can ensure he'll stay here, as well.* I do have to notify Marimo he'll be taking the day off, I have to go return this communicator to the guards, and there are a few papers to tend to still. Well, this took quite the dangerous

detours, but now everything is on the rails again. All that's left is making sure Shirogane remains in good health and-

"Yuuko!"

Turning around, Yashiro is guiding Motoko-nee towards me. Her steps lower in speed, she takes out the cigarette she was smoking and throws it in a nearby bin, then rearranges her glasses as she comes closer. Yashiro joins her hands, giving me a bow with a bit of tension in her lips.

"My apologies for the delay, Professor."

"It' alright, Yashiro. I was just done with the call, too. So Motoko-nee, I believe Yashiro should have told you what I need you for?"

She shrugs, one eye closed. "Oversee his status? I don't know why you're so concerned, or if you were being serious before. But don't worry," she then smiles, a subtle nod my way, "in the worst case, it's a matter of doing a blood test to verify which medicine we can give him to aid in the recovery from the shock. I'll work on the assumption that anti-depressants are a no-go, is that fine with you?"

"Yeah, that's a good call." I nod, folding my arms. After what the sedatives did to him in the cockpit, it's for the better to keep him away from those. "At least the injection Homura prepared calmed him down immediately, so you can work from there."

"Roger. By the by, there was another downwards spike in the G-Radiation," she says, business face in place. "This time, it was localized in the perimeter of the base. Do you think this is related to the boy?"

"I see, so that happened." Would explain his outburst, another forceful recovery of memories. So Her Highness ended up using a catalyst, huh. Was it that date in particular, or did his thoughts went elsewhere? "I think it is, for now. When you give him a checkup it should turn out something, anyways."

"Yeah, I suppose. Is there anyone else in the room now?"

"No, I dismissed Homura as well. This little matter remains between you and me, and nobody else can inquire about it." I remain staring, unblinking.

Yet, Motoko-nee smiles and chuckles lightly. "I understand, don't worry. Who would have said you'd be this overprotective of your pawns? Maybe there's something going on here?" She asks, raising a brow, raising a finger on each hand and slowly tapping them a few times.

"Ugh," sighing hard I shake my head, a hand massages my forehead, "this is not the time for jokes, Motoko-nee."

"Ahaha, sorry. You do look a bit too stiff and serious, though," she says, placing her hands on her pockets. "So relax a bit, he's in good hands with me here. It is a bit of a bummer that I won't get to talk with the famous Shirogane, but what can we do? Maybe you can let me ask him some questions once he wakes up?"

"If they're actually related to his condition, you may proceed once he regains consciousness. But, I warn you," grasping my chin, taking a step forward as I frown, my eyes remain fixated on hers, "if you do or say anything stupid in front of-"

"Don't worry, I won't," she sighs, waving both hands down. "Can't believe you let Mitsuko talk with him face to face yet you get so defensive in front of me. I'm just curious, is all."

"Sigh… Just do your thing, Motoko-nee."

"Yes, I will. After all, I can't exactly talk with the guy if he's out of commission. And don't worry, I won't scare him out when we share our first words."

"At least he didn't get a bad impression of you from the call, so just keep it professional, okay?"

"Huh? Yeah, of course, but…"

"What?"

"What do you mean by 'call'? You never allowed me to talk with Shirogane before, Yuuko."

…

Her eyes don't veer from mine, there was nothing impeding the flow of her words. She stands still, raising a brow at my silence, so she isn't teasing me this time.

"Motoko-nee, stop messing around. If you want me to say it, fine, I'll play along. I'm talking of the call he answered yesterday while I was asleep."

She blinks in quick succession, lips twisting a bit. "Yuuko, no one picked up the phone yesterday."

"… What are you talking about? Shirogane told me he picked up the calls you made, and told you I was resting. That's why you sent me a mail, right?"

Again, blinking fast. As she was opening her mouth, Motoko-nee slightly hunches forward while rubbing her forehead with two fingers. Eyes squinting, lips quivering fast as if she were talking to herself. Not meeting my gaze, she looks up as she keeps stroking her head.

"No, I… I was calling you for a report, but you didn't pick up. And then… And then I figured you must have retired for the night, so that's why I sent you a mail instead asking you to take care of yourself."

"… Excuse me, what?"

"What is it? I'm telling you, nobody picked up the phone yesterday."

"But there's no way that's-"

"P-Professor," Yashiro calls for me, she was by the door to Shirogane's room.

Standing still, she turns around. Shaking subtly, yet enough to be noticeable, she looks as terrified as when he showed us those memories of war the day I snapped at him.

"What is it? Is he having another breakdown?!"

"No… I can't…"

"What is it?!" I move past her, gripping the doorknob and blasting the door open. Inside, the same image meets my eyes. "He's still sleeping soundly. What is the issue, Yashiro?"

"… I can't sense him."

"Pardon?"

"There's no… no color. I can't hear him or sense his aura. It's as if…" she then holds her hands close to her chest, looking down, crashing down, "as if he weren't there."

What? But… I look back at the bed, and he's still breathing as calmly as before. Taking slow steps towards him, I place my hand on his chest through the sheets. His heartbeat echoes into my hand. I then grab one of his wrists, and his pulse is still there. Running a hand over his face, near his nose, shows me he is still breathing.

"Yashiro, are you certain of what you're saying?"

"Y-Yes. I… There's no color around him, at all," she insists, grimacing a bit when looking his way.

"But he seems fine, perhaps he's in a too deep slumber due to the medication and the shocks?"

"Yuuko, are the appliances connected to the guy?" Motoko-nee asks, walking to the other side of the bed, looking at what the readings

showed.

"Yes, they should be." Looking at the cables on his chest, at the small threads connected to the headband he always used when recovering memories, there's nothing wrong here. "Do you see something odd?"

"… Come here, and you'll see it too."

What has made her be this serious? Slowly pacing to the other side of the bed, brushing my bangs off my face, I look at the… monitors. One has his heart rate, which remains stable along the other numbers shown alongside it. The other monitor, the one connected to the headband… which is supposed to be tracking his brainwaves…

… is coming up empty.

…

"Yuuko, are you sure that thing you made isn't broken?" She asks, leaning closer as she taps her glasses.

He said once, when he gave me the theories before Niigata… about the experiments I did to him on another loop, on how he works as a conductor…

"Yuuko, are you listening?"

That when he started seeing dreams of his world, his consciousness was slipping between timelines. That we couldn't track his brainwaves when that happened, and that I relied on Yashiro to keep his 'self' ingrained to this world while he brought the theories back from his world.

Grasping my hair, feeling my mouth start to open, I look at him. Sleeping so soundly, as if he had already had a good fill of food after

a day's work. But the monitor still shows no signs of his brainwaves, and most importantly-

"Yashiro, do you still not feel anything from him?" I ask, staring. She shakes her head, lips crashing down as she touches one of his hands.

"Yuuko, what is going-"

You're kidding me, right?

His consciousness is slipping away? At this time, after I finally managed to negotiate a ceasefire with Her Purpleness?

Something touches my shoulder, shaking it. "Yuuko, snap out of it! What's the problem?"

What am I gonna do if he doesn't make it back? Will he wake up now? But, if Yashiro can't feel anything from him, then there is no way she could anchor him to this world. Yet, he could merely be-

No, wait.

Motoko-nee forgot about speaking with him last night.

And Shirogane said that, if he were to leave, people would forget about his existence.

And this isn't him just dreaming… he was absorbing too much G-Radiation, seeing too many memories at once perhaps.

And if he couldn't break the link, if he couldn't halt the recollection, if he couldn't dissociate the memory from the present…

… What if his consciousness remains linked to that memory, to the link to the timeline of that memory?

"Yuuko, please, tell me what-"

Placing a hand over what was shaking my shoulder, I take it off me as I walk up closer to the bed. The headband is shining in a pattern, recording information. Which means, it isn't broken. Which means, his consciousness isn't here at the moment. But if his aura also isn't here, it means there's no anchor to him in this world. That he simply started to… seep out to another world.

… Motoko-nee had said something odd, that she hadn't talked to Shirogane when she called before. Does that mean he was starting to slip while in the cockpit? Or, is this related to his greater absorption of G-Radiation?

… What if I'm tackling this in the wrong way? What if he's absorbing more radiation to make up for the deficit he's spending? If he's seeing many memories, traumatic and heavy ones at that, he'd be using up his own pull to do that. And the fluctuations of G-Radiation, the physical manifestation of the conductor's and nucleus' influence on the material plane, indicate Shirogane started to absorb more and more out of nowhere. And if he were to deplete his reserves… it is possible his existence could vanish once more. After all, so long as he remains as an anomaly, the only thing tethering him to reality is his own willpower and the excess of G-Elements that should have been used to allow him to exist in another timeline. Not only that, but if he is this world's Shirogane as I think he is, then he truly should be dead.

He's dealing with the pull of another world that tries to regain its Shirogane as well as the data of this world which says Shirogane should be dead. When he's unconscious and after having exhausted his G-Radiation on two toilsome memory recovery sessions.

…

"Motoko-nee, take Shirogane to 22F. Connect him to the device and begin treatment immediately."

"Huh? W-Wait a second, by the device you don't-"

"Yes, you know the one," I nod, her eyes part open wide. "Yashiro, you help her take Shirogane there in a gurney or something. I'll go handle what duties I have left, I'll go there once I'm done."

Nodding to them, Yashiro quickly returns a nod before going to the other end of the room to prepare the equipment to take him to the teleporter.

Motoko-nee grasps her forehead, sighing heavily. "Yuuko, what is going on here? Can you-"

"Motoko-nee, what should you be doing right now?"

"I'm just asking-"

"Preparing Shirogane to take him to the causality sensor, exactly. Could you be going there, right this instant? Yes, thank you very much. Now, if you wouldn't mind, stop staring at me, and get moving already. Yashiro should know what to look for, you connect him into the machine and check his brainwaves as well as his G-Radiation. If it's too low, start the machine and make sure he's taking it in."

"Taking it in? You want him to absorb more radiation?"

"Are you just going to repeat all I say like a parrot now? Come on, you have your orders. Prepare Shirogane to take him there, and *make sure you take good care of him* . Am I being clear? Good, thank you, now start moving."

Squinting my eyes at her, I nod and fold my arms before turning around and going to exit the room. As the door slides open, I take one last look at Shirogane. He seems to be sleeping as calmly as he was this night in the sofa, just without snoring. It seems as if he still were here, about to wake up any second.

But that might not be the case. Sighing hard, I shake my head and make my way into the hallway, towards the elevator.

This has got to be a bad joke, now of all times. *All because I didn't warn him of the sedatives, because I put him in a call with Her Highness…*

No, focus! There's a few duties left on my timetable before I can excuse myself to my 'office'. I also have to leave word in case we receive a call asking for our help on the relief efforts. In any case, there's still time. His body is still here, and I still clearly remember what happened thus far.

Yes, we… were talking in the medbay about how I didn't tell him anything, and he was pained about not recalling what he had seen. Then, I tried to motivate him by promising to treating him as an equal.

Phew… I still remember every second we waste puts him in greater risk, and also can make people forget about him. A small silver lining is that this happened during the day, so people being awake and after he made such a show in the mock battle should work as a deterrent to his data flowing out of this world. Sigh… Thankfully, I haven't activated the 00 Unit yet, so Kagami being alive is another safety net we have available. But that only confirms the status of the loop. Damn, and since we haven't made any testings to have him jump to other timelines, I have abso-fucking-lutely nothing on how to halt the memory leaks. Shit…

"Yuuko, hey!" Turning my head back as I stop walking, I see Motoko-nee jogging towards me. "Come on, wait a second here. Tell me what's going on, and why would you do something as crazy as taking the boy to that machine."

"Motoko-nee, what did I tell you to do?" I ask, folding my arms.

"Huh?" And she, for some fucking reason, opens her eyes and stares at me dumbfounded. As if this were an amusing joke, not even taking my order seriously.

"I had ordered you to take Shirogane to the underground causality sensor, didn't I? So, if you wouldn't mind, could you obey your orders and go back to the medbay?"

"H-However, at least tell me what-"

Taking a step forward, raising a hand to a wall, my stomach turns as I frown. "We don't have time for explanations! *Shirogane , to the underground. NOW!"*

"… Any specific directives you'd like to share with me, XO?" She asks, standing in attention, sobering up.

"I already told you an overview of what to look for. I'll finish my active duties and then join you later. On your way, now," I glare, she nods and turns around to jog her way back to the medbay.

Sigh… Fuck, damn it all. Ruffling my hair, I also pick up my pace to the elevator. Accident after accident, what the hell is today? Reaching the end of the hallway, I slam the button and the light confirms the descent of the machine to my position.

But yes, it was all just an accident. For all I know, I'm overreacting. Yeah, he might just be seeing something in his dreams and Yashiro can't sense his psyche.

…

He wouldn't leave us hanging, after all. Shirogane wouldn't… turn his back on us now.

The door opens, I enter and slam the button to my office and the whirring of gears starts the way down. I throw myself against a wall, sighing hard, covering my sight, feeling my heartbeats clawing up my neck.

*He is he even safe now? If he recovers too many memories at once, his psyche could be damaged. Or worse, he might revert to how he*

*was in this world when he served Her Highness. And that's not all, if he somehow ends up in another world, if his mind slips fully from here, what happens if he ends up in a timeline without the means with which to return here?*

*… What if he ends up in his home world and in the weakness he must be feeling after all the issues with the IRG he chooses to try and stay there? He'll only suffer more, he may not get another chance to remember all of his knowledge if he dies.*

"*… You better be safe, Shirogane . This is just a little accident, a little slip up. And it was my fault, so I can admit that. You can say it, that I fucked this up for not listening to you. So… you better come back to me. Don't you dare… to be really gone… "*

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*Two hours later.*

*(B22F. Teleporter's Room.)*

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The door slides open as I pass my ID on the reader, and I quickly go inside. The sound of clicking immediately reaches my ears, the smell of the smoke clogs my nose.

"Oh, hey," Motoko-nee waves at me, with a dead serious face. "Did you finish everything already?"

"It's all taken care of, or delegated to the right people. So," I fold my arms, looking at Shirogane. He's still unconscious, fastened to the machine as Yashiro holds his hand, eyes closed, "I suppose there has been no progress."

"No, he hasn't woken up nor have I managed to get a reading on his brain. Sigh…" her shoulders sag, she takes off the thing she was smoking and turns it off. Coughing once into a hand, she leans on the control panel, letting me get closer. "You were right though, once

I made a scan on him the boy was almost pristine clean of radiation. As if he had just gotten to the base."

"What? Was it that low?"

"Yeah, his levels are back to what's normal for those who remain here now. It's… uh, well, really odd to see it happen in front of me," she scratches an ear, tightness in her expression. "Yuuko, now that you're here, can you tell me in the Heavens is going on here? Because between missing brainwaves, G-Radiations sponges and the little girl being unable to sense anything, I think I'm dreaming right now."

"Sigh… Fine, I'll give you the summarized version of it." So I sigh, ruffle my hair as I tell her of the theories, and of Shirogane's status and how is he affected by the anomalies, saying it was due to him surviving an explosion of a G-Bomb on Lucifer instead of the truth.

She rubs her forehead, eyes lost upwards. Within her usually relaxed and clear eyes, only a small thread of light was visible as her features tighten further.

"So," she tentatively starts, licking her lips, "due to the Nucleus' pull, many memories he lost are rushing into Shirogane through the Conductor's link. And to sustain that connection, the G-Radiation he absorbed is given up in exchange of the memories. But, since he should have died for all intents and purposes, if he ever exhausts all of his radiation before you can 'stabilize' him, there's a chance his mind will slip to another parallel world?"

"Correcto, all data points to that being the case. The only thing is, Shirogane was never able to trigger a memory link on his own. So, this has got to be some of the heaviest, most core memories of his past. However, since he is different to how he used to be, he required a trigger, a catalyst for this to happen. I frankly don't know what's going on here to the fullest detail." Because if this keeps on happening, then he won't be able to even talk with the guards now. And that will sour our relations with the Shogun, and perhaps make

him more negative as well. Shit… Just what kind of thing did he see? When he was trying to get up from the bed… he said someone was still alive. I wonder what was that about, who was that someone to send him into such a rampage.

"Okay, so, what do we do from here?" She asks, gazing at Shirogane.

"You already tried activating the machine?"

"At minimal levels, I don't want to cut the power line entirely."

"Alright, let's try to use as much power as we can get away with. Yashiro," I walk towards them, *towards the paling and sunken shape of Shirogane and the equally sinking shape of Yashiro*, "Have you managed to sense anything?" She shakes her head, very slowly while not meeting my eyes. "Very well,we're going to push the machine to almost full power. You focus on him as we do, alright?"

"… Yes."

We both step back from the surrounding area, closing the hatch of the circular shape at the top, where Shirogane is bolted as of now. Looking back, I nod to Motoko-nee and she pushes the first levers.

The shaking starts, the static begins to fill the air, I can feel it in my hair. As the sphere begins to rotate, as the pistons move up and down with more violence with each repetition. The graphs in the monitors don't change, Yashiro's expression remains focused, her hands tightly joined as she holds her breath.

So I grab two more levers and push them forward, activating more engines to feed power to the machine. As soon as I do, the faint cerulean glow begins to appear, but only as dim illumination over the metallic frame of the sphere.

And yet, as the noise of the engine fills my ears and the sphere becomes blurred in its rotation, the numbers don't change. Yashiro's

brows begin to twitch, her mouth is partly open and taking small but deep breaths.

Even when I wait a moment, nothing shows signs of changing.

"Yuuko, should we…"

"Use one more, we risk a blackout if we push this further."

"Understood."

More noise, faster rotation, further tension in Yashiro's face as she now gasps with her mouth wide open.

But the numbers don't change, at all.

Despite waiting for a full minute.

Despite how the cerulean brightness now is clearly covering the whole sphere.

Despite being working at almost full output.

… It isn't working, at all."

"Fuck!" Punching the control panel, hunching onto it, both of my hands come to claw the back of my head. "Fuck, fuck, fuck… Why won't this work?! He should be reacting somehow to this!"

"Y-Yuuko, calm down. This is just-"

"How do you want me to calm down?! If he isn't regaining consciousness, if Yashiro can't sense his aura, then his mind really is seeping out to another world!"

Her hands raise, aiming at my shoulder, before they rest on my arm instead as she sighs heavily. "Look, I don't know what's going on here as well as you do, but there must be something to be done."

"Sigh… Yashiro, can you sense anything?"

Opening her eyes, her breathing compromised as she rubs her chests, she shakes her head. "N-No… I can see something… distant, buried. But I can't hear his thoughts or see his color at all."

Motoko-nee folds her arms, tapping her chin, "So not even you can get to his psyche?"

"At this rate, it might truly be… impossible to reach his mind."

"W-Wait!" Yashiro yells, drowning even the rotary gear for a second, while grasping my sleeve, bending it a bit. "Please, give me more time. I can… try harder."

Patting her head, I heave a sigh. "If you're doing all you can and still there's only a faint echo, there's little we can do now, can we?"

"But…"

"Hey, Yuuko," Motoko-nee calls, so I turn around and find her with her arms folded, staring at Yashiro with her eyes narrowed. "I'm just mentioning this, okay?"

"Huh? What?"

"Yashiro can't reach Shirogane's mind as she is now. So, uh, what if…" she slowly raises a hand, pointing at Yashiro's head, "we take off the bunny ears? Do you think that'll let her focus enough on his mind?"

"Ah… I hadn't thought of-"

"N-No, no, please…" the pull on my sleeve grew harder, Yashiro's further pleas are drowned by the machinery. Shaking, lips barely parting to speak her fears, she keeps her eyes bolted on the floor.

Gently placing a hand on her shoulder, she flinches at the contact. "Yashiro, this might be the only way to reach Shirogane's mind."

"I… I don't know if it'll work."

"I know. But it's either this, giving up, or… well… forcing you to scan his mind while inside the submersion mechanism."

"N-No, please!"

"C-Calm down, I'm just-"

"Don't medicate me, please!" Both hands grab my arm, dampness wells up in her eyes. "I don't want to forget, I don't want to forget! I'll try harder, just give me more time. Please!"

"Yashiro, it's okay!" Grabbing her by the shoulders and shaking her a bit, her almost desperate spiel is cut short. She remains still, lips twitching, as she stares at me. "It's okay, I won't… force that on you. I won't have you regress into a silent doll, and I believe I was clear when I said the previous times… were my mistakes. Sigh…" Patting her head, then clearing the lone teardrop that courses through her cheek, she looks up, wavering. "I don't know what could happen, if you try to use your full focus on a mind that's linked to another world. I don't know what Shirogane is thinking, so there are risks with asking you to, well, perform a proper mind dive into his psyche as of now. Not only for him, but for your health even if you fail."

"… I can try," she answers, barely audible.

"Let me remind you, forcefully synchronizing yourself with someone comes with its risks. His mind might reject yours, and without the limiter's safety net, I don't know what harm that might do to you. And still," I crouch, patting her shoulders, our eyes now at even height, "this might be the best shot we have to reach his mind, before he either slips out completely or people start forgetting about him. I won't force you to do this but, are you willing to?"

She breathes in, lips still shaking. Her eyes seek the sphere that still rotates, both hands again clasp together. Looking back at me, she takes in a deep breath, sharpening her features as she nods.

"Yes. I'll do it."

Petting her head, smiling her way, I nod back. "Thanks, Yashiro. And don't worry, I'll stop you if I see it's not working out."

I rise back up again, she closes her eyes as she leans on me, lowering her head. My fingertips rustle through her hair, looking for the clasp of the bunny ears. Merely undoing that causes Yashiro to shake for a moment, trying to calm her breathing. She looks back at me and nods, so I continue to remove the parts of the ESP limiters, she parts her lips as if to say something, but if she did I couldn't hear it through the rumbling of the machine. Which, by Motoko-nee's sober facade, is doing nothing to get Shirogane back here.

I remove the locks on the upper side, helping her slip her hair off the bindings. Yashiro lets out a yelp, grabbing the sides of her head, covering her ears. Slowly taking a few steps back, my eyes remain watching her features, her twitching eyes, the breaths she takes. Gulping hard and still breathing heavily, she removes the base of the sensors, quivering as she does. With one last quiver, as if she were outside under the snow, she then looks back at me as her whole hair flows downwards, her mind now free of the limiter's safety net on her powers. I stare at her, to make sure she's still feeling fine, and she returns a nod despite the frailty of the gesture, of the slow movements of her steps to look once more towards the rotating sphere.

"Alright. Are you ready, Yashiro?"

"Yes. I'll do my best… to reach Takeru-san's heart."

---

**[Kasumi]**

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Like a very tall pile of papers falling on top of me when I was younger. That is what resembles the slight pain that surges forth all over my head.

The Professor says something, I can't hear well enough. My feet rustle forward, the blurred frame of the machine entering my sight again after the recoil.

And again, like a sudden fire breaking out, a line of pain comes into me. From my nose to my eyes, as if I had fallen head first into a bathtub full of boiling water. It makes my skin crawl, or as if something were crawling under it. Kind of as if I had many, many syringes draining my blood all at once on my limbs. It is strenuous, the mere sensation of nothingness on his mind as of now.

Gasping for air, it takes my all not to break my sight from the sphere. It is like an abyss, but it isn't hollow. Unlike the scans the Professor requests out of me from gathered intel on the BETA, there is 'something' pushing back against me. As if someone were drawing a line back and forth from my nape to the tip of my nose, it burns and hurts. When scanning the BETA, there is silence but there is nothing. No response, no acknowledgment.

But if I sense something pushing, it means Takeru-san is still here… somewhere in there.

"Yashiro, don't exert yourself!" she shouts, sounding more rough than the pistons of the machine.

But… but just a little more… I can't simply give up now, even if it hurts. Takeru-san might not wake up, or it might take him a long time to do so and people will forget about him. Maybe I'll start forgetting about our games, our talks, the stories he told me, the shapes he taught me in Cat's Cradle…

"… No, I don't want that."

So I close my eyes very, very tight. So tight that a few lights start swirling, and the pain, and the burning grows harder to endure.

That small glimmer, I have to… get to it, somehow. If I focus on what I know of him… on the images from his world… and try to project

that into his mind, maybe that'll spur-

"Ugh!"

I open my lips, trying to scream. I can't hear myself, I can't feel air coming into me.

Everything grows blurry, the images I was recalling starting to mix and bend. The sole thought of pushing this into him… caused the images to surface, and spiral into his heart. And the barrier that before was pushing me away… now is pulling me in.

Locked in place, everything spinning. Strained, sore and dry, that's how his throat feels. Whether I'm standing or not, I can't tell anymore. But every image of what he told me, of his games and pastimes, comes forward like a small bubble. Like the light reflecting the colors off it, the images bend and swirl, the table on his home as he ate with Sumika-san and that mean squadmate, the room that looks like a lot of TSF simulators, the classroom where talks with his friends, the PX as he juggles with his comrades.

Each and every bubble come up and up in my mind, as if forced out by the spinning, the spinning that doesn't stop. Blinking a few times, only a small cerulean light I can see. And the bubbles start to burst, to fade away. But the spinning continues, like if I were being shaken back and forth in a twister of water.

But I don't drown, the light simply seems to become more and more dim with each passing second, becoming thin threads amidst the spinning. And the bubbles keep raising up, raising to then burst, to then fade to nothing…

And it keeps swirling, swirling, as I keep sinking, sinking, sinking in the bubbles, the currents of the twister.

Slowly.. slowly… so quiet… so soft…

Like a small bubble raising to the sky, wobbling in the air…

"Hnngh…"

Hurts.

I don't know what.

But it hurts.

Where was I?

I don't recall the specifics.

It hurts.

My eyelids feel so heavy. It reminds me of spring, before the BETA attacked. All the pollen made it hard for my eyes to open well when the Professor took me to take a walk outside.

She always complained the pollen ruined her hairstyle.

Yes, it smelled… like faint grass, with all the flowers fluttering in the air like small stars in the sky.

It was pretty.

Yes… it was…

Hm?

I can't open my eyes, and I do sense… a faint and pleasant smell. It feels odd. My fingertips coil, I can feel my arms and legs start to retract, activating again. But the sensation I'm resting on, it's soft yet hard. Many small and soft things meet my fingers, yet my back is sore and stiff.

Finding my palms on the ground, I raise my upper body and rub my eyes. Slowly, a blurry image comes into my sight as I take a deep breath.

"… Huh?"

A city. A real city. Not ruins, but a real city. I slowly stand up, seeing the… greenery around me. The grass growing wildly, the trees with all of their branches filled with leaves as they're rustled by the wind.

"It feels so… fresh." The air is so clean, is feels so nice. Looking up, the sky looks so… well, blue. A vast expansion of blue and clouds can I see from this height, almost to the horizon itself.

But it's so strong, and so clear. The sun is shining strong, so it looks more lovely.

And as I look behind me, a very, very large tree rested on the place, as if declaring itself owner of the foliage.

"Wait, this place… Is it the hill near the base?" I do recognize the place, the altitude. But…

But where the base was supposed to be, there's a similar building but without the radar dish or any security I also can't see the training grounds, either.

"… Where am I? I was… Ah! Takeru-san!"

Yes, I was trying to reach his mind. Then, when I thought of sending images of his world into his mind… those images went without any impediment into his heart, and I couldn't stop myself from sending more and more images, to sink more and more. And then… And then, what happened to me? Where is this place?

Well, standing around won't give me any answers. I suppose, I should try to descend the hill.

Slowly walking through the greenery, the daylight pouring through the treetops, the air rustling the grass, it feels so… alive. So nice. I don't remember the base's perimeter to be this nice when I was little and we went on walks. The air is still feeling so fresh, as well.

After moments of solitude and silence, I find a small road on the descent of the hill. Shortly after, I find myself on the slope that leads back to the base.

"Should I go there? I don't even know what is happening here… Oh!"

Someone is coming down the street, sporting civilian clothing. Should… Should I try to talk to that person? Uh…

Taking in a deep breath, I try to cross the street to intercept the person, the woman that comes down the street.

"Uh, excuse me. Do you have a moment?" I say, giving a small bow.

The woman doesn't even react, and keeps walking towards me. Maybe she didn't hear me well?

"Uh, excuse me. I do not wish to bother you, but could you tell me where am I?"

The woman keeps walking, walking past me without even looking my way. As she passes me, I realize that I can't sense her thoughts. Or see her colors.

…

I had removed my limiters, didn't I?

Patting my head, however, has my fingers finding the bunny ears in place once again. Even in a reflection of a window, I can see myself with them atop my head. Why? What's… What's happening here?!

Turning around, I follow after the old woman. "Uh, forgive me. But could you tell me-"

I reach out to grab her sleeve, yet my hand slips past it. Staring at my hand, blinking for a moment, I walk after the woman and again try to grab her.

Yet, my hand simply passes right through her, time and again. As if I were a ghost, unable to even touch her. Panting after trying for so long to catch up to the woman while climbing the hill, I rest my hands on my knees.

"What… is going on here? Professor… Where are you, Professor?"

Picking up my pace, I direct myself to the base. Yet, I find the doors closed. Not by the usual guard post, but by a mere sliding door with bars. There is no plaque that would distinguish this place as a base, and there is no equipment to suggest that is the case, either.

Then, what is this place? Why did my hand go through that woman? How did I get here?

… How do I go back?

Feeling something cold down my back, I turn around and run. And run, and keep running.

Even when no one answers my voice, when I pass right through the people walking on the street.

Even when the sun comes down harshly on me, as my breathing becomes ragged and I have to slow down.

There is no one who would answer me here, no one has any color in this place. I can't hear anything. The absolute lack of sounds just makes me run faster, faster, through the streets, through the people.

"Professor! Professor, where are you?! Can you hear me?!"

Panting again, I slow down where I stand, hunching over and grasping my knees, feeling the sweat run down my chin. As I take in air, I hear a small chime. Then, a louder noise. The rumbling of an engine, followed by that awful noise when the exhaust sends lots of smoke out. Looking up, there was a large bus on the street in front of me.

Coming my way. Speeding up. Getting closer. And closer, and-

"H-Hyaaa! A-Ah… Ah?" Opening my eyes, I see people seated on the bus as they pass me.

After a moment, the bus goes its way down the street, other cars also rushing through the asphalt, through me as well.

Blinking through it all, panting and feeling my heart about to leap out of my mouth, my feet drag themselves back to the houses. People come and go, some talking, others hurrying through the lights before it turns red. Yet, everybody passes right through me, not even hearing me.

Like a small shadow, always stepped on, never acknowledged.

Sitting down, I bury my face in my arms. Taking many repeated deep breaths does little to calm myself. Where am I? How did I get here? Why does nobody see me? I was… I was just trying to help Takeru-san…

"Hic… W-Where am I? P-Professor… please, help me…"

How am I getting back to the base? Am I dreaming? Or, maybe, did I get lost like Takeru-san's mind was going to? What if… all that's left of me is this, just my consciousness and no physical body? What am I gonna do?

I won't be able to come back.

If I can't even talk to people… maybe I could use objects to communicate, as if I were one of those urban legends the Professor told me about. But would that even work? I would have to find the Professor, and I don't even know where to look. Maybe she would appear in that building that's in the place of the base, since it should be a school…

But what do I do in the meantime? Will I get hungry? Do I have to sleep? How much time do I have left?

"Hic… Sniff… Professor, what happened to me?"

"Are you okay?"

"Huh?!" My head bolts upwards, I find a small pair of eyes staring back at me. A young boy with a blue shirt looks at me, tilting his head.

"Are you alright? Did you get hurt?" An equally small hand reaches out, as if offering me a handshake.

"N-No, I'm fine. I, uh… You can see me?"

"Hmm? Yeah. Why?"

"I, well, no one seemed to even see me, to listen to me…" Slowly, I stand up by accepting his hand.

"I see. But, are you hurt?" He asks, tilting his head again.

"No, I'm fine, thank you." Dusting off my clothes, I then sigh and join my hands.

Looking at him, the boy is even smaller than me. His light brown hair is made a mess, all swirly and knotted on its own. He has a few things on his person, however. A small pink cat with very long fur on one shoulder, an aquamarine tuna on the other that seems to be opening its mouth to talk non-stop. A brown dragon with a pair of glasses clings to his right arm as it makes a rather displeased expression, a dark dragon to his left one with both eyes closed and its head flopped limply on the boy's arm. Atop his head, two small bunnies lay comfortably as if they were small loafs of bread. One has much black fur, but its face and tail are white. The other is the opposite, most of its fur is a pristine white except for a few dots on its face and the tail, which are dark. Walking by his side, two small

puppies were looking up at me. One with a sharp shape to its fur, which seemed to shine proudly in blue, the other with more careful waves to its hair, which took a dark purple tint. And clinging to the boy's back, another small kitty, with strong red hair and a small yellow tie as decoration, meowed at me as it climbed into my sight.

… How odd. Something tells me animals shouldn't have these kind of colors to their furs. Also, I am certain dragons are already extinct.

"Are you alright?" The boy asks, furrowing his brows at my silence.

"Ah, yes. Um, why do you have so many pets with you?"

"Because I like them. And they're not pets, they're my friends!" He says, puffing his cheeks and pointing a finger at me. The white rabbit that was on his head thumps and opens it mouth, hissing at me.

Taking a step back, I look away. "Sorry."

"It's okay. So, are you really fine?"

"Yes, I'm fine. Uh, do you know where we are now? I was… trying to find someone."

The boy purses his lips, folding his arms, the dragon with glasses hissing in complain as it has to shift its posture to not fall. "… I think I recognize these streets, but I don't really know where this is."

"I see…" Of course, he's just a child. He probably doesn't even know anything other than the streets near his house, just as I don't know anything beyond the base's perimeter.

"Are you lost, miss?"

"No, well, maybe. As I said I am… looking for someone." I look at him, and I can detect his aura. A small glimmer of yellow and orange, positivism and happiness, energy and drive.

Why can I sense him just fine and why does the rest of the people ignore my presence? Looking around, I see someone coming down the street, a few young people chatting it seems. Stepping towards them, they don't stop walking as I approach. Standing still in the middle of their path, I close my eyes. Taking a deep breath, joining my hands, licking my lips.

When I open my eyes once more, the people were now walking on their way. They, too, passed right through me. Why?

"What are you doing?" The boy asks, arms folded as he raises a brow at me.

"I was… trying to make them notice me. Uh, can you talk with the people that are here?"

"Why would I?"

"Uh, because… I don't know. Why did you talk to me?"

"Because you looked sad, like you were hurt."

"I see… Thanks. So, um…"

"Yes?"

"Where are you going with those… friends?"

"I'm going back home."

"Oh, I see. Is it nearby?" Maybe I could stay with him while I try to see what is going on here, at least I have someone to talk to.

"Well… I don't know," he then looks down, lips cascading downwards as he kicks a paper that was left on the street. The white rabbit again looks at me and hisses.

"Are you lost, then?"

"I think. I was trying to go back home, but I don't know how to get there. So," he looks up, gesturing upwards with both hands open, "I started walking and walking, but I can't find the right way. Then, I saw you sitting there all alone and called out to you."

"I see. Well, I am lost as well, so I suppose that puts us in the same predicament."

"Predi… What does that mean?"

"Uh… It's another way to say conun… No, problem would be better."

"Ah, yeah. That's right," He nods twice, understanding the simpler term. "Oh, I know!" He suddenly shouts, making fists as his eyes blaze up.

"What is it?"

"How about we look together? Then, if we walk together, maybe we can find the person you're looking for and you can see if we pass through the same streets twice," He says, taking a step closer and smiling.

That smile… Wait, the color of his eyes and hair… the color of his aura…

"Um… Thank you for offering. Let's look together then."

"Yay! Thanks a lot!"

"No, it's nothing… So, uh, my name is Kasumi Yashiro, it's a pleasure to make your acquaintance," I then smile his way, offering my hand. "Who would you be?"

The boy then grabs my hand, shaking it with much vigor, causing me to slowly lean forward, my forearm and shoulder moving along as he shakes my hand over and over. All the while, the intense yellow climbs over me like a vine, like fire spreading over oil as his shiny gaze looks into mine.

And with a bright smile that could rival the incoming sunshine, he nods at me. "I'm Takeru Shirogane. Let's be friends, Kasumi-san!"

# Iceberg of the Soul (I)

*A/N: To that one reader who asked about the meaning of 'adusted', I took the word from a Yugioh card. Adust means to be burnt, blackened, scorched. The meaning I'm trying to convey is that, despite being burnt badly by the events of the war, Keru's anger is so fierce because it was born from those fires.*

*That's all this time. Thanks for reading and commenting. Stay safe.*

*Zuoriel*

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*Chapter 75:*

**Iceberg of the Soul - Lights**

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*December 3rd? Time Unknown.*

*(In a location similar to the Hiiragi District. Near a small shrine.)*

**[Kasumi]**

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"So, what did she do then?" I ask, minding my footing as we climb the stone steps in a hill, faint light pouring through the treetops.

Little Takeru-san puffs his cheeks, hugging both dragons to his chest, who bite and play with the leaves that sway in the air. "She got upset I showed her the pages, then punched my tummy so hard I went flying to the moon. Really, Sumika is so dumb sometimes," he nods to himself, the red kitty with a yellow tie softly nibbles one of his ears as it groans in complain.

"I believe you were the one at fault, you knew she disliked those pages of the book and you still showed them to her," I say, feeling

my limiters move slightly as a hand raises to block a strong ray of sunlight from my eyes.

He pouts back at me, giving me a side glance. "But it was payback for not letting me read that before. And if she hadn't scribbled over those pages, we could have bought another new book to read," he nods to himself, the red kitty still lightly biting his ear, until the white rabbit atop his head stomps its feet, groaning a bit.

"Revenge isn't good, Takeru-san," looking into his eyes, I hold the light twist of his features, and how the dragons and the puppies seem to also stare at me in aggression.

"… Well, maybe it was a bit mean," he says, scratching the back of his head, both the pink and red kitties giving light taps to his hand. Takeru-san then pouts again, once more crossing his arms, causing the brown dragon to hiss in complain for a moment, its glasses almost falling. "But she didn't have to punch me into the moon."

"Takeru-san, don't exaggerate. Sumika-san wouldn't be able to hurt you that much," I say, flapping my limiters as the red kitty meows and rolls on his shoulder, playing with the tuna, who keeps on bouncing as if trying to hit the leaves that continue to gently rain down from the branches.

Yet, as if not minding any of the animals' ruckus, Takeru-san simply keeps on pouting. "I'm not exagge… I'm not lying! She really punched me into the sky!" Slowly raising a hand upwards, towards the sky… that had suddenly started to darken for some reason, his eyes blaze again as the black dragon remains attached to his arm without much care. "I could see the moon really well up there, you know. There was also this really slim machine that was flying, and there was a girl with a pink ribbon called Rina moving it and all."

"Huh? But… No, how could you-"

"It was Sumika's fault. Every time she uses her Drill Milky Punch, I end up in the sky. One of these days, I'm gonna turn into a star for

real if she keeps doing that."

As he says that, the red kitty coils on itself, all of its hair growing spiky as needles, then tries to climb onto his head, only to be sent galloping away by the iron wall of the white bunny's hissing. As if munching on air, grumbling like the large machine was doing before I lost consciousness, the small thing doesn't relax until it sees the kitty back in the shoulder area.

"Um, Takeru-san?"

"Why are you still saying that? I'm not adult, Kasumi-san."

"Neither am I," I say, giving him a frontal look.

Which he simply answers by narrowing his eyes. "But you speak weird sometimes."

"… That is not true." I don't want you of all people telling me that, Takeru-san. "Anyways, um, don't you mind how they're always fighting?"

"Who is?"

"Well…"

Looking down at his chest, the brown dragon is trying to move the black one, so that both can rest in between his arms, but the black dragon remains slumped in place, comfortable in its position. While the black rabbit remains quiet and silent, the white one seems intent on receiving its attention, lowering its head and nudging the sleeping black bunny. Upon seeing the refusal, the ears of the white rabbit turn up as it thumps once more, groaning until Takeru-san raises a hand slowly to pet it for a moment. His hand is then caught by the pink cat, who nuzzles itself against it, making the puppies whine and tap his legs with their paws, the purple one standing on its back legs as it tries to lick Takeru-san's elbow while the blue one merely remains with its eyes fixated on his, whimpering as it rubs its face on

Takeru-san's leg. And all the while, the red kitty meows loudly in complain, again nibbling his ear, while the tuna seems to enjoy the chaos as it bounces higher and higher. And he doesn't seem to mind, at all.

"… Your friends. Don't you mind that they're fighting all the time?" And anyways, how are you still walking so well with all of them clinging onto you?

"Oh, no, not really. They're always like this," he says with a half smile, stopping his ascent on the stone steps to crouch and extend some kindness to the puppies, letting the dragons stretch their wings. "It doesn't hurt or anything, and it's kinda comfy to hold them close," he says, hugging the puppies for a moment, kissing their heads before welcoming back the dragons into his arms, cradling both with one arm to leave the other free to tend to the animals on his upper half.

"I see… Well, if it you say so."

"You guys better be good, okay?" He tells them, lowering his tone and pursing his lips as he pets both puppies and dragons, who then seem to relax, if ever so slightly, in their pleads for attention. "Well, let's keep looking around. It got all dark now, though," he looks up as his brow furrows, wrapping his arms over both dragons again, rolling his shoulders to make sure the two kitties and the tuna remained in place.

"Yes, it was noon just a moment ago," I sigh, looking up at the dim threads of light that filter through the branches, the small distant stars up above, as we slowly continuing to rise.

It is also odd, despite how long it is taking us to climb these stairs, I am not fatigued in the slightest. There is no burning in my feet nor stiffness which impairs my legs' movements. Glancing his way, in the dim light that remains in the area little Takeru-san remains walking in the same energetic stride as if pushed by a tailwind.

His steps do not wane nor does he show hints of apprehension or exhaustion in his complexion. A simple breeze he resembles as he again tries to placate the puppies as they get too close to his feet, noting their displeasure with some faint barking, demanding attention. The purple one seems more aggressive in remaining close, walking by his side with almost no distance between them. The blue one's steps are more slow, slightly behind Takeru-san, as it walks and remains staring, staring right up at him patiently, firm and shining like a lighthouse in a foggy day.

The dragons are still bickering, the black one repeatedly bumping its head on Takeru-san's chin to get his attention, which makes the brown one spew some small embers its way. The tuna doesn't seem to mind all the chaos, and keeps on bouncing from one shoulder to the other. The pink cat grumbles as it slowly bends forward, lightly tapping the brown dragon with one paw as if trying to pacify it. Its efforts are not very effective. The red kitty simply remains playing with Takeru-san's hair or the leaves that are still falling. And the two rabbits are still curled together on top of his hair, seeming to be sleeping.

And he isn't even showing any signs of anger, despite puffing his cheeks as he scolds the animals. Was this how he used to be? Or, is this a representation of the most childish attributes of Takeru-san's current persona? He doesn't seem to recognize me, and also didn't react to my description of the Professor. All throughout this walking we've done, through that small park where he played with the red kitty and made sand cakes with both puppies as the other animals ran about and chased each other, through the bookstores and shopping malls, he has remained calm and bright.

… And I can understand now, why you want to bring some measure of peace back to our world, Takeru-san. It isn't as if it were completely different to the walks I've taken with the Professor, yet the sweet smell of the food in the shopping, the dust lingering in the air of the bookshops, all the bright and most colorful images on the books which he called 'Daemons & Drakes', and at the refreshing air

that still remains now as we climb these stone steps under the moonlit skyline.

There is a soothing aspect to this air, to this pleasant silence, to the faint buzzing of insects. There is no rush, no haste in the steps, in the motions. It is all so calm, so simple, so… peaceful, not too different from that placid numbness that assaults me right before sleep as I hug Mister Bun. Even on the occasions when Takeru-san grabbed me by the hand and sped towards a store with a toy or a book he favored, it is all relaxing and soothing. And not sensing the colors of all those around us only accentuates the brightness of the stores, the multicolored lights, the kaleidoscope of butterflies and cocoons amidst a field full of flowers.

And as the stone steps hold steadfast, as the humidity of the night sets in and a chilly breeze blows through the trees, a small glimmer of lights reaches my eyes from the summit of the hill, beyond one of those large gates which indicate the entrance to a shrine, if my memory isn't failing me. But, why would there be such illumination coming from the shrine grounds? I believed their visiting hours did not extend to… well, whatever late hour it is supposed to be as of now.

"Takeru-san, do you know why are there so many lights in the shrine?" I ask, looking his way as I stop my ascent.

"Hm?" Standing a few steps behind me, one of his hands was stopping the white bunny, who wanted to jump from his head and was once more munching the air, and the other was halting the purple puppy, who was grumbling much as it pulled at its pants. "Maybe there's a festival going on?"

"You speak of a special date to celebrate?"

"I mean, that's what a festival is, right?" He says with a sigh, scratching the bunny's ears, petting the puppy. "You never went to a festival, Kasumi-san?"

"No, I never had the chance. So, um, do you think there's a path to your house close to this place?" I ask, staring at him while he placates the animals once more. If bringing him home is what causes this dreamscape to end, then it is perhaps what I have to do to bring both of us back to reality.

"Hmm… No, I don't think so," he answers, lips shrugging.

"I see. Then, should we look elsewhere?"

"Eh? Don't you wanna go see the festival?" He asks, coming closer.

"… It's fine. We should find your house first, it is dark after all."

"Mmgh… But, what if the person you're looking for is in there?"

"… He isn't, I'm sure. Come on. It'll take us much time to descend the stairs, so-"

A sudden and warm jolt in my hand, a strong twister of orange within my eyes, a faint scent of vanilla filling my nose. A wide smile and a tug on my arm. "Let's go see the festival, Kasumi-san. You never know if you might get another chance like this!" And without waiting for my reply, he starts to rush the way up the stone steps.

"W-Wait a mome- Takeru-san, don't run!"

"Then you start walking faster!"

"F-Fine, we can see the festival but please don't run," I lightly pull his hand, causing him to decelerate.

He then stares at me, in silence, as the two bunnies also do. The black one had raised its ears, apparently waking up from its nap, the white one was once more grumbling in discontent. "Okay, sorry. But you better not run away or-"

"I won't. So don't rush, we could fall."

"Okay. So, let's go! I'm sure you're gonna have lots of fun in the festival!" He says with a strong nod and a puff of his chest, irradiating more of that orange glimmer, warm as direct sunlight.

"… Thanks." So you always were as kindhearted as you're now, even if there is a certain rashness to the way of being of this small representation of your psyche.

Following after the starlight of his smile, we climb the last distance of the stone steps. And what unfolds once we do so is an expansive glimmer under the night sky. Much noise, concentrated brightness and smells. The laughter of most around, the rows yellow lanterns which cast light upon the grounds from above like marching fireflies, the many stands that are aligned and bustling with activity and odd trinkets, so full and noisy that it reminds me of the one time the Professor convinced me to put a mint candy in a can of soda and a geyser of bubbles began to burst from it.

Yet, unlike that time, the constant flow here is tranquil, pleasant as the breeze we could feel from the top of the hill at the end of our walks. As if multiple flowers had blossomed in unison as a strong gust blew, a shower of petals in different colors swirls everywhere I look. Strong, enticing smells float in the air, causing my tongue to trace my lips a few times, saliva building up below it.

It feels so… warm, and cozy, and welcoming. Nothing like the dead silent hallways, or the tense and grayed out meetings. Even if I can't sense the people in this place either, the scenery by itself paints such a radiant image.

"Come on," he pulls my arm, smiling again, "let's go see some stands!"

As I follow after him, as both of us pass right through the people in this place, many different stalls and foods reach my sight. Food I had only seen in blurred moments when speaking with Sumika-san, food I had sensed through the reminiscence of the Professor at odd times, yet now it feels real. As if it truly were in front of me, the small

balls of octopus, the fish-shaped delicacies, or even the fluffy cotton candy clouds, the smell grazing me, daring me to step forward and take a bite. Yet, I can only purse my lips and knot my stomach.

As Takeru-san and I walk in, no one recognizes or acknowledges our existence, despite the abundant noise he and the animals are making, rivaling the surrounding sounds and drowning them at times. I can understand it with me, since I am an intruder on his mind. But, why would they not acknowledge his presence either? Isn't this his own dreamscape, his own inner mind? What does this mean, then? Was Takeru-san ignored during his childhood? No, all of our talks do not point to that being the case. On the contrary, he seems very happy whenever he tells me of the games and books he enjoyed with Sumika-san when they were growing up. Is this a reflection of his current self then?

"Kasumi-san, here!"

"Hm? Ah…" Filling my view, a small box with six balls that emanated heat and steam, which I believe are made out of octopus. Slowly gulping the excess saliva that clogged my mouth after taking in the aroma when grabbing the box, and actually feeling its weight on my fingers and the heat of the rising steam on my face, I see that Takeru-san also has one such box with him. "Takeru-san, how did you manage to make them hear you to buy this?"

Slowly, his cheeks puff as he brings one ball to his lips. "I couldn't."

"So, how did you buy this?"

"I didn't. I just took it from the stall," he shrugs, eating another ball.

"Wh- Takeru-san, you can't steal from other people," my lips twists as I frown his way.

He merely eyes me sideways. "It's their fault for not wanting to sell me some in the first place, and I did leave the money in the stall," still pouting, he eats another ball.

… Well, this is just a dreamscape so there is no actual theft occurring. I do wonder if he ever did something mischievous such as this when he was little. But… my lips twist in, traced by the tip of my tongue as I look down, at the food within the box. I wonder if I could taste it or if it will all be nothingness in my lips. Barely grasping the small wooden stick, the minute weight on my fingertips, the rising smell which greets me again as I take a deep breath makes my mouth water once more. And after a moment of hesitation, I lift one of them as my lips part and I bite onto the small meat ball.

"Mmgh!"

Hot.

It's too hot, my tongue is burning.

But it tastes good, and my cheeks constrict inward, and my mouth and palate remain burning softly.

Unlike the synth meat I'm used to, this is juicy but too spicy. The diluted aspect of the taste, of the texture is missing, instead I can sense the firmness, the resistance on my teeth. It doesn't feel as if it would merely disintegrate in my mouth without effort, on the contrary the taste spreads further as I try and gulp. Opening my lips ever so slightly, a few puffs of air aid me tame the spiciness. Gulping the rest slowly, my tongue hangs over my lips as I gasp. "Haa… This is too spicy. My mouth burns, ow."

"Of course it is," he says, not minding one bit as he keeps eating unaffected. "This takoyaki has spicy sauce, that's why I chose it," nodding once, he passes me a small bottle of water… that I assume he took from another stall as I was fighting the heat.

Taking a quick sip, I heave a sigh as I enjoy the freshness in my mouth. "So you like spicy food?"

"Yeah. You don't?"

"It's not that I don't, I just… never ate many things to begin with."

I don't have a complain with the diet the Professor has assigned to me, except her insistence on having me eat carrots. And I never ate, well, food that felt so… natural. Synthetic foods have always been on my plate, be it when under the Professor or… back in the ESP training facilities. Supposedly, all the synth ingredients of my dishes are fortified with the right vitamins to help me grow well and maintain a stable usage of my abilities, and I do not particularly dislike the taste they have.

However, I never tasted anything as intense as this 'takoyaki'. Not only the meat felt, well, juicy and firm, but the added spiciness is still lingering in my mouth despite the water I drank. It's as if part of that burning sensation had left a mark imprinted in my tongue. And I never had anything that carried such a strong, distinct taste in my life, not even after Kyozuka-san became the head cook of the base.

But, this is also so very weird. Usually, I can only 'see' what transpires in the minds of others, for only brief seconds. Unless it is a very clear memory or the person is welcoming to my scans, I cannot feel the sensations coming from the thoughts that they experience during their reminiscence. My scanning can only be detailed with surface thoughts, otherwise there is resistance from the minds of others. I know Takeru-san never feared me, and I never had any trouble to look into his mind, and I once could almost feel the 'fried food' he was speaking about, yet for me to be able to experience this many sensations-

"Ah! No, don't fight!"

"Hm?" Looking up, Takeru-san was trying to… separate the dragons as they hissed at one another. "Takeru-san, what's the matter?"

"The yakisoba, that's the problem!" He yelps, trying to hug the brown dragon. Who then groans as it releases itself, and then scoffs a small flare which engulfs Takeru-san's face.

Yet, as my breathing vanished from my lungs, as the fire spread fully over his features, it all vanished as quickly as it appeared. And I now find myself at a loss of breath, not in fear this time. His face smeared with soot and his hair taking an exaggerated circular shape, Takeru-san coughs a bit of smoke as he pouts, his cheeks puffing as much as they possibly could at the brown dragon who hisses and turns away from him, folding its wings and tail inwards.

"Ha… Hahaha."

"Don't laugh at me, Kasumi-san!" He yells, frowning a bit as he waves his arms up and down.

"N-No, I'm sorry. It's just… I didn't expect you to end up, well, in such a comedic look," I say, taking a deep breath as I place a hand on the base of my neck. "So, what happened?"

Rubbing his face with his sleeves, cleaning off parts of it and coughing a bit, Takeru-san then points to the dragons. "See, the black one jumped off my arms as soon as it smelled the yakisoba. It went straight to the stalls there and stole some of the sandwiches they have." I look upwards, to the roofs of the stalls, and see the black thing happily giving repeated bites to a sandwich, while having at least another three by its side. "Then, the brown one tried to scold it, but then they started to argue," he pouts, crossing his arms.

Indeed, the brown dragon is flying about, giving small shrieks and casting embers, yet the black one remains eating without a care. And it only seems to invigorate the brown dragon, before it flies away, going to try and line up at another stand. And yet, no one even pays attention to the spectacle. Looking further in, both kitties were trying to catch some small goldfish, ignoring the people that tried to do so with some small paper cups. The two puppies are now running around, panting and with their eyes sparkling at every little thing, barking and jumping at what attractions the stalls further in have in display. And… Why is the tuna bouncing so high in between all the stands?

"Takeru-san, why is the fish doing that?"

"I dunno. That one has too much energy," he says with a slow nod. And that was coming from you, of all people. "Well, if they're having fun, then it's all good. But these two sure ain't moving one bit," he looks up, at the two bunnies that remain comfortably sitting on his head, despite the circular shape his hair is in at the moment or the small trails of smoke that from it come out.

If my intuition is correct then, all these animals represent people Takeru-san likes much. The black dragon would be the quiet and shy squadmate, the brown one is the squad leader, the tuna is the loud and small of the group, the pink kitty is the hesitant girl who shot down the large HSST, the red one would be Sumika-san, and the puppies are… probably the mean squadmate and the Shogun? But then…

As I clean the rest of the soot off his face and ears, as my hands flatten and fix his hair, dusting it off, the two rabbits do not move. The white one grumbles when I lift it to clean Takeru-san's hair, while the black one slowly moves away when my hands get close. These rabbits… The black one, is that how this representation of your psyche sees me? Then, who is the white one? The Professor?

"Uh, Takeru-san?"

"Yes?" He coughs, dusting off his shirt, shaking his head and making his hair go back to its usual messy shape.

"Do you know why the rabbits don't leave your head?"

"No, not really," he shrugs again, closing an eye. "I mean, they're comfy there so I don't wanna bother them much. Bunnies are dangerous, after all."

"That's not true, bunnies are cute. Right?" I reach out to the rabbits, to try and hold them for a moment.

Yet, the white rabbit again groans and thumps on Takeru-san's head, eyeing me sideways with its ears flat on its head's sides. Merely placing my fingers on its soft and welcoming fur is enough to make it groan once more.

"See? She's super moody for some reason," he says, eyes narrowing.

"She? You can tell the gender?"

"Huh? Aren't all of these girls?" He asks, tilting his head, to which the white rabbit groans again as it has to shift its posture to not fall.

"But how do you- No, it doesn't matter. So, she's a girl?" Those little eyes lock onto mine, once more stomping its back legs. A small, delicate lowering of its posture, the white rabbit takes a step forward, again biting the air. Gulping on nothingness, my feet retreat on their own, tension in my stomach. "How come something so small and fluffy can be so scary?"

"She has a short temper, looks like," he chuckles softly, petting the moody bunny.

"Uh… Does this white rabbit have a name?"

"No idea," he then shrugs again, which makes the rabbit in question groan for a moment as it folds itself into a loaf again.

"I see…" I suppose this Takeru-san wouldn't know the Professor. But… Eyeing the other rabbit, it remains watching me as my hand approaches. Gradually standing up, a small waddle towards me makes its head meet my fingers. Unlike the other, this one welcomes my kindness. "Do you also not know this one's name?" I ask, he shakes his head. "Can I… take it in my arms?"

"If she lets you."

"So this is another girl, huh." Is this… me, then?

Tenderly wrapping my fingertips against what feels like living cotton, my hands sinking onto the softness, I bring the rabbit to my chest and its nose twitches and scouts my dress. After a moment, it hops and reaches my shoulder, the tickling of its nose sending a shiver from my ear to my back. Standing on my dress, its front paws press my hair, as if trying to climb, before it groans at me. Slowly, I place it on top of my head. And without waiting a second, my own representation in this dreamscape curls up comfortably. It feels… cozy, not heavy at all, and nothing like my limiters. It's as if I had another blanket on top of my head.

"Hehe, I think she likes you, Kasumi-san," he smiles, now having a small stick of cotton candy on his hands, that he again took from a nearby stall.

"I see. Um, do you… do you like the black rabbit?"

"Yeah, she's my friend too. Why?"

"Well, you said rabbits are dangerous before… Are you scared of the white one perhaps?"

And again, the white ears point up, another small groan followed by a thump of its back feet. Which makes Takeru-san chuckle, give it some headpats, which makes the rabbit curl down again. Why is something so cute capable of being so fearsome as well?

"No, that's not it. But Maya-nee once scolded me a lot when I asked her about bunnies. I think she wouldn't like you much," he says, looking down, his lips delaying a munch to the cotton candy.

"… Why? Bunnies are cute, what's wrong with them?"

"I dunno," again puffing a cheek, he sighs and we start walking again. "You see, there was one time we were buying some books, right? So, when we were near the cashier, I saw a grown-up buying a magazine that had a girl in a bunny costume on the cover, kinda like you."

"Me? But… that's not possible," I say, sighing. He pouts, then looks down. Takeru-san seems to stare at my hands for a moment, giving me a silent stare until I resume eating the blazing takoyaki.

"But well, she really looked like a bunny, with the ears, the tail and everything," he says, nodding as he takes a bite of the fluffy cotton candy. "I thought it was weird so I asked Maya-nee about it, but then she got a super scary face in place and grabbed my ears so, so hard! I ended up looking like an elf for a week after that," frowning for a moment, he slowly rubs one of his ears.

I nod, drinking water after the fire, which didn't burn as much as the first time. "I… don't understand. Why would she be upset at someone wearing a rabbit costume?"

"Don't ask me, I dunno either. But these rabbits are not bad, so I don't mind them being on my head," he smiles, rubbing the white rabbit's ears as it closes its eyes, its head softly falling onto his hair.

As we traverse the festival grounds, more and more stands appear in our view. All of them brimming with energy and light, it feels as if my steps were lighter in this place. Despite seeing some games to shoot down prizes or land circles on some hoops, we couldn't make ourselves noticed. Takeru-san seems a bit bothered by this since he wanted to win some prizes, but still, seeing so many lights, so many colors, more and more new things with every turn we take is enough for me. As if every fold of a paper would reveal a visage of a different land, from both the relaxing winds of a prairie under a full moon night to the fields full of flowers and fluttering petals to a quiet vision atop a hill.

"… Takeru-san, have you gone to many festivals?"

"Hm? Yeah," he nods with another half smile. "I usually went with Sumika, we challenged each other to see who would win more prizes in the games."

"And who won?"

"Me, of course. When it comes to games, I am unbeatable," he smirks, pushing out his chest as he nods twice. "But…"

"But?"

He slowly, gradually stops walking. As slowly as his features lose light, as his lips turn into a dim line when he looks back at the crowds. "It's a bit weird, you know."

"What is?"

"I think… I used to come with mom and dad too. But, you know," he kicks the air, his shoulders slumping, "I think that there were times where… they just weren't here, too. Like, I remember coming with them and Sumika and Haruna-san, but when I try and think of the times we came with Maya-nee, it's like mom and dad just… aren't there anymore."

"Oh… Is that so." Is this an effect of the shared memories? Perhaps, is his psyche suffering from the dissonance between his own memories of his childhood and the ones he's inheriting from this world's Takeru-san? "Does it hurt to remember?" Maybe, it's my fault for forcing him to face such memories too abruptly?

He folds his arms, looking up, blinking in silence. "Hmm… A bit. It's weird, because I can remember Maya-nee being with me and Sumika sometimes, but then mom and dad are not there. But it's, like, there are other memories where she isn't but they are with us. And it feels as if Maya-nee was never there to begin with," eyes lower and lower, further into the ground alongside his voice. "It's not that it hurts, but I don't know why I can't remember things well. It… makes me sad. It's also really weird, you know."

"What is?"

"I mean, there's a festival here and all…" he looks around, at all the stalls, at all the lanterns, at the stream of people coming and going in between as marching ants, "… but mom and dad aren't here,

Sumika or any of my friends are also not here. Where are they?" His shoulders sag, lower as slowly as his eyelids, as his head.

I see, the confusion he feels is directly related with the erratic memories. "Then… Then, if you want to see them so badly, maybe we should be going back to your home?" Since that is a place that should not only be well defined in his psyche, but is also where this dream will end, as the place he seeks.

"… But why are they not here? Actually… Why have I been walking all alone for so long? It's… weird. They…" lips shake, voice cracks, ice crumbles, nothingness within, "wouldn't just go and leave me behind."

"Maybe they're in your house?"

"… Yeah. Maybe. I hope I really didn't get lost, mom and dad are gonna get really angry if I go back home late. But then…"

"What is it?"

"Ah, no, I was thinking about what to do with my friends. Mom doesn't let me have animals in the house, so… if I go back home, I don't know where to leave them," he says, sighing hard as he pets the white bunny, looking back at the other animals that are still playing in a stall nearby.

But if that's the case, if this representation of his psyche believes such a thing… Takeru-san does refer to his original world as 'home'. Would it mean that he wants to return there? That's why his child self is seeking his house, troubled by the duality of his memories, by having to leave his 'friends' behind if he does? Then, how do I bring him back with me?

… What if that only brings him more pain?

But Sumika-san needs Takeru-san to help her once we start up the 00 Unit.

However, the Professor didn't stop when I asked her to, when he was hurting so much in the medbay. If she continues to push him, if the Shogun would want Takeru-san to be as she remembers him to be… Will inheriting all the memories from another Takeru-san further divide his psyche? Or, maybe, will the Takeru-san I know disappear and be replaced with the scary fire he was engulfed in at the medbay?

Does that mean we are… killing Takeru-san with the recovery sessions?

… But I have to bring Takeru-san with me, or I may not be able to return either. Sumika-san has to be tuned, otherwise Alternative IV will fail and everything will end up like in those horrible memories he showed us when we met.

Yet, the Professor won't accept to have him stop impersonating this world's Takeru-san.

… What would be the best for him? W-What should I do?

"Ah! Kasumi-san, look!" Again pulling my hand a few times, again sending that warm and orange feeling into me, Takeru-san's voice sounds joyful. I look at him, he points upwards as a loud sound echoes.

Lights.

Many, many lights of different colors meet my eyes when I look up into the skies.

A curtain of sparkling shapes, a small trail of smoke raising to the stars only to burst and cause far more colorful stars to disseminate in the skyline. White flowers spreading wide, red twisters flowing outwards, yellow ripples in the moonlit sky's surface, and so many more colors and shapes. And they continue to appear, to rise up to join the stars for only a moment, a mere flash. And yet, these lights have taken my breath away, my heart lodged at the base of my

throat and pounding. It is all I can see as a calm shiver envelops the back of my head.

"… It's so beautiful. What is this?"

"You never saw fireworks, Kasumi-san?" He asks, tilting his head, even the white bunny now looks my way as it gives out a faint groan.

"Is that what these lights are called?"

"Yeah. They're pretty, right?"

"But, how is this done?" And why haven't I seen any?

"Well… Uh…" his lips twist inwards, he folds his arms, "I think they always use them for important dates? I don't really know why, but part of me says sometimes the giant robots fly by and shoot them in the sky, but there are other times where they're just, you know, sent from the ground as always," he slowly says, scratching his head.

"I see…" Maybe the Professor kept me close by on such occasions? She never… really took any time to rest, at least not as much as she does since you've been in the base.

"I think they light up a fuse, then send the lights up with that fire. And then they explode. But those are not the only things that shine in these days."

"Really? What else is there?"

Going up to a stand as the petals of colorful fire spread wildly above us, he comes back with a small blue pack. Opening it, he takes out a few really thin sticks. Lightning them up causes many sparks to come out, like the bubbles from that soda I put the mint candy in.

"This is a sparkler, me and Sumika used to run around with them a lot," he says, waving the thing about, the puppies coming close and staring at it in wonder, the kitties also arriving to meow and try to strike it off his hand. "Here, have one for you!"

The almost imperceptible weight in my fingers is nothing compared to the heavy breath I take in as the sparks come out. Moving the stick to and fro above me as the fireworks continue to illuminate us, it's as if I were holding a comet, a sparkling shooting star.

"It's so pretty."

"Hehe, told you there were lots of fun stuff to do here!" He declares loudly, waving some of those sticks further above, as if entrancing the animals with the shiny sparks.

And as we play with the sparklers, we remain looking at the sky, enjoying the shower of colors, the curtain of brightness that defies the night, for as long as it'll last.

A faint rustle on my head, the small black bunny sits up to watch the fireworks as well, giving out a soft groan. The rest of the animals also seem to remain watching, all of them huddling close to Takeru-san, admiring the show alongside us.

There is only quietness, and that faint sense of ease, that feeling I had when the Professor took me on walks to the hill and we would simply remain watching the scenery from there under the sunlight.

Quietness under the faint yet strong echoes of light.

Under the brief yet colorful stars which illuminate the sky.

Some in simple explosions, others in curling and twisting patterns.

Yet, it all makes my heartbeats knock and knock on my neck, forcing a deep breath.

For in the reality I live in, it has been a long time since I could admire such a clear sky, so vivid stars, much less decorated with the apparently unending illumination from each and every color imaginable.

Our skies are far more dull, contaminated by the heavy metal clouds. There is little to no light pollution near the base, yes, but the imprinted foothold of the war still reigns over the night. And the air is far colder, far less clear and refreshing than the one I sense here. Yet, the stark black of the sky serves only to enhance the frail sparks of colors. Coupled with the freshness of the air, it all spreads a numbness on me as if I were taking a dive into a warm bath. Slow blinking, slower breaths, I can only watch and admire.

Admire it all, until the last frail thread of fireworks vanishes from the sky.

"… It was so beautiful."

"Right?" He says, equally low as me. "So, did you enjoy the festival?"

"Yes. Yes, I did. Thanks for letting me see this, Takeru-san," I smile his way, and he returns the gesture. "But… it looks like everyone else is already leaving."

All the people that had gathered were quick to depart, or perhaps we were lost in our admiration, and some of the lanterns are already going off. A few stands seem to… deflate and fold into themselves, as if made out of paper. How odd, I am certain that is not how they are supposed to be dismantled. Then again, this *is* Takeru-san's mind.

"Yeah, the fireworks do mark the end of the festival, after all. So, do we keep looking around?" He asks, hugging both dragons as the kitties climb up his legs and the tuna bounces right onto his shoulder once more. This all makes the puppies a bit bothered, again rustling themselves against Takeru-san in their demands for attention. All the while, the white rabbit remains sleeping on top of his head, its breathing completely calm.

"Yes, let us go before all the lights go out," I nod, patting the small bunny on my own head. It slowly nuzzles itself against my fingers,

before it too slumps back onto my hair.

Talking of the games and foods, we descend the stone steps. Halfway through the motions, light began to pour once more from the branches of the trees on the sides. It's as if the abovegrounds were in a permanent state of dusk, perhaps because that is how Takeru-san remembers them as.

Back to the ground level, what resembles the city that was here before the BETA invaded, yet not feeling any fatigue at all, we once more resume our search without any destination or direction in mind through the clean streets filled with a faint buzz of chatter, some bins and lightposts reflecting the incoming sunlight like a mirror as a pleasant wind follows behind our steps.

"So then, since she was so buried in the snow, I decided to call her Snowmika," he says with a wide smile, the red kitty again nibbling on his ear.

"Takeru-san, it's really mean of you to bully Sumika-san."

"It's not bullying, I was just trying to get her to play with us instead of staying by the side," he retorts, pursing his lips as he pets the red kitty for a moment. "But then she got against me with Jouji, and when they buried me under the snowballs they started calling me Snowkeru."

"I-I see… Did you fight with her all the time, then?"

"Eh? We're only playing around. It's not like she's always punching me to the moon."

"That seems a bit more, uh, intense than mere games to me."

"… You're a bit too serious, Kasumi-san. You may look young but you really sound like an old adult," he says, eyeing me sideways.

It's not my fault you're so carefree, apparently since you were little. And as if in agreement, the small bunny on my head groans back, faintly stomping his legs. "Anyways… What other games did you play with your friends? Were there some you played in your house?" Perhaps, recalling good times would allow him to find his way within this dreamscape with more ease, without focusing on painful memories.

"Hmm… I think we did this kind of contest by Christmas, like a really big snowball fight or something with some nice food as the prize. But…" like the slowness of the clouds which obstruct the sun's rays, his steps wane, "I don't think I played that with Sumika and the rest."

"So, did you have other friends?" Perhaps, he engaged in this game with the Shogun? Is this a memory of this world's Takeru-san?

"No, it's not that," scratching his ear, hugging the dragons, which are now thankfully asleep, he mulls in silence for a moment. "It's neither with Sumika or with the Pickles and Yuuhi. I can't remember well, again," then, he pouts. The blue puppy groans, rustling against his leg until Takeru-san has to pet it for a little while.

… So, a fuzzy memory of those 'other loops' he took? It hurts, remembering the friends he couldn't save, perhaps?

"There's also the games on the TV," he says as he resumes walking, back to his usual cheerful stride. "But, for some reason, I can't remember if we played with them when Maya-nee was around."

"You mean videogames like Magorea's Mask?"

"Yeah, yeah!" Nodding and smiling as brightly as the incoming sunshine, a few sparks return to his voice. "Sumika complained I always beat her in fighting games, though."

"Why? Are they hard?"

"No, but she said me always using the crouch-kick was cheating," he pouts again, the red kitty once more grumbling in discontent, lightly slapping his cascading hair. "It's not my fault she doesn't play to her outs."

Lips shrinking, I hold his stare. "Takeru-san, if you knew she wasn't that good, you should have been nicer to her in those games."

"Her fault for not getting her game on. And anyways, she always beat me in the card games we played. So we're even," he declares with a nod, puffing a single cheek as he looks away.

"… And, what other things did you do with her?" I ask, getting closer as we cross a street.

"I think we read a lot of books together, folktales and later on CYOA stories. When Maya-nee was around, that's all we did."

"… What does CYOA means?"

"Oh, 'Choose Your Own Adventure'. They were role-play books where we played characters in the story, and we tried to make it to the end by using dice to see whether we won or not. Though," his brows lower, eyes blazing again, "Sumika always managed to roll nat twenties at the most weird times."

"Nat… twenties?"

"Yeah, rolling a twenty on the die. It gives you perfect success on any action you take."

"… You mean that dices can have twenty faces?"

"Yeah, there were many dices we used when playing D&D. There was the pyramid-looking D4, the normal dice with six faces, the pointy D20, and a few more," he says, swaying as the kitties keep hitting his long bangs. "So Sumika would always, *always* roll a nat twenty when doing these stupid actions."

"You're not saying that just out of rudeness, are you?"

"Of course I'm not!" Puffing his cheeks and holding my stare, his eyes blaze. "You're mean, Kasumi-san. Why do you look at me like that?"

"Well, you could be being biased towards Sumika-san's choices, since you do seem to like making fun of her."

"Mmgh… You know, I'm gonna start calling you Kasumean if you keep being bad with me."

"Come on, now. Do not get upset, I was-"

"Fine, I get it. I'm the bad one here, hmph. If you hate me that much, fine, I'll go home all by myself," he then turns away from me, walking faster all of a sudden.

"Ugh, wait please. Sorry, I didn't mean anything ill with my words," I give him a small bow as I place myself in front of him again, which dissolves his puffing cheeks but not his or the white bunny's groans.

"… I'll forgive you, just this time."

"Sigh… Thanks. So, why did you call her actions dumb?" I ask as we walk together side by side again, crossing a street.

"Because she always did these silly things outta nowhere, and always got good rolls for them."

"Could you give me an example of these 'silly things'?"

"Like, there was this really big gate, right? As tall as a mountain, all made of steel, letting out a small heatwave under the sun."

His features turn stern, his tone also lowering as if in threat as he raises both hands, the sleeping dragons still firmly clinging to his arms as if they were vines. I nod, holding my breath, huddling a bit closer as our steps slow down.

"So, we had to get past that door to infiltrate the fortress to help Dennis save Prince Horace from Lysanderoth. But we couldn't find a way to do that, we couldn't blow it up with magic because that would alert the golem army inside, we couldn't climb the mountain because it was guarded by basilisks, and we couldn't try to sneak from another entrance since we didn't have a rogue in the party."

"And, what did you had to do?"

"See, we had to wait until it was night, use a small spell on the lake nearby to make a distraction with a water elemental, since it couldn't be turned to stone by the basilisks and would melt the clay golems, and in the chaos some of us would get to sneak into the fort while the others played decoy."

"That seems like a well formulated plan. I do not see a problem with it."

"Yeah, it was our best shot with what we had. But, what does Sumika thinks would be a good thing to do instead?" He asks as he shrugs, my shoulders compact as do my lips while I remain silent. "She just walked up to the gate and asked the guards to let her in!" He yells, rolling his eyes while shrugging in slow motion.

"And… it worked?"

"Yeah, because she rolled a twenty and had a big enough charisma modifier."

"That seems too reckless. Her idea could very easily backfire, if she enters the fortress on her own. Why would she do that?"

"Because maybe being nice would help us with the guards since they weren't the bad guys, she said," he pouts, shrugging his lips. "So she had to infiltrate the place all alone until she found a way to let us in," he then sighs, pulling the ears of the red kitty for a moment. "She almost got found out twice, and even then she

insisted we shouldn't hurt any of the NPCs because they were kind with her character."

"… But she's right, if they did help her then those people weren't bad," I retort, causing the white bunny to grumble again.

"We had to escape by flying! We almost got shot down and all!" He says as his eyes blaze again. "And even then, all the golems kept chasing us. But Sumika made such a mess when we tried to fight them off. We lost lots of XP thanks to that."

"But that sounds… fun," my gaze lowers as I sigh. It'd be nice if we could play like that when Sumika-san wakes up as the 00 Unit. Even if only one time…

"Yeah, it was a bit fun, to try and beat the book without resorting to fighting," he smiles, briefly, "even if we lost a lot of really good treasure," but immediately pouts as he overlaps his arms once more. "Well, at least it wasn't as bad as when Yuuhi gets mad," he nods, which causes the purple puppy to let out a small bark.

"Did you also play this game with her?"

He purses his lips, silent for a moment. "I mean, yeah, we did. But Yuuhi's luck is awful, she always rolls ones. All the time. Also, horses hate her."

"… Why horses?"

He shrugs, one eye closed. "I dunno, it just happens. Like, every time there's a horse nearby, Yuuhi's character gets hurt by it. One time, she had cast a spell to make herself invisible, trying to sneak into some enemies, but their horse got scared of Shion's warrior as it attacked and started to sprint. But since Yuuhi was invisible, the horse didn't see her and just ran over her," his lips purse again, restraining a smile, as the purple puppy softly bites his pants, "and then it scored a crit, which killed Yuuhi's character since it had very low health."

"Eh?! They can die?"

"Of course, it's not fun otherwise."

"I think our definitions of 'fun' are a bit different, Takeru-san," I frown a bit, feeling my limiters move.

He and the white bunny seem to pout in unison, both groaning in synchrony at me. "That's not true. If your characters never died, then you wouldn't need to take care of them."

"… Take care of them?"

"Yeah. Since they can die, you have to think well what you're going to do. And since there's no limits to what you can come up with, it's really fun to try and see what might happen!" I believe this is the same he told me when we played that CryRing game before… just that now he's blazing and sparking, no restrain to his joyful retelling. "Though, we never really managed to beat the games in Steelman mode."

"I suppose that is some ruleset that punishes you for letting your characters die?"

"Yeah, their death is permanent so you can't just make another member for the party. We only did that with smaller books, but even then someone would always die. It sucks, really," kicking the air, he sulks as he scratches the pink kitty's chin, making it start purring.

"I see. That… sounds like a lot of fun." It is understandable, you'd wish to restore some sliver of that to our world. But, if both Takeru-sans wanted the same, why was he blazing so painfully at the medbay? He did say a moment ago that the Shogun would easily become angered. I wonder if that has anything to do with what happened. "Um, Takeru-san? About before, is the Sho- Ahem, this Yuuhi so easy to anger?"

"Well, just a bit," he admits as he chuckles, then has to stop walking and ruffle the puppies' hair as they both barked at him, lightly hitting his leg with their paws. "It's that whenever there's horses nearby, Yuuhi gets run over by them. Since it always happened, she got really bitter about it too. It was so bad that when she was invited to some important meeting or something about how warriors should learn to ride horses, she refused a lot. Her eyes were so full of fire I thought the house was getting burnt down," he says with a nod, the purple puppy groans and repeatedly barks, louder each time, until Takeru-san gives it the attention it demands.

"I would refuse too, if such animals presented themselves as ill omens in our games. If her good characters all die to the horses, I can understand the frustration at the outcomes. But I doubt she'd do something as drastic as burning her residence down." He's again exaggerating much, why do you like to be so dramatic all the time, Takeru-san?"

Rolling his shoulders as if doing a little hop, he raises both arms quickly as he shrugs his lips. "I'm not lying, she did set the kitchen on fire once."

"Eh? How?"

"I told her she couldn't cook anything and she got so mad she tried to prove me wrong. But since she didn't knew how to do anything, the kitchen ended up exploding."

"… Then, it was all your fault?" Hurting a girl's feelings on such sensitive subjects is a cruel thing to do, Takeru-san. Furthermore, assuming females have to be good in the kitchen is also a mistake. Just thinking on handling a knife is scary enough to make me not want to try.

Small embers, a faint pout. "Was not! I only made fun of her because she said the lunch Sumika made me couldn't be that tasty. She was just jelly she couldn't cook something as nice as that," he nods, the

purple puppy barks a few times at him, and he has to pet it to get the doggy to calm down.

"I see… You were completely justified, then."

"You're a bit contradictory sometimes, Kasumi-san," he says, eyeing me sideways again, both puppies grumbling as they stare at me.

"I am not. She was who hurt Sumika-san's feelings first, so you were merely defending a friend. Did this Yuuhi do any other mean things like that?" A minute growl, the purple puppy lunges and barks at me, making me stumble backwards and hit a wall. The blue one remains simply eyeing me, as if about to howl.

"Well, Yuuhi can be a bit blunt, yeah," he nods, crouching to fiddle with the puppies' heads, scratching their ears to calm both down. "But she isn't bad, she just hates to lose. Like, a lot. Even more than Shion."

"I see… Did you play any games exclusively with her?"

"Shogi, since Sumika doesn't like that too much. Yuuhi always beats everyone in that, though."

"Hmm, is that so. Then, if you could choose, who would you like to play with? To go look for this Yuuhi or to go back to your home to play with Sumika-san? Or, would you like to go somewhere else to play with the ani- friends you have here?"

"And why can't I do all that?" He asks, raising a brow.

"Well… I don't know. So, you do know where your house is, right?"

"Yeah, of course!"

"Are we going in the right direction, then?"

Scratching his head, folding his lips, he stars to look around the street. "Hmm, I guess? I mean, I think we're- Oh!" Flinching a bit, a

smile flourishes forth. "Look! There's an art gallery over there!"

"An art gallery? Oh, is that where there are paintings and the like for show?" I ask, gazing at the tall and completely normal-looking gray building in the other side of the street. How does he knows there's an art gallery there?

"Yeah, I think me and Yuuhi visited one. And… I also went with a very good friend, I think?" Folding his arms, he tilts his head.

"I see. But, back to the point, do you know how-"

"Why don't we go take a look there?" He says, not waiting for my reply as he crosses the street, not even minding the cars that are coming and going. Not that they can hurt him as he still fazes through them, but for him to be so rash.

"Takeru-san, please stop getting sidetracked," jogging after him, my hands meet the air as he rushes me to the building in question. Even the doggies make it to the other side faster.

"Come on, it's gonna be fun!" He says, smiling again in rivalry to the sun.

Sighing as I surrender myself to following after the tornado of impulsiveness, I nod and approach the building in question. In any case, I do like drawing so maybe I could find something to learn a bit more. The Professor hasn't brought me any art books for a long time, after all.

Entering the place, a freshness surrounds me whole. As if a blanket of pleasant winds it were, the AC's caress falls upon me as I step into the lobby. So I can even feel this sensation as well. The rest of the place seems rather normal, a simple lobby with some seats, a few planted flowers, and a few elaborate paintings lay on the walls. The people here are all grayed out, however.

"Did you came here once, Takeru-san?" I ask as I approach him, while he's looking up and around along the animals.

The brown dragon seems to have woken up, taking quite the interests in the pieces left on display, flapping its wings excitedly. The puppies also seem keen on observing the art, slowly pacing along the wall instead. The tuna remains bouncing, the kitties don't seem to be too interested in this building.

"I think," he says, not looking at me as he continues to stare at the paintings. "Anyways, let's go to the place where they have all the fun stuff!" Nodding much, he marches towards the elevator.

And smacks his head against it, despite the light indicating that it's in this… Hm?

"What's with this?" He pouts, clicking the button, making the chime of arrival resonate. "Now that it's here, let's get- Agaah!" Once more, he walks into the wall, the 'door' refusing to part. "What's wrong with-"

"Takeru-san, I believe this might be a painting on the wall."

"Huh?! Really?" He extends a hand towards it, and the flatness of his palm courses through all the extension of the elevator. "Uwah, you're right."

"I suppose, this must be a simple illusion." If the personnel could see us, I believe they would be chuckling at how well the trick worked. It is malicious of them, to also set up a chime and a calling button. This feels… like something the Professor would do, just for fun. Perhaps, this art gallery is owned by a relative of hers?

"Mmgh… Now that I think about it, I think I also fell for a trick like this when I visited an art exhibit or something," he crosses his arms, pouting and groaning along the white bunny, who was awakened rather rudely when he ran into the wall.

Flickering some fire upwards, the brown dragon seems to chuckle in its own way. The puppies also seem to find this funny, rolling on the ground, barking back at Takeru-san, who puffs his cheeks at them. A small rumbling echoes, both the white bunny and the black dragon rustle in their places, fur becoming needles, claws tightening on his arm and exuding a singular ember. Even the red kitty seems about to burst, hissing at the other three animals as a lone hair tenses up into the shape of a thunderbolt. Yet, the brown dragon continues to let out small embers while pacing above him back and forth, the puppies waddle and bounce about Takeru-san, tapping the 'elevator' before looking back at him.

"… I think they're making fun of me," his lips shakes along his fists, pouting much.

"It was rather funny, albeit dangerous," I admit, to which more embers flicker in the air.

A small shiver on top of my head, the bunny was quivering. Soon after, my own knees imitated the small gesture as a blurry shadow coursed through my sight. Blasting away as if performing a boost jump, the white rabbit lunges from Takeru-san's head, hitting the brown dragon in midair and tumbling it to the ground. In unison, the black dragon and the red kitty leap forth, aiming at the puppies. In a matter of seconds, the six of them begin to quarrel in close combat as if they were in a coliseum, scattering a cloud of dust around them as they fight.

"H-Hey! Stop it, don't fight!" He yells, waving a finger. They do not pay much mind, however. "Mmgh… Kasumi-san, help me stop them!"

"What? You want my help?!"

"Of course, you're the older one here!" He says, eyes blazing again, as he throws himself into the cloud of dust, shouting and waving his arms to catch the dragons.

The pink kitty meows softly by my side, trying to become a needle ball in threat, and it is ignored at large by the quarreling animals. The tuna does not seem to mind much of anything, launching itself like a cannon ball to stop the fight instead, smacking the Sumika kitty right in the face. And a blur of furs of many colors with Takeru-san in the middle of it all flickers in my sight for a moment. A small groan on my head, the bunny which represents me moves a bit, as if deciding whether to jump in or not. It then turns to look into my eyes, thumping and groaning as I stay quiet.

Sigh… It seems scary, but even if it hurts this is only a dreamscape. Feeling nothingness on my mouth, my steps waver their way to the loud battlers.

…

Bits of fur float in the air, intense groaning like a stuck engine failing to ignite proper combustion, a few patches of red in my hands, more all over Takeru-san's body as if a zebra he had become. Molding my arms onto my sides as I grasp the tie, I keep the kitty which represents Sumika-san quiet despite its loud wails. The black dragon was simply resting on the floor, Takeru-san was placing the glasses back on the brown one as he pulled the tip of one of its wings. Both puppies had their chins on the floor, covering their noses with a paw in apology. However, the white bunny remains looking away from us, thumping its tiny legs when I approach, groaning and seeming about to rush in aggression once again, like those super fast cars in the game Takeru-san likes so much.

"Listen here, all of you!" He shouts, brows narrowed, waving a finger around. "I don't want you to fight again! You could end up really hurt." Still releasing a few sparks, he points to the dragons. "You two, you can't start setting everything on fire every time you quarrel. I don't want to see you spewing any more embers today."

Small sparks fly off his eyes as he holds their stares, the brown dragon lowering its head and folding its wings and tails, the black

one simply rests on the floor, limp and silent. Takeru-san then looks at the puppies with shrugged lips, both hands on his waist.

"And you two, you can't start making so much trouble just because you can. You can't snap at every little thing," both puppies slowly crawl towards him, trying to lick and rest their noses on his shoes, yet he remains firm in his scolding. "Don't think I'm gonna forgive you just because you're adorable. And you, too," he shrugs his lips, tapping the red kitty's forehead, "No more fighting the puppies, look at all the scratches you left me with!" He raises his arm, swollen lightning scarring it. Kitty Sumika growls lowly, trying to make itself smaller in my arms.

"Takeru-san, I think this was enough," I say, petting the red kitty as it tries to curl in my hold.

"No, if I don't scold them they just won't stop fighting each other," he says with much impulse as he nods.

"But do they understand what you're saying?"

"Of course they do, look," he points to the doggies and dragons, all of them with their heads lowered and whimpering softly. "They know they were being bad, and if I don't do this they'll just keep fighting. It's like when me and Sumika were little and broke stuff as we played in the backyard," he concludes, sighing and dispelling the high shoulders and scary voice.

"I suppose you're correct… But they already understood, there's no need for you to remain so angry." He did get a bit upset while we practiced with the games against the Valkyries, but Takeru-san didn't remain this angry back then. Maybe he used to be like this before?

"I'm not angry, I'm just teaching them to be friendly with each other instead of being fighting all the time. So, you're the last one. You can't just go full aggro on everyone else," he says, low, as he walks up and crouches by the white bunny's side. The little thing thumps again and turns away, groaning again, not dispelling its anger at

Takeru-san's soft caresses and pats. So he heaves a short sigh and stands up, crossing his arms and making a scary face, his aura swirling red for a moment. "If you all keep being bad, I'm not gonna make you any more food, you hear me? No more yakisoba sandwiches, no more apple pies, no more ramen, no more strawberry muffins!"

As if reacting to the threat, all the animals went stiff. Both dragons let out a small shriek, the puppies wail and again try their hardest in their waddles and wails for sympathy, even the white bunny raises its ears and hops closer, staring right at Takeru-san.

"Um, Takeru-san? Aren't you being a bit too hard on them?"

"No, they need to know that they crossed a line," he says, puffing his chest. What are you, their father?

"But can you actually stop them from eating those things?"

"Well… I can stop making them and that's it."

"Wait, you can cook?"

"Of course I can! I… think?" He then tilts his head, twisting his lips. "I mean, I do know a few recipes but… Mmgh, it gets hard to remember well what else did I knew, though."

… So he remembers that. Takeru-san said he knew how to cook, that he learned back in his world. So, even if his appearance is that of a child, this is a representation of the current Takeru-san. Unless this world's Takeru-san also knew how to cook, for some reason. Which would explain the haziness of what dishes he knows he can prepare.

After a moment of further scolding, he pets all the animals and brings them back on his person, the rabbit to the head, the dragons on each arm, the kitties to his shoulder along the tuna, and the puppies again stand close to his feet. All of them enveloped by that aura of

orange and yellow, the blanket of kindness he extends even when he's a bit upset.

We then climb the stairs, the pink kitty purring as Takeru-san praised it and the black bunny for not fighting. Reaching the exhibit, a vast expansion of little glimmers showers my sight. Be it the paintings, the sculptures, or even the small optic illusion trinkets seem to pull my eyes to them, all I can do is look around in place.

The illumination also seems to have been chosen deliberately, as there are no windows in this vast hall and only a single source of light brightens the place and the pieces from up above, a calm and warm white light. It leaves ample visibility to see what's in the other end clearly yet it also is pleasant and kind to the eyes. The spacing of the pieces is also comfortable, which aids to not be overwhelmed by colors and choices.

"… It's amazing, this place."

"Hehe, there's lots of stuff to see, right?" He says, nodding as he raises an arm to allow the brown dragon to take off towards the paintings.

"Yes," I follow the dragon, seeing colorful representations of nature, buildings and flower fields, windmills and small villages. The minute detail of the strokes, the depth of the colors, the perspective of the image which feels as if I were actually looking through a window to the scenery. "It's so beautiful, I wonder how they can make things like this. Especially the monochrome ones." It is amazing, the usage of shadows and varying grades of gray to showcase the depth.

"The mono-what?"

"Oh, it means black and white. See, that painting of the tower? It only uses black, white, or a mix of the two. And the detail of the shadows, of the texture of the land, the falling boulders, the thunder which strikes the top of the building… I wonder how they managed to do that by hand."

"I mean, maybe they just used a black page first and painted over the white parts as they went?"

"Eh? A black page?" I look at him, Takeru-san nods back with a small smile as he petted the black dragon. "Do you know how this is done?"

"Yeah, well, not everything but I did come to a place like this, I think. Look, there are no scribbled lines in the white and black parts, right? That's because it's better to just paint all the shadowy areas first and once the paint dries up you use white on top of it to have things look more clean. Or you use a black page if most of everything is black. Like, uh," he scratches his head, groaning as he looks up, "you do the painting layer by layer, kind of?"

"I see… It makes sense, I suppose. It does makes me wonder how much work and time it must have taken," and how many failed attempts they had to do before completing this singular piece. A small cold shiver runs down my sides, just imagining it all.

"Well, making pretty things takes time," he nods, then his eyes open wide, giving forth a small smirk. "I guess you could say you can't spell painting without pain."

"Takeru-san, don't start with the puns again."

"Tch… You're so lame, ruining my fun. I just wanna make a pun, no need for you to pull out a gun," he then looks away, trying to keep his lips shut despite the quiver of his chest as he drowns the chuckling.

"Sigh…" Must you always try to make jokes about every subject we talk about? "But I didn't knew you liked art, Takeru-san."

"I don't like it much, I just like to learn new things. I can't draw very well but I still find it fun to see how things are made."

"I agree. Let's keep looking, then."

Coursing through the hall along the happy barks of the puppies and the brown dragon, and the small tickle of the bunnies' noses on our heads, more and more fascinating things appear on every corner. Both the fine usage of shadows by contrast, the ample illumination, the variant from showing scenery or people, or merely abstract twisters which leave me a bit baffled on their possible intent going by the name of the pieces. It is all so interesting, yet it makes part of my throat feel hollow.

After all, all of these pieces… probably no longer exist in our world. All of this gallery, of this city, of all the possible marvelous pieces that were in this nation and many others… are simply gone, lost to the BETA.

… It is also very mean of Takeru-san, to never have told me of what he knew of art despite knowing I like to draw.

Both kitties don't seem to interested and remain sleeping on his shoulders, as does the dragon on his left arm. Takeru-san and the puppies go from one place to the other, looking at the pieces without stopping to admire them proper, but I suppose that's just how he is. It doesn't take long for the brown dragon to land on him, demanding attention as well. Yet once more, that small ball of cute white sends everyone else galloping away.

Now that I think about it… Unlike the other animals, however, the white bunny has refused to leave Takeru-san's side for even a second, almost as if it craved being showered by his glowing aura. The one in my head has complained at me a few times during our walks, yet it is my own representation so it makes sense for it to be at ease with me. And the other animals do leave his side at times, as right now where they're roaming freely to inspect the paintings and other offerings in the hall. And yet, the bunny remains as a loaf sleeping on his head.

I do not recall the Professor being so, well, possessive. Could this rabbit be someone else, then? If I am also a rabbit in this

dreamscape… but Takeru-san didn't seem to have been close to other ESPers, from what he has told me.

It's also odd, this situation. He took off towards this place, as if to avoid my prior question. I cannot sense his thoughts, which makes sense since I am already within his mind, yet his colors are again fluctuating easily, as opposed to when I bring up his house. Even as we talk of the paintings, as he goes in great detail about the ones he recognizes are about shows and games he favors, there is no hint of apprehension or displeasure. He's merely enjoying his time along his 'friends'. Trying to enjoy days past, embracing the nostalgia, unwilling to return home?

"Uh, Takeru-san? Shouldn't we be on our way?" I ask, getting closer.

"Hm? Well… We did already see everything here, I guess," he scratches the back of his head, looking up. "It's okay, though. If you have to go look for your friend, you can go. I'll be alright on my own."

"Huh? No, that's not true. You were lost when we met, right?"

"W-Was not! I was merely… taking a long walk."

"Do you not want to go home?"

"… It's not that I don't want to, I just wanna stay with my friends for a while longer," he says, rustling the animals' heads, his lips cascading in slow motion, the sparks flickering to nothing within his eyes.

"But you can keep playing with them even after you go home," since your squadmates are still waiting for you in the base. And me and Sumika-san will always stay with you. My hands reaches out, grasping his in my hold, my thumb moving back and forth over his tiny knuckles. "Come on, we've been walking for a long time already, right?"

That is also a concern. As much as I've enjoyed spending time within this dreamscape, if we dally for too long perhaps people will forget

about him. Or even me, maybe. It is hard for me to tell for how long we have been walking, and my sense of time should not be trusted during a mind dive.

Pursing his lips, hugging both dragons tightly, he gives me a faint nod, allowing my hand to spur his feet to action. The crawling orange is more subtle this time, a faint warmness or a tender brush all over my arm. While most of the animals do not seem to mind our departure from the gallery, the white bunny's ears perked up as soon as I started taking him to the stairs. And it keeps staring straight ahead into my eyes, drowned growls every so and so. It looks like a kettle of fur in warning of its boiling point. It even keeps looking back to the hall as we descend, did it want to keep looking at the paintings?

Burying the premature shadows of hesitation, Takeru-san once more engages me in discussion of what I thought of the art gallery, if I enjoyed my time there, the energetic and fast stream of questions seeming to be unending. Amidst the streets, the honks of transit, the buzz of the people we keep passing through, we continue our walk as he tells me of swirling rides on roller-coasters and visiting aquariums, of getting lost within the lush foliage while chasing a squirrel, and of his very first failings when it came to cooking, described by himself as turning pizza into charcoal. And even then, he remained stoic and unmoving as a wall in defense, saying this Yuuhi's failures were far worse then his.

As we move on to less populated streets, as the silence sets as a cloak and the sun's glare eases on our shoulders, a tingly feeling appears on the back of my head.

Brief at first, yet repeated. Distant yet constant, until it starts gaining strength like repeated waves reaching the shore, further and further with each repetition.

Needles poking the scalp, tracing lines from my nape to where my limiters usually are. A gradual lowering of the sounds around us, a slow tilting of my sight. The street seems to curve diagonally, as if

turning into a spiral. Color fades, yet the warmness of his hand linked with mine does not disappear.

A moment of dizziness, a second of blurriness in my eyes, a beeping echoing in my ears, it all slowly fades away, as slowly as a cube of sugar sinking into my morning tea.

And my throat feels sore, so I cough for a moment. Dampness obstruct my sight, so I rub my eyes softly as the needles disappear from my nape.

When my vision refocuses once more, a large shadow covers the sky. Clouds, many clouds. All of them taking a dark color on one side, glowing on the other where they take in the last threads of the afterglow. The sky is already darkening, a faint orange remains behind distant buildings while traces of yellow and pink overwhelm the rest of what's not yet conquered by clouds. Why did it became this late so abruptly?

"Kasumi-san? Are you okay?" Takeru-san pulls my hand, looking down I see his brows and lips curving down as he stares.

"… Yes, merely a bit tired. Didn't you… feel that?"

"Feel what?"

So he didn't sense that shockwave? The animals do not seem disturbed in the slightest. What was that, then?

"No, it's nothing. It did became late all of a sudden."

"Well, we have been walking a lot," he nods, pulling me as he walks once more.

"That is true. So, is your house close by?"

"Hmm… I think we're close. Ah," stopping suddenly, lips remaining barely open, I follow his gaze on the street.

Down a few meters, there was a house which is a perfect copy of what his own house resembles in the images I could perceive in our talks. Faint, the way in which his fingers slip from my palm. Shoulders sagging, Takeru-san looks down. Quiet, silent, still, unmoving.

"Don't you want to go home, Takeru-san?"

"Eh?"

"That building over there, that is your house, isn't it?"

"… Yeah."

"Is something the matter?"

"No, nothing. Just… Why are the light's out?" He asks, tilting his head, briefly glancing at his home before once more turning away as if recoiling from a source of heat.

My lips twist then retract, about to simply say that's due to no one being there at the moment. Brushing my hair, inhaling slowly, I then reach out for his hand once more. "Perhaps they're merely saving energy. You know, to not have the lights on while there is natural light?"

"But it's already getting dark, though."

"Well, that's true but-"

"And our windows don't face the sunset anyways, so if you don't turn the lights on you can't see anything," he again counters immediately, as stubborn as a mule, as incessant as the snow in winter.

"But anyways, since we finally found it, there's no reason to stay standing here, right?"

"I… guess," he says, rather, whispers as he gives the slowest nod Takeru-san has ever given me.

"Your friends must be wanting to rest, too. Let's go?" I ask, giving a minute squeeze, a slow pull to his hand. He looks up, then nods again, slower this time.

As we slowly approach his home, a cold gale blows. Hitting us right in the face, scattering a newspaper and a few leaves. For every step we take, the wind howls and swirls around, the clouds melt and fuse, covering and blocking the sky, enlarging the shadows of the lightposts and houses, showering us in the yellow glow of the setting sun. Just a short distance separates us from our destination, and Sumika's house is also pitch-dark. The blinds of the windows are down, not a single sound can be heard nearby. Only our footsteps along the howling wind.

Takeru-san remains silent, simply looking at the door, petting the red kitty that gives out a small cry.

And in only two or three steps more, we end up face to face with the entrance to his house.

He doesn't seem willing to take the first step, all the animals huddling closer to him as the wind howls again. Will this take us back to the base? Will he end up returning to his own world? In any case, there is nothing else I can think of to put an end to this dreamscape. So, joining my fingers with his, giving a small smile, I step forward and grab the doorknob.

With a delayed and creaky echo, the door opens and we enter the place. In the darkness, I can see a set of stairs nearby. A door further in down the hallway, an open space to my left. And the scent, the strong scent of vanilla I felt before.

But the fine color of the wood in the floor, the nice cream colored walls, the few paintings that decorate the place…

"It's a nice house, I like it. Where is your room Ta- Huh?" A strong hold onto my arm, his fingers were shaking. "Takeru-san?"

As if using me as a shield, he does not move a single millimeter. Even the animals have gone dead silent, quiet and stiff. Before I can utter another sound, the wind howls again. A loud noise, a sharp slamming, the door closes itself and takes away what little light we had. Further creaking, more disturbances, the windows prey to the gale.

"T-That was scary. Takeru-san, where is the switch?"

"… The lights won't turn on," he whispers, not looking up, his aura dimming more and more with every passing second.

Blinking for a moment, my eyes adjust to the low illumination and easily find the switch. Yet, as I push it repeatedly, nothing happens.

"Maybe it's broken?" I ask, yet he remains silent, only the howling gust from outside answers. "Well, let's go further in. Is your room upstairs, Takeru-san?"

"Yes…"

Wrapping my fingers over his hand, I walk towards the stairs. Not even two steps after I feel myself stopping, my arm bending backwards in tension. As I look back, I spot a small white ball by Takeru-san's feet.

The white bunny was stomping its feet again, yet it was not groaning this time. The deep sound resembles more the beginning of a rumbling, an angered hissing. Takeru-san remains still, his eyes locked forward, towards the open space. The puppies both bite and pull at his pants, the dragons and kitties do the same to the clothing on his arms, and after so long the tuna lowered itself to the floor, somehow standing on its tail yet remaining quiet.

"Takeru-san, what's the matter?" I ask, pulling his hand.

Which slowly slips from my grasp as he starts taking steps forward, into what looks to be a dining room. The white bunny stands up,

hitting his legs as if practicing boxing. Yet, he does not stop his slow steps. The other animals follow closely, in equal slowness.

Peeking into the place, all I can see is a table, a few chairs, a rather new-looking television, and a kitchen further in. Amidst the quietness, Takeru-san keeps walking towards the kitchen.

Until he stops suddenly, subtly starting to shake.

And then falls to his knees, all of a sudden.

Rushing along the animals to his side, his chest hiccups as the sound of stuck breaths come from his lips, his arms as vines cling to his shaking shoulders, his eyes unmoving…

… from the collapsed body that laid in the kitchen, a very pale looking woman with long hair in the same color as Takeru-san's.

" *It seems this winter was too harsh for her, Takeru."*

A voice, cracked and low, echoes in the room. There is no one around us, yet as I look about the place my breathing and heartbeats stop cold. Suffocated by the air, the sudden smell of incarceration, coughing and hacking is all I can do, covering my mouth with a hand, supporting myself on the table with the other.

The contact on my fingers feels odd, as if sticking to my hand. Abandonment and dust conquered the table, which was fine moments ago. As the stagnant air continues to linger, the smell of humidity, of strong yet unpleasant dampness fills the room. The paint starts peeling off like skin after a burn. In its place, crimson moss seems to surge, to ooze from within. Other parts simply blacken as if under constant fire, markings of candles pressed against the walls, at times large stain of humidity corroding it all from inside out instead..

"Haa… Haa… It's a lie…" he says under his breath.

Looking back, Takeru-san is clawing at his head with shaky hands. Cracks spawn in the floor, fissures that seem to extend towards him as does the moss. All the animals are on top of his hunched shape, meowing, barking and pulling at him, yet he does not move, still speaking under his breath.

"Takeru-san, please stand up. Let's get out of-"

"No, no, no, no," he shakes his head, the pressure of his fingers upon his scalp allowing me to see part of the skin. As I place a hand on his shoulder, he continues to shake and quiver.

The same dizzying sensation, the needles pierce my nape again. And as they do, that same stagnant smell grows stronger as a voice echoes once more.

" *You see Takeru, mom went on a voyage."*

"No! She never left!" He screams, dampness falling upon his cheeks.

" *She was really sick."*

"It's a lie! Mom never had to go to a hospital!"

"T-Takeru-san, please calm down!" Covering him with both arms, bringing him closer as I crouch by his side does nothing to stop the hands that claw and dig at his head, the slowness of the tears that come out.

It's my fault. If I hadn't brought these memories so suddenly to his mind, he wouldn't be suffering like this. I… I have to get him out of here, before anything else happ-

Static, interference, or something that resembles that echoes close by. The television that was nearby, shaking as if the earth was rumbling, displays a blurred image. Distorted by scanlines of black and white as if the screen was a pond being permanently showered

by pebbles, two people in suits sit on a table, perhaps in a news' program.

"… *It has been confirmed, in accordance to Mr. Kawamoto's testimony, that the victim was one Jinguuji Marimo, a teacher living in Yokohama, Kanagawa Prefecture."*

"No! No!" He thrashes in my hold, the animals' cries louder as they cling to him as well.

The static-ridden voice continues to report the news, distorting like a molten radio, looping over and over. Coughing, short of air, I can't even seem to move him one bit. His legs are becoming bruised by those lines, those cracks that spawn on the floor and cling to him as if they were parasitic roots. Crawling, inching closer, it feels as if I had bugs or spiders climbing on my back, the soft poke of those long and skinny legs, the contraction of my neck in sudden stiffness as the sensation raises to it and the back of my head.

"Come on, we have to leave…" Panting for a moment, I push an arm under one of his, yet its as if he were stuck to the my feet slip and I fall back onto the squishy and humid moss that's coating every corner of the house, the television's screen flickers and another different image appears.

" *It seems that the power plant has exploded. The cause is still unknown, and the damage is still being-"*

"It's a lie! It has to be! Make this stop!" Leaning onto me, he leaves dampness on my shoulder. He's still clawing at his head.

Knifes which sink for dear life, his teeth upon his lips. A broken exhaust pipe, his throat as he coughs, drowning in his own cries. Little comfort, the licks of the puppies, the nuzzling of the kitties, of the rabbits. Both dragons start spewing embers at the moss, at the cracks in the tiles, keeping it all away from Takeru-san. The white bunny looks back at me, thumping.

Yet, as I stand up, my palms almost slipping on top of the moss, before I can even try and lift Takeru-san, something else enters my sight. On the opposite end of the table, someone was hunched over in the same way little Takeru-san is as of now, both hands crushing the back of his head. But… why are there two different-

" *Why did she have to die too?! Sensei, you said everything was going to be alright once I wasn't a conductor anymore!"*

Takeru-san, the see-through shadow, screams as it hits the table, shaking the entire house, widening the cracks, dust falling from the ceiling, and making me shiver as I step back. It's as if I had my face right besides a fire, the lack of air, the emptiness in my stomach, the repeated blow with each cry of both of them.

" *Cough*… *Cough…* We have to get out…" Slowly walking, I grab the little shoulders, lifting them off, finding next to no resistance. "Takeru-san, stand up. We have to leave."

"It's a lie… It's not my fault…"

" *My dear Takeru. If you're reading this, it means Dad has gone to meet Mom and Grandma."* Another voice echoes, further choking comes out from his lips.

"Dad… D-Dad never died…"

It's my fault.

Because I wasn't careful.

He was always being tormented by these nightmares, and kept doing his best while saying nothing during the recoveries.

A quiet rumbling, the shadowy Takeru-san that was hunched over the table begins to crack. Small at first, growing larger gradually, pieces fall apart from him. A void where his heart should be, as if he

were nothing but an empty statue. Yet, tears keep falling from the cracks in his face, in a slow yet constant stream.

The same voice from before echoes, slower and lower, *"We had to take Sumika-chan to the hospital. When your mom went to call her for lunch she was very weak, couldn't even stand by herself."*

W-What? Sumika-san was… sent to a hospital? Looking down at him, his fingers cling to my arm, shivering and shivering. Still repeating 'no' over and over under his breath, no amount of caresses to his hair seem to break through the shock, nor does it get easier to move him. His feet remain limp on the floor, both doggies trying to help me by biting into his pants and pulling strong.

" *We couldn't determine the reason, but her vitals were plummeting very fast. Her heart stopped just as few minutes ago,"* a cold voice slowly tells.

"N-No… it can't be… it's all a lie, a nightmare…"

"It's alright, Takeru-san. Don't listen to these voices, just listen to me, okay? Let's get out before-"

" *Sumika-san is dead. Your fight is already over."*

It hurts, how his hand crush my shoulders. It hurts even more, to see his lips part wide, to hear nothing come out of them, to have his eyes squint so hard they might regress into his skull.

Unable to scream, simply resting on me. From the bottom of my throat, a soreness rises and gags me as I cough. As if a pincer had taken hold of my head, a deep and sharp cutting feeling pierces me. From my nape, through my ears, right into my eyes, barbed wires and shards of glass, stingers at the minimal movement of any muscle, and coughing. Much coughing, as if my heart wanted to be spit out, as if I had to spit it out because it was rotting within me as it beats faster and faster against my chest.

Is this… how you always felt every morning? Were you putting on a front so that I didn't feel this? Why didn't you say anything?

Dragging us both through the moss and cracks, the dragons start cutting and clearing the way to the front door. Taking in a deep breath once I make it outside, my feet entangle on themselves as the freshness returns to my nose.

Rolling for a moment, a momentary shock courses through me as I hit the ground. Softly rubbing my head, I sit on the floor. From the outside, the house looks just as before. Yet, the acceleration of my heartbeats tells this was no illusion. Wobbling as I rise back up, coughing again, my fingers meet the shaky hair as he coughs and fails to calm his breathing.

"Takeru-san, come on. Put both hands over your mouth, take a few deep breaths," I slowly whisper, grasping his hands and bringing them up to his lips.

Eyes still closed, he hiccups as he tries to restore calmness to his breathing. Any more stress and he might start hyperventilating. The puppies whimper, resting a paw each on an opposite leg. Both dragons rustle against his back, the kitties coming to lay by his shoes along the tuna. The black rabbit slowly comes closer to me, simply remaining by my side as he continues to fail to regain his breath. The white rabbit, however, is behind him. Ears up and alert, groaning every so and so as it looks into the open door.

A soft coughing, followed by a dry and faint whisper. "I'm f-fine… I'm okay…"

Letting go of his hands, I start petting his head as he has done so many times for me. "It's alright, don't force yourself, Takeru-san."

Simply hugging him as we both remain on the floor, I start rubbing his back and close my eyes.

The soreness eventually vanishes from my throat, the numbness from my lips. The small jolts of pain leave my limbs, my heart once more calms down into a steady rhythm. Now able to hold the air in my stomach, now feeling his grip softening, I open my eyes again and slowly start to stand up. As we do, I see that the sky is already dark, a few stars visible through the clouds.

"Are you… feeling well?" I whisper to his ear, still holding him.

He nods, sniffing and wiping his eyes as he moves away. "Yeah… I think."

"Um, uh… Takeru-san, well, I… I'm sorry. I shouldn't have insisted to come here so much."

"… Why?"

"Huh?"

"Why is my house like this? Why are mom and dad not here?" He asks, looking up at me, dampness still lingering in his gaze.

"I… I don't know…"

"Is this… really my house? Why is no one here, then?"

"I, well, uh…"

"And… what were those voices? W-Were they telling the truth?"

"I… well… I'm sorry," it's all I can say, rubbing his head. This is all because I didn't see your pain, because I wasn't careful enough.

"… Then, was that the truth?" Upon his gaze, my lips regress and regress until it starts to hurt. "But I can't stay here… If this isn't my home then, where is it? Is there… someplace I can still call home?" He pulls my sleeves, I can't return his stare.

And I take a step back, and another, and another. Unable to look up, all I can do is hear him sob again. And he starts coughing again, failing to take deep breaths. And he keeps asking why, saying it's all a lie.

… What do I do?

I cannot possibly take him back with how he is as of now. But then, how do *I* return to the base?

Even if we do, how can we let him recover? I don't think the Professor can shield him even further from the inquiries of the nobles. And if he's this hurt, Takeru-san might not be able to keep walking forward as he has been. All this time, he was smiling through it all, doing his best to endure these nightmarish feelings… and now, he just can't anymore.

… What can I do? What should I do? I… I don't wanna hear him cry anymore… I… ugh…

Again, needles pierce my nape. Sight grows blurry, can't feel my arms or legs. Cold all of a sudden, mouth drying up, I stumble for a moment. And as the pain subsides, clutching my forehead I look up.

"… I think I get it," a light and dry voice says, very close by.

A tall shadow, right in front of me. Basking into a glistening halo of moonlight, he remains quiet as he stares at the house.

Long and unkempt chestnut hair, dry and with some strands stuck together. It all falls on his shoulders, on the rather long and worn down red scarf he's wearing.

Lines of orange within the dark of his clothes, tattered gloves that reveal swollen fingers with long and cracked nails, and a skin that was paling far more than my own. It is all a stalwart shadow contrasting against the white and cold moonlight, the dark blue of the skies. An ice wall which does not even flinch or close his eyes as the

cold wind howls again, as the clouds swirl into cyclones above us both.

The exhaustion lingering in his voice, in the eye bags left under his eyes, in the hunched and low posture he takes on. Cracks in his lips, like in his mud-stained boots.

Takeru-san, a Takeru-san that was just a bit taller than me, is now standing in front of me, dressed in the darkest attire the nobles of the IRG usually endow. The animals all gather to his feet, slowly touching his lower legs, speaking up softly. Moonlight breaks through the clouds again, showering upon his features, perhaps making him seem more pale than he actually is. And yet it contrasts against the full dark of his dress, the quiet kindling within his eyes which take in the moonlight as the breeze passes and makes both strands of hair and scarf flutter to the wind.

Sighing hard as he sits on the ground, petting the animals, he looks up at the moon, eyelids almost fully closed. "This feels as if I were dreaming, as if I were seeing something that happened a really long time ago. A trip down memory lane. I guess that's why no one sees me, why everything and everyone is so gray."

Unlike what I expected, his voice is so slow, so calm. It's as… it feels as if I were floating on my back atop a body of water, a rather cold body of water yet not unpleasant by any means. Unlike what the Professor and everyone seems to say about 'this' Takeru-san, this is… similar to that day when he told me of Galaxy Wars, right before I entered his office. A calm and silent sorrow, being taken away by the slow current of blue.

"It's simple, when you think about it," he chuckles, giving a cracked gesture that does not resemble a smile despite the rise of his lips. "This isn't 'today' anymore. This is 'yesterday', isn't it?"

"Uh… Um… T-Takeru-san?"

And slowly, he looks back at me. Lips clearly marked downwards, blinking slowly yet leaving his eyelids barely open. Dark, so dark blue. As if it were a net, a cage he was trapped in, that is what his aura now resembles. A strong, impregnable blue. And yet, there are cracks in the ice, there is something flickering within the ice, in the tense expression and posture. As if unyielding against any hammer even if it were the Mjolnir itself, spears risen in defense.

"Hm?" His eyes remain on mine for a moment as only the wind betrays the silence, as his unblinking stare cascades onto mine. "You… were following me as I walked the city, right? Your name was… Kasumi, was it?"

"… Y-Yes. Um, Takeru-san, are you… alright?"

Making that cracked gesture that does not resemble a smile, he shrugs slowly. "I guess. Maybe, kinda."

As he pets the animals, his aura takes on a deep blue of sorrow, as if his features were constrained by vines and roots, as if the thorns were piercing through his very being. There is no anger to be felt in the Takeru-san I now see. Which is… odd, considering the strong reaction he had in the medbay. This feels… like an invigoration of the emotions the little Takeru-san had when that mean noble left him alone without dinner in his room. But this isn't the Takeru-san I know. This is a manifestation of the memories I allowed him to recall, this person is this world's Takeru-san.

… Then, why do the stingers remain in my chest, at the base of my throat?

"Um…"

"Yes?"

"Takeru-san, you're… a Royal Guard, right?"

"… I suppose, yes. A commoner member, a…" he looks down, the rustling of furs growing slower, "baseborn, more accurately."

"So, uh, um… you're, I mean… Do you truly feel alright?"

"Yes, maybe. Is something the matter?"

"No, it's just… well, I heard that, uh, some royal guards are very… angry, adusted at times."

Slow and dry is his chuckle, which shortly turns into more coughing. "Yeah, I can see what you mean, bunny girl. But don't worry, I ain't like the more, uh, intense of our ranks," he nods, not dispelling the coldness which matches the night yet not seeming unwelcoming either.

"So, uh, what are you going to do now, Takeru-san? Your house is… well…"

Remaining inexpressive as he caresses the animals, he whispers back after a sigh. "There is little for me to do here anymore. Not gonna lie, it was nice coming back here, to spend even just a second reminiscing of these peaceful days. But… this isn't where I should be," he then chuckles dryly once more, a single teardrop escaping his left eye, "… even if there isn't anywhere I should be, anyways."

"Huh? What do you mean? Do you not have, um, fellows in the Imperial Guard?"

Grimacing for but a second, his expression tightens as if he had touched ice. "… Doesn't matter. By the way," he slowly stands up, dusting off his uniform, taking a few steps towards me, "isn't the other one with you today?"

"… The other one?"

"You know, the one that's always with you. Dressed in white, with purple hair, and that smug smirk."

"… Why?"

"Eh?"

"Why… do you know… Do you know the Professor?"

"… So she's a professor?" He whispers, grasping his chin and nodding slowly.

"Huh? I… uh… yes, she is. So, you've seen her in… your dreams?"

"Yeah, doesn't she always appear with you? Guess you're alone now, huh," he says, still lacking any and all energy.

The animals hurry closer, the bunnies hopping in between us. The black one sniffs his hand, welcoming the slow caress of the torn glove before hopping my way, asking for me to again take it atop my head. The white bunny does the same with him, only thumping and groaning at the delay in tiredness of his gestures, like a wave retracting back to the ocean after hitting the shore.

"Um… Takeru-san, have you dreamed about these animals before too?"

"Kinda? I guess, at times. It gets hard to remember, everything just spins at times," he shrugs, placing the moody white bunny back on top of his messy hair. If it weren't for his clothes and the exhaustion which lingers in him, it's almost as if I were talking with the Takeru-san I know. "Still… Sigh." His shoulders then drop as do his lips, the blue darkening in his complexion.

"Are you feeling well?" I ask, extending a hand.

He again tries and fails to smile as he shakes his head. "Yeah, I'm… fine. It's just a bit distressing, is all."

"What is?"

"I just wonder what it says about me, dreaming about a loli bunny girl escorting me through the city," he then sighs again as his posture lowers.

"What is wrong with that? Bunnies are cute."

"Yeah, I guess you are… cute. It's just, you know, weird. I feel like we're going to skip the MPs and go straight to the yanks if I gotta explain this one."

"… I don't understand."

One eye closes as he shrugs. "Better that you don't, I suppose. Sigh… Still, thanks for keeping me company, bunny girl," he nods back, starting to walk past me. As he does the animals hurry to follow him, the dragons cling to his arms once more, the kitties and the tuna jump to his shoulders and the puppies hurry as they bark in complain.

As I turn to follow him, a distorted image reaches my sight. Like when I cannot focus anymore, the rest of the neighborhood is becoming colorless, swirling and crumbling apart. So silently, so quietly, as if was never there to begin with, simply crushed like lonely leaves on the ground.

"Why is this all falling apart?"

"Because it's just yesterday, this… isn't real anymore," he says, voice lowering.

Looking back at him, more crumbled buildings were in his path. Yet… the scenery down the street is the same as the one near the base. Almost as if it were a reflection of the nearby buildings, as if a mirror was placed at the next street, the crumbled version of Takeru-san's house was close to us, the Gekishin which fell upon the remains of Sumika-san's house is also visible under the moonlit skyline. And yet, the path does not seem to lead back to the base. On the horizon, a vast wasteland seems to expand, like the one…

that he showed me and the Professor when she threatened him with a gun.

"Um… Takeru-san?"

"Yes?"

"Where are you going?"

"… No idea."

"Then, why are you walking into that wasteland? Your home… I mean, if you wake up now, uh, we can-"

"It'd be nice, to stay chilling here. But this… isn't my home anymore," looking down, the fissures of blue seem to spawn all over her body, as if a shock of electricity they were. Yet, he remains still, inexpressive. "I don't know where I should be, but wherever that is has to be past this wasteland. It's always the same in all of my dreams, anyways."

"So you… you dream of an eternal wasteland?"

"Yeah. I never have managed to make it to the other side yet. Guess all I can do is keep crawling forward on my own," he says, beginning to frown as he turns around, "like every goddamn day since this invasion started…"

"Stop, please!" Rushing to his side, I grab his hand. It feels cold, too stiff and swollen. "You don't know if that's the right way, maybe you can wake up if we go elsewhere." If he follows the same dreams of this world's Takeru-san, then… there is no other representation of his psyche nearby, so our Takeru-san is being affected by the shared memories. And if I don't stop him-

Slow, he places a hand on my cheek. Almost like a towel is the softness which rubs my face for a second, as I'm unable to look away from the cold expression with small candles as eyes. Even

slower, he parts my bangs as if they were curtains, ruffling them for a moment. Then, he seems to pet the bunny on my head, that wavering expression again in his face, that exhausted smile.

"You don't have to force yourself to follow me. This is my own burden after all, can't push you to tag along," he whispers, slowly turning around and walking off towards the ruins ahead.

As he does, with every step he takes my limbs grow numb, my sight grows blurry. The shiver on my nape, the jolt through my legs, it's like when I halt a recovery session. Am I… waking up? This opposition, is it like when I was trying to enter his mind and I was rejected? But… But…

Takeru-san then turns back, the wind blows and swirls his scarf and hair. The tired expression betrays the stoic dark of his dress, he gives another cracked smile and nods. Then weakly raises a hand, waving at me as he starts walking with the moonlight as his cloak.

"Later, bunny girl. See you in another dream."

… What do I do? My lips part, no sound comes out.

Should I let him wake up on his own terms? His silhouette grows hazy, I can't feel the wind anymore.

This might not even be the Takeru-san I know, maybe all I did was guide the one I know to the memories of this world's one, to the wrathful guard.

Merely trying to move forward send pain into my soles, palpitations fading as everything dulls and numbs, as moving anything causes pain to flare up under my stiff muscles.

I do not know if it is safe for me, to delve deeper into his mind. If he becomes that wrathful guard, he might harm me. I don't know what consequences that might have. Yet, to leave him alone… when it was my fault he's feeling this shock at the memories…

… But it hurts, merely trying to remain aware and focuses. If anything like what happened in the house occurs again…

A faint groan, a tender pressure. A tiny stomp on my forehead, the black bunny jumps off me. It lands and looks back, staring at me for a second. It groans loudly, thumping its legs again, before it dashes away in hops in chase of the blurry figure in the distance.

…

I… I can't… I have to…

"Haa… Haa…" Frowning, I hit my cheeks with both palms, taking a deep breath.

As the remnants of the peaceful city disintegrate calmly to the wind, turning to ash and dust, leaving nothing but a void in its place, I also rush into the ruins. Through the debris, through the concrete and fallen steel limbs, ignoring the spikes and stones which sink onto my feet, the prickling spider legs that crawl up my back, until his shape becomes recognizable again.

"Takeru-san, please wait!"

He was crouching, playing with the black bunny. Looking up, he raises a brow. Standing up slowly, those calm features merely observe as I gradually lose speed, panting and sweating, until I stop a short distance away from him. As I claw at me knees, bending my dress, something soft yet rough covers my eyes. Forcefully rubbing the sweat of my face, Takeru-san then pets my head, slower and stronger than usual and without the orange aura filling me with warmth. Yet, there is a certain relaxation coming from the slow freshness of this blue aura that kneads my hair.

"What is it, bunny girl? It's alright, you can go back to wherever it is you gotta be. I can-"

"Let me go with you."

"… What?"

"I want to accompany you, until the dream is over. Until… you go back home." Even if you're not our Takeru-san, this is his psyche. And if the memories are trying to be assimilated, then you'll guide me to him. And also, I… don't feel anything bad from you.

He blinks, leaving his hand on my hair. Lips part, close, retract inwards. Takeru-san then sighs with closed eyes, his hand slipping off my head, falling limply by his side. "It's not a good idea. You shouldn't stay near me."

"Why?"

"Well, everyone ends up leaving me anyways, or ignoring me, so you don't have to worry. I'm… used to this, bunny girl."

"I… still want to accompany you. Also, my name is Kasumi."

"You're sure you wanna come with?"

"Yes… for real."

Blinking slowly again, he chuckles dryly. "I see. Thanks, really," and finally, as the moon covers his face again, he smiles, earnestly yet small.

"No, it's nothing… So, um, do you usually walk with the ani- friends through the wasteland?"

"More like they just follow me. I've no idea why, but they give me this sense of deja vu. Can't just leave them alone in this mess," he shrugs, leaving his hand for a small moment on each animal, scratching their heads.

A small poke on my leg, the black rabbit stares at me. Groaning when I don't lift it immediately.

I wonder, if the one in front of me is this world's Takeru-san, and he says he saw me and the Professor in his dreams… Is this because his memories are mixed with the ones from our Takeru-san? Then, what is it with these animals forms? It is all so confusing.

The Takeru-san in front of me shows no hostility, no anger or any violent emotions. He's blue, completely sad and quiet. Not despairing, but unable to lift his good spirits as he always does. Simply… lips pursed in discouragement, shoulders sagging in quiet loneliness, and a forced ice mask in over his face. It's like nothing I've seen in Takeru-san thus far, and it also does not align with that I know of this world's Takeru-san. His quietness is a bit… unnerving, considering the usual loud cheerfulness he displays, both in the base and as he was in his child form.

But that doesn't change what I have to do, for it was my fault your memories are in such disarray. No matter where it is you're going, I'm going to follow you and bring you back. No, wait, is it him or our Takeru-san? If they end up fusing, that will only make things worse, right? Or would it clarify everything in his heart?

… No, I cannot doubt. For now, this Takeru-san does not seem like a bad person. Just like the little one in the house, he's saddened to the core. But instead of crying, he's keeping quiet and marching on… perhaps as Takeru-san was all these days, saying nothing on his pain as we kept doing recovery sessions after his duties.

As I put the rabbit on my head again, we start walking alongside the puppies.

After a moment, Takeru-san looks at me and gives a small nod, his bottom lip retracting fully behind his teeth as he whispers words of thankfulness as we march into the wasteland of cracked dirt and cloudy skies.

So I reach out for his hand, and a small grip returns mine own. The puppies bark once, the kitties rustle under his large red scarf, and both bunnies seem to curl once more into a loaf of bread.

In silence, we slowly venture forth towards the unchanging scenery that extends deep into the horizon under these skies brimming with stormclouds, towards whatever is waiting for us after light's out under the moon's guidance.

# Iceberg of the Soul (II)

*A/N: I'm not going to bore you with what's going on IRL on this side of the monitor, so I'll cut to the point. One half of me says that to continue posting would be a bad call, that the warning is hanging from the wall, that it's courting controversy, but instead I'll be open with what's ahead. I fear the rest of this story will come out as demonizing the Japanese, as it will go counter to the strong views displayed both in our world by the old Empire of Japan and the mirror that those beliefs have in Muv-Luv's Japan.*

*I don't think my writing skill can do justice to such topics in a neutral light, so I want to make it clear that I do not hate the Japanese or their culture. If someone wants to criticize this particular aspect of the story, please do point me to either books, sources, or personal experiences that could help paint a less dark picture, to not fall to stereotypes or any possible prejudice on my end.*

*I do understand th at a flithy gaijin writing of these topics will feel insulting, that perhaps people will get heated about it , and y ou're free to think I'm toxic or that this story is a piece of shit, you're equally free to simply turn around and ignore this fic . Don't start spamming hate to me or the other commenters. T o whatever readers remain , do not engage in debates in the comments . Let people say whatever they want, and ignore the obvious trolls fishing for drama.*

*This fear of getting bombarded by hate, along other stuff IRL, is what mainly made me want to just delete everything, to avoid becoming more stressed over how to portray this properly, how not to make people angry, and it sucked all the enjoyment out of writing for me.*

*I do appreciate the honesty though, so if what you read from now on pulls you out of the story and you feel like saying your piece, don't hesitate so long as you're polite about it. Editing and a general lack*

*of time have kind of desensitized me to the contents of this particular chapter, so I admit I might have gone too far with certain stuff.*

**WARNING:** *This entry goes deep into the dark and has graphics descriptions of violence, mental anguish, and other disturbing shit, and it's also really long. Due to both the explicit content and the rawness of the material, I've decided to not screw around with any possible triggers so I'll point you back to the list of warnings that are in the first chapter, most of them apply for this entry* .

*I know my takes aren't as 'based' as many would like for a fanfic that follows the masterpiece that is the trilogy, but I do think some of the most gruesome moments of this chapter can still hit badly despite my lacking skill.*

*While it isn't enough to send me away from the screen, previous reactions from readers about other similar dark moments, namely the original rendition of chapter 46 and the nurse's scene, make me believe I might have gone too far this time and thus it's necessary to put this large warning here. It's not DEA or RK or MIA levels of cursed, but maybe enough to upset a few sensibilities. I haven't been enjoying the best days over here, and I'm sure my strong negative vibe will permeate all of this chapter.*

*If I was wrong and the content did not deserve the trigger warning, do let me know. I may be trying to overcompensate here.*

*Well, enough tangents. I know what lays down there is not enjoyable in the slightest, so tread carefully. As one last suggestion, I recommend reading this entry while listening to the song 'Labyrinth VI' from Etrian Odyssey 3: The Drowned City.*

*T hanks for reading. Keep staying safe.*

*Zuoriel*

---

" *In the days before, many moons ago, decay came to infest*

*T he path of the wise, the stream to glory*

*Even those anointed in honor long ago now oppose wordlessly, seal the way forward*

*S hrouded in hazy dreams, sealed they remain*

*Those golden chrysanthemums, the choirs of EDEN*

*Even a mere prayer is denied to you,*

*pushed always forward by the indifference of time*

*Can you hear it, that silent whisper that seeks you?*

*Will you then reach out for it , grasping at the void?*

*W ill you then cross this filthy stream for it , willingly bring its water to your lips?*

*Be wrath i ncarnate , Indra!*

*Fierce enough to melt away the soil!*

*Embrace thus the dark child who swing s at nothing ness , lost in rage*

*Be a rampart, Indra!*

*A refuge for this, oh, ignorant child*

*Clear all signs of fire; allow calm ness to come forth . "*

INDRA, by Susumu Hirasawa. Sword of the Berserk: Guts' Rage (Dreamcast).

---

*C hapter 76:*

**Iceberg of the Soul - Shadows**

---

*D ate and Time Unknown.*

*(In the middle of a twisting wasteland filled with broken buildings and debris.)*

**[Kasumi]**

---

"So you were sent to a very snowy mountain?" I ask, sidestepping over the bolt-like shapes of the cracks in the asphalt, from where dried up weeds come out.

"Yes, it was truly a bother," he sighs, again, walking as slowly as his voice through the sinking and rising parts of the broken street. "I didn't mind the permission to train a year ahead, but I really wanted to go to that release."

"Was that book truly so interesting?"

"Yeah, it was. It shows that a warrior's sharpest tool are its wits, not its sword. A friend even told me there was a reference to Lethal Combat somewhere in the story, too."

"… Lethal Combat?"

"Oh, another LitRPG series of books, focused more on the PvP aspect of roleplay. Basically, just a fighting game," he says with a slow shrug, coughing and covering his mouth as we pass a few broken cars, oil and rust filling the air.

"I see… Um, do you remember playing fighting games on a television?"

He raises a brow, his steps waning. Standing still at the edge of a shadow, his fingers absentmindedly play with the dragons as he

looks up to the tilted and broken buildings that are half-sunk into the wasteland. "Hmm… It kind of feels like that should have been a thing but…"

"You can't clearly remember?"

"No, like, I think I did… but I don't remember having done that with the Pickles or my friends after changing schools," he nods back at me, taking a second to douse the complains of the red kitty. "Back when everything was fine."

After a sigh his aura once more grows blue, a curtain veiling part of his delayed, almost apathetic gestures. We remain quiet as we walk through the cracked asphalt, under the swirling clouds, bent lightposts and cars decorating the soil with their impregnable shadows. Only eventual twitches of the lights above grant us momentary visibility, which isn't particularly welcome in my case. The erratic pattern somehow turns the surroundings creepier, making the shadows flicker.

It also serves as a gateway to those days of the invasion. Hands which cling to portrays, the shattered glass of the frame sticking to the skin. Bowls broken in half, packs of rations for which my hands are too large scattered through the abandonment of cars and asphalt. The once shining parks I saw moments ago, deserted and quiet, clouds of flies covering their expansion.

And many, many stuffed toys left behind. Some merely left by the road, others ripped apart, a few stuck under the rubble. Observing the area, the lightposts nearby decide to flicker to life. As illumination feeds clarity upon the destruction nearby, my feet suddenly stop, mouth hollowing all air out. The light lasts a second before it again fades, yet I couldn't take my eyes off the tiny, tiny hand that was still clinging to the arm a the stuffed animal, despite not being connected to anything, despite the white beneath the muscle tissue being clearly visible, despite looking like a tightly wrung-out towel as it clings onto that tiny, tiny stuffed toy.

… I tend to forget, how cruel reality can be, how blessed I am to be in the Professor's care, to have Takeru-san by me. And how odd it is, that now I feel my throat wringing, my lips retreating at such sights as opposed to the frozen indifference that lingered in me before. Watching his back, his gaze was locked in other signs of disaster, not showing hints or tells, except for the apathetic drag of his feet. Almost limping, merely walking forward.

The road ends and returns to dust, large craters having blasted the street apart. Hopping back onto the dry soil, buildings arched downwards like some sort of horns, as if sinking into an antlion's den, loom over us both as we keep on walking in silence. The lingering smell of something burnt is strong, dwelling deeply in area, which makes my tongue stick to the back of my teeth at times. And yet, despite the rugged and jagged surfaces we traverse in the irregular terrain, the sole of my shoes does not hurt in the slightest. Not even the little animals show signs of exhaustion, despite their occasional wails for attention to try and bring some cheer to his grayed out complexion.

"Um…"

"Yes?" He asks, not even moving his eyes to acknowledge me.

"So, um, you stopped living in your house since you started studying to become an Imperial Guard?"

"No, I still went back to Hiiragi every weekend, when I didn't have any studies to take care of," he says, shoulders sagging. Lips retracting, gaze focused and unmoving from the ground, slowly dodging elevations and sinkholes, always looking back to help me and the puppies with our steps.

He pulls me upwards as I stomp on a broken and rusted hood, leaning on him as we again reach even terrain. "… But you did manage to become an Imperial Guard. So you passed the test at the mountain?"

"Eh? Ah, yeah. Me and… both cousins managed to be given the approval the same time, more or less," he whispers, gently releasing my fingers, looking forward at the never-changing scenery as light flickers from above again.

Why is he not saying 'Pickles'? Is this Takeru-san upset at them? His aura is… still locked onto that same blue hue. "Um, did you have any issues with the training, perhaps? Something you didn't agree with?"

A minute lowering of his eyelids, he then shakes his head. "… No, not really. I could pass the combat exercise, even if barely, and the written aptitude exams were hard, not gonna lie, but they weren't impossible. Back then, I didn't have any complains, everything seemed clear."

"Clear how?"

"It was all black and white, a world of zeroes and ones. This is good, this is bad, I have to do this, I don't have to do that. Simple stuff, simpler times. Before…" he grimaces, standing still as he waits for me to catch up, his eyes locked on the cloudy skyline under the momentary illumination, "the war teared those words apart."

A small flash of red, a faint mist of black surging from his heart. It makes me shiver, my neck closing as if someone were pressing a hand onto it. "Um… Did you have a confrontation with someone?"

"No, that's not it. Sigh…" shrugging, he chuckles dryly, voice lowering further, "I always get in trouble, thanks to not knowing how to shut up. But it's… kind of like this wasteland, the problem I have," he looks forward, pacing through the dust in the air while wrapping both kitties and the tuna with an arm, both dragons clinging to him, yet their bumps onto his chin or the nibbling to his fingers or ears does not change his composed and neutral expression.

"What do you mean? Do you feel alone in your endeavors?" I ask as I follow, placing a hand on the bunny on my head as I balance my weight on an iron beam, seeking his hand for support.

Which he extends, pulling me to cross the gap as my feet hesitate, when I catch a glimpse of small books, picture books, that were at the bottom of the hole, along the remains, scattered remains, of their owners. Patting my shoulder while I replenish air as my feet hit stable ground, he simply waits.

"It's kind of how you must be feeling right now. You can't really compute what's around, something should be changing soon, right?" Another sigh, heavier, as his aura thickens in blue. "But no matter how much I walk, how much effort I put in my work, nothing ever changes. There's no light at the end of the tunnel, and all this gloom and doom are just, you know, starting to stick," he sighs, kicking the air, hugging the dragons. "And when this scenery loses impact and it becomes routine… it just gets harder to *do* anything, to find a reason to get out of bed. Get what I mean?"

"I suppose. War can certainly… dull the heart to allow one to survive."

As I've been living, taking everything I was told as the norm, never expecting anything other than what I was given. Until you and Sumika-san came into my life, as it was before the invasion with the Professor to an extent.

"Is this wasteland always like this for you, Takeru-san?" I ask, fingers twitching, hesitating for a second before grabbing his hand again, absence of heat permeating it.

He blinks a few times, the edges of his lips moving ever so subtly before he gives another gradual nod. "Yeah, I guess. There's really not much here other than wreckage and destruction, and nothing to be done about it."

"Do you have any idea why you dream of this? Isn't there even one small glimmer of hope left for you?" I ask, walking closer to him, shivering a bit as his aura enters in contact with mine, a chill into my arms.

"Hope, huh," he looks down, sighing yet again. "After so many salvage missions, it kind of gets ingrained into you, this scenery. It's always the same, there are a few parts that can be recovered but the rest…" he suddenly stops walking, lips twisting in, throat folding down. I follow his gaze, finding a torn plush toy with its filling leaking and sprinkled with red, buried under two masses of bones and flesh pressed together by a falling boulder. "… The rest is always the same shit," he whispers, petting my head slowly as he brings me to his chest, shielding my sight from the cruel visage.

And for a moment, I merely cling onto the somber and quiet blue, feeling it seep into me with its stillness as the rabbit on my head and the dragons ruffle my hair at times. A pat or two on my back, they aid my breathing to return to normal. Slow steps he starts to take, and I follow. A small moment of walking in silence and darkness, I cough and slowly pull away from his gentle grip.

"Are you feeling okay?" He asks, rubbing the back of my head.

"Yes, I'm alright… Do not worry, I am rather used to… such crude images. I can't really avoid them, after all." No matter how hard I try, merely walking is enough to hear or see these cruelties at times, even if it isn't as normal as it was two years ago.

He pets my head, softly nibbling at his bottom lip, sinking further in blue. "Sigh… You really don't have to come with, bunny girl."

"No, I… *cough…* I said I would keep you company. I… I do know war can cause such cruelty."

It's like all the blurred flashes I've seen in the hallways, the frail but intense memories of anguish of the soldiers marching about, the losses of the Valkyries, the pain of the poor Instructor. But, to see it with such clarity, to feel the putrid stench corrode my lips, to hear the screeches of the flies, what once was brimming with life imploding in decay despite this place being a dreamscape…

"U-Um, Takeru-san, is it really always like that during your missions?"

Shaking his head, sighing short yet deep, he hunches over again as the dragons cry out and lightly hit his chin, as both puppies whimper. "Sometimes it's worse. Sometimes we find all the pieces, scattered everywhere, flies dancing over 'em. Other times…" biting his lips, he looks away, "we find them still alive. And all we can do is spare them the pain, and nothing else. Nothing else…"

He grabs my hand and we walk again, under the rows and rows of wreckage, the rows and rows of rusted TSF parts, of what truly resembles a wolf's maw. And yet, despite a few cracks in the colors, Takeru-san remains marching forward, his sight locked onto the far off horizon as the buildings grow closer, our pathway narrow under the flickering lightposts and howling wind.

Never wavering, never reacting. Slow but constant like the tickling of a clock, yet darkening a little more every second. Just like the moonlight that accompanies us, despite a few thickets of clouds blocking the upper and lower parts of the moon as of now.

Pursing my lips, gripping his hand as the puppies look up at me and softly whimper, I bump my shoulder with his, enduring the prickling of cold blue on my nape. "But… But you did manage to save some people, right? The war was horrible, but your efforts weren't pointless."

"… Save?" A stutter in his voice, a ripple in the ice, heaviness at the pit of my stomach as dark fog covers him for a moment.

"U-Um, is something the matter?"

"… I guess, yeah," he barely whispers, now dragging his feet and making the puppies bark a bit as they gain a sudden lead on us. He sighs again, extending his free hand to tend to the showy complains of the purple doggy, then softly scratching the ears of the patient

blue puppy. "I guess… I guess we managed to save a few, just a few."

"Are you displeased in your position in the IRG?" I look into his eyes, giving a squeeze to his hand as he raises back up.

He merely shrugs, leaning his chin onto the kitties that play with his scarf. "I'm not upset or anything. I get that there ain't much else we can do. It's just…"

"That you don't agree with their methods?"

"No, that's not it. It's that, well, I believe small gestures of kindness can do much for us in the long run," gradually coming to a halt, he looks up at the crashing clouds as the wind howls again, the light leaving his features as his complexions softens, "but no one seems to even care anymore."

Despite being covering my eyes to avoid the dust and the strong scents, his aura tells a gash is once more open, in his face and heart. Taking in a deep but short breath, I once more look up into his eyes, that are still scouring the pitch-dark cloak of the clouds above while petting the white bunny. Only to see him grimacing.

"I used to think that day was just an accident… but it turns out that was how we always did things."

"That day?"

He doesn't reply, starting to walk again into the closed-off pathway in between the buildings. The animals stall the motions before following, and I have to jog lightly to reach his side again. As I do however, the burning scent grows stronger, enough to make me cough. Upon opening my eyes, a circling wave of yellow and orange covers my sight.

Pillars set alight, hazy. Petals scattering into a whirlwind of flames, fading to ashes. The heat crawling all over a building, stitched

screams echo close by.

"W-What is… Where-"

"I thought this was just an accident," he whispers, eyelids almost closing, fingers slowly treading the fur of the animals. He crouches, hugging both puppies as they start to cry and wail louder and louder.

The stampede of smoke rushes out of the woodwork, winged flames erupt from within the windows in much violence, creating a shower of glass in the periphery. A large house built in the old ways of the Empire burns, not even this garden seems safe from the heat as the rows of ovals with flower offerings are made to endure the falling sparks. Specters of shadow rush through some hallways, some falling, others screaming, yet all stumble and collapse within the smoke.

"What is this? Just what- How did such a thing happen?"

"I told you, I thought this was an accident," he says, and I see him give a faint kiss to both puppies as he lifts both and covers the animals with his long scarf. Both dogs in his arms, the dragons clinging to the inner part of them, both kitties rustling on his shoulder along the tuna, all of them taking shelter in the scarf. Only the white bunny refuses his offer, thumping and insisting on remaining on his head, as does the one above mine. "What you see here is when terrorists attacked the Main House one day, outta nowhere. Or at least what this nightmare twisted it into," he admits, shifting his arms to ensure none of them fell, starting to arch his back at the weight.

"Eh?! Terrorists? When… Wait, did this happen in 1997?"

"Huh? How did you know?"

"Well… A weird agent once came asking for a favor to someone I know, saying they needed help with an unfortunate incident." My scanning ability's help, to be more precise. It was truly the first time I

lamented being born with such powers, when the Professor taught me what the words 'disgust' and 'repulsion' meant.

"I see… Well, yeah, this happened back then. And as you can see, it was pure chaos."

"Did… someone you like died during this incident?"

"Thankfully, no. But many good fellows did, and a lot more got badly hurt or got severe burns somewhere. But even then…" he grimaces again, shaking his head as he enforces his embrace, Takeru-san then walks forward while using himself as a shield, crossing through the smoke and flames.

"Takeru-san, please wait! The fire is- *Cough! Cough! "* Unable to endure the slamming impact of the heat on my features, my feet retreat as I cover my mouth.

Yet, he keeps on moving through the rows of flowers, the rows of burning flowers and into the building. Hesitating at first, until the bunny atop me groaned and thumped, I follow after him through what little space we have. The lack of air lasts a moment, the fire seems to be concentrated in isolated areas unlike the all-encompassing smoke which roams freely through the hallways. A flood of rotting flames, is how the place looks from within, heralded by the stream of dark clouds. That, or this is how his mind remembers this incident. Walking for a moment, descending to a mere step at a time, I end up finding him amidst the current of smoke, coughing as a wall of fire covers the path forward.

"Takeru-san! We should- *cough…* We have to get out of here!"

"… There's no point in going back."

"Huh?"

"Even if you close your eyes, what's around you won't simply disappear," he rasps, his hold over the animals tightening. For a

moment, incineration which would leave the one around us paling shone within his eyes, a brunt stroke of dark in his aura. "There's only one way out of this nightmare, forward. Even if… there's nothing we can do…" he sighs, taking a few steps back and taking another hallway, away from the smoke.

With every step I take, my palpitations rise through my throat. "But you might get hurt."

"… And nothing of value will be lost."

"W-What? Don't say that, please! You're- *Cough! Cough!"* The reflex seems to remain in place, until I feel his presence pull me away from the clogging clouds. Taking in a sharp breath of heat, I look up into his eyes, his downcast eyes as the white bunny seems to groan and thump. "You should never say something like that."

"It's just the truth, bunny girl," he sighs, again, while wiping the sweat off his face, panting for a moment before turning and walking once more through hallways with walls falling to fire.

"Why? You're always- You're so… Why would you say something so cruel about yourself?"

He stops walking, shoulders sagging. "… You asked me before if I had saved anyone, but every time something happens… no one can rely on me."

"Why? You're… You're always so bright, and are always trying your best… And anyways, what could you do during an incident such as this? If the authorities didn't see it coming then-"

"That's kind of the point," he says, shifting his hold on the animals, making sure they didn't slip through his arms, faint wails coming from under the tattered scarf. "I used to think we got caught with our guard down, that because no one saw it coming things escalated to this point, to the hell you see now."

"Then, what is causing you to deride yourself? An individual cannot be held accountable over such turns of events, much less if you were not holding any authority." With every step closer, the scent of gunpowder strengthens along small sobs, faint crying.

"That every time, every single time, it's always the same answer," he whispers, hanging his head, softly biting his lips. "I can do nothing to help, before or after the fact. And… I hate that about myself."

A sudden gust of wind invigorates the flames, raising beyond the ceiling, sending the heat towards us. After a moment of burning, of veiling my sight, the pain soon fades away, replaced by sharp groans, muffled groans. Opening my eyes, I'm met with darkness and a soft feeling near my nose.

"T-Takeru-san!" He had shielded me from most of it, now groaning in pain before he falls to his knees, features twisting.

As I look around, the walls seemed to have melted away into pure blazes. Rushing through our sides as if they were the rapids of a river, like trains blasting past a station, the yellow and orange light blurs and sizzles by our sides. In the middle of the two ramparts of fire, a small hallway was left for us to walk through.

Takeru-san remains gritting his teeth and groaning as smoke slowly raises from his back, parts of his dress darkened further. My hands flinches away when I try to touch his shoulder, and the animals start to lick at his face or hair, whimpering until the pain seems to leave his features. A thump on my head, I gulp and try to pat his shoulders, offer some respite. Merely touching the fabric is enough to send a quiver through my skin, wanting to release the grip.

"Shouldn't you take off your dress, Takeru-san? You might get burned." Even if this is nothing but a dreamscape, there's no need for you to suffer needlessly.

"N-No, I'm okay, it's fine… I'm used to this… haa… haa…" He slowly raises up, a hand resting on his shaky knee, his complexion

wavering as he refuses my hand of support, still gasping.

"Are you certain that we should keep going? You're truly going to end up hurt."

"Yeah…" And slowly, he starts to walk again through the narrow space left to us by the flowing fire walls.

"You won't turn back?"

"There's nothing to do back there, you saw how my house was left. This place, too, is nothing but another stop on the never ending conga line of shit that plagues my dreams."

"But there has to be another- *cough…* Do you truly have to subject yourself to this torture?" Your dress is blackening further, there's smoke still coming off it as if you were garbed in incense.

"At this point… Heh, it's almost like just another Wednesday," he dryly chuckles, the coarse coughing claiming his throat afterwards, then turning into mournful grinding of teeth which spur further complains from all animals.

"S-So…" considering the change in scenery happened as we talked, perhaps, "was the resolution of this incident something that happened again during the invasion?" Is that why he's so conflicted, so determined to keep moving forward despite the state of this place?

"Every time something goes wrong, it's always the same answer. Just like when-" He suddenly stops walking, his upper body quivering oddly.

Reaching his side, I immediately flinch away. A pond of red that enlarges every so often, pink strands of hair falling into it. A completely slouched, slumped body, features fixed as if a statue it were. The kitty wails, jumping down from Takeru-san's shoulder and

rushing towards the limp body, licking the face of the woman, biting her fingers, looking back at us and wailing, wailing.

"Takeru-san, who is… What happened here?"

His lips quiver, stalling an answer before he closes, wrings his eyes shut. "As the attack started, I was with Maya-nee and the cousins, preparing for some duels we were going to have with other heirs. We split up, to cover more ground and alert those in charge, but it wasn't a single group that had infiltrated the House or protesters forcing their way through the main gate," his chin folds inwards, elbows sinking into his sides, breathing picking up speed, short and shallow. "Gun shots everywhere, the smoke raising, everything just came and went in a blur, everything's so fuzzy. But as we were moving towards Yuuhi's room, we ran into some intruders holding hostages. Maya-nee and her group disposed of them… b-but it was too late."

Swirling smoke roves around us, rising to conquer the ceiling. Small flickers of yellow spark up, gunshots reverberate almost by my side. Holding his shaking hands, his cold hands, only serves to enhance the echoes of the screams, of the gunshots, of the burning wood, and I can only grit my teeth to endure the unrelenting sounds. And as the pink kitty nuzzles itself against the slack features of the deceased, everything sinks into place. And it leaves a vacuum in my stomach.

"… *Takeru, take the daughter to the central hall right this instant,"* a sharp and imposing voice so tells, and through his hand I feel the quiver over his entire body.

"I used to think," he whispers as he steps, as he hesitates towards the corpse, "we merely didn't have time that day, that we weren't ready for this fucked up shit happening," he crouches, and that shaky hand closes the eyelids of the woman despite the bite of the pink kitty that he then embraces. "That everything would be fixed as swiftly as this incident, and that that's all it was. A cruel accident no one could see coming. But it seems I've always been in the wrong."

My feet barely lift from the floor before they stop, lips clamping shut as if walking through the thicket of smoke once again. Screams reach the back of my head, crying out for the woman, claiming she is not yet dead, asking why no one would help her mother. Unable to breath in, to even gulp, I can only remain still as I place a hand on his shoulder, shuddering at the sizzling heat that surrounds us, as the walls seem to inch closer.

"This… wasn't your fault, Takeru-san," I say, both puppies barking in agreement and huddling closer to him, licking his swollen fingers.

"But I still did nothing."

"H-However, what could you-"

"If you do nothing, if you achieve nothing… then, you're pointless," he whispers, still rubbing the head of the pink kitty which seems to want to curl into invisibility before hiding under his red scarf. "And it's always the same. Every time something goes wrong, instead of trying to come up with different solutions, it's always the same. Just leave them behind, anyone who can no longer go on already exhausted their potential. Always the same shit, and I never can do anything."

Following after the slouched shape, the fire eventually gives up and the hallways return to a normal form, despite the smell not leaving us. Finding a large door, we end up in a vast hall filled to the brim with wounded people and hurrying guards. Screaming plummeting down to my ears, empty medkits lying on the ground, bags and bags overflowing with bandages dampened red. Suffering, so much suffering.

"Not enough supplies, it's important to prioritize them to those who contribute more value," he spits, beginning to frown, his aura solidifying and sending shivers down my spine as he holds my hand tight when stepping forward. "And there's nothing you can do, more than offer them company in their pain before the end comes," he then sighs again, marching through the distorted place, the bodies

that crumble to sand or ash, teeth gritting in imitation of an industrial press at the treatment of unresponsive limbs.

Holding his wrist, almost slipping on our march, my lips quiver as I take deep breaths, the mixed scent of both medication and burnt material bringing an awful taste to my mouth, making my tongue regress into my throat.

"But the terrorists were repelled, right?"

"Yeah. Doesn't make the treatment the wounded received any better."

"Yet, one cannot-"

"Foresee all accidents nor avoid death during battle, I know. I know some 'elite' squadrons should get priority access to the supplies, but," his lips twist downwards as he looks back.

At the twisted bodies, at the cocoon of bandages that shield the burning skin, at the splatters of red, at the hands that rummage, and dive, and thrash, and seek something within medkits and suitcases yet only grasp air, or their own hair in frustration.

"Is this really all we can do? Just throw people in an open room, jammed like fish in a barrel? Sigh…"

… Why? I thought he'd be angry, but his aura remains so blue. I don't even feel any of the usual gale he shows when arguing with the Professor. "You said you thought this…" gulping hard, I look away from the spiraling bodies and furniture, the liquid feeling covering my ankles, "was just an accident. Did another incident resembling this happen again?"

"All the damn time."

We reach the end of the hall, he opens the door and a small garden greets our sight. Growing to a stop, he turns around and presses

part of his scarf on my face, cleaning it slowly then petting my back as I take in air. Breathing in deeply once again, exhaling as the echoes recede and stop tailing us, the tension leaves me as he pats my head. The animals are all unhurt, save for the pink kitty which remains hidden under the scarf, unmoving. As he rubs his arms, dusting the burnt parts of his dress, I spot two shapes nearby. Wait, that's…

"And this, too," he says, hunching over, hugging the animals, running his fingers over them in search of burns or injuries. "There's always the scapegoats."

A little girl with pink hair remains shaking, crying, not lifting her face as her father tries to look into her eyes. The erratic breathing does not stop as he embraces her and joins in the weeping, she continues to apologize in whispers without even blinking, without the shaking stopping.

"I know I'm the idiot here, but it really pissed me off, seeing this kind of thing."

"Huh? It doesn't upset you anymore?"

"… I guess I just don't expect anything out of my superiors anymore."

Looking back for a moment, that crying girl is definitely one of his squadmates. Yet, it would seem she doesn't recall having met this world's Takeru-san, perhaps due to the trauma of the situation. The building which melts like wax to the crawling fire is now unrecognizable from its prior shape, leaving only the flowers nearby safe. Truly fading to nothingness as his home was before we started walking.

And yet, despite the sickness, almost losing balance, what I felt in there… was only sadness and grief, what one would expect of anyone faced by such an event. Such a horrible thing… so much fire, so much pain, everyone was still grayed out so I couldn't hear anything, thankfully, but still, I know what it must have sounded, felt

like. Burns which expand over the skin like the first rays of sunlight at dawn, unceasing beating in the chest while rushing, rebounding off one patient to the other, wanting to tear one's scalp apart as no amount of searching meets the right solution within the spareness of the medkits. As if looking up at open sea for directions, yet no stars were shining above.

I do tend to forget, how precarious the situation was during the invasion, how miraculous it was that Lucifer succeeded.

A hand on my hair, coldness which roves all over my cheek, a pair of eyes scan me. "Are you alright? You didn't get burned or anything?"

"Ah, no, I'm unhurt."

"You don't look fine, why are you hugging your shoulders so tightly?" He asks, slowly placing his hand on my shoulder.

"I was… thinking, is all. What of you? Are you not in pain, after almost being burned?"

"I'm fine. You can't die in your dreams, bunny girl."

"… But if you're conscious about this being a dream, why can you not wake up?"

"I dunno. It's just how it is, I guess. You can turn your brain off, but you still gotta do the grind. Maybe I'm just coping while sleeping."

You seem… oddly composed for someone so young going through so much cruelty. Perhaps, he truly is merely coping by brandishing a stoic facade. But all of those people, that poor woman in the hallway… A focus on individual suffering can fog your vision. Those who cannot thrive against the indifference of the flow of events are to be disregarded. I know you employ such mantras whenever I tend to hesitate. I know there is little to be done after the fact, that letting guilt become your main source of fuel is only detrimental to one's

growth. Yet, amidst such savagery, is such a compressed graveyard the only possible outcome, Professor?

" *Tragedy creates opportunity, fear numbs the mind and tames the heart. Only by remaining composed in the face of such approaches will these tactics lose their intended effect on your psyche."*

I know, I know this disquiet in my breath is caused by my own limitations. But is there truly nothing else to do? Is this Takeru-san correct in his assessment of those in power? You wouldn't… support such a sorrowful state of affair in that hall, right? Knowing what laid in the hearts of those apprehended, knowing how you reacted when Chief Yoroi came to request that favor out of you, I cannot see how you could-

"There, there," slow rocking on the back of my head, fingers tread my scalp. With nothing but a gentle push I end up resting onto him, an arm wrapping my shoulder. "It's okay, you're safe now."

"I'm fine. I'm not-"

"I can tell you're trying to stay strong. You don't have to," he whispers, running circles on my hair as he makes us both sit down in the middle of the garden, the animals coming closer, bumping their noses on mine.

So I close my eyes, clawing at his dress, at the coldness of the blue. The rabbit on my head descends and nuzzles my cheek, the red kitty licks my hair. For a moment, that is all that happens.

As I try to stiffen my cries he remains drawing circles on my hair, humming some sort of song. Simply laying against each other, surrounded by the ashes which raise and depart, by the rows of flower that still remain intact. I can still her the creaking of the wood, smell the burning mingling with the lavender in the air, even see the searing fireflies that to the moon scatter, yet my breathing returns to normal, no longer do I seek to crush or constrict my own palms, which now lay against his dress.

There is only silence, and, while unsettling, it is also… peaceful. Refreshing, in a sense.

"… Did you used to enjoy being here, Takeru-san? Simply staring at the moon in silence?"

"Yeah," he whispers, still playing with my fringe. "Whenever I had something to think about, I'd come here, to the gardens in the back and stay staring at the moon, at the constellations. Sigh… Even if I only got scolded for it."

"Why? Did they punish you for simply looking at the stars?" How cruel. Why would they do such a thing?

"No, you see, turns out that whenever I go stargazing I end up falling asleep. So, well, Maya-nee and Yohime-san worried that I could get sick when I did that," he says, scratching the back of his head. Smiling, for the briefest moment.

"I see. Did you ever truly become bedridden due to watching the stars?"

"No, dumb people don't catch colds. One advantage of being really dense, I guess," he chuckles to himself, to the groans of the animals which retaliate against his falling strands of hair. "But I also came here, after…" he looks back, sobering sharply, "the accident. I really liked this place. Really…"

"… Was it lost during the invasion, I suppose?" He nods, eyes closing, saying nothing while petting both puppies that whimper and rest their heads on his thighs. "But you could… try and rebuild a place like this, right? Certainly, someone in the IRG would favor such a proposition."

"… No, I don't think so."

"Why?"

"Most parks have been turned into shelters, and even the gardens and parks of the palaces are scheduled to be demolished. Kitanomaru has already been turned into a military camp, and chances are the rest will be next on the chopping block," he spits, frowning, resting his chin on my head.

"But isn't there anything you can do?" Is this why he slowly grew more and more angry? Yet, he's still so cold, so blue. Sturdy as a glacier, icy as one could be.

"Nothing a commoner like me can change. No one even thinks I'm worth my rations…"

"Eh?! Why? You're…" grasping his dress, leaving his arm's hold to stare into his eyes only sends further frost into my lungs. "Do you… truly not find yourself useful to the IRG?"

"Sigh… Again, if you accomplish nothing, it's worse than if you were not there. People are counting on me, and I'm always letting 'em down."

"Do you not try your hardest to support your comrades?"

He looks at me in silence, before sighing. "Matters nothing if they're not happy with my performance. It do be like that sometimes, I just can't seem to stop screwing things up," he sighs once more, the white bunny groaning, both puppies barking, the others rustling in his hold.

The clouds start parting and bathing us both in ample moonlight. Beckoned by the breeze, small firefly-like ashes scatter to the sky. Amidst the silence, the scent of the flowers, we stare at the skyline. Simply resting against one another, simply enjoying this momentary and unlikely peace.

As the butterfly wings rise and fold upon themselves, ashes finally losing luster.

As the threads of moonlight defy ramparts of clouds.

As the breeze rustles armies of flowers, their scent giving no quarters to the burnt smoke.

As I rest my head on his shoulder and close my eyes, tending to the red kitty with a hand, both dragons curling in the space between our faces.

In the silence of this better dream, we remain in place. Simply resting, relaxing under the moonlight.

"… Well, guess I should keep going," he says, slowly standing up, taking the animals on his person once more.

"Do you know where you should go now?" I ask, fingertips still lingering on his dress.

"Eh, forward. Thanks for having accompanied me, Kasumi," he says, again petting my head, placing the black bunny on it again. "But you really should turn around, this is-"

"I won't."

"… Things won't be nice to see. I know you're also part of the dream, but there's no need to-"

"You don't have to worry about me. I will be fine… if you're by my side. Would you rather me go away, perhaps?"

Again roughly rubbing my head, playing with my bangs afterwards, he shakes his head. "Thanks, really. You too, little bun," he then pets the bunny on my head, who rolls on its side to welcome the kindness, almost sliding off my hair. "Well, let's go then. Just… please turn around and leave if things get dangerous, okay?" I nod, stepping forward, grabbing his hand.

And so, he takes one final look at the house which fades to the blaze. Sighing again, taking in one deep breath of the fragrance of

the flowers, slow steps he takes towards the gate. Back to the wasteland, to the flickering lightposts and almost abstract patterns of machinery and buildings.

"Um…"

"Yes?"

"Well, I wanted to ask, were you living in that house before?"

"Ah, yeah," he smiles faintly, again looking back for a moment. "I was lucky enough to be allowed to."

"May I ask why? If you're a commoner and that's a house belonging to the nobility, why were you there?"

"Well… It's kinda complicated to explain. Basically, Yohime-san made an exception and allowed me to live with them after my dad died," he says, the purple puppy barking much and hopping about, clinging again onto his leg, biting his dress until Takeru-san pets it for a while.

"Were you… happy back then?"

Again, he smiles briefly. This time, tears are set adrift for a second. "Yes. Those years were probably the happiest of my life."

"Then, do you not have any friends that still care about you? I understand that… the system does not care for one's woes, that anything that hampers the cycles should be discarded, and this may be taking its toll on you, however, surely you still have someone to trust in, right?"

His hand slips from my grasp.

Halting his steps, the hold over the dragons and kitties grows stronger.

A slow shake of his head, a slower descent of a single tear to the soil.

"No, there's no one. Not anymore…"

"Huh? B-But what of the cousins? There's also the Sho- I mean, this Yuuhi you're friends with."

Again, he shakes his head, bottom lip regressing completely behind his teeth despite the barks then whimpers of both puppies, that are met with hissing from the red kitty and white bunny.

"I… I see… Did you have an… argument with them?"

"… Doesn't matter. I'm a nobody for them at this point…" And dragging his feet, he resumes the walk.

The purple puppy whimpers, intently staring, barking. Ignored. So does the blue one, that chooses to remain silent as it walks right beside his feet. The other animals try and huddle to his face, he absentmindedly caresses them. The white bunny on the other hand is now staring at me, and when our eyes cross it gives a slow munch to the air.

"… I'm sorry, it was insensitive of me."

"You don't have to apologize. I'm at fault for letting this get to me. A warrior must not push his emotional burdens onto others," he wipes his eyes, sighing again, a completely neutral and stoic mask shielding his complexion once more. "I'm just a weakling."

"That's not true, Takeru-san. Being open about your pain doesn't make you-"

"A warrior must never falter, must never surrender to despair's freezing grip. Those of us in the IRG have the duty of the Shogunate on our shoulders, so we can't waver or show weakness," he repeats, as if he were an announcer in the radio.

"But being pained about losing people you like isn't weakness."

"… It is for those who must fight."

"I do not agree. It's because you like those people, because you want to give others the peaceful days you enjoyed that you keep moving forward, right?"

"… I guess," he stops, looking up as the illumination flickers on around us. "But someone like me doesn't get the leeway of being bratty. If I talk back, it's more shouts and reprimands. I don't wanna know what's gonna happen if they find me moping about."

"Um, you are assigned as a surface pilot, correct?"

"Hm? Yeah, why do you ask?"

"Well… You said something horrible like what happened in that building occurred all the time, right?" He nods, slowly. "Then, I was wondering if you had other duties on your shoulders that are making your duties harder on you. I know casualties are unavoidable," even if I disagree with the Professor's prior claim that those who perish had nothing of value to offer to humanity's cause, "and that your comrades need you ready for the time of battle, yet, there is no need to punish yourself needlessly, to the point of bottling up your grief. There is only so much that can be done, and you are already a decent enough pilot. I think you shouldn't be so hard on yourself."

"… For real?"

"Huh? What did you… that wording…"

"I think there's more we can do, things don't have to be as shitty as they are," he kicks a rock, sending it crashing against a car, breaking its only sane window. "Sigh… It all feels so pointless…"

"Don't say that, please. There are people that you've helped, right? Like that girl before, you protected her to the best of your abilities."

From what the echoes told me, you shielded the girl after her mother perished during that terrorist attack. "You should be proud of being so brave in the face of danger, Takeru-san. There are people that do thank your companionship, I'm certain."

"I guess… I guess you're right," he nods, not sounding very convinced as he pats the pink kitty. The white rabbit thumps, looking back at me.

And for a moment, neither of us says a thing. Looking around, the stormclouds claim the sky, the desolate wasteland extends again everywhere. That veil of sweat, that heaviness inside me that was clogging me while inside that building is no more, even if a slight burning pain remains on my mouth.

It is no wonder he lacks so much energy, to face such cruelty at an early age. I know you've said that thinking on the individuals only hampers one's thinking process, yet I believe you wouldn't deride Takeru-san for taking this as hard as he is now, Professor. Even if in the bigger picture the situation was solved, those who hold the bigger picture on their shoulders were made to suffer quite much. However, if what has him in this shape is reminiscent of what we saw on that building then, was his anger born out of the required harshness the people had to endure during the invasion? It would seem he is dejected at the lack of empathy and care his superiors display, and at his own lacking results. While it is true that those who cannot contribute would be scorned and replaced, the Takeru-san I know already tries hard enough to make himself useful. But then, if he shows how willing he is to aid others, what could possibly have him being so-

A sudden yelp, an acute bark echoes, almost like primal cackling. Flinching and looking around, I spot a pair of eyes staring from within the shadows in a corner of a street behind us. Glistening, unmoving.

… Getting closer.

"W-What is that?"

"Hm? Oh," Takeru-san's eyes widen, looking at whatever it is that remains hidden behind the shadows. Then, he shrugs as he shakes his head. "That's the fox, I think."

"Fox?"

Upon my question, the animal leaves the cloak of shadows with slow steps, circling around us. Its unblinking and deep violet eyes look down at us in a perfect lock as it walks circles around the collapsed streets, boxes and abandoned mementos, its purple fur shining bright with not a single speck of dust or filth. It hops in place, laughing and letting out a small yell, slowly wagging its tail as it stares.

"Sigh… I guess it wants us to follow it," he says, both bunnies groaning a bit.

"Have you seen this… fox before, Takeru-san?"

"Yeah, when I get lost in the wasteland. It's always laughing at me for some reason."

"Do you… think it's one of your friends?"

"No, doesn't feel like it. It doesn't really let me get close, and it kind of gives me the creeps."

"Why?"

"I dunno, it just does. See? Even the bunnies don't like it," he says, petting the white fur until it calms down. I also have to pet the small rabbit that my self is within this dreamscape, for it also was most displeased.

"So you don't want to follow it?"

"Sigh… I don't mind it trying to help me, but I've got the feeling that it's playing me," he says, starting to walk towards the fox, that then seems to cackle as it runs into the ruins. "It never lets me get close,

and when it does and I try to pet it, it rushes off in a hurry. It's a bit annoying, but it hasn't tried to hurt me or the animals, so I guess it ain't bad," he nods at me with a shrug, once more hugging all the animals while letting the puppies now walk on their own.

… I assume the fox is the Professor, then? She has been referred as such by some hostile people. So this world's Takeru-san thinks so of her? Maybe, his mind sees her like that due to her underhanded way of acting?

Walking after the fox, it always tries to stay on higher ground than us, staring as if to gauge whether we're following it or not, and letting out a small bark before running off as it sees we are on its trail. A mischievous and untrustworthy guide through the wasteland. There is a certain… pressure coming from the unwavering gaze as it looks back at us every now and then.

What would happen if we tried to turn around and stop following it? A faint groan, the rabbit on my head moves a bit. I suppose, as foolish as it would be to ignore her words back in reality.

But then, if this fox is the Professor… I look at the small loaf of white atop Takeru-san's head, that now has its eyes open and seems to be softly groaning in discontent. Our eyes meet, it wiggles its ears a bit. If you're not the Professor then, who are you supposed to be?

We hop over some lightposts, walking sideways to squeeze ourselves through two crumbled buildings, the puppies walking in between us as he extends a hand to aid me not stumble, the fox still cackling and staying a few steps ahead of us, in the shadows. The nearby area looks exactly the same as the wasteland from before, littered with empty water drums and broken buckets, cracked bowls, and other artifacts. In the silence, not even the faint moonlight reaches us as the tall buildings obscure the area, a thin thread of fog hampering our vision, my breath visible as I exhale.

Rubbing my arms, stealing a glance at him, I edge closer. "So, um…"

"Hm?"

"Err, back to what we were talking about…" I say, looking at him, seeking a reaction. He merely nods back, awaiting my words. "Despite being a pilot, do you have other pressing duties on your shoulders?" I suppose, that would explain why this world's Takeru-san grew so blindly angry, if forced to see the asphyxiating pressure of the war, like it felt within that rotting sea of flames. But then, why is he still so silent, so quiet? Wasn't he supposed to be someone really violent?

"Eh, it's more or less the same as the rest, it ain't like I have it harder or anything," he shrugs again, composed despite his posture remaining hunched. "All members of the Imperial Guard have to aid with patrols, the delivery of supplies and the checks of inventory, the usual reports and other bureaucratic junk, and being a commoner makes me no exception. We're short-staffed already, so everyone is juggling two or three duties at times, even if they're basic tasks."

"For example?"

"Tsuhi aids the maintenance crew besides her patrols and surveillance duties, Fukuha and Okamoto cooperate with the IJA with the chain of deliveries, Amanohara and Kobayashi-san deal with some of Raiho-san's petitions for meetings, and Takahashi-san oversees the maintenance and patrols of our fellows."

"And what about you?"

His gaze falls away, hands retracting inward. "I help in the kitchen and in keeping the shelters calm, besides my office work."

"The shelters? How?"

"By giving them updates, or just listening," he says, tone and face suddenly submerged fully under the dark blue hue, now barely lifting his boots to walk, wrapping both dragons more in his hold. The hand linked with mine starts to slowly shake. "People are desperate, you

know. Look around at all this shit, how could they not lose it? So if you leave them alone, telling them nothing, they'll assume the worst."

"I see. Little updates, even if they're false at times, aids the civilians to deal with the pressure, avoiding them from falling to dread."

"Yeah, kind of. They need to try and get a routine going again. And sometimes, all they need is someone listening, to feel those in charge do really care. That's all I can do… all I'm good for."

"I s-see…" again, cracks and vines of dark overpower the blue, the boots dragging on the soil, enough to let me overtake his walking speed. "And, um, does your unit have a name? Perhaps," gulping hard, the caustic scorching almost gags me as the illumination above turns itself off, "t-the Swordbreakers?"

"Huh? The what?"

"Oh, it was just a, uh, name I heard once," I say, looking away, to the ground to not stumble under the low visibility. Shortly after, I hear the white bunny groaning again, its eyes fixed on me.

Yet, Takeru-san merely fiddles with his hair, then the bunny's, before shaking his head, without any sudden disquiet in his body or aura. "No, I never heard of a unit with that name. The unit I'm assigned to is the 44th Independent Squadron of the IRG, callsign Chain. We're officially under the Wolf Battalion, but we mostly just do our own thing," he again shrugs, corking his brows as he hears the fox laughing, doing circles ahead of us, before sighing yet again then climbing the uneven terrain as the lightposts around us continue to flicker on and off, giving away sparks.

I do not recall ever hearing of that squadron from Takeru-san, nor do I remember hearing about it during our recovery sessions. But why would he have not recalled that yet? Hmm, because the memories are not yet assimilated? So that would equal that this Takeru-san is how he was right before becoming that angry person everyone says

he was? But he doesn't seem evil or violent in the slightest. Even amidst the fire and in front of that corpse, he felt so silent and cold. Almost as if he himself were like this wasteland.

He offers a hand, I take it and he steadies me as I climb over some cars that are in the way. As my feet slowly reach the other side of the street, I look into his eyes. "… So, are you content in this squadron? Is there something you're not pleased with?"

"… I fulfill my duty, and I try for that to be enough," he says, swallowing another sigh.

"Why? Aren't you helping the people of the shelters? I understand that… in the face of something as overwhelming as what happened in that mansion-"

"It's not like that, at all," he replies, soft acid dripping from his lips.

"Then, why do you feel like your efforts are pointless?"

"Because, I dunno, I feel like we should have better protocols, or some plan to actually help our fellows. It's like…" His arms slowly fold, he looks upwards as I approach his side as the fox barks once more.

A strong wind howls, coldness crawls up my spine as needles dig at my nape. Dizziness, disorientation. Lights flicker above me, or perhaps they're fireflies. But as the blurriness fades, I can see they are ashes.

All around us, smoke and ashes. Strong clouds, even stronger echoes of explosions, distorted shapes flying about, fingers coiling like the horns of a goat, a pouring beating of metallic bits and torn cables falling upon us. And yet, despite the closeness of the explosion's glare, it all feels so cold.

"W-What is… What is-" I gag, coughing brusquely, yet he holds my shoulder in support.

"I always had these nightmares since the defense of Kyoto, when I didn't make it to save some of the fleeing civilians, leaving a girl alone after all that mess."

"Huh? You… didn't manage to save them? But… But you're such a good pilot, how did-"

"Because I started arguing instead. I could have, I dunno, made a more convincing argument instead of snapping. And the time I wasted… caused this," he says, looking around at the blackened smoke which swirls around us, at the shapes that are bent and broken behind the veil. "It don't matter how good a pilot I am, long distances can't be cleared in just a few seconds. Not with a Zuikaku."

Chests folding inside out before giving in to the blazes and smoke, crabs sliced in half, manic screams, mournful screams. No stars above, no wind clearing the smoke, I can only choke as I lean on him as the entire place is engulfed in the suffocating sensation as if this were a closed-off room.

My hands meet the softness of his dress, however. And nothing collides against me, instead I feel something poking my nose. One of the dragons, the black one, rubbed its nose on mine, the blue puppy also huddling closer to my legs.

And yet, the other dragon starts to shriek, shriek and scream as the thin trunks of the Warriors are turned into pincushions, yet the metallic frames up above only find a lone girl safe after the fact. He pets its head, the brown drake slowly curls inwards, hiding its face into one of Takeru-san's armpits.

"I used to think I was having a breakdown after seeing battle for the first time, after only managing to save that lone girl. If we can even call that saving, of course," he spits in a whisper. "I thought that I was freaking the fuck out, despite how many times we were told that people would die in battle," he says, low and cold, eyes barely open. "That this happened because I was a dumb rookie and things would be better when the vets got everything back in order."

A hammer cracking my skull in half or being forcefully pushed down into water. An impact like when I tried to dive into his mind, again spurring dizziness, again sending a line of fire from my forehead to my nape. Stiffness, contraction, hair stands on edge, pain all over the back of my head. How… How can you remain so immutable while feeling like this?

"I used to think there was a solution being prepared…" he whispers, a single tear again falling from his eyes as most buildings around us are crushed into dust, into darkness, "but the hours just keep getting harder to endure, and nothing seems to be going to change for the better."

I pull his wrist, hands shaking, "H-However, you did save that girl's life. Your efforts weren't-"

"That's not the point."

"Then, what is?"

He points up, grimacing. Spiraling around us, smoke, fire and debris flashes in my sight, lifted off the ground like papers from the desk as the Professor hits her muse and blasts into full focus after the customary palming of the wood. Up above, beyond the buildings, echoes of thunders within swirling clouds which shriek into a falling drill. Yet, the storm is blasted apart for a single moment, like a curtain swatted away by the morning breeze, as four metallic shapes descend in the distance. The ground shakes, my feet slip, his arm catches and holds me steady so that I can see well. A few Takemikazuchi units rush through the battlefield like a see-through mirage, splintering even the smallest BETA in twain, standing proud in their conquest over the hellfire.

"Is this the counterattack of the Kyoto Battle?"

"No, this is the first night," he says while still grimacing, the purple puppy barking at the ongoing onslaught where tanks and Tanks are lifted and swatted in the air like ping pong balls by the flight of Type-

00 units. "We had the power to halt the invasion, we had the units to protect the city, to evacuate the people safely even if the shit hit the turbine. And guess what? They left no one to shield the last defense line," he says, sinks, as he wraps the brown dragon in his dress, as he pulls me closer, tapping his boot to halt the aggravations released by the purple doggy. "And even after that battle, there were many small things we could have done. Little details, small gestures of kindness, small moments of bravery from those high up. But every day, it's more silence and nothingness."

For a moment, there are only distant echoes of violence in the darkness. There is only the nose of the black rabbit that scours my hair, rubbing against my scalp in sympathy. Only the soft contact of his fingers as they caress my fringe, the warmth of the animals that huddle close. With one deep sigh, he shakes his head, pats my shoulders, and everything around simply fades away, receding back into the shadows, just barely out of sight. Be it the thrashed furniture, the carpet of shattered glass, the little books burning by the remains of machinery, or the knitted clothes or small accessories or tiny toys that spill out from what boxes, bags or luggage those escaping tried to salvage from their homes, what little dear mementos crushed by either the Warriors or by the Takemikazuchi's feet as they stomp in triumph over their battlefield of choice.

Knees quiver as I try to stand on my own, taking a slow breath in. "Are these the nightmares… you always have every morning?"

"Huh? How do you even- Sigh… Yeah, something like that."

"So is this why you hate the Royal Guard? Because they…" arranged such an accident, to display their Takemikazuchi for the first time? Is this what you meant by 'giving meaning to the burning of the Capital', Professor?

"Hate? No, I don't really hate anyone… I'm just disappointed," both watering eyes look upwards again, both puppies whimpering in agreement, the rest of the animals huddling closer, the white bunny opening its eyes and groaning, the one in my head simply huddling

into my touch. "There's no solution, only the same words echoed time and again. Those high up don't listen, they take it as a personal attack if you try and suggest something to 'em. And it doesn't matter what you do in the end, you're just another worthless pawn, another lowborn to use as a meat shield," grimacing, cracks spawn in his complexion.

Yet, where the Takeru-san I know would have ignited further while mentioning such things, there's hollowness behind the cracks, a saddened quiver in his lips as his gaze crashes down, far worse than the wreckage in this place, as he starts to walk once more.

"Are they truly so harsh towards commoners?"

"It's not just commoners, it's anyone who is of lower station than the one speaking," he slowly says, hugging the dragons to his chest, petting the tuna and the red kitty that within the scarf remain. "So if a Shinpan orders something, there's no changing that. Even if all you try to do is give them a suggestion, inform them of how the terrain looks like so they can make a better decision, all you get are shouts and punishments for speaking out of turn."

"So they're truly nothing but prideful buffoons." Just as that mean squadmate of yours, just like Sumika-san told me.

"… If that was all, I could stomach it, you know. Accept the rules, play with the hand I got." He whispers, taking a second to hesitate on his steps, avoiding a lone flower, an abandoned stuffed toy. "Maybe I'm the idiot here, always trying to 'help out' when I'm a stranger in the guard. Sigh…"

Silently, he continues on walking. The fox remains watching us for a moment, before once more hurrying off into the stretched shadows. Under the swirling clouds, small ashes posing as fireflies in the air as the wind howls serve as as powdery light accompanying our travel through the seemingly unending expansion of dirt and debris that goes into the horizon.

Sigh… As if it truly were an eternal wasteland. Yet, even now, there is no hatred, no tension in his hands or lips, none of that fire within his eyes. So quiet, so slow, so dimmed. So, so blue. It might not be wise to press further, but…

"But why won't they care to listen to your reports? The IRG are the protectors of the Shogunate's interests, right?"

"Yeah, that's exactly the problem," he sighs, again.

"Huh? I do not understand. If your work could benefit the organization, why dismiss your reports?"

"Well, you could say salvation is what many are after nowadays. To prove their devotion to the nation to get better food, to find a solution to stop the BETA, to do enough patchwork to keep everything tied up. Or, like… to make business with the situation."

A faint wind blows, ashes and dust kicks up, small flickers of yellow and orange flutter about as the lightposts turn off. And this time, they don't regain their shine. Within the blurry haze of the foggy curtain, so very small specks crack through the ice of his aura.

And near us, a robust building can be seen through the fog, appearing suddenly like a castle by the sea, like in the tales the Professor brought me when I was little.

A large auditorium, overflowed to the brim with people. Thrust together, falling and folding onto one another, toads in a bucket, all of them smeared in filth to the point of leaving their visible skin reddening, their nails long enough to resemble vampires of folktales, tainted bandages surrounding each and every one of them like a cocoon, far more overflowed than the hall we saw before.

A small scratch, a tiny distortion in his aura, in his lips, as he stares at the spectacle of shapes that can be seen through the broken doors of the place.

"… But there is no salvation to be found here."

"But there are people trying to solve the issue, I'm certain. The Prof- I mean, some of the authorities must be devising a plan to counter the invasion and return some normalcy to the Empire."

Instead of answering me, he again stops walking, despite the warning in barks from the fox, to once more seek the moonlight obstructed by stormclouds, only a rough shape filtering through.

"In any organization, high impact decisions take precedence over small adjustments. I know that much, I get it, for real," he says, slow, detached, no different than the beeping of a machine in process. "Those in charge want solutions to the current problems of their agendas, regardless of the methods used to solve them, more so if they come with lots of benefits." Again slumping, his head crashes down like a meteor, the gaze burning even further below. "Focusing on things that give little to no tangible return will only get you yelled at for being useless to the system."

"B-But even in times of crisis, to neglect the safety of the people is-"

"They're well enough in the shelters," a brow twitches, "it's us soldiers who do the heavy lifting, they shouldn't take us for granted," then it's both eyelids as he starts to frown, ripples turning to waves within the glacier. "The safety and interests of the Empire should be prioritized over anything else, and any of us should be overjoyed to courageously offer flesh and blood for the nation."

"I concur a focus on the individual can cloud one's mind when overseeing matters from a position of responsibility within large structures, however-"

All lights in the area shut off, the empty drums falling down, the tiny rations pack joining into tumbleweeds, a cold gale then blows.

"Indulgence in luxuries and selfishness is a sin, instigating dissent and discontent is an offense towards His Holy Majesty's royal

commandments," his fist begin to shake, his already tattered gloves breaking further. "Austerity is a value to praise so it is commendable to make do with what the ration-card gives you without expecting further reward for your services," breathing grows erratic like a scared horse, ignoring the taps of the kitties' paws, the grumbling of dragons and puppies, or the groans of the white bunny. "We're not supposed to help, because it's better to spend our resources to turn around the war. Even if… lots of people die for it."

"However, it can't truly be so desperate, right?" I know the situation was, and continues to be, truly rough on the majority of the population, yet there has been a small rebound effect after a few cities were rebuilt. "It is a herculean effort what is asked of you, I won't deny it, but there must be a solution awaiting beyond the horizon. After all, the sky is always darker right before daybreak."

Holding my gaze for a moment, gazing around for another, a slow shake of his head follows while he runs a hand over the dragons and kitties. "From my spot, it looks like everything is going to hell and back, with no turning back. They're planning to even send the orphans to the factories to builds ammo and 'contribute' to the nation."

"H-Huh?! That's not possible."

I recall the Professor saying she pressured the UN to prevent such things from happening, to truly send inspectors to verify where our supplies came from, to avoid needless entanglements with controversy. I still remember how badly she felt after drinking so much coffee when staying up many days in a row for the negotiations between COSEAN and the Empire, as well as the old chain of command from the UN from before the Treaty fell down. Simply thinking about it is enough to make me sigh and look down, the hours on end surrounded by towers of reports I readied for her, the databases I had to build. Left with only being able to bring tea to her bedside after she almost fell sick as my sole way of aiding the Professor.

He sighs, once more, his feet starting to drag and lift dust. "It is very possible, bunny girl. There has been a certain, uh, 'narrative' I think it's called by the higher ups, going around that says that there are actually no civilians in the Empire."

"What? However, why would anyone claim such a thing?"

"Because everyone should see him or herself as a soldier, and all vassals of His Holy Majesty must be honored to be of use for the war efforts," he says, a cracked gesture that does not resemble a smile, further submersion of his features and aura, his pants bitten by both puppies. Crouching to pet them, enduring their climbing attempts, holding them for a moment. "So everyone should obey the orders they're given without protest, no matter what. All thanks to *Her Highness'* royal decree," he spits as he frowns for a second, lips cascading, with a loud bark from the fox answering it as if in agreement, a whimper of both puppies that try and lick at his chin.

All I see in his logic and sharp eyes is a pyramid enduring a storm. Hand reaching out like roots, like a flower left at the bottom of a ravine seeking the sun, only to be stomped back underwater. Only those high above manage to ignore the pouring rain, those down below remain forever holding the impossible weight on their shoulders even as their inner fluids and vital components are made to join the turbulent stream of the storm.

My fingertips reach for his sleeve, yet are unable to pull it ever slightly. I can only look down, to avoid peering further into what his aura reveals, into the echoes. "Uh… Um… W-Was it truly so desperate? Wasn't there even a single good thing, a small victory you can think of?"

I know our situation was truly dire, the Professor looked miserable on those days, everybody looked completely dark. Empty, void, apathetic, as if they were completely dead inside. I couldn't go outside as much, everyone looked on edge on those days and the Professor didn't want to risk anything happening to me. But going by the ripples in his aura, how it isn't becoming red in anger but falling

further into midnight blue, it all would indicate that the visage that lies in front of me is not an exaggeration from his psyche. It is the manifestation of his issues with a reality he cannot cope with.

"… No, it wasn't one lone thing that was unbearable," he whispers, shoulders sagging, a small tickling sensation falling on my head as he stands. A thin thread of something liquid… coming down from his forehead… "And if you stray a single millimeter from the lane," he says, dry and low, "accusing fingers blast to you faster than piranhas to a roast beef," again shrugging, his features relax as he again pets the animals.

I can say nothing, he simply rests for a second. In silence, he walks again and I follow.

Sidestepping through the wood planks, wires, and who knows what else are those broken parts, his hands always extended backwards to aid me traverse the wreckage under the ever-present stare of the fox. And he says nothing else again, leaving that prickling and cold feeling piking at my nape. I breath in, looking down, the rabbit on my head rustles, groaning. The white one does too, as I look up I find the thing staring at me. And as I remain quiet, it gives a small munch to the air, causing Takeru-san to sigh and pet its head.

… So they want me to keep the conversation going? The rest of the animals also stare at me, whimpering as he merely touches them to silence their concerns. And looking at him well, Takeru-san is… limping on the way forward, resting his weight only on one leg. The coldness in the air, the light vanishing from the place, and… the lack of any signs of people or remains in the area is a bit disturbing. Before, I could easily find plushies or books or even… remains. Now, however, there is nothing save hints of unmaking.

Gulping, grasping his sleeve a bit, I inch closer. "However, I, well, believed the selflessness of the army was what allowed them to protect the people. That despite the, uh, strong worded opinions some hold they had managed to open a river through a desert during those days." That's why Lucifer could be a success, that's why the

Yokohama Hive could be recovered, that's why the Professor managed to keep Alt IV on the rails despite the almost hopeless situation of this nation on that horrible year that was 1999.

"… A river of blood, that is," he frowns, stomping slowly for a moment as we get to an open expanse of wasteland again, a glimmer of moonlight gracing the edge of the sky. "Sure, we're still floating but even then… we've already lost the war."

"But if the BETA are repelled-"

"So what if they are?"

A flicker of fire, sparking within the blue.

Eyes that open wide, eyes brimming red, eyes that overlap.

And acid, a venomous acid which is equal to the tone he employed when he showed us his memories of battle.

"Is that gonna make up for all the deaths we've allowed to happen? How the fuck are we even supposed to rebuild this nation if all everyone can think of is to keep on fighting to their graves?"

"H-However, there must be something you can do, without countering in aggression," I say, pulling his arm. "Someone has to still be looking out for the future, right?"

The tension recedes, a wave back to the sea, diffusing the red within. "Sigh… I know, I hope, but no one will listen. It's one thing to unite us to try and brave this dark hour, another to… simply surrender everyone to die and glorify it as something praiseworthy."

As if to answer to his words, the ground shakes a bit as the fox's howl reaches my ears. The iron beams, the torn wreckage twists and bends, forming rows of real fangs under the wasteland.

"And as long as those prideful, extreme approaches continue to produce the results those up high want nothing will change. It's just

like with Shura's Dance…" biting his lips, he kicks the air, the deformed maw that springs forth from the dried soil, "they'll just abandon the civilians to their luck, because it's better for the battle plan. 'Cutting the right corners' as they say," frowning, he spits on the ground.

"However, humanity's salvation… can still happen because of these noble sacrifices. If the Empire were to fall-"

"Then tell me, Kasumi. How am I supposed to convince an MP that wants to die after losing a limb because 'she can't contribute to the Empire's expectations'?"

"H-Huh?"

"How do I get the kids to eat their meals when all they think is that they'll be sent to work or to train?"

"I… I was- I don't- I mean… Um…"

"And no one bats an eye anymore, no one speaks up against this madness, no one questions the decisions our superiors take, and no one listens to the advice those of us who work the terrain have to give." He then shrugs, his chuckling breaking at times when the fox howls, glaring at us from a distance. "And I ain't even talking about me, some of my squadmates also get lots of shit just for trying to offer their grain of sand. And if we guards get so much shit, how do you think the civvies are treated when they try to offer their advice in their fields of work?"

It's as if a viscous, swirling fire of red were constantly changing shapes inside his heart. Kind of like one of those lava lamps the Professor showed me when I was little, but with true magma encased in dry ice. And eyes, and lips, and fingers melt and swirl within that liquid fire, as if throwing themselves onto it.

Coughing and hacking, my knees meet the ground. A strong scent fills my nostrils, as if oil and fuel were showering upon me. Again

slowly stroking my hair, rubbing my back and casting the spikes on my nape away as his aura flows into me.

"You really should turn back and leave, Kasumi," he whispers, patting my shoulder. "This isn't your battlefield."

"… Is this how you've been feeling everyday?" When I wake you up, when I notice your aura darkening in your office… Is this what plagues your mind, below the surface?

"Well… Not every day, no, but for the most part, yeah, it's been the same shit non-stop," he rubs his eye bags, ruffling his long hair for a moment as the animals all press themselves onto him. "Too many things to fix, to little I can actually do, no one who would listen, failing to just, I dunno, contribute anything that actually matters. I'm just… exhausted, I guess?"

After a few deep breaths, after leaning on his arm to stand up again, I cough and speak slowly. "B-But there's no way that there's no solution in sight for you," enduring a strenuous effort, a sharp pain on my lower back, behind my knees, I hold his gaze, sinking fully into the cloak of dry ice which is his aura. "What I saw on those days, what you say happened, and all of this darkness around us… I know the situation must look miserable from the ground, but the UN wouldn't allow civilians to be abandoned or for all of them to be treated as part of the military. And I doubt the soldiers of the Empire would welcome the notion, their honor to protect their people would make them feel dishonored by that. And even then, you wouldn't… y-you wouldn't-"

Again petting my head, he shakes his. "It ain't always so easy, Kasumi. Sometimes, the shepherd's best choice is to blast the lambs to save the farm. And us sheep ain't strong enough to face the wolves on our own."

"But… But even if impossible for common people, there was someone who-"

"Sudden malfunction of communication," he says, sighing, hollowing himself out, "deliberate black screens, false reports, and abuse of the chain of command. If a Shinpan or a member of a Regent House declares an area liberated, no one would be stupid enough to doubt them. Like they did when they abandoned Uncle and his family…" more lava bubbles raise below the icy water, small dents and scars. No amount of kindness from the animals douses his mood. "Where was the UN back then? Running away like cowards. Where was the IRG? Supporting a 'national hero' that abandoned his people. If they had tried, they could have saved Uncle Koetsu and everyone else…" And again, he starts to shake, sink further into dark blue. "But it wasn't worth the ammo and fuel. It never is." Another bark, a cold gust, he frowns. "Ugh, shut up, you stupid fox!"

Clutching his arm, I lean on the freezing fog again, seeking and finding no glimmer in his aura. "However, there are regulations that forbid acting in-"

"Like the Geneva Suggestion?" He asks, raising a brow, a bark from the fox and groans from both rabbits as answers.

"Ah, well… Yes. The Professor tends to refer to it in that way, at times."

"Hahaha… Sounds about right, doesn't it?" He then sighs again as he tends to the animals, making swirls on hairs, rubbing foreheads and ears before we walk again, hands still interlocked, this time with the fox remaining closer. "But a few 'small sacrifices' are little when compared to the 'big picture'. Why waste time saving a few hundreds when thousands, or even millions, hang on the survival of the Empire? And to that end, it's an honor to find meaning in your death. To cheat yourself into believing you dying means something down the line."

"But it's because people fought that-"

"There's a difference between a suicide and a sacrifice, Kasumi. And…" he touches the lump in his forehead, lips receding until

they're fully behind his teeth, "it's a hard difference to see, when you've no reason to go on," again he sighs despite the strong gale, the thunders in warning that echo from the thickening stormclouds above. "That's why I've been trying to help the shelters, to tell my superiors of things we could do from our position, but all I ever get are shouts about how useless I am…"

… I suppose, this was caused by the negative of the Professor to relocate Alt IV to the States. If I recall correctly, she had received such an offer after we retreated from Hakuryo Base, after Professor Kirigaya perished. A proposal of support, to merge her project with Alt V, to be granted protection, funds, and new members for the STF. I myself believed she was going to agree, to gain a foothold on the US, to have influence on the decisions made for the supposed new armaments and bring a tailwind of stability to the Empire by supporting a total evacuation of the mainland, more so after the death of the prior Shogun sending quite the chaos into the soldiers of the nation, going by her and the poor Instructor's words back then.

Yet, the Professor vehemently refused. Not only that, but started to push for her own agenda to assault the recently formed Yokohama Hive as soon as its existence was reported. Such an assault required manpower to be preserved, resources to be amassed, appropriate defense lines to be crafted. And a few concessions and deals with the right people, to earn their support.

… And her vision would come to pass, even if it came with a draconian regime to follow so that the Empire's and UN's armies could meet the requirements to execute Lucifer, in opposition to the total loss of sovereignty that meant to send the population as refugees or entangling Alt IV with V.

So the rising magma in him stems from such days, as one of those who had to push the gargantuan wheel with his bare hands. One of the many 'small concessions' the Professor was willing to make when she became the sole lead of the project, one of the 'lambs to blast' as he put it.

And even then it's not like her reaction at all. It's not burning red, it's not sinking dark. It's still so very much blue, so sorrowful and grieving despite the cracks all over him, like metal sinking further beyond the sea.

As if that same ice were constricting upon me, my voice barely leaves my lips. "… However, in the long run, once the BETA are vanquished, everybody will be able to restart their lives once again. It is a strenuous effort that you have to endure… but there is a light awaiting on the other side."

"Even if entire families prefer to kill themselves instead of evacuating, to 'not be a burden on our land'?"

A small flash, or many in quick succession, within the fangs that surround us in the wasteland. Tight expressions, sunken eyes, bolted doors, slow shakes of head. Absolute absence in the little mounds of dirt and balls of concrete where bustling life once was, now twisted and mixed into the sharp shape.

"Even when there's little to no support coming from above?"

A slicing sensation down my back, the point of a knife running up and down. A wounded woman in a BDU, pressure on my arms as I see Takeru-san's own arms in the suit's shielding as they press themselves over reddening clothing wrapped around the lower leg of the soldier. Pain in my lungs, soreness, numbness, a grip at the base of my neck as my eyes water, as red lightning roars in the sky.

" *We're wasting crucial time on the mission due to your folly, Shirogane! The man's as good as dead, and we should not be loitering here. Chain One to all. We are leaving, this instant!"*

Blinking repeatedly, fighting the haziness, a strong circle of pink now lays in one his cheeks, over the overall paleness of his skin, illuminated by the red bolts which start to fall like the shots of a cannon.

"… Even if we can't give the little kids a single reason to dream of a better future?" He says, falling on his bottom, wrapping both hands over his shoulders.

Whether I sat down on my own or if I fell, I cannot tell. Was it because of the strong wind, of the threat of rain? I do not know. Did a thunderbolt fall nearby or did I collide with one of the fangs? It is hard to tell. All I know is, I cannot remain standing, and my palms meet the dryness of the ground.

It's like back at the facilities, the freezing grip of the weather, the ice spears which tear my insides by merely inhaling. Such is the pressure on his chest as two small shapes come closer, as if they were right in front of us in some narrow, filth-strewn room. Two small little girls, dressed in some rags that would resemble potato sacks more than proper clothing, one with strong pink hair and the other with lime green. Both with sunken cheeks, their collarbones visible and protruding from the skin, both resembling boiled tomatoes that could very well just peel themselves off. As the small girl with pink hair approaches, withstanding her gaze, the pleading, faint hold of her hand on his sleeve brings a twister to his stomach, that spicy fire burning my palate again.

" *But the adults said I'll never go back to my village, that I should get used to living and working here in the shelter. My siblings in Suno told me that 'hope' was something I never had to lose when they left to train, but everyone looks so sad and no one wants to play or read with us anymore, and we're only getting one meal despite not doing anything bad. Mister Guard, is everything really going to be fine? Do we have any hope left?"*

My throat closes up, a burning sliver of vile slips through my lips.

Crushing my nose, a hand covers my mouth. Yet, the instinct, the hiccups on my chest do not stop.

The repetition, the unending loop of scenes that do not stop in the large auditorium, in the open slums, and who knows where else

makes me dizzy, lightheaded as more and more spikes and thorns drizzle over my nape.

Gasping for air, looking up, my eyes find no respite. A vast row of torn shapes hangs below the clouds, coiling and mixing with each other. A large tapestry of grotesqueries, exposed innards which are used as puppet strings, stitched together in a sailor knot, into a large mass which would soon resemble a Legion from folklore, hanging from lightposts or antennas, dangling like swings left to the elements. All of them, in the end, are set on fire and blasted away by red lightning that come from the stormclouds.

"That's why it feels so pointless, they insist on the same tactics and approaches every goddamn time while the ones suffering don't even get words of fellowship to keep on going."

"That's not true…"

"Heh, of course it is. Speak against anyone up, your meals get cut in half. Ask for some help or try to pass a suggestion, you get flamed by the 'honorable' superiors. They don't give a shit anymore, and there's nothing the ones at the bottom can do to change that. Dissent is not tolerated, after all."

That's not true. The Professor was working day and night to reach a solution, against the clock and the opposition from both the UN and the Empire. It's true that she… she was far colder back then, that she did say any sacrifices were worth it for humanity's salvation to come to be. That we had to cut the right corners, and that wasting potential resources on dead ends had to be avoided at all costs. But she did all that for the future, for Alt IV and the salvation that would come.

"The UN… Even if some Imperial soldiers acted out of line, the UN wouldn't-"

"Yeah, right. The 'international police' to the rescue," he sighs, the white rabbit looking back at me and groaning. "After Shura's Dance,

who the hell would believe in the UN Farces?"

"But there are many that are trying to-"

"After their 'inspectors' visit the shelters and find nothing wrong?" He asks, again hunching over as a sigh escapes his lips. "I wanted to believe in them, bunny girl. But they're staying safe behind their defense lines, more worried about their meetings than in forwarding actual policies to help their own foot soldiers. Whoever is in charge over there is probably a demon, like whoever planned Shura's Dance and abandoned Hakuryo."

"… That's not true."

"Huh?"

"The Professor isn't… She is no demon."

A cold sensation covers me, the images around me growing defined, clear, the more that frozen blue approaches. Out of air, yet something tries to rise from my stomach as I gag.

"You don't understand…"

"Please calm down, I wasn't-"

"You can't understand!"

"S-Sorry, I didn't meant to-"

"Don't say she's a demon! All she had to endure, all that she convinced herself to do… You can't understand anything of that!"

The Takeru-san I know wouldn't say that. He wouldn't give up at failing, and he wouldn't blame the Professor for it. You should know it, how awful it felt to abandon Hiiragi. She was mostly alone back then, forcing herself to bear everything, even against the opposition of the nobles that hated her so much. And even the Professor… she had to completely drown herself back then just to keep going

forward. Hollowing herself out, not even eating, despite how she was trying to remain strong she was cracking all over. Every night, every night I could hear her inner cries before going to sleep echo in the back of my head.

And that's saying nothing on all the members of the STF or the Instructor, all the hardships they had to endure once the Professor formally made their shift to UN Command unlike the mixed arrangement that was in place in Hakuryo Base.

You're always so shining, that drive you always have… I envy it so much, as someone who never did anything on my own volition. Don't call her a demon, don't fall to this dread… Please… You should know how it feels to keep on walking only to see no results come up. Don't talk about the Professor like that. Takeru-san, you more than anyone should be able to comprehend how pained she truly was…

"So if you don't understand, then don't say such awful things please." Don't fall into hatred, that's not how you really are. The Takeru-san I know isn't-

"I can't understand?"

Looking back at him, his lips remained half open as he hangs his head. And slowly, so slowly, a single teardrop falls down, not even strong enough to make it halfway through his cheek. And while subtly shaking…

He starts to laugh.

And doesn't stop.

Instead it grows in strength and loudness.

Even as the puppies bark and tap his legs, he doesn't stop.

Ignoring the groans of both bunnies, the distant barking of the fox, the grumbles of the dragons, the light hits of the kitties and the tuna,

or the gust that hits our faces and scatters dust around us as thunders roar above.

He keeps on laughing, almost hysterically, eyes watering yet not enough to shed tears.

"U-Um… I-I'm sorry, Takeru-san. I shouldn't have… shouted at you. So please don't focus so much on… Um…" Without even listening to me, not even seeming to notice I am now in front of him and shaking his shoulder, he keeps on dryly chuckling.

"Haha… hahaha… I see. No wonder you snapped at me, looking at me like that. It's always the same with you."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

And wiping his eyes, coughing for a brief moment, he looks at me, straight into my eyes, as a wavering smile raises. "In the end… you always leave too, don't you?"

"… What?"

"So it's okay, bunny girl," he turns around, slowly taking a few steps forward. "Just turn around and leave like you always do."

The bunny on top of my head groans, thumping strongly, as I also do, lips shaking as I step closer towards him. "W-Wait a moment, I didn't meant to- I wasn't- What are you even talking about? I just don't want you falling to anger… That's all I-"

He stops, looks up, and I follow with my gaze. It freezes my insides, and I can hear nothing for a moment. Save of a strong rumbling, the rumbling of thrusters coming to life.

A long, long rocket vanishes into the stars while piercing the clouds.

Looking at it brings shivers down my spine, the slow poke of spiders crawling up the bare skin of my back follows right after.

A faint, see-through mirage flickers within the echoing thunders of the propulsion's trail.

A silhouette which resembles me, embracing the cylinder with Sumika-san inside. Screaming at Takeru-san, that he will never understand, before he holds her up and dashes away from the room.

"Ah… A-Ah…" M-My head… It hurts, as if something were piercing from inside my ears.

" *No, I don't want to leave. I'll lose myself if I do."*

The hallways blur in an instant, held by a strong grip. My nose hurts, as if inhaling into water, as if shrouded in sheets as liquid falls upon me. Gagging, coughing, clawing at my face does nothing to stop the grip of liquid which binds my face.

" *Without Sumika-san, I'm just another esper. I don't want to go back to those days…"*

Reaching outside, some of his squadmates gather and warn us there is little time left. Sinking to my knees, embracing my stomach, my sight blurs more and more.

" *But I… I don't want to say goodbye…"*

Takeru-san then pats my- her head, asking for a 'See you later', waving with a smile. Wheezing for air, ears ringing, I keep coughing and coughing. The pain does not recede, now covering all of my head and stomach.

" *Don't lie to me. Don't tell me we'll see each other again… Don't make a promise you cannot keep…"*

Lifted by a Gekishin's hand, her sight remains locked onto Takeru-san as the machine takes off. His shape becomes so small in the distance, until there is only a tiny, tiny dot. Someone… help… *Cough…*

"… *Don't give me hope, Shirogane-san."*

Looking through a small opening nearby, beyond the glass a lone Gekishin waves at me, before everything shakes and the ground becomes distant, so far away. And yet, the large machine that grows smaller and smaller never stops waving, not even as it blurs in with the rest of the landscape of the base.

" *Why say 'See you later'? You know that… we won't ever see each other aga-"*

"No! This is a lie, Takeru-san isn't going to leave anywhere!" Clawing at the sides of my head, clamping my ears does nothing as the faint cries continue, regretting the time wasted, insisting on the permanent departure. "Get out… of my head. This isn't real."

A strong yet soft hit atop my head. A loss of weight on it.

I blink, gasping for dear air as the echoes suddenly stop, vision refocusing instantly.

The black bunny was now in front of me, looking into my eyes as if waiting.

A moment passes as I regain my breath, rubbing my forehead as my every muscle, my every vein twitches and pulsates, as if I had an engine in overdrive within my skull.

Thumping again, the rabbit groans at me then turns around and quickly hops off beyond the wreckage.

Looking as it goes away, I can only gape as I breath in, my composure finally returning.

Rubbing my head, the lower part of my ears as I blink at the hazy darkness around me, the disquiet ceases and the heaviness leaves me. And only now as I stand up do I realize, Takeru-san is nowhere to be found.

"Takeru-san? Where are you?"

Only a dry, distant echo of my own query answers me. Only the twisted shapes right behind the veil remain here, the silence of the wasteland.

Complete, utter silence within the darkness, the enlarging shadows that seem to fall further upon me.

Everything in sight grows dim and unfocused as the blanket of the fogs tightens its hold over the area, as everything entrusts itself to the conquest of the haze.

And again, the faint sensation on the back of my head, the numbness of wakefulness.

Should I give up? Just surrender to the numbness and wake up? No, I can't… I can't leave him like this!

Slow steps at first quickly turn into a sprint, tripping and almost falling face first into the dirt. No one answers my screams, nothing pierces the shadows. Almost tripping, I end up kicking a torn pairs of boots left behind, stepping on a broken pot with drying flowers. No one answering my screams, only silence around me, I start running in earnest through the shadowy ruins and cracks. Barely stopping as I spot an odd shadow, a crude plush toy with enlarged eyebrows torn and hanging from an iron beam as if it had hanged itself there. A minute golden amulet also lays in a sinkhole shining at the faint threads of light that yet remain, there's even old clothes which remind me of the picture books of Santa Claus the Professor once bought me when I was younger lying in that pit.

All of that and other trinkets remain lost in the holes that spawn in the ground or dangling from the broken remains of TSFs, mostly F-15 models and Gekishins, that take their eternal rest on the ground. The dust and stains on them, the decay permeating them serves as proof of the abandonment said items have been enduring. All of these items, they belong to our Takeru-san's memories, do they not?

If this specific place belongs to his own mind, why is this other Takeru-san roaming this wasteland, then?

Decelerating gradually until my hands meet my knees, again I stand still within the all-encompassing fog. "Haa… No, why did he react so oddly? He remembered something… from one of Takeru-san's previous lives?"

Why did he say 'I always leave too'? He had said before that… he dreamed of me and someone else. But if that is the case then, that would be… exactly like the recovery sessions. That flash of memories, was it how he parted ways with the me of another timeline? But if this world's Takeru-san knows of it-

The ground starts to shake, and shakes, and keeps on growing in anger, sending me towards a wall. What few buildings remain start to collapse as well, the air thickening in heat and ashes. Covering my mouth as I stumble about in the shadows, very slowly the fog starts to clear, allowing a pair of large cliffs to emerge from the white blindness of this haze. With nowhere else to go I thus hurry down the narrow pathway available, my breath becoming visible, the shadows beginning to thaw.

As soon as the minimal thread of light pierces the ravine I'm traversing, needles once more sink below my ears.

" *The only thing… a dead soldier can do."*

A voice rasps, I hit something with my feet. Still and burnt, the black dragon lays mangled on the ground as smoke still raises from its shriveled body that now resembles charcoal.

Gagging on empty air once more, I step forward in a hurry. Further knives come up my throat and I stumble, the taste of iron causing me to cough and choke on the vile air I did not wish to inhale.

" *I-It buurns! Please Shirogane, kill me!"*

A scream shatters its throat, and my ears as well. Shaky fingers dig into the solid dirt to propel me upwards, bringing another small shape into my sight. The brown dragon, its facial features distorted and out of order, sliding away from their rightful positions, its tiny arms bending backwards, its wings and tail melting and fusing like plastic near fire. All of its body turning to goo with bubbles gurgling up, ending like some toxic tincture in a witch's cauldron, with both eyes still staring, still crying within the brew.

Tightly closing my eyes, shielding both ears with my hands, I run and run while enduring the boiling sensation building on my stomach. Colliding against a stonewall, placing my hand onto its rugged surface and using it as a guide, I slowly walk forward.

Until I step on something, something that makes a disgusting squelching sound, something that is rather firm under my heel.

" *Nooo! I don't wanna be eaten!"*

Faint figments of pink fur float in the air, a small and tiny paw severed off lays under my feet as I lift it off, along the tail and head of a fish, and an amalgamation of meat, bone, pink hair, and ligaments fused together into a regurgitated ball that oozed spit.

Unable to hold it in anymore, the burning liquid pours off from my lips. Again, and again, the back of my head pulsating my vision unfocused. The pit of my throat wrings itself yet dares me to continue gagging, my lower back tense and hurting every time I try and continue to release the seemingly unending vile that comes up from inside.

It hurts, and burns, merely breathing causes the reflex to restart, and I can barely remain standing. Gasping for dear life, massaging my neck, I drag myself away from the atrocities.

Only to find a yellow ribbon peeking out from under some large iron beams, red fur dirtied with blood, sinking further into the ground.

" *Good morning, Shirogane-kun."*

"Huh? Is that… S-Sumika-san?! A-Ah… N-No… W-Why is-" Yet, as I walk closer, an image flashes in my eyes.

Something that resembles the auditorium, a large structure on the ground as a few adults. tell the younger ones to disperse. And how a few comment that limbs do not bend in that direction, just as the remains of the red kitty in front of me are at the moment, a puppet subjected to the cruel performance of having its every joint imitate a spinning top.

Closing my eyes tightly and feeling them searing with heat, I rush away from the gore as my stomach swirls in sickness again, rising up my constricting throat with the haste of a snail.

Is this a memory from Takeru-san's last experience? Is this why he so desperately wants to save both worlds? Is this what can happen in his world if he doesn't fix the divergences of the conductor?

…

Then, why didn't you say anything? Why didn't you tell us? Or did the Professor always knew… and still pushed you to inherit these memories? Knowing you have no choice but to rely on her… and yet, you still try your best everyday…

Trying to make haste, my feet trip and push off sunken parts in the dirt, sending me forward while I try to backpedal. Both legs stop synchronizing, I end up stumbling. Supporting my fall with both hands, which then claw at the dry soil as a cold gale blows along further thunders, I can only cry and shake.

"Why didn't I feel this before? Why did I not notice anything?"

… Is this my fault, then? For stirring what trauma laid buried deep within his mind? Panting for a moment, I look back at what

abominable spectacle was in the ravine, covering my mouth as I sluggishly raise back up.

"… So this is what can be happening in his world right now? All of them, dying all over again in such cruel a manner? If so then, why couldn't I feel your sorrow for so long? Why didn't you say anything… A moment, if the animals are here then… That Takeru-san that was walking with me is the one seeing, the one recalling these memories. But these are your memories, which means… that Royal Guard was you all along? B-But the one with me so far was supposed to be this world's Takeru-san, how did- This can't be. Even if the memories are trying to assimilate themselves, that other Takeru-san shouldn't be seeing- No, wait a moment…"

Let's say, for an argument's sake, that for some reason this world's Takeru-san could in fact be the same entity I know as 'Takeru-san'. The Takeru-san I know always keeps himself in check, because he remembers most things about his life and wants to restore some small measure of happiness to our reality. His dream and oath to forge a world with zero wars, in honor of all the comrades and beloved ones he has lost, is what fuels his unyielding resolve. That's what the Professor told me before we started these recovery sessions, that his will to see his goals through would allow him to connect with some of the memories despite any recoil from my psychic invasion upon his mind. And that focus on the good things he wants to bring about is what probably obscured his deeper, darker thoughts from my everyday scans.

But if, somehow, there were no two Takeru-sans and they were one and the same person… assuming that is true, in the case that he were to lose his memories… and started to see them in the form these nightmares are taking… while lost in the war-torn reality of the invasion-

He wasn't angry or wrathful, yet.

Yet, thinking twice, he looked as he was right before our last recovery session, after our morning battle in the Mindseeker.

And what's most dear to him, the one thing that could more easily send him into blind hatred?

A thunder echoes, rain starts to fall. Gently at first, until the wind starts to howl once more. Enduring the beating of the falling downpour, the warning of the reddening thunders, I rush out of the ravine, my feet almost slipping on the muddy soil.

Shielding my face with both arms does little to prevent the incoming gale from almost send me recoiling backwards, the droplets hitting all over me, almost piercing through. Sliding both feet, mire and dampness filling both shoes, I press on and call out yet my scream is obscured by the rumble of red lightning. It all weights on my back, as if now I were garbed in a metallic attire, to the point of almost failing to produce a step forward.

Another thunderbolt falls, yet this time a shadow is cast. Lowering my arms, I discern a large structure in the distance. The moment I step forward, the ground sinks. Carried by the downstream current, I can only scream. Rolling and sinking, limbs flailing about, I manage to hold onto a rock.

And gasping for air as I raise myself, another thunder echoes, its crimson light bathing the area. Again, a shadow is cast. Looking up, I finally take it wholly, a large statue that kept on receiving repeated thunderbolts.

A single spiky horn raising to the Heavens in defiance as it stuck its chest outwards, as if provoking a strike on itself. Despite the gesture, the statue lies armless on its posture. Not by damage done through the elements but by design, if I base myself on the lack of damage on its body.

As I observe the monument as its struck by further lightning, something else catches my attention. The shape that crawls behind the shadow of the statue, a shape I recognize. Screaming his name, Takeru-san doesn't seem to hear me. Fighting the stream for a

moment, my fingers claw at the stone to not have me washed away. Just a little further… If I can at least swim to the shore-

Another thunder, another thunder, the statue begins to falter, to catch on fire. The extra illumination reveals fangs, maws extended in threat. Large wolves rove closer, excessive claws protruding from their paws, jaws bending further than normal and revealing a twister of fangs, another maw within the maw. Glistening like fine steel, thin eyes which remain locked on the crawling shape of Takeru-san as they slowly approach. Within the cracks in between their ribs, further mouths open and shriek violence, rampant enough to brave the downpour and the stream. And as they come closer, it becomes clear to me. Their furs are colored…

… in a strong royal purple and an equally firm indigo blue.

Something tugs at my elbow, dragging me into the stream. Yanking my arm from the water, a thin, skeletal hand remains attached to it. A cold creeping feeling surrounds my arm as a mangled, distorted face gazes at me from under the filthy water, staring into my soul.

"… *Pull the trigger."*

"A-Aaaah! No, don't touch me!" Leaving the rock, fighting the stream, I try and swim to the other side.

Pressure on my ankles, needles or knives sinking into my arms, entangling into my arms, pulling at my hair, water hitting my chin, slipping into my mouth and nose, everything growing fuzzy for a moment.

" *Pull the trigger!"*

Hurting the inner side of my lips in a moment of hesitation as the water overtakes me, I thrash and fight the hold, a raking pain on my bottom legs and upper arms. Gasping, swimming to the shore, my hands slip as I raise myself, sending my face to meet the mud. The rain keeps on falling, making my balance hard to regain. And while

those ghostly wails continue within the river, another rumbling thunder echoes above.

And this time, I see fire. A horn breaking, falling apart and making tsunamis on the mud, the tail end of the ripples reaching my hands. Fire over the armless statue that's beginning to fall apart, into the mud, away from sight.

Immediately after, a loud roar breaks through the rain, leaving the droplets floating in midair. Two large shadows rush to us, large enough to obscure the horizon and part of the sky from view. I blink, yet the sight does not change. Now that they've come closer, I can clearly make out the patterns to the fur of the wolves, of the blue and purple beasts. The circular sigil on their foreheads, a crimson circle with slow waves outwards, a small square with a horizontal line in the middle. From said sign, from the flesh underneath it to be more precise, chains and ropes come pouring out, at parts flesh, at others steel, at times both mingle together. Rippling through the skin, entangled together as if overgrown roots they were, pulsating, twitching in a rhythm.

The large tendrils spread outwards, reaching the shadows that closer come. The wolves which overflow the area, wolves in dark, in golden, in gray, in red. The chains fuse with their joints and limbs, the sleek metallic shape of their claws and fangs glistens as the surface of a lake under the moonlight. All of them do not even bother to sheathe their jaws for a second, tongues running down to the ground as they howl, as they surround the breaking statue.

Those eyes, the lost downwards spiral within them all, the scattered monochrome patters in it somehow remind me of the sight in televisions when the signal is lost. Blank, vacant, wordlessly opposing.

"W-Wait! You two… You're the little puppies, aren't you?!" I scream, almost slipping face first into the mud, yet the two large wolves do not even acknowledge my presence.

All of them pace forward as the protective glow of the statue fades to the dark, towards the groggy, shaky shape of Takeru-san.

Whose dress is torn, exposing his skin, claw marks all over him.

Whose knees and legs quiver and stall a fall, barely hanging on as the downpour resumes its assault.

Who remains standing, shielding… the two hurt bunnies behind him, which lay unmoving by the statue's remains, surrounded by purple flowers.

"Takeru-san, run! Don't fight!" I yell, trying to hold onto the larger wolves.

But my fingers meet the air, I walk through them, meeting the mud.

Why?

Why now?!

A shriek, followed by many howls. Stomping on the ground, along more red lightning.

Seeking his shape, I catch Takeru-san within the stream of bones, fur and violence. Clutching a sword tightly, jumping onto a wolf, preying upon its sight, forever blinding it. Jaws which part to swallow, steel that cuts through. Flanks that are devoured, ripostes delivered to give eternal rest to the beast. Dodging the falling red bolts that seek his shape, the few that dare to come close are dealt quickly.

Yet the claw marks only increase in number, overgrown roots crawling all over the soil that is his skin. And yet, as the blue wolf blasts towards him, there is no movement. Takeru-san is sent to collide against the remains of stone, by the rabbits' side.

" *Precisely,"* a voice echoes through the storm, " *you have a duty and an obligation to serve."*

It stalls my walk, for I recognize the voice, the arrogant and dismissive tone.

Another thunder echoes, deflected by the sword. Now clearly limping, all Takeru-san can do is swing wildly, a mere detriment to the surrounding horde. Until the purple wolf howls, raising its head, causing its chains to twitch like veins. Causing geysers of blood to burst from all other wolves, all shrieking as they charge forth.

" *You must never waver, when it is time to bloody your own hands."*

Fangs meet the arm, the sword is lost, trampled by the blue wolf. Chains of red lightning shackle, shock Takeru-san, hitting him over and over again, Mjolnir incarnate.

Rushing to his side, again moving through all this madness, once more that smell reaches me. The scent of rotten flames, of burning. Smoke raising from his dress, hiccuping on the ground, legs unresponsive. Clawing at the soil, still trying to stand up.

"Takeru-san, please stop! You have to wake up!"

Slowly cradling him, moving him upwards, I shield him with all of myself, while trying to open his tightly closed mouth, to allow him to breathe, somehow. Now that we're in contact, the wolves seem to have taken notice of me.

Circling around us, they sniff the air, those tempestuous, ravenous eyes stare at me, unblinking under the rain.

"Why are you doing this?! You were the puppies, weren't you? You're supposed to be on his side!"

Another thunder, more red bolts fall around us.

Jaws that part wide, another howl. Both of them roar in unison, as if mocking me.

All of a sudden, it feels cold. A brief contact makes me shiver, and I see that… the rain now turned to snowing.

" *You shall be stripped off the honor of carrying my House's emblem on your person,"* a voice which rivals what the gale sends into my face.

" *I know not who you speak of. Lower your armaments, otherwise I shall be forced to subdue you in them Empire's name,"* again, distant, indifferent, frosting.

All of their vacant eyes focus on me, beyond the storm. Like stars in the night, yet out for blood. Howling, growling, getting closer and closer. Erratically, Takeru-san tries to stand only to fall face first into the piling snow. Crawling, seeking to shield both bunnies. Both have a wounded leg, unable to run away. What would happen to me, to him, to us if these beasts harm us? Would the nightmare end? Where would his mind go to afterwards?

… Why am I even wasting time, asking pointless questions?

Gripping my knees, I stand. A quiver, a shiver, a step forward. Staring upwards, covered wholly by the cast shadow of the beasts. Looking into their eyes, not a trace of the puppies remains. To try and reason with beasts would be a waste of time.

"Takeru-san, you have to wake up," shaking his arm, he remains clutching the rabbits to his chest. "Please, come to your senses! This isn't real anymore!"

Snow is crushed, a loud stomp right behind me. Shadows covering us both. Turning back, a blur of steel and purple.

Pain, all over my face.

Coldness, I'm suddenly buried in the snow.

It hurts, it hurts, it hurts… Air leaves me, I can't see well with one eye anymore. It's cold and yet it burns, so much. Hair gets stuck in between my fingers, stuck by freezing redness to the skin.

Another stomp. Another shadow above. Constricted by snow, by the blasting of the howling, I cannot move.

Only to move my sight, find the end of a throat, rows of iron fangs already descending upon me.

Is this… Am I going to… to what?

If I perish within a mind, during a scan… What happens to me?

Am I… about to…

Another howl, another stomp.

Followed by heat, heat holding me in its grip. Followed by whimpers in pain. By the mist clearing, the snow melting apart as the heatwave of the impact makes my hair flutter, everything else raising in the cyclone.

As the purple wolf is sent flying upon the surrounding hound, pieces of teeth, patches of fur drizzling from above and near me along tiny snow crystals, I look up.

And find a back littered with scars standing in front of me.

"… Fuck off, you ain't taking any more lives tonight." Hoarse, rough, a subdued war-cry.

"… T-Takeru-san?"

Butterflies flicker about him, sparks of cerulean, will-o-wisps in black. Wounds reopened, or rather… wounds that never seem to have healed burn. The hound roars, trespassing our personal space yet not daring to fall to lethality. Only then, as the fire Takeru-san emits clears the fogginess, do I see another flicker of blue, more subdued,

more faint, lying behind all the beasts. Shredding its lungs, another wolf roars, the sigil in the larger wolves burns, causing them to spasm. Followed by manic cries, the chains regressing into their skulls, splintering part of it.

" *It is all for the greater good, for the sake of the Empire."*

"Don't fuck with me… Where's the mercy in this? You motherfucking sons of an eldritch-"

"Takeru-san?" I tentatively ask, grasping, pulling his wrist, halting his raising screaming. My hand flinches away, as if touching a boiling teapot. "Is that you?" Getting closer, enduring the heat, gripping his shoulder then one of his cheeks I look into his eyes. Into the face of the Takeru-san I know… except with way longer hair, way bigger eyebags.

"Huh?" He blinks, going wide eyed as the frown he had ingrained melts away. "Ka… sumi?"

A sharp howl, rumbling on the ground.

Jaws that lunge forth, eyes glistening through the dark.

A strong push on my body, my back hits the snow again.

And all I can do is watch, watch as the maw of the blue beast fully closes all over Takeru-san.

The fangs move up, and down, and up, and there's a crunching sound, something being grind to nothingness, and a thread of liquid coming out from in between the jaw.

"Ah… A-Ahhhhh! N-No, this is-"

" *For the greater good."*

"It's a lie! I- I was only-"

" *For the thousand years to come, for pebbles to turn to a mountain range!"*

Hurrying to my feet, banging onto the monster, on its eye, on its jaw, it merely moves its head roughly, again causing me to stumble to the ground.

"No… Why? Takeru-san… This can't-"

"Shut up…"

"Huh?"

"Shut up… with your bullshit…"

Smoke, overflowing the jaw. Fire raising from within the eyes, searing the blue beast. Until it all catches fire, engulfed wholly by a dark blaze. Erupting into tiny giblets, nothing is left. Only a shape standing amidst the fire… or perhaps, causing it. That back full of scars, those eyes branded in red.

" *It is the duty of those who must pierce the Heavens, the duty of-"*

"Shut up! You and your holier-than-thou act of superiority can go to hell! *If I'll lose it all, I'll struggle to the very end! I'll despair after I'm dead!"*

The cape of blaze becomes a trench coat, perhaps a cloak. Engulfed entirely, the black fire shines above the snow with an uncanny glow. As if taking a fighting stance, a rapier of fire he produces, he forces the blaze to be.

"You'll never take their future, never again! *I'll burn your salvation to cinders first!"*

Something grabs me, everything spins. Yet, it feels warm. Feeling his hair graze my face, the bunnies on one shoulder, the howl and the rumbling approach us, the echo of the thunders. Striking all around us in a pattern, growing ever closer, a cage of bolts. Merely raising a

hand, he stops the chains of red lightning, bending them into a leash, a whip with which to strike at the beasts, ripping them in twain. The lightning seems to fizzle, to try and escape his grasp, he rasps a scream, binding it to his hand, chaining it into a weapon that shrieks and sparks in place.

Collapsed Gekishins flicker in my sight as he rushes through the horde, through flesh and bones like a cannon ball. Desperate cries for help, explosions, silence. Almost as what's around, as the skulls, the eyes are sunk in before fire takes them to pointless ash.

" *I cannot force any soldier to depart to the frontline, but I won't refuse any volunteers,"* low and dull, a voice tells. Brown eyes, long frilly hair, the draconian composure of the mask she endows during the training drills absent completely.

Cascades of metal, of bones. A bonanza of fire, treating the large beast as if mere paper, like when the Professor discards failed approaches. Crushed tightly, into nothing but an amorphous ball. Tastes like iron in my lips, bile again rising to my throat.

" *Please, do think on the future. It is imperative that the equipment is shipped posthaste. Furthermore, are you not aware of the Professor's research? As the rulers, it is our duty to safeguard our people,"* composed as a pond, someone tells. A face mired by static, the recollection halted by loud clanging of steel.

The large wolf by the back finally decided to come meet us… purple fur amidst its claws, munching something, spitting out a bone. Giving out a howl, pieces of flesh raise, swirl into a vortex, the blue beast regains form, stitched together, the tendrils now binding it to the other wolf, of a clearer blue.

"Takeru-san… Stop, please… Let's go back home…"

Pain in my throat, searing pain. Coughing, out of air amidst the heat, the swirling in my eyes as he draws circles, spinning and spinning, stretching the blaze outwards, cutting their ranks in half. A ballad of

revenge, a dance of carnage, too fast for me to make anything out besides the silhouettes that are torn, and crushed, and ashen in mere moments, all of the wolves crying out in pain. Grunting like a beast, Takeru-san gives no quarters nor mercy. Taking in a sharp breath, enduring the kindling of the heat on my palms, I try and reach out to his face, to rouse him to wakefulness.

Yet, I find dampness.

Tears.

And now, his screams finally make sense.

The rocket that departs once more reaches my sight, the hateful facade of the azure eyes, the visage of the wasteland filled by that giant orb of dark.

And a small hand, wavering like candle by a window, raising to his face. A worn down smile, a face drenched in redness.

Followed by an unending, outstretched, louder by the second flat-line.

" *It's not goodbye, Kasumi. If you want to see me again then, let's say 'See you later'."*

Piercing in my heart, something chokes me. Constricting the base of my throat, until lights sway and dance in my sight. Unable to withstand the fire anymore, lightheaded and dizzy, my fingertips slip, the warmth leaves me, cold wind envelops my face, I fall. Fall and fall, the specter of black fire continuing his rampage unimpeded. Wicked wings of warfare searing the disaster of a battlefield, departing to the distance as the horde gives chase and devours the shadow of the pyre.

I can only remain in place on the ground, rubbing my chest, the emptiness which now rests in me. In silence, watching the clouds of magma depart beyond the horizon.

Slowly, my breathing returns to normal. Running a hand over my legs, standing up and finding no burns, my palpitations are still lodged at the base of my throat, the warmth that enveloped me, Takeru-san's warmth, still lingers in my fingertips.

But what was that? Why such pain over a hand stroking his cheek? Everything else, I can make a case. Yet, all of those memories, it is understandable he'd be pained, shocked… But why won't he come to his senses? Why won't he wake up?

"… What are you looking for, Takeru-san? Why do you refuse to end this dream?"

Under the hazy mist that falls upon me, I walk after the trail of fire. For how long, I do not know. Simply replaying those moments in my mind, the clarity of what was probably Iceberg, grants credence to his refusal to surrender. The blazing anger did not belong with such emotions, however. The almost suicidal manner of his prior actions, shielding the bunnies and myself despite the damage he suffered, would align more with the desperation of those memories.

"Did the blue beast attacking him caused a buried memory to come forth?"

Then, what can I do? Should I… give up? No, he recognized me! If I hadn't been so weak, I wouldn't have fallen off. But then, what was that sound? Someone… dying? Why did I sense that parting line from within his heart, then? Can I even do anything for him at this point?

Gradually coming to a halt, rubbing the small scar on my left cheek, merely touching it stings. Looking around, the traces in the skyline are barely visible. The fog is falling down heavily again, I can barely see a few feet ahead of me. Even if I get to his position…

A noise, like a can rolling on the ground.

Followed by small pebbles falling down.

Glancing around, a shadow approaches me from behind, from a blank point caused by another ruin. Yet, my tight breathing eases up as I recognize the intruder. The fox from before, the representation of the Professor, paces towards me.

"So it was you. You scared me, you know."

Slowly pacing towards me, circling around me, the fox gives out a small growl. Tail and ears up and in attention, eyes twinkling within the mist, never leaving mine. It grows closer, growls turning to screeches.

"H-Huh? Why?" Stepping back does nothing to douse its apparent ill mood, it continues to approach me, back arched and at the ready to pounce. "S-Stop… Professor, calm down please! I'm not your enemy!"

Ears twitch, it tilts its head. Sitting on the ground, the fox stares at me for a moment. Coming closer, at a snail's pace, sniffing my hand, circling around me, it then gives out a small cackle, wagging its tail.

"Why were you so upset? Oh! Right, weren't you guiding Takeru-san somewhere?" I ask, its eyes glisten.

Letting out another cackle, it taps my leg then starts to walk back the way it came. It looks back after a moment, growling. So it wants me to follow after it? As soon as I do its complains cease, and like before it remains a few steps ahead of me. Still, is this safe? Wasn't Takeru-san following the fox yet end up surrounded anyways? After all… just like how the puppies turned to beasts, the fox might actually be nothing like the Professor. What should I-

A chill down my spine, followed by a sharp growl. The fox's staring, unblinking, showing its fangs. In the reflection of the sockets I could see a spiral of shadows triumphing over the mist, analyzing me whole. Only now do I notice, there are a few small patches of fur in the fox's jaw. Little poofs of white and black. Another growl, low,

follows, a reflection of myself, only slumped and cold, eyes blank as paper, coming up in those small, violet eyes.

"Ah, um… You will really guide me to Takeru-san's side, right… Professor?"

Apparently pleased with the word, it gives out a small, inoffensive bark as its tail wiggles. Yet, the coldness of the stare does not thaw, not until I resume my walking. Cackling a bit, seeming more than happy, shining through the humid haze, it resumes its guidance. So all I can do is rub my nose, clean it from the humidity's effect and walk, walk after the fox.

"You really… will take me to Takeru-san, won't you?"

It looks back, seeming to smile as its facial features relax, then it starts cackling as it runs circles around me for a moment, before marching onward once more in little hops.

Sigh… I can only hope, that Takeru-san remains safe from whatever plagues his mind. And that you truly take me to him, Professor. As if reading my mind, the fox looks back and cackles again. Even its mannerisms are alike… Perhaps, there was some truth to the nickname.

The clouds part, the mist gradually clears. Revealing a large expanse of wasteland, yet unlike before, there are no buildings or anything else here. Nothing, except something at the very edge of the horizon, something shrouded by the night.

"Is that where you're taking me?" The fox scratches its head, wagging its tail, resuming its walk.

So, taking in a sharp breath, I follow after it, back to the wasteland. Looking up as a breeze blows, I see the glimmering stars, the moonlight basking onto me.

The pleasant light… of a crescent moon, with an inverse cross encrusted on its lower half.

# Shirogane (II)

*A/N: The same warning of the prior chapter applies for this one, disturbing dark content lurks in this entry.*

***P roceed with caution, reader discretion is advi s ed .***

*As one little suggestion, I recommend you to read this chapter while listening to 'Guts' from the Berserk OST. That's all for now, see you at the end of the chapter.*

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" *You see, the war, the **true** war, has never been one waged by droids, warships, or soldiers. They are but crude matter, obstacles against which we test ourselves. The true war is waged in the hearts of all living things, against our own natures, light or dark. That is what shapes and binds this galaxy, not these creations of man. **You** are the battleground. And if you fall, the death of the Republic will be such a quiet thing, a whisper that shall herald the darkness to come."*

Kreia, from Star Wars Knights of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords

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*Chapter 77:*

**Shirogane - Howling Towards a Distant Earth**

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*Time and Date Unknown.*

*(In the middle of the foggy wasteland.)*

**[Kasumi]**

---

A pleased bark, the fox stops in its tracks, looming over me.
Covering my mouth and coughing, I clear the small hill that impeded

my steps. Taking a moment to sigh, the Professor's representation merely stares back at me before standing and slowly moving forward. Following it with my gaze, I finally catch a first glimpse of the location it was leading me to.

Through the fading mist, shapes begin to take form. Large expansions of foliage, from left to right, covering the horizon. It is not a normal forest, however. The shapes of trees, of their branches, would make one think people are being kept prisoners within the bark, trying to scream for freedom. Vines or something resembling them drips from the treetops, almost like corroding muck. Small flickers of light, stares shining within the dark, the bark, enlarged flowery shapes which fall and devour one another, surge from one another like matryoshka dolls. Wood that sweats, roots that twitch, the leaf eyes which remain all locked onto me, shifting patterns behind the foliage's cover.

Billowing from the soil, walling itself against the incoming moonlight, the wilderness towers over me, a cradle hoisting distorted yet stitched masses that crawl, that feast, that prey upon one another incessantly.

Gulping hard, unable to endure to cyclopean spectacle before me, I close my eyes and step back. Another bark, a cackle, the fox remains staring at me. Taking a pouncing stance as I hesitate. All it takes is me stepping closer, feel the stench meet my nose, for it to relax. Spewing the two little puffs of fur it had in its mouth, ears and tail standing in attention, it cackles again before darting into the mutant forest, casting one final glare, one final growl from within the veil as its shape mixes and blends with the foliage.

Alone under the light of this crescent moon with a cross in its lower half, alone under the stare of the wilderness, the rustle and echoes of it all, time passes me by as I imitate a crab's walk in my indecision. The roots look like they'll spring out from under the ground as soon as I approach, the slimy vines would perhaps fall upon me and restrict my movements. Who knows what else lurks within that bog?

But Takeru-san must be beyond this place. I could always turn around… but that would equal forgetting all about him if he never wakes up. I inhale into the humidity, seeing the expansion of my sigh in front of me as it departs.

"It's for Sumika-san's sake… for the Professor's sake… for Alternative IV's sake…" One step, knees quiver. The vines twitch or wobble, their gooey shape seeming to wiggle upon my footsteps. "It's for… humanity's victory… I must not be afraid, they're counting on me… It's for Takeru-san, to wake him up before it's too late…" The twinkle of lights resembling eyes lock onto me, the cloak of shadows creaking and shifting with every step I take. "I have to be brave… I have to," otherwise, Alt IV might not reach success, Sumika-san may never be able to regain her self once she becomes the 00 Unit. And I'll forget about it all, all about him, as if he had never even been there to begin with.

I don't want that, I don't want to lose these memories, I don't wanna forget about-

"Are you truly certain this is a wise decision?"

"H-Huh?!"

Frantically looking around, I spot two eyes lunging at me from within the foliage. Swatting the fluid vines which tried to prey on its shape, the shadowy figure takes its time to approach me. Stepping on the gushing flowers, dismissing the crying shapes in the bark, slow yet undaunted. A slim figure of medium stature meets my gaze as it's bathed in the faint moonlight, a prim and proper office attire with a pencil skirt, all in pure black with the exception of what resembles a white handkerchief on a breast pocket.

Those eyes… those cerulean eyes remain locked on mine through the veil, as if drilling into my soul. I take a step back, her eyes squint. Trying to hasten her approach, a minute frowning, a momentary grimacing and stumbling. One of her legs is hurt, there's a stain growing through the leggings. It does not impede her exit through the

cyclopean forest, now standing merely a few feet away from me. Garbed in all black, her paling features offer great contrast. A stare frozen in place, cerulean eyes which I've only seen in others like me, silverish white hair done in two slim pigtails which I've also only seen in others like me. Yet, she remains quiet, silent, observing me intently. Nothing in her posture indicates aggression, yet for some odd reason I cannot sense her aura despite how she's not being grayed out as every other person was in this dreamscape thus far.

"Who… are you?"

"It is unimportant," she says, shaking her head. "Why are you here, young Yashiro?"

"Eh?! W-Why do you know my name?"

Not even reacting in the slightest, she takes a step forward, never lifting her eyes from mine. "Why are you here, trying to advance into the forest?" She repeats, not altering her monotonous voice.

"Uh… I was… looking for someone, guided by a fox. Who are you?"

"I see, so the fox brought you here," she whispers, nodding while grasping her chin. "Tell me, what do you hope to accomplish in this forest?"

"… Um, why are you asking me these questions? Anyways, who are you?"

"I suppose someone such as you could already have a hunch on who, or more precisely what, I am. As for why I'm inquiring into your motivations to be in this place, it's because you should not be here, young Yashiro."

Lips fold in, my hands shake. Resisting the reflex to cough at the foothold of dampness in the air, I instead step forward. "Why? I mean, why are you- how can you talk to me? Everybody else in the dreamscape hasn't reacted at all to my presence. And there's no

other ESPer in the base. Wait, did so much time pass that the Professor requested aid to bring me back?!"

"Easy there," she comes closer, lightly petting my head. "No such thing is occurring in the outside world."

"How do you-"

"Simply take my word for it."

"B-But if you're an ESPer-"

"Matters not to your objectives who or what I am, right? In any case," what at first was a gentle hold turns into a firm grip, her features freeze further as her sight clashes into mine, "you should turn back and return to the waking world, now."

"I refuse."

She blinks, gradually easing her stare. "Why would you?"

"I have to bring Takeru-san back. I won't leave until he returns with me."

"… Takeru-san, huh," she seems to chuckle, letting my shoulders go and crossing her arms then playing with a pigtail. "Surely you're aware of the dangers that herein lurk?"

"What dangers? I admit the forest looks scary… b-but I believe I can traverse it without much issue," I reply, returning the unblinking stare. After all, I just slip through almost everything in this dreamscape.

"I see, so you do not know."

"… What are you talking about?"

She looks back, gesturing towards the forest. "This place is one of the deepest recesses of this person's mind. To advance further beyond equals to sink into what he actively suppresses. The

thoughts that in this specific area reside are strong enough to bring harm to you, were you to see even a glimpse of them."

"And how do you know this?"

"I am an observer, just as you."

"So… Why are you in Takeru-san's mind? Why are-"

"At ease, young Yashiro. I am not an enemy," she says, holding my gaze, squinting hers. "Merely know that you might receive injuries should you try to advance further, to delve into what traumas lie in another's mind is to allow them to echo in yours. Do you not know the saying? If you stare too long into the abyss-"

"The abyss stares back into you. Yes, the Professor is always repeating that phrase," I sigh, feeling my limiters flopping down. She nods, folding both arms behind her back, staring. "Um… So, if you're not an enemy… What is going on outside? Why did the Professor ask you to dive into Takeru-san's mind?"

"… Therein lies the problem we both face, albeit for different motives," she looks back to the forest, I slowly walk up to her side. "I am here for… surveillance purposes, on my own accord."

"Surveillance? Why are you stalking Takeru-san's mind?"

One of her eyebrows twitches, lips and throat also do. "I am not doing anything of the sort," she says, frosting again.

"It certainly looks like that to me."

"Hmph… Quite rude, aren't we. You suck," she then looks away, slightly frowning, crossing her arms tighter. It lasts only a second, she reverts to the prior composed and stoic facade. "In any case, I am seeking the same as you albeit for different reasons."

"… Why are you after Takeru-san? Why would an ESPer-"

"I was here before you, and I shall remain after you. I merely observe, that is all. Yet, on this particular occasion, I have deemed it imperative to assist in the awakening of the soldier," she says, almost choking one of the pigtails. "In any case, while I praise your grit to have reached this far, what lays ahead is too much for your mind to handle, young Yashiro," looking at me, back to the neutrality of a frozen pond, she holds my gaze.

Looking down, losing stillness to the seizing humidity, once more I shake my head. "I won't. Takeru-san… He recognized me for a moment, he should be ready to wake up."

"Then, why hasn't he?"

"… Do you know?"

The edge of her lips sinks, she gazes back at the forest. "I have a hunch. Yet, knowing the fox now lurks within this place, it is better for you to turn back." Looking back, drilling back, she closes the distance, standing over me. "Strong echoes can harm the mind and distort your self. Do not take lightly what this Black Lilith is meant to represent, young Yashiro."

"Black Lilith? What are you-"

She points upwards, to the moon with the inverted cross. "Such is the sign of the black moon, the darkest reaches of a mind. As someone who also used to stargaze frequently, I can understand why the soldier's mind would place such a symbol in this particular location. So," curling her hair on a finger, she again stares through low eyelids, "care to guess why the fox brought you here?"

"… The Professor must have wanted to help Takeru-san, obviously."

She scoffs, sighing short. "Is that so. The fox does want to find the soldier, that much is true. Well, I cannot waste any more time. I have warned you, should you choose to advance know that you might physically suffer from what memories are buried herein." And without

awaiting a response, she turns around and strolls towards the forest once again.

Watching her back, then up to the moon, gulping and shivering, I choose to quickly jog after her silhouette, covering my head from the vines that reach out to grasp at my limiters, stomping forward as something thin and slimy tries to sneak into my shoes.

For a moment, there is only the strong odor of decay, of humidity. The sinking soil on contact with my feet, the mire seeping in between my fingers, faint rustling about amidst the foliage. Merely advancing a bit is enough for the bark to truly become human-like, the wood darkening. Antennas rising from where eye sockets should be, more of that molten goo from a witch's cauldron, more stares from within the filth. Bark that crunches whatever is within it, the, um, greenery taking a grotesque, larger shape. The overbearing dampness makes it hard to breathe, the convulsion of the foliage makes it hard to want to breath in.

"… So you've chosen to ignore my warning," I hear her say, she was waiting for me albeit not looking my way. Slowly swatting another vine that seemed to try to drop onto her, a single eye scans me thoroughly.

"I… I want to help Takeru-san, I don't want to forget about our time together. Will you help me find him?"

"I suppose. However, I do not know if I am able to shield you should something grab onto you. You will have to look out for yourself if you desire to remain safe."

"What do you-"

"Step forward, and remain quiet. Close your eyes, I will make sure it only lasts a moment," she says, raising a hand as if to chop something. As I hesitate, she squints her eyes. "Will you turn around, instead?"

"N-No, I… don't want to. You won't hurt me?"

"You might be hurt, but not by my hand. Worry not, it won't last long," she states, firmly, her gaze does not waver. Her aura remains a mystery, yet if she had ill intentions there is little I could do to defend myself properly without her needing to resort to trickery.

Giving then a minute nod, I take a single step forward as my eyes close. There is nothing odd, only the distant disquiet of the wilderness. Why did she ask me to close my eyes? Maybe, she's taking her leave as I stand here, blind to my surroundings? And anyways, who is she even supposed to-

Cold, wetness sieving into my shoes, up to my ankles. Swirling around my leg, something clasps a sturdy shackle onto it. Crawling, crawling on the back of my knees, spreading, extending that damp, filthy sensation over my legs. Opening my eyes, some sort of… of… Thin, yet sturdy, whips of gurgling goo, whips which crawl like spiders over me. Not just one, many of them, many small tendrils which raise and pull me down, seeking to disturb my balance.

Breathing is hard, I look up at the woman for support. She remains still, unconcerned, staring. Palpitations rising, rising as those tendrils do, now tearing the low end of my dress, I raise my shaky hand to get them off me.

Only to end up jerking back and forth, only to feel needles dig onto my wrist. The vines, the vines that drip like sludge from the treetops cover my arm, a few leaves filled with dilated eyes staring into me from within the slimy substance. As if with a life of its own, the muck spreads through me up to my shoulder, a prickling feeling piking at my skin, burning.

"A-Ah! It hurts! M-Make this stop, why are- M-Mmghh!"

Mire invades my lips, infestation overflows my throat. Everything loses its defined shape in my sight, distortion similar to watching everything from underwater taking over my eyes. Feeling as if

sinking into a downwards spiral, the threads of light retreating, my ears start to ring, to clog. Trying to cough, trying to struggle only serves to further advance the infestation. Limbs grow heavier and heavier, harder to resist, harder to swim and fight the invading stream. My nose is running, but in reverse. That burning bile seems to also regress, and I might as well have boulders pressing themselves onto my eyes and lips, the cascade of mire doesn't end.

Yet, something, something small twinkles in the distance. Echoes, echoes edge closer, closer. Through the water veil, falling upon me, ripples which grant clarity to the liquid.

And I can see red.

Red hair and eyes. And the night sky. And a tree, the tree by the hill.

Why am I seeing-

Heaviness, gagging me. Burning, searing, my throat constricts. As indifferent as the streams of characters of a program, running on automatic, the flash does not halt as I scream and wail. No matter how much I bash my head about, the error persists, the horror persists.

A chop on my head, air suddenly enters me again.

" *Cough! Cough!* A-Aahhh… Ugh… Kgh…" Unable to stop the reflex, more heaviness molds my back as that pain flees my insides.

And yet, something's stuck. It hurts, I choke on it. Squeezing through the pit of my throat, I see something dangling from my lips. Squirming, and turning, and convulsing. Moving on its own.

It only furthers my puking, until it slides out. Until it joins all of the other ones, all the moving spaghetti-like parasites that are sinking in sickly green.

"There, there," the woman pats my head, it feels strangle soothing, her fingertips running through my scalp. "It's okay, it was only-"

"I-I could feel it, down to my stomach. Those worms, entering my mouth, forcing themselves-"

"It was only a memory, not one of your own experiences."

Shivering at first, for some reason it's growing unbearably hot. Hugging my shoulders, biting my lips, I close my eyes, shake my head. "I-I felt it! The rush of all those small tendrils, over my arms, into my lips, my nose, my-"

"Calm down," she presses my face into her chest, patting my back strongly for a moment. Entangling onto her, I cry in silence, something drizzling from my lips as I shake the urge to continue to release whatever is swirling within my stomach. "To bear another's suffering opens you to feeling it on your own flesh. You seem able to do so without much effort, so this is the outcome of what should happen if you are not careful while performing a proper mind dive."

"B-But it… It was all over me, and I could-"

"It is not one of your own experiences. Focus, dissociate it," she whispers, circles over my hair.

It hurts, ears ring, and buzz, and screech, and feel stuck. Enduring the damp sensation which still lingers in my feet, taking in a deep breath after another, those images replay in my mind. She gently wipes my arms, the liquid that had started to harden taking some effort to depart from my skin. As the hold of the damp mire over me fades, the first flashes return to me.

"… It was Sumika-san?"

"Looks like you're stable once more," she says, breaking the lock my hands had on her back, separating us. "Do you now see it was not you who suffered through those-"

"W-Why?"

"Hm?"

"Sumika-san… defiled by those- those things… W-Why does Takeru-san know of that? Why did it felt so real, so vivid?"

Closing her eyes, she shakes her head. "I am not the one to answer such a question. Yet all you saw, no matter how brief, is something the soldier has gone through at one point. If the recollection felt vivid for you, then whatever the reason why he was made to see such events, they felt equally as vivid for him at the time," she says, the ice never faltering.

Did… the 00 Unit show such a thing to him? With the full extent of her powers? For what reason? Such a- Such a twisted, sickening- Ugh… Kgh…

" *Cough!* U-uhhh…" Throat burns, hard to breathe…

"Sigh, you truly should not proceed any further," a delicate rustle of my bangs, of a cheek. "You won't be able to withstand any memories that-"

"No!"

"However, you're clearly-"

"I refuse! If Takeru-san is… enduring this everyday… Hic… Why?" Why remain quiet? Why not ask me to suppress it if it hurts to such extent? How could Sumika-san do such a cruel thing to him?

… Such a sickening, infestating feeling. Was that how… she was taken to her current form? Hollowed out from the inside? Ugh… N-No, focus, don't fall to the reflex, deep breaths…

A few breaths, regaining my rhythm, I look up at the immovable ice mask that scanning me remains. "If I follow you into the forest… Will I see more of these memories?"

"Indeed. The one you saw was a rather surface level thought, something the soldier would like to repress but cannot fully do so, for whatever reason. I am able to resist the impulse to scan such thoughts, while you still seem to rely on… those bunny ears you wear for the control of your powers."

"What? Why do you know of-"

"Matters not," she says, shaking her head, again slicing a vine in half, stomping one of the crawling insectoid-flower hybrids back to the mud. "If you choose to continue, know that you may fall to another of such memories. And if you cannot dissociate what you see before it starts taking hold into your mind, the damage might be irreversible," sharpening her eyes, lowering her tone, she so states, staring until I give a nod. She then turns around and resumes her walk, not even slowing down despite her attire, the harshness of the bog which still tries to prey upon her pristine form.

A single droplet runs down my back. Dirt still clogs my fingers, sticking them together at parts. Spitting away the toxic that lingers in my mouth, I take in a sharp breath and follow after the woman once more. She merely looks at me, saying nothing, expression unchanging, before locking her sight forward once more.

We traverse the pulsating forest in silence. Only a thin glimmer of moonlight filtering through the trees, the eyes that upon us stare. Flowers that munch and chomp on one another, slow movements around the shadows, claw marks on the bark, on the figures. Thin, thin branches take on an arachnid form, tying the trees to one another.

Able to see my breath, walking with an eye on the ground to squash any small vermin, any small tendril that tries to lunge, and another up to scan whatever may fall upon me, to tame the repeated piking on my nape, I can only envy the precise, almost graceful stride of the woman. Unfazed, unblemished by this all.

"Um… Miss?"

"Yes?"

"Do you know how to exit this place?"

"I do," she retorts, not looking back nor changing her speed, not even as I almost stumble while trying to catch up.

"Does that mean that you've been in Takeru-san's mind before?" She did seem to allude to that before.

Looking back at me, she merely shakes her head. "It is unimportant."

"Then, why are you observing him?"

"I have my motives, as you do."

"Uh, well… Can you tell me of how you plan to wake Takeru-san once we find him?"

"… We should remain quiet, young Yashiro. Predators lurk within this place."

"Eh? Predators? But this is Takeru-san's-"

The trees shake, leaves falling, eyes sinking into the mire, melting. A gust blows, cold and seizing. A rumble in the ground, ripples in the puddles, squinting are the eyes within the bark, the arachnid branches regress into the leaves.

"Tch… Sooner than I thought," she rasps, beginning to frown.

Screeching, shrieking like a thousand cannons firing off at the same time, a low roar rushes through the foliage. Not of anything natural, instead burning.

Complexion tightening, she grabs my wrist. "Hurry, or it'll find us."

Without wait or warning, she pulls me to follow, my feet dragging on the stickiness. "What is going on? Why are-"

"Make silence, and hurry up," she says, low, showing me her gritting teeth as her steps grow in strength, as her eyes squint as she exerts her wounded leg.

Through the roots and flowers, through the screams and compulsion, we run and run. Wood creaks, a scream follows. Another rumble, a tree is tumbled. There's even distress in the repulsion within the muck, all of the grotesqueries above also fall back.

So I then cast my gaze backwards, and meet two large eyes. Two violet eyes in the distance, almost out of sight. Eyes that could very well be as large as myself.

Eclipsing the foliage, a staircase of fangs lunge through the damp dark. Those eyes, vacant and swirling eyes the wolves had were now in another beast. A colossal fox garbed in proud purple, rippling with muscles, metallic wings shredding the bark and foliage, giving chase.

Letting out a cackle when I stare, into those monochromatic eyes.

"Hurry!" The pull on my hand grows hurting, I lose a shoe, something sinks into my skin.

Panting, gasping, gaping, the periphery blurs. I run, and run, and continue to as something crawls up my back, echoes of clanking metal growing violent, wood crashing that feels closer, palpitations clang and clang within me.

And I keep on running, until the grasp on my wrist seems to slip.

Something catches my feet, my sight spins, everything grows dark. Dampness in my face, coughing right after as yet again that filth permeates my lips.

Shivering as I leave claw marks on the soil, I look back. Finding those eyes, that tempestuous monochrome chaos staring into me. The unbearable heat of the breath on my face, the thread of saliva

which burns as it falls, the metallic fangs which resemble a twister. Mucus ingrained deep in the skin, the scent of sickness corroding within. Features so sharp one would deem it a machine, yet those wide, starving eyes betray such an assumption.

"Get down!"

Cowering upon the warning, I immediately feel heat basking on me. Fire and sparks dive onto the maw, walling onto the fox. Skin and steel beginning to burn, the beast shrieks as it recoils.

Hurrying to my feet, hands almost slipping with one of those helix-like vermin, I rush towards the woman that lights up a small object, throwing it towards the beast that roars once again. Immutable in front of the blossoming blaze, frowning when retaliating with yet another of those small explosives, she then covers my retreat, pushing my back towards a respite in the foliage, light incoming through the thicket.

Reaching a clearing, I spot nothing to hide in, nothing to guard myself with. Looking around in a daze, another roar reaches me, both feet collide on one another, I stumble to the soil again.

The spiral of a maw swallows through the greenery, casting a large shadow over us both. Yet, its eyes squint, making the wounds on its jaw contort, bleed. Avoiding the moonlight, it slides back into the shadows of the thicket. A step back, another, the beast retreats. Eyes squinting harder, head lowering and lowering. Almost afraid, as if touching a source of heat, before it violently leaps back into the darkness of the distorted and atrocious foliage, shredding and maiming what obstructs its escape.

"Haa… Haa… T-That was so scary," placing a hand on the base of my neck, only sighing in relaxation is what I can afford. Even if the slimy feeling at the contact with the soil and the stench remains all around me, weakness and limpness comes to my limbs, air freely seeps in and out of me.

"Siiigh… We were lucky this time," she says, nearby. Looking up and around, I find she was rubbing the wound on her leg, grimacing. "If this clearing hadn't been close, we'd have sustained a few injuries, to say the least," she sways her hair backwards as she slowly raises up, offering me a hand.

Which I take, almost stumbling as my ankles seem to have deactivated. "Um, what was that… thing?"

"You already know, it is the fox."

"Huh?! B-But the Professor isn't an enemy!"

The hold on my hand tightens, as do her features. "Lower your voice, and do not call the beast by name. You'll attract it again," she scolds, brows lowering.

"However, why would-"

"Your views on reality matter little in this place. Logic will not work out in this particular situation."

"T-Then, are you implying it was really going to… try and swallow us?"

A moment of silence, a minute nod. "This is the fox's hunting ground, one could say."

"But why? Takeru-san wouldn't… He doesn't…" Gaze falls down, silence sets in as a faint breeze blows.

"… Have you ever had a voice whisper something to you, on the back of your head?" She asks, looking up at the dark clouds, at what little we can see of the moon from this clearing.

"A whisper?"

"Yes, a whisper. As if you were talking to yourself, yet the voice is not your own but at the same time similar," sighing, she again plays with

her hair, eyes falling to the mire. "Such intrusive, recriminating echoes seem to plague the soldier's mind as of late. The predators in this recess hint at that, at what is that he hears, almost out of reach."

"I don't understand… The Professor is-"

"Do not summon it!" She scolds, lightly hitting my shoulder.

"S-Sorry… However, while she's harsh, why would she take this shape in his mind? It makes no sense, I think… I think Takeru-san really likes the Pr- her, deep down."

"… I am not who should answer such a question," she shrugs, sighing. "Perhaps, you could take a wild guess on why would the soldier view the fox in such manner."

"B-But she isn't- I don't believe it's fair." The Professor might be harsh at times, yet she wouldn't drive us to such a chase, she wouldn't threaten me or Takeru-san in that way. "This must be a mistake, it has to- Huh?"

In the middle of the clearing, behind us both, there was something large sitting, sinking into the toxic. Craving the skies, clawing at them, a rusted Gekishin raises a hand. Completely overtaken by moss and corruption, by slime and mire. Broken and twisted like an old toy, just as ice would thaw upon warmth does its armor now surrender to the elements.

"What is this?"

"One of the, ahem, sanctums within this area. A lone moment of respite the soldier had, before facing unforgivable suffering."

"That's… the unit he was using during that mission called Iceberg, correct?" She nods, slowly. "Why would this place be a safe area among all this madness?"

"… Matters not. Simply know that the fox despises the moonlight and that… the stars grant some measure of peace to the soldier, which is why the rest of the corruption that falls upon the area cannot infest these locations."

"But these are still painful memories, right?"

"Yes, of course."

… I don't understand. How could something traumatic give him any measure of peace? Rubbing my hands together, dispelling the chill that's beginning to stick to me, my sight remains on the slumped machine.

She sighs, also running her hands up and down her arms. "In any case, we must make haste. The fox might have retreated, but it will soon resume the chase. We cannot idle by or it will surround us," she then takes in a sharp breath, returning to tending her wound.

… The fingers stretched to the skyline. The visor that so does too. Is this one of the things he prevented me from seeing during our recovery sessions? If only I were stronger, notifying the Professor of his inner suffering might have allowed her to devise a way to aid him truly recover.

Bent at places, sunken at others, lines and markings of dogfighting plague the plating. Now that its laying on the ground, it looks almost as large as the fox despite the treetops eclipsing it. Scars deep as a canyon in the cockpit area, small sections missing, the wilderness making nest in the void. The lines of green, of mire and corruption… almost moving like in a pattern over the steel, the rust…

Like waves hitting the shore, like a puppet's strings…

Like that stain, that trickles on the side. That missing chunk on an arm, as if chomped.

Something echoes, far away, a voice coming from above water. The smells seem to vanish, vanish as the erratic patterns of green fills my view. Fills it up, until it's all dark again.

But not really, because I can see the sky. Small dots, tiny dots above. The stars, far away. Twinkling in the distance, never faltering, no matter what. A cloud of fireflies daring the dark with their tender illumination, always up there for us to look back at. So shiny, so beautiful…

" *Please, be safe…* "

What? But I didn't-

Pressure on my neck, on my heart. Something clings onto me, hands, nails. Biting, sinking, slicing.

It hurts, but it feels cold. So very cold, colder than the dampness of the bog all over me as we walked.

Again, that rocket. That rocket that departs. It hurts to breathe, I can't feel my arms.

" *Fare… well,"* the voice, Takeru-san's voice, whispers in collapse.

Nothingness. Are my lips moving? I cannot hear anything. Struggling, thrashing, twisting, nothing seems to work, I don't feel it working. Legs, arms, eyelids, nose, heartbeats, anything.

Absolute.

Unbreakable.

Silence, utter silence.

Something shakes, the sky moves. A warning beep, the visage of the stars disappears. Metal shrieks in pain, bent, bending, being bent, a small crack appearing in front of-

Red. Teeth. A large hand.

Limbs feel heavy, can't even scream.

What was cold suddenly blazes in full focus, an arm is twisted and twisted. Ice blades my blood has become, piercing my veins and flesh, only to shrink back to liquid. And start again, higher on my arm, seeping through the pores, dampening it all, mangling the flesh.

With every bite, with every nibble.

With every crunch, with every chew.

Burns, then it's so cold. Burns me so much, like that one time I touched an oven barehanded. Then it's so cold, like when an ice cube got stuck to my tongue.

Again, and again, and again, and-

Pain, on my head. Everything swirls, I shiver and quiver. Hazy, fuzzy, a pair of eyes gain form above me.

And then, she sighs as she places a hand over my head. "I told you to be careful in this place, didn't I?"

"… Huh? I- *COUGH!* "

From the pit of my stomach, the reflex surges and doesn't stop. Soreness, that expands inward with every breath I take. Simply coughing, any and all air leaving me, everything graying out.

Something covers my mouth, something soft. "Breathe in, slowly. You'll hyperventilate otherwise." I do as told, closing my eyes, hands resting on my neck.

Hiccups that refuse to leave. Dryness that hurts to heal. It takes a minute, or perhaps ten, maybe more. I cannot tell, and my lips feel dry, frail, and broken.

"Can you remember who you are, young Yashiro?" She asks, brows furrowing tightly, lowering a knee to the ground, a hand to grasp my cheek, thumb on my chin, forcing my sight to return hers.

"Ye- *Cough…* Yes. What was," I sigh, taking in a long breath, shivering at the cold blanket that falls around my shoulders, the wind that howls, continuing in a whisper, "t-that vision?"

"I suppose, one of his final moments. Are you uninjured?"

"… He was dying?"

"Yes, so I said. Most of what you'll see here are what death repressed from his conscious mind," up and down, the silky hand comforts me, the monotonous voice never falters. "Are you feeling well enough to stand?"

"I think…"

"If not, I believe I can send you back to the waking world."

"No… I can- I will stand. Just give me… a moment, please…"

Shivering, running a few fingers over my arms. That same slice of ice tears into me, spurring a beating, a swelling sensation on the back of my head. The feast that monster had on my arms, the cruel slowness of the killing, and yet there was… no fear. Pain and the reaction it brings were there, I believe, but… Looking at the Gekishin, that faint whisper, those final words.

Why was he content at such an outcome?

Resigned, yet feeling fulfilled. Believing to have… saved someone? Did he sent his lover with the migrant fleet, then? Right, Takeru-san didn't knew there were so many BETA in the universe then. Perhaps he also knew of the possibility of failure of the migration, yet found solace in sparing his beloved the pain of Iceberg.

… He now knows they might have died, or would have as soon as the BETA made it to the target planet.

A pointless struggle. Nothingness, except pain.

So this is why he takes so much to stand up every morning, why he insists on clearing his mind. Aware, painfully so, of all the mistakes that must not be repeated.

… Like the Professor was, after Hakuryo burned down to ashes.

Slowly raising back up, I finally can breathe in calmly again. The Gekishin remains in place, in its sorrowful prayer, the clawing towards the stars. A hand supports my head, another hoist my fingers upwards, stabilizes my posture.

"Are you truly in proper form to continue, young Yashiro?"

"… Yes."

"How odd, I'd thought you would not endure a vision of what lurks here. You are not forcing yourself, are you?" She asks, tapping my forearm as I take a few steps, wobbling as shocks run up my legs while they reboot.

"It would be a lie if I said no, but I'm tired of… watching, and nothing else."

I did nothing when the Professor needed help, I merely lived by my orders when her heart was in pain. Just being close is not enough, she needed support. Support I couldn't give her, that she instead finds in her coffee and medical supplements. I do not want to remain staring in the medbay, hoping for Takeru-san to wake up someday. I want to… help them, with my own hands, with whatever little I can do.

Knees shake, I rest my palms on them. It does nothing, both feet refuse to part ways with the soil. That coldness seeps down my

back, the prickling, tearing shiver of cold scratches my skin, I hug, and squeeze, and constrict my arms, closer and closer, keeping the dampness at bay.

A soft caress, she pats my shoulder as I take in a sharp breath. My eyes find a nod, a small smile, a hand in the air, awaiting mine. With one last gulp, a long sigh, I take her hand and force the first step out, the stiffness out of me. And once more, we venture into the dark wilderness.

It takes my all to blind my nose to the thickening scents that linger in the foggy air, my tongue desiring to be swallowed whole. Skeletal structures visible through the wood, the mire. A dissonant orchestra of wildlife plays to the madness, entire entities vanishing like candles onto themselves behind the veil of shadow. Seas of worms spilling from cavities, like the soda I once put a mint candy in. More and more of those odd insectoid shapes, of greenery turning to true green in sickness, conquered by mucus and grime.

And within this cyclopean haunt, there is something that starts to linger in my eyes. All the unit patches that float in puddles, in the purplish gray mire. Folders with reports, faces imprinted on the bark. Trays of food, pieces of clothing, collars with tags cracked at the edge. Unable to truly zone everything out, flashes and figments end up reaching me. The face of the poor Instructor carved into the wood, before a cloud of insects splatters her head into fireworks. Two of his squadmates turning to charcoal under the acidic hold of the bog, another taking the shape of a normal pink flower that is then crushed by overgrown vines, swatted over and over again like that one time the Professor found a cockroach roaming in the office, until the remains resembled jelly more than a living being. And a lone, thistle beetle squashed by a lightning-shaped wooden spear, burning to the venoms of the bog.

It is all followed by the toxic scent, the cold sweat, that tight binding on my stomach, and brief yet terrorizing images of tragedy that flash in my eyes when my eyes or ears linger for too long.

Taking in a sharp breath, biting my lips as an image of Sumika-san frozen in a hospital bed with the company of a flat-line etches itself over my vision, my feet drag themselves to a halt as the walls of defense fail me on this occasion, the memory seeps into me.

Massaging my neck, taking one step at a time, I look up and find the mystery ESPer waiting. "Um… Are these all things Takeru-san has lived through?"

"Indeed," she whispers back, slicing vines and cobwebs that obstruct our way. As well as what grotesque shapes came alongside them. "Are you wishing to go back?"

"No, I… I have to bring him back. I'm just… curious, is all." About how is it that he can remain smiling, if such is the pressure on his shoulders. About why he never asked for my help, if he was hurting so much.

She shakes her head, a hand on her waist as she stares, lips cascading. "You do not need to feel obligated to-"

"I don't want to forget. I don't… want to lose him."

"Then, what spawns such a creak in your voice?" She inquires, taking a step closer.

"Well, for me… it's more scary, more horrifying to think of going back to my old life, alone in my office, than it is to face what other… dark memories might remain."

"… You seem to value him much," she comments, eyes remaining on me.

"He's my friend. I know Takeru-san would do the same for me."

"Right you are, young Yashiro," smiling for a moment, she then resumes her walk.

As do I, in silence for a moment as we cross uneven terrain. "Um… Miss, do you know Takeru-san?"

"If I didn't, I wouldn't be able to be this deep in his psyche. His mind would have pushed me out, rejected my presence."

"I suppose… But I don't think Takeru-san knows any other ESPers, and he wasn't being observed as far as I recall." The Professor wouldn't have hid something of the sort to me, and I'd have felt it on my scans too.

"He probably did not know I was observing, truth be told."

"… So you were stalking him."

Her steps halt, eyes squinting. "Quite rude, aren't we."

"Then, why do you want to wake him up?" She closes her eyes, once more giving me the silent treatment. "Miss, could you at least tell me your name?"

"… It is unimportant, and we have more pressing matters," she again strides forward, causing waves in the puddles of mire.

"So you will help me bring Takeru-san back to reality, Unimportant-san?"

She twitches, a single cheek puffing as her lips seem to contort. "You suck."

"Can you answer that? You really will help me?"

"Sigh… I know I must be causing much curiosity, but you truly shouldn't concern yourself with me. If there are any questions that need answering, I shall acquiesce once we exit the Black Lilith," she states, nodding at me, and I return the gesture.

For another moment, we walk in silence, enduring the stench and coldness that upon us falls. Yet, as I look around, avoiding lingering

on anything for too long a time, something catches my attention, something in a nearby tree that looks most odd.

"Um… Miss, you did say that everything that appears in this forest is something Takeru-san has lived through, correct?"

"Yes, what is the matter?"

"What is that supposed to be?" I point to a piece of metal with the shape of a hand, that was protruding from one of those people-shaped trees.

"… It, too, must remember him of something painful," she says, hastily looking away, resuming her ant march through the foliage.

"But Takeru-san doesn't seem to know what a cyborg is," besides the knowledge he has of the 00 Unit, "and I don't think he ever met one."

"Perhaps, perhaps not," she dismisses, not even turning back.

"Um, do you know if… it could be linked to… the Takeru-san that was a Royal Guard?"

She suddenly stops, I can hear her breathing in sharply. Wide eyes, almost crossed, lunge straight into my own. "Careful what you speak of in this place. If you summon any further dangers, I may not be able to come to your rescue, young Yashiro," she whispers, threatens, a spiked whip of absolute zero.

"Why? Do you know of-"

"This place hoists all that the soldier does not, or cannot, recall. Summoning it would be a folly on our part. Even mentioning it as you did could cause such hallucinations to inch closer to us."

"… This whole situation was caused by him remembering something about that, something that pained him greatly. Can't you at least tell me anything that might help him recover?"

Eyes squint, not in rage, as they lower, crash onto the dirt. Nibbling at her bottom lip, she shakes her head. "It is not something I should interfere in."

"Then, why are you helping me find Takeru-san?"

"I'm merely…" she crosses her arms, before sighing, short yet heavy, "striking a balance, and repaying a favor. Nothing else. Let me remind you, if we are harmed within this specific place, parts of his darkest memories might etch themselves onto our psyches. And… loath I am to admit that I'm not strong enough to withstand a direct confrontation with Shirogane-san's lowest moments." Sighing heavily, her shoulders sag. She then turns around, advancing while dragging her feet.

Why won't she tell me? She has to know something, and being an ESPer there's no possible way in which she's ignorant to the situation at hand. It is true I am not certain of her intentions, yet I do not feel malice from her being. Her aura might be locked for some reason yet her gestures do not come with falsehood.

Following after, the silent walking leaves me to my devices, which soon spin their gears and overflow my ears from inside. It at least grants me a distraction from the distorted forest, allowing me to walk on automatic. The woman seems rather distressed, however. Ever since we passed a small white hat with cat ears and twin-tails that ended on cat paws, she has been taking glances all around us, almost frantically. Trying to resume any thread of conversation proves futile, so my steps dwindle as I try and regain my breath, unable to match her phalanx march. Lost in thought, my eyes wander about through the horrid visage, almost blurring everything.

… Only to find a silhouette a few odd meters behind our position, in the middle of the trees. Someone was huddled amidst the greenery, unmoving. Upon closer inspection, sharpening my sight as the mist refuses to clear, and moving some vines away-

"… Takeru-san? Ah, Takeru-san!" I finally found you!

"Huh? Hey, wait!" She calls out, but I do not heed nor hear what follows.

Almost tripping, my hands find a root to propel me forward. It grows harder to approach him, the foliage acting as barbed wires impeding my steps, the smallest blade of grass now sharp enough to leave markings on my legs. The figure grows firm, defined, allowing me to recognize the messy hair, the chestnut color. So I rush, hop, and blitz through all what lays in between us, almost running out of breath.

Only to start to decelerate, more and more until I stop cold in my tracks.

The uniform… is different, it's not the white one from the old school, not a BDU nor the fatigues, it is also not the formal dress. The patch, the unit patch on his shoulder… isn't… from the UN…

A purplish pink tint to the skin, sunken at places. Claw marks and tears tarnish the full-black suit, near the draconian design of the patch, almost up to his shoulders. Dark red, coagulated blood shields the wounds, pointlessly. A broken rapier lies nearby, filthy up to the hilt. Surrounding him, feathers form a carpet, a halo on the ground. Bones drained and dried, crushed as if stomped, some with sharp cuts which are unnatural, tainted by the same filthy stains with which the rapier is wholly covered.

The gale courses through us, my feet feel freezing, ice starting to ingrain itself to my sole more and more as some intelligible mumbling whispers out of his lips. And again, it rings in my ears.

The flat-line I heard by the statue.

A rumble in the ground, a shiver down my spine. Two eyes, large eyes locked on me in the distance, a howl that catapults everything in its path into the skies before it begins its assault. The spiral staircase of a maw open fully, the fox is charging at me while tumbling trees and what else is in the way, blind to the destruction it unleashes so long as it reaches its prey.

"Hey!" The woman screams, reaching out to me from higher terrain. "Take my hand!"

"B-But Takeru-san-"

"Don't! That's just a specter of this forest, he's not who you seek!"

"H-However-"

I cower on the ground as a tree in its entirety falls almost by my side. The glimmer of the claws, of the fangs is now visible, clearly and defined like an equation's true and only result. And as cold and uncaring as those numbers are those eyes, those eyes from which drips venom, slime, and blind bloody murder.

Hitting the mud, I reach up to the hand the woman's offering me. But my feet slip, my remaining shoe overflowed by mud, the sole feeling completely covered by it too. So my back meets the sticky wetness as I hear her yell, another of those small explosions followed by a shriek.

"Stand up! Please, hurry!" Almost falling down herself, hanging on with her legs coiled upon a branch, both hands seek at least my fingertips.

A howl, wood that is preyed upon, a storm at ground level.

The pressure of the heat surrounds my nape, clasping a lock on my neck, claiming it preemptively.

Fingertips slip, barely meet as I raise, extended and seek her hand. And again I fall to the mud, her features pale further.

Ears ring, a blitzing mass of fur and bone zooms towards me, allowing me to see the true end of its throat.

" *Stop…"*

Dampness hits my face. The purplish pink of the skin begins to turn red, dripping down, dripping down, reddening the rest of the arm. The cackle of constricting chains, the grief of a saw grinding itself against a wall. A single hand, holding back the monstrosity. A back filled with wounds once more standing before me, barely covered by the tattered dark uniform.

Knees quivering, starting to buckle, the hand which grips and seals the maw convulses. *"You've had enough… You have enough now, right?"* The other hand slowly, hesitantly, raises towards the beast. Barely placing his palm on it, skin on skin, the slow rubs seem to unnerve, to anger the monster further as it tries to pull back but finds its efforts futile.

"Hey, Yashiro!" The woman's shout snaps me out of the daze, she was still desperately choking the air, trying to reach down. "Give me your hand, before they move!"

"But… But Takeru-san is-"

"That's not Shirogane-san! We have to leave, quickly!"

Creaking, a low grunt in paint. Fingers that disappear into the jaw, liquid that pours from it. Monochrome eyes that flicker and swirl, claws which aim to tower over Takeru-san, the maw trying to open again. And yet, he doesn't move. A small scarecrow under a storm, the tiny wires of straw tense and stretched, limbs about to forever bend. And yet, despite the required grip in seal, the voice remains soft, low.

" *Night by night, a life by knife. Always on edge, with it on your throat, as you devote your all to breaking your chains. But you're not…"* The beast swipes at him, the claws finding his body, growing intimate with the scalp and skin. *"But you're not being chased anymore. You don't need to keep this up."*

The shoulder bends, the red spreads. Knees break away, pinned down easily without mercy. A hollow howling, the staircase of a jaw

opens again.

"S-Stop!" The beast halts its moves, those eyes again focusing on myself.

"What are you doing?! Hurry up, give me your hand," she pleads, I can hear the wood nearby creaking.

Yet, taking in a sharp breath, I hold the gaze, the cold gaze that… in a way does resemble hers, when her mind grows resolute to the extreme. "P-Professor, this isn't how you truly are! You're not some mindless, murderous beast, you're our hope. You're Takeru-san's biggest ally. Why are you harming him?"

A smile, the gesture resembles. Shifting its posture, ignoring what was below, now the maw aims at me once again. Completely deaf to my words, blind to my intentions, there is only aggression. Cold, ruthless aggression to anything that gets in its way. Is this… how you see her, then? The part you hate the most, the one that caused the accident with the poor Instructor you showed us? B-But she should still be-

" *Stop."* Both hands push forward, blackening fingers struggling against the pressure. It again turns into a small show of force, that small lock somehow keeping the monstrosity in check despite its attempts to further fall into murder.

Something hits the back of my head, a small twig. Looking up, a paling and wide eyed complexion meets me, a hand reaching out.

"Snap out of it!" She screams again. "We need to leave, now!"

"But… But if his memories are hurt… Takeru-san doesn't deserve this!"

"This isn't him! It's just a reflection of a past self!"

"Even so… We can still bring him with us, instead of abandoning him!" He tried to protect me. And even now, he's doing what he can despite the injuries. Turning to face the attacker, sending dirt into the eyes of the fox and causing it to flinch, I rush to his side, extending a hand. "Takeru-san, let's run!"

"Stop! Don't look into his eyes!" She screams again, hoarse, louder.

And I cannot understand why she warns me of that. The eyes I see are sunken as well, with larger, darker eyebags branded in blue. Skin flashing red, motes littering and breaking the strong tint. His hands, dry yet warm, are hard to move.

And again, the pressure of the heat, the small growl, the towering shadow. A small explosion, the woman sent one of those small bombs at the fox as she slides down the mire. In a quick hop, she comes to me, grabs my wrists and pulls.

"We're leaving, now!"

"W-Wait, Takeru-san is-"

"We don't have time, we need to get out of here!"

"But is he going to be fine? That monster is going to-"

"I told you, I cannot shield us both from the darkest memories. We can only try and-"

The wail of leaves, branches, and insects. A tree that crumbles in front of us, over it the figure of the beast. Spreading its odd, metal wings up, howling in pride.

"Tch… If only you had listened…"

" *Don't you dare…"*

I look back, Takeru-san wobbles to his feet. Slowly walking towards us, or the fox perhaps, his gaze remains locked on the ground. A

growl in answer, a claw stomping the fallen bark. Tension in the hold on my wrists, shadows coming to her face.

"… Did you look into his eyes?" She whispers, subtly shaking.

"Um, I shouldn't have?"

A rumbling answers me, lifting my feet off the soil, sinking my face to the muck.

Smoke and fire, black fire surges forth from the blackening wounds, fueled by them. The same specter of blaze now stands on front of the beast. Spinning in the air, kicking its jaw shut. Landing in the same violence as his TSFs tend to, an arc of fire contests the slamming claw that seeks to enlarge already gaping wounds.

" *I told you to stop!"*

A hand raises and punches, and beats, and slams, and knocks itself over and over again onto the maw, not stopping at all. Instead it grows in strength with every swing, the colossal beast collapses to the ground, staggering. Yet, the hound refuses to remain still, winds spread a cutting gale about, blasting away upwards, diving towards us once more.

As the blazes fall back upon the impact, as the heat forces my eyes shut, my wrist is pulled, my feet meeting the ground running.

"W-Wait, that's Takeru-san! He took that form when-"

"I'm telling you that is not Shirogane-san!" She scolds, limping on a leg as she endures, as she forces herself to run. "We need to get out of here now before it's too late!"

"But he's shielding us!"

"Exactly!"

"… What? Why would-"

Another quake, fiercer, causing branches to break. A howl compulses the atrocities, all of the grotesque inhabitants of this accursed bog start running, rushing, falling, folding onto themselves, into a stampede that aims for our silhouettes. Another hollow howl, the shredding gale giving chase.

" *If you won't listen…"*

Thunder echoes above, rain begins to fall. The pull spurs me to run, and as I look back I spot the flicker of the fire beyond the treetops. Starting to grow, and grow, and grow until it fully eclipses the moon.

"Hurry up, we're going to end up swallowed by their fight!" She shouts, gritting her teeth as we have to jump and sidestep as vines and roots whip and slash at us.

"But what's going on here?! He's still trying to protect us!"

"Just keep running! I can't shield you or me this Shirogane-san!"

Is she more afraid of him than the fox? Even as all of the corruption is intent on slowing us down, as we stumble and lose speed, she remains looking up at the ball of fire. Even when the heat of the breath, the rumbling of the howl pierces our shadows.

" *It's still beating, it ain't too late…"* A broken voice whispers, causing all warmth to vanish from the hand of the woman, the pull and running growing afterwards.

Pushing on against the stream of never-ending monsters, the orb of dark fire descends in an arc, missing us by a hair, as if drawing a line between our shadows and the chasers. Even as the fox aims at him from a blank point, he remains in sturdy in protection. As if the pain were gaining him further strength, as if his blood were the fuel of the fire.

For a moment my feet try and grind against the mud, against the rushing of the woman. Eyes remaining locked on his back as

cyclopean swarms surround him, allowing the fox to glide to us unimpeded. The jaw opens, falling right straight towards us even as we run.

" *I told you… to* ***stop! She's still alive!*** "

Fire darts erupt, the treetops turn orange. Prey to it all, the foliage surrenders to the fire twister which grows and grows, a dark hole swallowing everything in its suffocating erasure.

And then, as if it were right besides me, it echoes again. The flat-line, extending, stretching, undisturbed, unchanging.

Blossoming fully, the petals reveal the core, the prominence of pure scorching.

Kind of like those pictures of boats with candles sailing that the Professor showed me once, kindling under the rain, within the haze of this forest.

It erases my shadow, the shadows around, ahead.

Cleansing the bog of all of its impurities, by force, by brutal force, as brutal as the inhabitants were. A counter in perfect reflection.

Only a shadow remains, witnessing it all from above. Illuminated by sparks and sprites, the fox glides over us.

A thunder echoes above, a thunder rumbles below. Another shadow dashes, swirls in my view, a blurry mass I cannot recognize. Both of our steps halt as the beast is sent on a collision course with the people-trees nearby, splintering them all, making them part and fall as if someone had forced a pathway to manifest through open seas.

Wiping the mud of my face, coughing and hacking, I try to look around through the fire, to find either the woman or Takeru-san. And it takes my breath away, what now looms over me.

Firm silver settles in my sight, small threads of it within the dark plating. Modest yet sharp claws, small spiky wings, a bit too sharp maybe. The slim yet compact form of the armor, the few spikes that surround shoulders and wrists, the glistening of the fire that still burns within it, billowing from the cracks. If not for those light brown eyes within the draconian features, for the scars, the dents and scratches that mire its back, I'd have no way of knowing the angular, weaponized, yet gallant-looking dark dragon in front of me could be Takeru-san.

It stands its ground even as the beast lunges for it, biting, thrashing against the plating. Instead of retaliating, however, the dragon merely sinks its claws onto it, aiming to immobilize the fox, surround it with its wings to prevent it from taking flight once again.

"Now's our chance!" She says, slowly pulling my hand, spurring me to my feet.

Yet, I cannot depart my sight from them as we escape. Even under constant aggression, under the incessant downpour, under the shrieks, the screeches, the clash of bone and metal, the dark steel remains stalwart. Almost as if it were a last rampart, never falling to true aggression, trying to simply cease the drillwind that bites into its frame.

The downpour grows harder, almost impeding our advance. The mire almost reaching my knees, contact with the bark, with the corroding environment is unavoidable, so all I can do is nibble at my lips and swallow down whatever brief flashes my mind is subjected to.

"Can you still go on?" She asks, barely audible through the rain, almost bending backwards as the stream pushes against us.

"Y-Yes… I can do it…"

"Do you think you can clear that hill quickly?" She aims at an elevation, where apparently the forest meets its end.

"I don't know…" It does look rather steep, I could slip and slide down on my face if I try and hurry.

"Then, make a choice. We hurry before either the fox breaks free of the dark armed dragon's hold or we drown, or I return you to the waking world," she says, looking completely frozen as a thunder illuminates her features.

"Drown? The rain isn't strong enough for us to drown, we can take some time to clear the rest of the forest. It's true that advancing against this current is really hard but we can-"

"No, we do not possess the luxury of time, now that the dragon has awakened. I… I don't know how much we have, but I need you to decide now."

"Why? You've been giving me cryptic warnings all the time, please explain me what's going on here. Why did Takeru-san turn into a dragon anyways?"

"Look, we truly do not have-" mouth gaping, her words halt all of a sudden. Eyes widening, petrified.

She looks to the east in said horror, her head falling back until it meets the skin. What meets my gaze as I follow hers is a colossal shadow towering over the very same storm that's raging as of now, piercing the clouds and thunders in its seemingly slow advance. I step back a few times, twisting my neck backwards while supporting myself against a tree, yet my eyes cannot see the end of it. It extends to the Heavens, perhaps further beyond. Falling back on my bottom, half sunk into the current of mire, I can only stare at the gigantic tidal wave that approaches, tall enough to make this large forest seem minuscule by comparison.

"What… W-What is that?!"

Her lips quiver as her hand allows me to stand again, to not slip into the small current twice. Gulping hard, running a hand over her face

to try and clean it, through the space of her fingers those eyes, wavering and frozen, remain on that tsunami. "If the forest is the amalgamation of what traumas he can remember, this…" she bites her lips, eyelids falling down all of a sudden, "oceanic collapse that approaches are all the memories that are impossible for the soldier to recall as his current self. The mark of his greatest suffering, of a life he cannot integrate into himself, no matter what."

"The memories of a Takeru-san… that is different than Takeru-san?"

"Or at least, of a life that brings so much misery to him he cannot recall it without it breaking his will. So instead, he forces it all to remain locked away, fused into this filthy tsunami you see before you," she says, taking a few steps back, clawing at the bark to gain balance. "As I told you before, even I am powerless to resist the intensity of those memories. The emotions are too raw, too strong… or too hollow. Thus, we need to depart from this forest, now. I am certain I can clear the distance. What of you?"

Gulping, bending my neck to stare at the water wall that looms, at the small flicker of fire that still holds onto the violent grip that returns the embrace, I shiver and close my eyes. A thunder booms, trees fall and are carried away by the current. Eyes and hands sink into the grime, washed away. All the while, the shrieks of the fox sometimes overpower the rain, followed by the flicker of dark blaze and a low roar.

He shielded me from the fox, and he continues to do so now. Without even trying to harm the beast, merely attempting to stop its rampage. Why am I hesitating? Heaviness again swells in my stomach, on the sides, hurting. There is so much I cannot understand, so many cruel things that I've seen… And just looking at that mega tsunami is enough to spur the echoes I felt while in contact with the Takeru-san that turned to fire.

"If we make it past this forest, Takeru-san… the real one will be close by, right?" She nods, extending a hand, an inquiry. Tightly clasping my own around hers, I slowly start taking steps forward.

She smiles, placing one leg in front of the other, fighting the stream that pushes against us, the droplets that bombard our heads.

"… *What's the point in moving on if there's nothing left for you?"* A whisper hits my ears, a twig my leg, I stumble and mire almost overtakes my chin. *"There's no joy in martyrdom…"*

Bending my knees, gripping the hand which pulls me, I try and keep walking. Grinding, sliding both feet, something entangling or sinking into them.

" *Where's the mercy in this bloodbath?!"* A completely lost voice screams, accuses.

Flashes of burnt buildings, of people scattering like little ants in front of water through the streets. Of giblets and severed body parts scorched by artillery fire, a downpour of it coming from TSFs guarding a dock, a port.

Shifting shadows pounce upon us, end up in pieces that sink into the stream. A sway of the tail, the spiked drill on it, another roar in warning from the dragon, a fire blast that reduces all around us to ash.

Eyes lost in the sizzling shape of the pyre, in the fading dark of the fire… Pain, in my neck. Unbearably burning me first, freezing me firmly a second later. Followed by an impact in between my brows, sight shatters and it seems my skull will soon meet the same fate.

Water hits my chin, the grip on my hand fades, nothing meets my feet as they thrash, and the same for my fingertips as I reach out for who knows what while dragged down by the current.

Gunshots, the scent of gunpowder, broken buildings, hospitals. Hands reaching out in pleading, hands that melt, that sink, that burn, that crumble within the ensuing smoke.

Coughing only serves to fill my lips with more water, eyelids are growing heavy… it's all so cold…

… Huh? For some reason, the stream ceases on its intent to drown me. The liquid that in came now flows outward, throat feeling hoarse after so much coughing. Cold to the touch, sharp to the touch. Raising a hand to seek balance causes it to flinch away, a cut etched on my fingertip, a trail of red flowing downwards. Looking up, angular, metallic features gaze upon me.

Sitting on the palm of its claw, I meet the dragon's gaze, that light brown stare I've grown used to. Short of closing its grip, it remains still, towering over me, shielding my body from the relentless beating of the rain. Faintly warm to the touch, the sharp yet dented steel shines under the storm. A shriek echoes, the blurry shape of the fox diving from behind. Merely swiping its tail, Takeru-san sends the beast to collide into the trees, the stream, causing waves and waves to ripple outwards like a geyser.

"… Takeru-san?" A growl, those eyes again meet mine. "It's you, isn't it? Why… Why are taking this shape? What's going-"

Lowering its head, the dragon slowly opens its maw. Scythes for fangs, a forge lurking at the end of the throat, sparks and embers brimming, ready to pour forth. Closing my eyes, shielding myself with both hands, nothing happens. Blinking slowly, a soft caress begins to envelop, to surround, to embrace me. A soft and gradual sigh, a breath of kind heat covers me whole, drying me, restoring warmth to my body. And in the mist of that dark heatwave, of the lukewarm embrace…

… An old lab flashes in my mind.

Towering papers lurk barely out of sight, at the edge of vision. A gaze drags itself on the ground, miserable and hollow. Making herself smaller, both shoulders and lips, the Professor lies in my sight.

"… *I'm telling you, there's no need for you to remain locked up in here, Sensei,"* Takeru-san asks, low, somber. She remains quiet, crossing her hands over her arms as if enduring the cold. *"Are you hesitating because you're afraid of what could happen if you take the pass?"*

Quivering, eyes close. Crushing both arms in the grip, a twisted smile raises along a broken whisper. *"If I said yes, that it terrifies me to try and get out of this lab, to try and believe in what you propose… Would you laugh at me?"*

A step forward, a tender yet tight hold. Lukewarm as the breath is over me, hands rustling over thin, dry strands of hair. Enduring the shaky hold over his shoulders, the quiver as if frozen that struggles against his embrace, the soft caress of warmth continues.

"… *It's alright, Yuuko. You're not alone, because I am still here. Even if the whole world is against you… me and Kasumi are still here, and many others also are."*

" *It's too d-dangerous. Bringing discord to the chain of command… trying to regain my position would-"*

" *Then, do you believe Alt V to be the solution we should support?"*

" *If… it avoids any disturbances…"*

" *But that doesn't mean you have to give up, does it?"* He asks, rubbing the back of her head. *"You still can try to find another solution."*

" *Shirogane, it's already over…"* she barely says, slumping into his hold. *"I couldn't find the solution to-"*

" *To Alt IV. You can still look for another solution."*

The recollection he showed the Professor, the final one of that day when we met for the first time plays out… yet diverges at a point

before the end I remember.

" *What if taking my side puts you in danger?"* She asks, trying to regain her edge.

" *Don't worry about me, I'll be fine. No matter what may come at me, I'll show you… I'm enough to support you. Sure, I can't operate a PC like Kasumi, and I can't help in the calcs you make either. But I'll be enough from now on. Gimme some credit, I did manage to reach this far,"* he fakes a pout, lifting a smile into the utter lack of light of that gaze.

That then chokes his shoulders, hers shaking. *"Are you certain of what you're saying? I've no allies left, I'm-"*

" *Hey, I'm still here, you know?"*

" *Be serious!"* Soft, repeated strikes slam into his chest, cracks of distress flood her complexion. *"Just what do you think you can even do to aid me? I'm… I have a duty to-"*

Halting the spiel, bringing her to his chest with a tight embrace once again, he whispers. *"You always took care of me, ever since I came to this world. Can you let me take care of you, just this once?"*

" *And what happens when you get hurt?"* She whispers back, not fighting the hold this time.

" *Heh, I rather try and roll for the twenty than to remain in fear of the one. And don't worry, I ain't gonna get myself in unnecessary trouble. But, if and when shit hits the fan… I'll despair after I'm dead, I won't let anything ruin my efforts. So, if there's any part of you that wants to fight back, know that I'm here, on your side."*

"… *Even if what I'd like to do were I to regain my freedom would pit us against quite a few dangerous people?"*

" *Yeah. I'm with you, until light's out. And this time, I'll truly will be enough for you. I know I'm… not who you rather have as an ally but… this is all I am, all I really want. Will you let me help you carry the burden for even just a little while, Yuuko?"* He asks, fingertips tracing her arms, seeking her eyes. Meeting them head on, not wavering as her hand clasp onto his cheeks, as her sight scans him deeply.

Only for her to then start to giggle then laugh, leaning onto him, returning the embrace, the all-encompassing warmth.

A thunder echoes above, broken trees below into the stream, the storm returns me to the palm of the dragon. It gives out a small growl, lowering me into the water, close to the woman that hesitantly approaches us. Leaving the lukewarmness, looking up into the somber face of the dragon… I notice there is dampness lingering in its eyes, flowing down its chin. Tears, not droplets of rain.

Howling through the foliage, the fox blasts towards us once more. Again, countered by the dragon, both beasts grappling and contesting one another. Again, merely keeping it at bay, not using its fire or weaponized armor to hurt it.

"Are you alright?" The woman inquires pulling my arm.

"… Yes, I think. Let's… Let's go," I turn away, taking a step forward. Despite the incoming rain, the water up to my knees, the warmth does not dissipate. Even as we run away, as the echoes of Iceberg again reach my ears.

The woman stumbles, her wounded leg limping. Lending my shoulder in support, grabbing onto one another, we continue our march. Climbing, clawing at the soil, at the roots, at those stars that lay in the distance, at the rocket that departs, an end to the foliage comes into view as I push my upper body over the edge of the small elevation. A hand reaches down to aid me, and for a moment I look back.

At the mass of fire that is still burning, at the guardian of our shadows. At the pit in my stomach, the gagging that follows. Choking, a noose binding itself to my neck, my feet jumping down on their own accord, is what this feeling resembles. A complete compression of both hearts and lungs, a searing, piercing into them as well.

Someone that's still alive… That's what he screamed before turning into that dragon. Despite the blazing eyes, he isn't maiming the fox. Even as I catch my breath, run a hand over my legs to gauge any injuries, their struggle seems to not be close to ending any time soon even as they're already half-sunken onto the flood.

… A Takeru-san I know nothing about, wounds that remain open to this very moment.

"Are we safe now that we exited the forest?" I ask, placing a hand on my shoulder.

"Eh? Ah, yes… We should seek higher ground quickly, before the tsunami hits. There should be no further dangers in the way, however" she reassures, looking at her leg, the small cut now visible as the rain clears our shapes of the sludge and grime. I nod back as she looks up and, after one final gaze towards the dragon, I follow after her steps.

Again climbing through elevations of the wasteland, pushing against the impact of the droplets, the stampede of the wind, the warning of the storm. All that I saw before, the small hands, the distorted shapes, the buildings, the rusted TSFs, all is drained and carried away by the stream. It leaves the wasteland void of anything and everything, and as we walk onward those remnants pass us by, fading into the dark and filthy current.

Reaching a cliff, supporting each other to traverse the narrow path to the top, I throw myself to the ground once we do, gasping as the rain falls and falls on me. Looking towards the forest with one cheek sinking onto the mud, a lightning vortex roars in the sky. Unable to

stand, crawling to the edge, thunderbolts continue to raid the forest, a twister seeming to spawn on it. The tide regresses inward, the colossal tsunami looming closer and closer, a liquid sky falling upon the ground, Poseidon's revenge in all its glory.

The impact shakes the entire cliff we're on, waves crash against the elevation despite the distance, hitting my face as well. The woman stumbles backwards, also falling on her bottom, and we both can only stare into the stagnant and filthy stream, into the cyclone of this oceanic collapse that swallows all the terrain I had traversed thus far.

The waves continue to thrash among themselves, into the cliff. The splash sticks to me like mucus, a slimy sensation on my fingers, as if I had jumped into the mire. It all swirls into a gigantic cyclone, even the stormclouds are sinking in a tornado, drained by the whirlwind in the sea. Descending, descending, all of it begins to disappear as if swallowed by an abyss. The rocking, swirling waves, the thunders, the giant waves that collapse upon one another. They all fold and fade, lower and lower.

Until they leave nothing behind, a gaping hole of nothingness where the terrain I have been walking on was before.

The woman wobbles as she stands, brushing her arms off remnants of filth, sighing and returning to a calm complexion. Taking out that white handkerchief she had been carrying, she wipes her face and hands, then offers one to me, helping me stand up, patting my shoulder before gently cleansing my face with that tattered and old-looking cloth.

"You're unhurt, correct?" She asks as she sways the cloth, before folding it and returning it to its prior resting place.

"Yes, thanks. Um, miss," looking up, gripping her hand, "are we safe now?"

She nods, slow yet firm. "I believe so, there should be nothing impeding us from reaching our objective now."

"And you… will truly let me wake Takeru-san?"

"I so said, young Yashiro," she sighs, pulling away, rummaging through her hair. "Whether he decides to wake is up to the soldier, however."

"Why do you refer to him like that?"

"… Is there something wrong with it? He is a soldier, after all."

"Well, yes, I suppose. Then, um," starting to walk, my eyes remain on hers, "can you tell me why the Professor took that horrible shape within that forest? She wasn't aggressive when we met the fox in the ruins."

"… That is something only the soldier himself knows," she says, sober, hands folding on her back.

"I see. You did seem to know what would happen, that Takeru-san would turn into a dragon," I say, staring.

She remains walking, saying nothing, eyes locked forward. A momentary gaze my way, she sighs as I do not stop looking her way. "Yes, I was aware of it. Little it matters now, does it?"

"… Miss, you won't tell me your name?"

"It is unimportant."

"Sigh… Then, why did the dragon refuse to attack the fox? Why did Takeru-san turn into that thing? And… about his uniform, and the wounds he had all over, why was-"

She stops walking, looking up. My gaze follows, finding the clouds clearing away. A skyline in perfect dark is revealed, no moonlight to disturb the twinkle of the stars, the expansive bridge of constellations that extends from horizon to horizon.

And as a single hand plays with a pigtail, she again sighs. "Even if some people are truly dear to one, the damage they inflicted upon one's mind is not easy to forgive, much less to forget. Despite what they once meant to you, it is an arduous effort to dissociate their current self with what once you held so dearly. To continue to treat them with the deference, the unwavering honesty, the lack of doubt they once deserved from you would be equal to cling after an afterimage, ignoring all the signs, all the thorns you swallow for them now."

"What? But… But I saw it! As the dragon held me, I saw how dearly he cherishes the Professor!" I stomp closer, coiling my hands.

She shakes her head, brushing her hair as the wind blows. "That is what once was. It's *yesterday*, not *today* ."

"The Professor still thinks highly of Takeru-san. She wouldn't have grown as upset as she did otherwise."

"… Does that make up for the harm he has had to endure thus far, young Yashiro?"

"What? She hasn't- Takeru-san doesn't hate the Professor! Why do you assume that is the case?" Who are you even to make such a claim? You don't even know, you're not by their side everyday.

Sighing again, still playing with her hair, she looks down, at her hands, at her wounded leg, back into the void left by the oceanic collapse. Then back at me, her shoulders sagging, lips lowering. "Hatred and love are usually opposing sides of the same coin. If he didn't held the fox so dearly, he wouldn't allow it to reach so deeply into his mind, right into his weakest recess. Yet, the damage she has inflicted on him, the haunt of her words still echoes in him."

"But he… he doesn't think badly of her. I admit she might be, well, uh, ruthless at times, that she refuses to listen once her mind is made up, however all she does is with the greater good in mind." She even hesitated before asking me to perform a mind dive, she

was… creaking, her aura was cracking as she hit the controls over and over, cursing everything as Takeru-san didn't wake up. "The Professor might be harsh and dry ice cold at times, that is true, however she is nothing like that savage and monstrous fox. Why would Takeru-san picture her in such a way?"

Staring into me, blinking, looking down, then up as she hugs her arms. "Did you hear what the specter said, before turning into that dark armed dragon?"

"Eh? Yes, I believe… he was asking the Professor to stop. Because someone was still alive."

"… Tell me then, young Yashiro. Do you know why people raise their voices at each other?"

"Huh? Because they hate each other, because they hold violent feelings towards one another. That's why I don't understand, this doesn't align with any memories of him I know of. This must be one memory of that awful and aggressive Royal Guard that fell into hatred, despising the Professor in his ignorance of the bigger picture, due to the cruelty he saw from the ground of the chain of command."

"Sigh… So much presumption, so little desire to understand."

Frowning a bit, I take a step closer. "What are you trying to say?"

"If all you want to hear are answers which align with your beliefs, then there is little point in continuing this conversation," she dismisses me, casting a narrow glance my way before she resumes walking.

Hurrying after her, I cannot match her stride. "Then please be clear. I do not understand… I can't understand what all I saw means. He being pained at what transpired during his prior experiences is one thing, but why hoist such animosity towards the Professor?"

Without stopping, she looks back at me, calm and frozen once more. "You should look deeper into people's feelings, the hints that float in the surface. Furthermore, you should already possess the answer to that query."

"I don't. I truly don't. Please, tell me. Why did he raise his voice, sound so angry back then?" And why did the dragon not attack the fox?

"Sigh… While I can see why you'd assume hatred is what fuels one's screams, there is another reason why people raise their voices at one another." She then looks back, into my stare, then slows down her steps, allowing me to walk by her side. Gazing at the stars above, she again plays with her hair. "Because they want to be understood."

"… I don't get it. Yelling is not productive to express one's ideas."

"Yes, that is true to an extent. However, those who are close to one another can sometimes understand what the other is thinking and feeling at a mere glance. That connection… is something truly dear, very important between peers, comrades, or lovers." She sighs, the wind blows, her steps wane. And again, her eyes lose themselves on the blanket of stars. "But when one desires to be heard yet does not find the understanding one wishes, the vocabulary turns faster, louder. They see the other as being away, growing distant, so they raise their voices in hopes of closing the gap. Of course, sometimes there are ill emotions fueling a rising voice, but sometimes all one desires is for the other to see what you see, before you're so far apart from one another that no words can properly convey your feelings to that someone. Pain more than anger, is what usually fuels a rising voice."

"But… But… But the Professor isn't dismissive at all. She always listen to-"

"Does she truly hear what you or the soldier have to say? Isn't she the type to zone out anything that might impair her devised plans?"

She inquires, turning around, towering over me, into me.

"T-That's… However, it's all for the sake of-"

"Hasn't she acted only on her own interests, disregarding collateral damage and any effect her actions might have on anyone else's life?"

"But she… she does what she has to because Alt IV must be successful or-"

"It's easy, isn't it? To justify yourself with a large, honorable cause. Who could argue against the 'safety and wellbeing of mankind as a whole'?" She shrugs, nibbling at her bottom lip for a second. Folding her arms, once more she plays with her hair as she stargazes. "Yet, try and understand how the soldier sees these actions, these justifications, the dismissal, and what comes along with the landscape the fox has painted, in your world and within his mind."

Lips shake as do my hands. Taking in a sharp breath, I swallow and dry my mouth, taking a step forward. "Are you… Are you saying the Professor is wrong?"

Meeting my gaze for a moment, holding it for another, once more she seeks the stars. "… One has to wonder, until when do those justifications hold real weight and when do they become mere wordplay born out of selfishness and arrogance."

"The Professor isn't mistaken. Her plans are the only hope left for-"

"Even if she holds quite the intellect, she is still fallible like every one of us," she counters, glaring in absolute zero, her already monotonous tone lowering further. "Despite gaining access to causality's flow, the actions she takes are only following the future she desires to bring about, and there is no telling if her ideal desire is truly what's best. To elevate her to a state of unchallenged authority, of permanent righteousness would be the same as," she frowns, clicking her lips, turning away, "enshrining her as a God. And for as

much honest care for the planet that fuels her actions, for as much as she might desire to become one, the scientist will *never* be the Holy Mother."

"Why… Why are you so harsh towards her? You don't know anything… of all she has to do, how she feels, how-"

A small pat on my head, slow and constant. Her eyes lose all edge when I look up, she remains rubbing my head. "She is a mere mortal like everyone else, young Yashiro. Failing to account for collateral damage, disregarding it by claiming a higher cause and that her methods could in no way be mistaken, is precisely what could spur a reaction such as the one you've witnessed in the Black Lilith," she says, before starting to walk again.

"But Takeru-san… he doesn't hate-"

"I am certain you've felt it, the wrath of that dark armed dragon. The soldier does hold the fox quite dearly, and yet… there is a side of herself that he loathes like nothing else. And you should already know why that is."

"What… I don't understand. He knows the Professor's project is our only hope, you're not making any-"

Looking back, saying nothing, frowning faintly as the wind howls and her pigtails flutter. "You have managed to walk past the forest, you've felt most of his repressed trauma, and have retained full consciousness until now. Then answer me, young Yashiro. Do you believe the results to be worth the sacrifices?"

She stops and holds my gaze, arms folding as she awaits my answer.

Under the fully clear skyline, as shooting stars begin to paint thin strokes amidst the dark.

As the wind howls and tickles my nape, those eyes do not leave mine.

Yet, I look down. Recalling all the pain, all the moments of horror I've endured since I entered his mind.

The little child in the house, the ravine with the corpses of his comrades, the wails by the statue as the wolves surrounded us, all that transpired in the forest, the screams of that specter in a dark blaze.

"W-We are still alive. I know he- The project will lead us to-"

"Alt IV might see fruition, only due to an oversight, an unexpected result outside of the her control," she says, shaking her head, looking up as her hair sways in the air. "By the scientist's own efforts, only by the results of her plans and actions, Alt IV would have failed as a few memories of the soldier indicate."

"But… But he said that in his prior experience Alt IV did manage to strike down the Kashgar Hive! The Professor's project can save-"

"Due to her own laid out plans or thanks to the wildcard she was unexpectedly bestowed with?" She inquires, narrowing her eyes. As I say nothing, she shakes her head, takes out that white and tattered handkerchief to wipe her face. "And even beyond that, his most recent experiences in the wakeful world indicate that, indeed, the fox doesn't seem particularly keen in heeding his warnings."

"Wh- The Professor does care. D-Don't say bad things about her!"

"If she truly cared, truly, we wouldn't be having this conversation. Nor would the dragon remain so angered. It is, after all, the rawest representation of his natural coping mechanism."

"Huh? What do you-"

She sighs, raising a finger, "Unable to fully drown within the grind, the soldier punishes himself for all that has transpired, all you've seen in the wasteland." Cracks in her eyes, that then collapse to the ground. "Because if it was something he is responsible for, it means he had some agency in the chain of events and can then strive to mend what has gone wrong in other experiences. Even if he accepts that he has to surrender to the fox's whims when it comes to the big picture, to see there is nothing he can do to protect his beloved ones is too much to bear, regardless of whether his self-blaming tendencies are justified or not. So, he shoulders it all on his own, in silence, until he cannot go on… or someone he cherishes is hurt due to his inaction, thus unleashing that bursting draconian wrath you saw in the Black Lilith."

A cold blanket falling upon my back, the darkening of his aura back at the base when he was pained, the contrast with the shine of when he told me of Galaxy Wars, it all sinks into place. It makes my knees quiver and waver, pressure at the pit of my neck. "But he- Takeru-san doesn't ever grow as angry as-"

"Because while he may lay low and take the blows, thinking he deserves the pain as punishment for his 'failures', nothing could anger him more than to see someone he likes be made to suffer unfairly," she whispers, sighing again.

"But… But Takeru-san does… I believe he does appreciate the Professor, he understands why she has to do all she does!"

"Precisely."

"E-Eh?"

Sighing again, hugging her arms, her gaze observes the pale, cracked wasteland. Her complexion sinking more and more as she does, taking out the white handkerchief to clean something in her eyes. "Precisely because he appreciates who the fox is, or rather was for him, is that he is so hurt by her refusal to listen. It is fitting,

for one born under the two-faced star such as her, that he would favor one side of her personality and despise the opposite."

… Is she talking of how Takeru-san sometimes refers to her as 'Vice Commander' when upset? And what does two-faced star even means? "B-But still, to turn her into that monster… Why? The Professor always does what she does for the greater good, and even when she darkens her aura it hurts her much. And she does care about him. She was truly worried and angry when Takeru-san was about to vanish!" I hadn't seen her aura blazing crimson in a very, very long time, too.

"You should already have reached that answer, within the echoes of the forest," she says, brushing her pigtails, turning around and walking again.

"You're just being cryptic to avoid answering me…"

"As much as he might," she stops, words and steps, before she looks up to the starlight, "… love the scientist, hold her truly dearly within his heart, there is someone, someone far more dear than anyone else to the soldier, that was gravely hurt by her actions' ripples, her refusal to consider other outcomes." She says, somber, colder. Again, looking up to the stars as the last threads of shooting stars vanish from sight, I can only walk step by step closer, until I reach her side and see her softly squinted eyes as she gives out a tired, exhausted chuckle. "After all, it is ironic. She desired to achieve order, to gain the means to prevent ruin, yet failed to understand what laid in his heart. She had it in the palm of her hands, the unwavering devotion of his soul. And she threw it away, in her quest for… absolute allegiance to her devised ideal. Heartache, hatred, and hope. It is hauntingly amazing, beautiful perhaps, how such opposing emotions can be held in unison towards a single person," she says, admiring the strokes of the shooting stars, the minute flare in the sky as two comets collide.

"What are you even talking about? I don't- You're not making any sense. It's true that she didn't listen to his warning, about how he felt

about the memory recovery, but in the end she grew truly-"

"And that refusal to listen caused the beasts you saw in the forest to be born within his deepest reaches. That dismissal, the deafness towards anything she might deem an inconvenience, a threat to her desired future, or a pointless concern. You already know Shirogane-san well enough, there are a few, only a tiny few things that can truly tip the scale of his heart towards open aggression. The echoes you've heard should be enough for you to piece this puzzle together, young Yashiro," she says, then starts walking again.

"Someone dear to him was hurt, and he can't forgive the Professor for that? So whenever she becomes fully cold and doesn't listen, it reminds him of that?"

"More or less. If you had an ill experience in a relationship, you'd certainly be more reticent to tolerate similar behaviors as the ones that ingrained suffering into your soul."

"Well, I suppose. Then, is that someone… who the white rabbit is meant to represent?"

"… Who knows?" she shrugs, slowly looking back at me in the same cold facade. "In any case, what we may think matters little. Only the soldier can decide how to handle his feelings, his guilt and frustration at the indifference of the silence."

"Um…" Unable to meet her gaze, I gulp in nothingness. "Is there anything I could do to help him? Do you know what could stop these nightmares he's having?"

"… Time. Give him time, and silence. Stand by him, and do not pressure him regardless of his choice. A cruel word from you, even if small from your point of view, could truly harm him much."

"Huh? Why would I ever say anything-"

"You could," she looks back, sighing. "Do not lose your temper, regardless of his choice. And if you value him, truly value him, then give him a shoulder to lean on. In the reality you face, few are the people that would allow him to show weakness. And I also doubt he'd be comfortable, allowing himself to 'being weak'."

"… Just that? Is that all I can really do for him?" All I'm good for is just to stand on the sidelines? All he does for me, and I can't even-

Again, she pats my head. Smiling, she chuckles. "It is no small gesture. Does him being by you hold no meaning in your heart?"

"N-No! Takeru-san is my friend! I… I…"

"Then, you know how much it should mean, to have at least one person close by," she says, giving me one last rub on my hair before turning around.

"But is there nothing that can save him from those nightmares? If it hurts him much, then-"

"Salvation," she says, frowning, frosting, "is no longer available to him, for it would equal erasing who the soldier is, all that he has lived through. If amnesia and blissful ignorance equals salvation, then Heaven is no different than a comatose dream. You might as well say that he can only reach peace in the vastness of death."

"I never- I didn't mean to say that- Then, are you implying he's destined to just keep on suffering?"

"Learning to manage his emotions in front of the shadows he has lived through is a struggle he must endure. It would be easy if he could merely forget it all, yet life isn't as forgiving, is it?" Slowing down a bit, again she looks up, into the starry skyline. Compacting both shoulders, she then taps her lower lips. "Healing, on the other hand, perhaps is not yet beyond his possibilities."

"… Is that so?"

She nods, not turning around, continuing her advance as I follow after. As an elevation comes up, as we walk uphill and my steps wane, she remains looking back, ensuring I do not lose my way. The steepness of the terrain makes it hard to traverse it quickly, it feels as if this hill's inclination were rising and rising the more we walk. The cold wind only makes this harder, even if the illumination of the stars above guide us through the desolate wasteland.

"Um, miss?"

"Yes?"

"How do you, well, know of Takeru-san? You said you're an observer but-"

"Matters not, does it?"

"But how did you manage to dive into his mind?"

"… I merely observe, waiting."

"Waiting for what?"

"… I don't know, truly." Again, her steps wane to the point I can catch up. She remains watching the stars, whispering. "I simply wanted to return the favor, to honor a promise."

"A promise? Did you… knew the Takeru-san of this world?"

"In a way, you could say," she chuckles, again playing with her hair.

"Um… Is he truly as violent as everyone says he is?" I ask, almost stuttering, tongue pressed against the back of my teeth.

"You saw the dark armed dragon, that should be enough," she replies, immediately. "In any case, it seems we are here already."

"Here?"

Hurrying to clear the last part of the hill, a line of asphalt comes into view. The road near the base, the road towards the gate, the trees that stand on the side… except, the ground is missing. Instead of showing even terrain and the base at the distance, only the way up the hill remains intact. The rest has crumbled away, an abyss opening on it. However, there isn't darkness below. Stars and constellations, cyclones of the cosmos swirl both under the road and above in the skyline.

"What is this place? Where does this road go?"

"It is the deepest sanctum of his mind," she says, standing by me, pulling me away from the edge of the ground. "This road shall lead you to the core of the soldier's mind. There, you should be able to find him, his current self."

"I see… What should we do once we find him?"

"Merely limit yourself to simply talk with him, and he shall decide how to proceed."

"Wait, you are not accompanying me?"

She shakes her head, placing some of her hair behind an ear. "I already did what I came to. Guiding you to this place is all I should do."

"You… don't want to talk with Takeru-san?"

She closes her eyes, lips pressing onto each other. "I have already interfered enough. If he is to awaken, you should be the one who spurs such a decision."

"Is that so? Um, thank you, for guiding me here. I, well-"

"There is no need for thankfulness," she says, giving me a small nod. "Simply be careful of your words, and accept his choice

regardless of your views on it. Well then," she turns around, giving me a glance, "I shall be taking my leave here."

"Um… Why do you not want to see him? I mean, you could come with and let me talk. If you truly-"

"Because I gave up," she says, spits out, as she fully turns around. "I did not believe, I simply chose to forget, to accept. Unlike the one who remained seeking, waiting for a shooting star, I have no right to see him now. Furthermore, I've lingered enough," she looks at me, giving me a smile. "Best of luck. Cherish these moments you now live, what little time you have left by his side, young Yashiro."

"… W-What? What is that supposed to mean?"

"Only what I said, and only that," she nods, still smiling as she turns around, pacing down the hill. "Look after Shirogane-san. He needs it, more than he thinks."

I try to follow after, a strong wind blows. An arm covers my sight, enduring the gale, yet when I lower it and open my eyes, I find no one around. Walking back to the edge of the hill, she is nowhere in sight.

"… What did she even mean? Sigh… Cryptic until the very end, how rude."

Still… To remain with him, isn't that what I always do? Or, perhaps, she meant more than physically? After all, despite being right besides him, I did not take notice of the hurting he was enduring. I did… not try and stop the Professor, offer another point of view, despite sensing the pain and conflict that within him swirled before our last recovery session.

And… to cherish the time left. Was that a warning? Why would it be one? Who was she even?

"Sigh… She didn't even give me her name. All she left me with are more questions… You suck, miss."

Turning around, taking a deep breath in, I walk up into the road available. Raising to meet the stars, the street goes in a direct line unlike the one in the base. The sakura trees by the side have an iron beam dug into the ground right besides them, for some reason. All of them have an item right in front of them by their roots. A small slice of cake, a spinning top, a shuriken, the small juice box that many pilots hate, a bottle of alcohol, a violin, a basketball-

Noise in my ears, pain below them. Figments flash through my sight, something red filling a control room, a talk with the Captain of the Valkyries, one of the younger ones using her seniority to order Takeru-san to leave somewhere, the aggressive one asking him to tell the rest how 'cool' she was until the end. Something swirls in my stomach, holding it I cough a bit, hurrying past them.

Another tree to my left, a bowl with an unnecessarily large portion of rice. A flash of Kyouzuka-san handing him the extra large serving, along a strong pat on his back. Followed by a hand stretching itself out, missing Kyozuka-san's for a hair. Rain hits his face like a machinegun as he watches the tempest of the ocean swallow her in a second, the raging fury of that oceanic collapse. The scream that follows is enough to fully eclipse Poseidon's rage, enough to shred his throat apart.

By the next iron beam to my right, a small envelope, a letter. Words of encouragement, coming from the Instructor. On a rooftop, in the hallways, a soft and repeated pat as he cries onto her thighs, further warmth comes from that voice as his sight remains locked on the ground by the broken TSF. I try and hurry past it, yet that gruesome end still reaches me. Followed by a harsh, dead-serious expression as she aims a gun at him, someone saying it's okay for him to die if she is restrained.

Almost tripping with a hole in the ground, barely balancing myself on a single leg, my hands meet the rusted iron that rests besides the

next tree. The plush toy with large eyebrows lays its back onto the bark. The gurgling goo comes back, a blackened figure being taken away in a gurney, lips pursed along a flushed face as he taps her eyebrows as they lay side by side under the sheets. And the echo, the shaking of an explosion within a hive's corridor.

Recoiling away as if touching an oven, I stumble back. Hitting another tree, stepping onto a yakisoba sandwich. Another explosion, another gurney, his hearing ringing, and the pressure of a hug as both rest on the tree by the hill, feeding each other one of those sandwiches as snow gently falls down.

Hurrying away, gasping, I rush through the trees. The one with a pair of boots, the one with a pot of flowers, the sounds of electric shocks, the crushed and tainted strands of hair, the crying shape as they wave goodbye to a small kitty, the giggle as she falls on top of him from a tree's branch.

However, my escaping rush gradually comes to a full stop as I see a small rabbit. A rabbit in a Santa Claus costume that hangs from the iron beam, like the one Takeru-san brought from his world, that's hanging near the cylinder. Slowly, hesitantly, I drag myself past it. Closing my eyes and pressing both hands on my ears does nothing, the falling basketball ring still comes into sight, the still figure in a pod and a hospital bed flash through. As does a moment of complaining from Sumika-san about sauce, before both simply eat together, alternating the add-on of choice.

Hugging my shoulders and taking deep breaths, what's ahead is that sword he had on him resting by the tree. Walking besides this tree causes my neck to hurt, to burn. A face drenched in red, a pleading voice. A rumbling that follows, a light that blinds. A figure clad in a white dress that wishes to cry as he shouts at it that he is here for her, a smile that embraces him as both roll in the snow. And a distorted stare, clad in strong purple, that oozes violence as it towers over him, aiming… that same sword to his neck.

My knees meet the asphalt, skin turning pink, small stains left below. Taking repeated short breaths, rubbing my neck from the collar bone to my chin does little to calm down the spike that drills my lungs. Crawling, I try and get away from that tree.

Only to shiver, seeing the collapsed woman in the kitchen again, the letter of death resonating in my ears. A tree with picture books and what I assume are game consoles lays nearby, flashes of small arguments and games flash through my eyes. Ending on a discussion in the living room, him punching his father into a wall. And a prayer, a prayer that echoes as I stand up. A whimpering voice that looks back at his house, wishing for them to remain safe and sound, hoping to one day return.

Sighing, wiping the dampness in my eyes, the blurriness does not release my sight. I turn around and wipe my forehead, slow steps forward. Only to twitch and stop again. Because Mister Bun lays resting on the next tree, its eyes looking back at me, a white cloth tied on its arm for some reason.

Gulping again on nothingness, I waddle and halt, I inch closer and stop. Taking in a sharp breath, I slap both of my cheeks and hit the ground, rushing forward.

The rocket, the moment by Sumika-san in the pod, an odd scene with stars hanging from the cylinder as he hands me a small box, me waking him up like always, the seashell he gifts me, a talk by the hill, a promise to one day take to see the ocean. And yet another memory, as he looks back…

His eyes discover frown, a side glance. A frosting, dry ice tone that follows.

" *Coward."*

" *Cough!"* Almost hitting both feet together, I hug my stomach, tight, tightly, tighter. "I… I didn't say that! I would never-"

" *Coward."*

"That's not me! I wouldn't be so cruel…"

Clamping my ears, I run and run. Images and sounds flash before me, the burning of Hakuryo, the damaged Kyoto, a quivering hand that takes on a purple tint handing him that large red scarf he had at one point, someone showing him a red car, a gaze of turquoise promising to teach him about swordplay.

Rushing through it all, gasping for air, I stop as I see one last tree before wilderness and grass claim the asphalt. A tree with a large stack of papers, a Santa hat, and some odd glasses nearby.

Resting my palm against the bark, the scent of alcohol surrounds me. Resisting the urge to cough, the sunken shape, the crushed gaze that meets his lips… is nothing like I know the Professor to be.

Until it changes, to the rooftop of the base. And while wearing a rather revealing set of clothes…

" *How do you think Marimo felt as she was thrown headfirst into that meat grinder?!"*

I… can't breathe. Lungs burn, his sight grows distorted. Lips hurt, much, very much.

" *You're even worse than those BETA you spoke of. You could doom billions to their deaths."*

"T-That's… The Professor wouldn't- She wouldn't-"

" *Marimo died because of you!"*

Running away, away from the echoes of the one dressed as I know, of the offering of a gun, of an acceptance over killing soldiers, of them being worthless. Chased by the voice that grows even more cold, I lose my balance, my face meets the grass. Hitting it as I raise,

groaning as I wipe my tears, hiccuping for a moment as I rub my arms, something else enters my sight.

Below the twister and brushes of stars, there is a tree. A large tree, like the one on the hill near the base. Illuminated by the kaleidoscope of constellations, the peak of this place, the end of the road finally enters my sight. My feet tickled by the grass, slowly I approach the peak, the tree. And alongside the full extend of stars that fill my sight, a blue shirt rests against the bark. Long hair of light brown, and eyes that remain on the sky.

One step, perhaps two. The shape grows defined, clear.

Three steps, maybe five. The brown of his trousers, the slouched posture, the shape of his chin and arms all matches what I know.

Stopping a few feet away, seeing the white bunny resting atop his thighs, my lips part, close, twist and bend, press themselves together. A shiver on my arms, another step forward as both hands come together, fingers interlock.

"… T-Takeru-san?"

Slowly, gradually, belatedly, he turns his head towards me. A neutral expression, slack and tired expression, is in his face. He says nothing, simply staring at me. The bunny flaps its ears, looking my way then slumping back as Takeru-san continues to pet it.

And he simply looks at me. In silence, scanning me, watching.

"U-Um… You do recognize me, right Takeru-san?" My voice quivers as I take a step forward, as he remains silently staring. "Uh, um…"

"Are you alright?" He finally asks.

"Eh? Ah, yes, I'm unhurt. Um, you do know who I am, right?"

"Yeah, Dersh Bnnuy, the Mighty," he says, chuckling softly.

I don't know if I want to smile, laugh or chop his shoulder right now. Slowly getting closer, sitting by his side, welcoming the bunny as it demands head pats from me, I look and find him again staring at the shifting constellations in front, all around us. "Um, are you feeling well, Takeru-san?"

"Kind of," he merely whispers. "Uh, are you just a part of this dream or-"

"I'm the real Kasumi," I say, feeling my limiters flapping for a moment.

"For real? Since when can you psychodive into people's mind?" He asks, raising a brow.

"Huh? I… don't know. I can always scan people's thoughts but, well, this is the first time I could perform a proper mind dive. I cannot confirm whether this is normal or not," I say, resting on the tree, huddling closer.

"I see…" Grimacing, he again gazes at me silently. Before he reaches out and pats my head. "Sorry, you must have," looking down, biting his lips, "seen a lot of shit on the way here."

"Uh, well, yes… Takeru-san, what I saw, those memories, were they all real?"

A slow nod, as slow as his finger drop through my cheek to my chin, as his hand flops back to the grass. "Yes, I think. All you must have seen… No, all we both saw as we walked was real at one point for me."

"As we- Wait, you were the child and the guard?!"

"Yeah. I was adorable when I was little, right?" He chuckles, the rabbit rubbing itself against his chest, demanding further kindness. "But yeah, I kind of recall how we walked through my… memories. Sorry, you really should have left after… what you saw in my house."

"… D-Do you want me to leave?"

He pets my head, the bunny grumbles as it looks at me. "No, didn't mean it like that. You didn't need to put yourself at risk, seeing all the shit I've had to endure. You're really fine after all that?"

"Yes, somehow. Um… Were those memories what your nightmares are about?"

He sighs, retracting his hand, the bunny continues to angrily stare at me before it gives a munch to the air. "Sort of. All that remains when I wake up is a sketch, a paragraph, a piece of the whole along the cold hands that clasp onto my shoulders."

"I see. So then, um, we have to return to reality. The Professor is really worried about you slipping to another world."

"I see…"

"And I honestly don't know how much time has passed, so I think you should try to wake up, Takeru-san."

The bunny grumbles, thumping then letting out a pained growl. He pets the white fur, remaining silent as he steals gazes, then once more seeks the stars. "I see."

"Um… Don't you want to wake up?"

A moment passes, silence extends. Under the stars and the wind, he closes his eyes.

"It ain't like I don't know the risks. But I don't feel like just now."

"… Are you upset with the Professor?"

"Huh?"

"I mean, that lady said you could, well, hate her…"

"Wait, what lady?"

"You know, that lady in the office suit that helped me get through the forest."

"… Again, what lady?"

"Huh? You don't know? I mean, she had hair and eyes like mine, so she was an ESPer. Who was she, by the way?" I ask, staring, inching closer.

His eyes narrow as his lips barely open, the bunny groans a bit. "Kasumi, you're the only ESPer I ever met as far as I recall."

"Then, who was that lady?"

"I dunno. But no, I don't hate Yuuko. Why do you think that?" He asks, narrowing both brows.

"Well, in the forest…" I tell him of what happened there, his complexion darkens and tightens as I do. "So she said love and hate are sides of the same coin, and that you were hurt much by the Professor. I, well, heard her say some cruel things to you as I passed a tree with an iron beam on the way here… So, well-"

"I don't hate her, per se. It does…" his lips curl inwards, the fingers over the bunny sink into the fur, "unnerve me, how she acts when the Vice Commander takes over. I know she has to do what she has to for the project but, well, I know looking for other solutions ain't beyond her."

Gulping on nothingness again, I pull the edge of his shirt. "Do you believe her to be mistaken, then?"

"No one is right one hundred percent of the time, Kasumi."

"But the project… You know it can be successful if-"

"If everything goes perfectly and in our favor. And even then, that doesn't mean it's the best thing for the future." He sighs, grimacing, looking up, hugging the bunny. "What is of that world as of now? You should know as well as I do that the only thing preventing Yuuko's research to be militarized in a large scale is her guarding hold over it. Imagine what will be of the future when she's caged as she was in my first loops, when the military starts getting access to loads of G-Elements, new mass-produced versions of the XG line." Breathing in sharply, curling inwards, she subtly shakes. "Imagine what they'll do to research and manufacture new 00 Units."

"But… But the war… But she's-"

"You saw the wasteland, right? You heard… the echoes of Iceberg, right? Those are the results the pigs up above created back then, when they refused to veer away from their stupid plans despite Yuuko's warnings. Even as I supported her to try and wrestle some sense into the UN, nothing changed in the end. Sure, you can fix and mend some stuff at the lower level, but the big picture… was already set in stone." Sighing sharply, unable to lift a crumbling gaze he cannot repair, harvested by the Reaper. "Now imagine what would happen, what is happening over there in that world now. Would you leave your future to people who plot and devise 'accidents' for their own benefit, that shift common policies to make it seem they are the fruits of their accomplishments?" He punches the grass, the white bunny groans in agreement, nuzzling itself against his belly. "Even if, somehow, they avoid the fucking mess of Iceberg in that timeline… It's a matter of time before an idiot tries to start another war. All it takes is a terrorist getting inside an XG…" His eyes gaze at me, falling, falling and burning like a shooting star. "I assume you saw… the time when I had to shoot the particle cannon on Meiya, r-right?"

"… Yes. I do not think any less of you for anything I've seen, Takeru-san," I say, placing a hand on the back of his head, bringing him closer, resting my chin on his shoulder. "Do you think that world is in danger?"

"Either it is, or it will be. Sigh… Imagine Babylon but with XGs and particle cannons. All it takes is an idiot with too much power, a struggle in Europe over natural resources or the G-Elements of the recovered hives, or even here in Asia thanks to the march of a triumphant Empire and the issues that might cause for war to spark up. And… you saw what the UN did during the invasion, so I can't fully trust them either."

"… So you don't want to come back?"

"Sigh… I wanna think, Kasumi." He leans into me, the bunny sitting between us. "I honestly don't know what to do anymore. I gotta be part of the system if I wanna be heard, I get it, but no one will agree to not use Yuuko's research for military developments, and no way in hell we can stop production of war armaments with the G-Elements that will be recovered after we start Alt IV. Siiigh…"

"But, um, couldn't you… negotiate with the Shogun? I know the purple puppy ended up turning into a wolf but, surely she could still be an ally to you?"

"… I doubt it."

"Why? Because her posture on the war differs from yours? Or… because you don't want to… do the same as the Swordbreakers did?"

"This isn't only about the war anymore."

"Eh? Why?"

"You… saw it, didn't you? How my world was, how the wasteland was. You didn't notice any similarities?" He asks, hunching over.

"I don't understand. What are you worried about?"

"Well… To put it simply, the Yuuko from my world warned me about something when I was about to start the transfer. And the highway

has remained open, it still is as we speak."

"What highway? You mean the conductor?"

"The ripples of it, to be exact," he sighs, playing with my hair, tone lowering. "At first I didn't think anything of it, I assumed things were just like that in this world. But the similarities are too strong, and on this trip down memory lane I only get more and more certain of it. That this world is, for some reason, being affected by the leaks."

Blinking as I gape, the puzzle shifts, the pieces scatter. "Wait a moment, the world?"

"Yeah. Everybody here is far more nationalistic then before. Like they were in the worlds where Alt IV failed and the US-Japan Security Treaty was reinstated, as it was… after the Babylon Disaster. Even my… situation as Yuuhi's stepbrother, as part of a special task force, and a member of the IRG. It is all an echo, a perfect mirror match to things that have happened before to me."

"But… But the past cannot be changed, and any divergence due to causality must be born from an intense desire in the first place. Wait, Takeru-san, you… were in the Royal Guard before?"

He shrugs, giving me that twisted gesture that does not resemble a smile. "It feels like, for some reason. There's…" he rubs his neck, the bunny tries to climb up his arm, falling due to the wound on its leg. He takes the loaf in an embrace, looking back to the sky, eyes dampening. "There's a memory where I see Meiya aiming a Minaru Kamui at my neck, another when I'm storming a Reactor alongside Shiranuis, Raptors, and Takemikazuchis. And then, the uniform that I see on my arms ain't from the UN." He sighs, rubbing his forehead, rubbing it slowly, hitting the bark with the back of his head. "And those memories feel like a living hell."

"And you're afraid those emotions could… leak into the people of our world?"

"If they haven't already. There are many differences the world you live in has to the one I was looping in. If, somehow, data from the unlimited amount of failed worlds was seeping through the highway for who knows how long, anyone with a strong enough desire might have triggered a leak. And that can continue to happen… with events that could very well screw us over, badly."

Leaves, dry leaves begin to flutter from the tree. Some in yellow, some in red, all swirling on the air, falling and falling.

"Um, so, you think the project is in danger?"

"No, not really. I doubt Yuuko could be stopped this late into the game. That," he sighs, patting the bunny that then grumbles, "is the main problem."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"… What date was back in reality, Kasumi?"

"December 3rd, I believe."

"Well, let's just say there's an… incident coming up, an incident that…" he gulps, shivering as some leaves fall upon his head, "I don't know if I can prevent."

Rubbing his arm, feeling the coldness through the blue fabric, I grip and pull. "You're not alone, Takeru-san. The Professor will assuredly-
"

"Yuuko ain't helping me this time."

"Huh?"

"I doubt she'd agree, all things considered. And even if she keeps her word, if she ends up helping me safeguard my world…" lost in the stars, showered by their light, small hints of fire seep through his eyes, "that won't erase the lingering echoes of those failed worlds that are already present in reality."

"Don't call them failures, Takeru-san," pulling at his arm, I pout into his eyes. The bunny thumps and groans in agreement, headbutting his hand. "You did manage to save your… beloved, right?"

"… Sigh. I guess." Not lifting his cheer, still hunched over and completely void, his aura remains neutral.

"And you're… not alone now. The Professor is your ally, I'm sure that if you explain this to her, she'll find a way to help you."

The rabbit again munches the air, sends me flinching away. He pets it, leaving his hand on the head, scratching the ears. "I don't think she will."

"Why?"

"… Because Yuuko only saw me as an ally after she lost everything. The Vice Commander never let me into her decisions, and truth be told, she might choose to leave the conductor open so that she can research it. It is, after all, her life's goal to understand causality."

"But you could, uh, talk with the Shogun to-"

"Kasumi," he says, colder, frowning, "you saw it. Yuuhi doesn't exist anymore."

Shivering, looking down, gripping my dress, not looking up even when he pets my head. "Why? Why are you being this negative?"

"It reminds me of," voice cracks, fades, folds, "those memories after Iceberg." Looking up, I find a single tear running down his cheek. "Meiya chose the Shogunate over me in that world. Instead of trusting and relying on me as she did back in my home world, she decided to serve the Shogunate. That's why, I think, I joined the IRG. To try and protect her, even if stuff went wrong between us." He sighs again, hugging the bunny that licks his chin. "And I ain't blaming her or anything, it's her life. But love is a two-player game, and devoting your whole life, placing your trust in someone that sees

you… as nothing but a piece on a board…" shaking and quivering as if under snow, his skin is truly cold to the touch, dry even. It takes a moment for his breathing to stabilize, yet his eyes remain shut. "I made that same mistake in this world, again. Yuuhi was… all I had left, like in that world. But she didn't, she doesn't see me as anything but a pawn."

"Did you see memories of the Swordbreakers, then?"

Slowly nodding, features tighten. "Not just small flashes either. Their relation… was nothing but business. Even during a meeting with a guy I think I recognize while a storm was raging, all she was worried about was her standing and the alliance she had. Made me so mad I almost choked her then and there."

"Huh?! Y-You what? Why?"

"Sigh… You know, I think I knew I had gone through that shit at one point, subconsciously," he says, shrugging. "But even as I look after her, it feels so fake. All she wanted out of the oath was my services, and nothing else."

"But… But she argued with the Professor a lot! I do think she… might still want to see you."

"Yuuhi or Her Highness?"

"Huh? Aren't they the same person?" I ask, tilting my head.

He chuckles, ruffling my hair. "Not at all, little bun. It's kind of like with Yuuko and the Vice Commander, one might be cold but always has your back while the other won't hesitate to backstab you and throw you down a flight for her own gains."

"The Professor isn't- She isn't-"

"Kasumi," he holds my head, drawing circles on my scalp, "you and me both know Yuuko doesn't give a single shit about what stands in

her way. Why would she or Her Highness take my side, hear me out even? When pitted against a high noble, an influential person that can be a tailwind for their dreams… It's obvious who will they choose. That's why… I don't think I have any allies back there."

"… You have me."

"Huh?"

I pull, and grip, and squeeze his arm, over and over. Unable to breath in, just holding his gaze, "You have me."

"Sigh…" Smiling, he pats my head. "You know I can't force you to go against Yuuko, Kasumi."

"But I'm your friend."

"Sumika needs you more than I do. Plus, I doubt there's anything we can do this late into the game."

"Please, tell me why you think that," still pulling at his arm, feeling a pit in my stomach start to grow. "What is this incident you speak of?"

"… Something rather convenient, similar yet different to an incident that happened in my first loops. At first, I thought it was something we could prevent, that we had to prevent… but Yuuko might disagree."

"Why?"

"For the sake of Alt IV, to bring stability and predictability to the Empire. That's why I wanna think, reflecting on everything I've gone through," he says, looking back into the swirling stars.

The cyclones reflect shards, images, as if the skyline were made out of glass that was breaking. Parts of the images I saw while traveling alongside his child self, the festivals, the games, the tender moments, the happiness he had along his squadmates, all of that shimmers within the constellations. That multicolored thread, the

halo that upon us showers its shine, deeper within the luster of days past, bubbles and what off them is reflected.

"As I am now, I can't really change anything," he says, low, rubbing the bunny. "I don't think I can put my all behind Yuuko or Yuuhi. I don't wanna live a life in servitude if it's gonna end on that madness again. I… need to save someone, Kasumi. Prove to myself I can make a positive difference."

Slowly, he stands up. Walking up to the edge, extending a hand, grasping, clawing at what within the cosmos shines. Tightening his fist, the rabbit climbing onto his shoulder as I reach his side.

"It would be easy, to snap as I did when Marimo-chan died, as I did… after Shura's Dance. But really, there is no one to blame now. I do get it, they're safeguarding their own lives, betting on a guaranteed result."

"That's not true! Takeru-san, you're not some asset," again pulling his hand, I plead and grip.

He shakes his head. "If I have a bad return of investment, I'll be discarded, forgotten. Just as Meiya did in my other lives. Life goes on, with or without me."

"But if you remembered then, why do you refuse to come back? You could… well, parley with the Shogun, even if she doesn't agree with your feelings. You could warn the Professor of what you believe is happening due to the conductor. And of whatever this incident is, and to help Sumika-san… and even then, you're not merely a pawn."

Again, softly rubbing my hair, smiling, pulling me closer, his hand patting a shoulder as he hugs me with an arm. "Thanks. But Yuuhi has no reason to place her standing at risk over a peasant when a successful man with the approval of the people exists, as like Meiya did back then. Yuuko has no reason to keep compromising her project over a nobody that has next to nothing else to give her, compared to the support of the Empire and the IRG."

"Huh? You… You mean to say you wish to go against-"

"Kasumi, with how silly I am with names and songs, do you think I chose the name 'Swordbreakers' lightly when appointed as the Captain-in-Chief? You do remember the odd song we heard during a memory recovery, right?"

"Wait, so he liked to sing as you do?"

He chuckles, playing with my ear. "There's no 'him', Kasumi."

"So it was… you all along?"

"Always has been, looks like, feels like."

"But you're not as aggressive as him, or as that dark armed dragon," I say, wrapping a hand over him.

"What dragon?"

"Huh? Ah, well, while I was traversing a forest where… your darkest memories lie, I saw a Takeru-san in there, all wounded and hurt. But when the fox tried to harm me, he turned into a dark armed dragon and started to fight her off."

He raises a brow, then chuckles. "Heh, that sounds metal as fuck. So I'm a dragon, huh," he laughs quietly, the bunny groaning a bit. "That does sound better than a blossom, to be honest."

"Blossom?"

"Oh, someone once compared me to a flower," he scratches the back of his head, giving a small smile that could counter the brightness of the stars around us. "But, well, all I know to do is shut up and move on. Dull myself," he brings me closer, voice fading, "push onward and do whatever I can. I think… I was blind back then."

"Blind how? In anger?"

"No, not really. Working to protect her, the only person I thought I had left, doing what I could to support, complement her actions. But in the end," he sighs, heavy yet short, "it was all just part of a play in a chessboard. I don't…" voice quivers, his hand on me enforces its hold, his breathing growing erratic, "I don't want to live like that ever again. Left with no choice but to keep serving, eating out of the hand of those who left your comrades and beloved ones to die as pigs."

"But you're not alone," wrapping both hands around him, I return the intense hold. "Why do you think that?"

"Because the answer I came up with, the only answer I see for this jigsaw puzzle… takes me away from my peace," returning the hug, the white bunny groans in discontent, nuzzling itself against his face until he pets it. "I know it's the mature thing to do, to move on and act with the cards you're dealt… Sigh."

Slowly threading his hair in between my fingers, rubbing his head, I shake my own. "Takeru-san, please. We're still here, we're your allies. I know… the Professor can grow cold when it comes to her project… but she was really angry when you fell unconscious."

"Because she lost a valuable asset, nothing else."

"… Why? Why won't you believe in her?!"

"Because… the Yuuko that saw me as an ally was the one who lost everything, Kasumi. The one you know has no emotional connection to that world, to those feelings, has no reason to value me as that Yuuko did. She is more like the one I met last loop, it'd be wrong of me to expect her to have any patience towards a hesitant idiot," he says, shoulders sagging, bunny groaning.

"… Even then, you have me. And Sumika-san, too. Please, let's go back home…" holding his gaze, gripping him, his eyes scan me silently for a moment, then another.

"… By the by Kasumi, do you know who this white rabbit is?"

"Huh?" My eyes go to the little thing, that groans a bit. "No, I've no idea. You don't either?"

"Not really. But, for some reason, I like holding it close," he says, smiling while scratching the ears, the back of the bunny's head, who then rolls in his hold. "It kind of reminds me of when I was little, of why I am here. I wanna strike a balance, save my world and try to prevent more shit to happen in the world we're in now. Even if I haven't saved anyone thus far, even if my player two doesn't reach out, the least I can do is not fall back to living solely for another, placing all the responsibility on their shoulders. So for now, I wanna think some more."

"You… You won't come back?" He shakes his head. "But… But the Professor is… Your mind might-"

Placing a finger over my lips, he smiles. "I'm very slow, Kasumi. It takes me a lot to reach a decision, and I don't wanna rush this. So, the first step is to try and remember who this little bugger is," he say, giving pats to the rabbit.

"I… I can help you with that, I can bring the memory-"

"No, I have to do this on my own."

"W-Why? Do you not trust in me?"

"Sigh… Yuuko will demand to know what you scan, and I can't risk getting you against her. You've already seen too much, and frankly I think she might choose to pull the plug on me after you report what you've been through here."

"That's not- She wouldn't do that! The Professor was very- She's waiting for you to come back, please." Again, I pull his arm. Again, he shakes his head. "Why? Why, Takeru-san?"

"Because this, the chaos you saw, is my battlefield," he then looks up to the starry kaleidoscope, at the faint glimmers of happiness that

shine through. Taking in a sharp breath, his features tighten, firm orange glows around him, along small traces of red. "And if I cannot choose how to live my life, then I'm as good as dead."

Fire surges forth from the brink, a tidal wave of dark blazes cover the skyline. The shapes of the forest, of the ruins, searing and screaming, faces folding, falling, fading upon one another. Merely standing in its presence is enough to have my eyes squint under the heat's impact.

"T-Takeru-san, please stop! You don't have to go through that again!"

"… I don't even remember that all that well, you know."

"Huh?"

He continues in a monotone, observing the waves as they keep rising and clashing against the edge. "Too many faces I seem to recognize, yet no name comes up. It happens in my dreams, seeing an old friend, unable to remember their name, or anything at all. Waking up while hugging the air, left with nothing but a sad gaze lingering in the back of my head."

"But that's in the past. You don't have to fall into that horrible abyss again," I try to reach out, end up recoiling at the heat that he somehow endures.

"It doesn't look horrible to me. Everyone says the abyss is evil or some shit… but all I see are hands seeking anyone, anyone to pull them up from the silence. And, how was that saying? The people that forget their history are doomed to repeat the same mistakes again and again?" He asks, tilting his head. "Well, I already fucked up my shot while I was in this world before, whatever the reason I was reset like in my world again. Because I couldn't remember, so I did it again," he laughs, running a hand into his hair, eyes closing as he takes in a sharp breath. "And I know what happens when I run away."

He takes a step forward, his figure growing blurry amidst the fire.

"So I'm gonna return the abyss' stare, and go down there to give it a hug, pat its back. After all, I've abandoned those memories because I couldn't deal with 'em. All those versions of me have left… is me."

Screaming, yelling, my voice doesn't seem to reach him. A spiral of fire surrounds him, he looks back with a smile.

"This is my war, against myself. I won't get another chance to face myself, to try and change the road causality wants to integrate into the world. Thanks for worrying Kasumi, but this dense idiot needs a bit more time. So for now…"

Standing up, trying to reach him, my hand meets the air. Takeru-san vanishes from my sight, the ground starts to get tilted. Losing my balance, I meet the grass but start to slip off it, falling. Clawing at the grass, nothing meets my feet as they extend and search for stable ground. Up above, the flickers of flame, the shifting cosmos remains. At the distance, a hand raises to wave at me… as the Gekishin did in that memory I saw.

"You've seen enough. This is my burden to bear, my own actions are what screwed up my future after all."

"That's not true! You're not guilty of anything, Takeru-san!"

"Thanks, for real. But Sumika and Yuuko need you more than I. So… don't lie to the Vice Commander once you wake up. With some luck, I'll follow right after you."

The ground shakes, stronger and stronger, violent and fierce. Flares of black, threads of stars swirl and rotate in my view. Free falling, surrounded by sparks and bubbles, the kaleidoscope, the silhouette of the tree grows distant. Typhoons of fire engulf it all, stars and meteors picked up by the current.

"See you later, Kasumi."

Explosions reverberate, the hill folds and fades like origami, like leaves dancing to the wind. It all grows small, sinking into a dark hole surrounded by a halo of meteors and cyclones of stars.

Descending and descending, I cannot fight the tide, the pull. Like a single droplet that falls of a leaf. Shining for a single moment, before it forever fades into the ground.

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*Around Three Years ago from the present time.*

**[Takeru]**

---

Softness surrounds me, quietness.

Where am I?

I don't… feel anything. It's as if I were suspended in a void, neither cold nor warm. Where am I? I can barely feel my body, the pleasant cushy sensation under me. How weird… The alarm didn't wake me up, but I feel the sun's warmth on me. There are no windows in my bunk, so what gives?

Can't open my eyes. I… can somehow breathe? Or… Do I feel air coming into me? How strange. What was I doing before? When did I fall asleep? Yeah, I was… tending to the office, looking after the shelter… I already had left dinner ready, too. Hmm… Is it my day off duties today? If it isn't Raiho-san is gonna murder me for real today.

But no matter how much I try, my eyes give no fucks about it and remain closed, my arms refuse to budge. Am I so stressed I'm completely spent? I gotta get up, fast. If I'm late… More shouts, more screams. I'm already a burden, I gotta try harder… If I don't-

**KNOCK** ! **BANG** !

**KNOCK** ! **BANG** !

Wait… What's that sound? Someone is… pounding a door like a bull. What force, however, to make that echoing sound. Ugh… How rude can someone be, and that's coming from me.

" *Wake uuup! Takeru-chan, wake up! And open this damn door!"*

… Huh?

Sumi… ka?

Somehow, I felt a cold shiver on me. As if my heart had being struck by a dart. Only to then be followed by thousand more.

It's a lie. A joke. Sumika is… She didn't make it out of Hakuryo. Why am I… Mmgh! Why can't I open my eyes?! Suspended in a void, struggling to no avail, my body gives me the middle finger and remains slumped.

" *Open this door and let me in right this instant! Waah… Why did you use the chain lock?! That's not fair…"*

What is she complaining about? A chain lock? Is this… a dream? Where am I? Am I back home? If she's coming to wake me up… But, why would I put a chain lock? I… I wouldn't do that to her, she's a good friend.

And there she starts to pound the door again. I mean, Sumika is pretty strong, not gonna lie, but she's going to destroy the door at this rate. Dream or not, to be able to see her again… I should get up and go open the door before-

" *Gah! Cut it out! You're so damn annoying!"*

My eyes suddenly opened, and I heard my voice coming out of my mouth.

… But I didn't say anything. What… What is this? What's around me is like my room back home, but more… pristine? It's a bit more…

how to say it… Well decorated? Brilliant, polished? Like, looks good. But it's made a mess. What the hell.

And yet… I can't move. What is this? I can somehow feel my body but… I-I can't move. What is going on here?! Why can't I-

" *Indeed… What a commotion."*

Huh?

My head turns to my right on its own, and I meet a gaze that rests on the pillow. Yuuhi's sleeping by my side with… almost nothing on her person.

…

W-What… What the hell… She's so close… But she looks so… pure, so calm. As she used to be, before she became the Head of the fellowship. That faint and pure smile… she hasn't given me since then.

" *Such a rude awakening can hardly be beneficial to one's mental health.* " Yuuhi says, as softly and sweetly as she used to.

Yeah, she always looked so shiny and welcoming. I know we're at war now… and that she won't ever give me this smile, never again. Everyone's been on edge all this time, hoping for things to suddenly turn for the best would be pretty stupid, even by my standards. But, wait a moment. If this is a dream, why does it feel so real then? Why can I smell Yuuhi's hair, feel her warmth by my side? A moment…

Her hair wasn't blue, Yuuhi's hair is purple. Then, is this Meiya? Why would I be sleeping with her? I never even got to meet her face to face. What the hell, yet again.

" *Yes, that should do it! Takeru-chan, I'm sure you're awake by now, but I'm still coming to wake you up anyways!"* Sumika's far away

voice joyfully declares, as Yuu… Meiya seems to be reflecting on something.

What the hell is going on with this dream? Or, was the war the dream? Which is real? And why can't I move?! What is this… Why can't I do anything?! What kind of dream is this, teasing me with my home and not letting me move?!

Sigh…

I somehow can begin to feel my body again, the edge of my fingertips, the taste in my lips. But I seem to be sweating an Arctic ocean as of now, for some reason. My lips trembling, barely managing to squeeze out a sound, but said sound wasn't my words. Well, it still sounds like my voice, but I didn't say anything.

Yuu… Meiya giggles at me, edging closer under the sheets. "Whatever is the matter? You sound as if you had seen a ghost."

Yeah, gee, I wonder why. Damn, she's as sarcastic as Yuuhi.

The stomping rush of Sumika raising up the stairs echoes, my body begins to shiver for a second. I can't understand why… Why is this happening? First, why would I be in a bed with Meiya? I mean, if it were Yuuhi I could… Well, if it were as she was before, maybe.

A vacuum on my stomach, absorbing my warmth like a twister. The smiling face right besides me now only sends further darts into my heart.

Yuuhi, Mion and Shion, Maya-nee and Mana-nee… shoved me away. They made it clear that none of 'em think of me as family anymore, after I disobeyed Yuuhi's order to depart from Hakuryo, to abandon the base and the town. They left me behind, and it feels like it's been a million years since I've seen Yuuhi smile as this Meiya does now. She's now the Shogun so she can't have a 'commoner' being her brother anymore. And Mion, Shion and Maya-nee… are acting like those who were horrible to me and Masahide-san while

we helped in the invasion. Maybe they were right, though. I… haven't really managed to help with anything on my own, Raiho-san never stops scolding me, everyone else seems to be ignoring me…

My vision grows dark, for some reason I… or rather, the dream's me brings the blanket over our head. Meiya's face being so close to mine, her body pretty much rubbing against mine, the worries left my head. It's as if… I had gone back to before the terrorist attack. When we could fool around and laugh with the rest. Tension and icebergs slide down my back as Sumika comes up the stairs, but I can't share the emotion.

The bed feels so soft, everything in this dream feels… pleasant, like an old memory. But, anyways, why would I be dreaming of sleeping with Meiya? And to have Sumika coming to wake me up… What an odd dream. Then, am I trying to escape my duties by dreaming of a pleasant time? But, why am I conscious of how awful everything has been lately during the dream? That kind of defeats the point, doesn't it? Goddammit subconscious, you had one job…

… I don't deserve these cuddling dreams. Because of me… All because I wasn't good enough, because I'm still not good enough. How many people, how many battles would have gone differently? Maybe Raiho-san is right… I should have died as Hakuryo burned instead of you…

" *Taaaakeeeeruuuu-chaaaan?"* Sumika says, an eldritch screech. And again, my chest hurts. Why? I like Sumika a lot.

She gets close and tries to lift the blanket but, understandably, this dream's version of myself is strongly against that. They begin to pull at the blanket, like whenever I didn't want to wake up and she insisted I should anyways.

Hehe… You really looked after me much, Sumika. And in the end, I couldn't even do anything for you. Sigh… Though, dream me is kind of being too rude to her. There is no need to utter such words, especially when she took time off her own schedule to come wake

you up. Get out of the bed, you damn slacker! Go and make breakfast with her or something.

… I wish I could go back to those days. It's all because of the stupid authorities that don't do shit when it matters… all because of these binding rules… All because the UN ran away like the damn cowards they are. I know we shouldn't pick a fight but they're just using us at this point. Not that our 'beloved national hero' is any better, though.

And dream me is still arguing with dream Sumika, pulling and pulling at the blanket. It's gonna break, dammit.

" *She speaks out of kindness… There is no need to be so harsh."* Dream Meiya speaks the truth.

…

Which I think is counterproductive in this situation.

Well, it's just a dream anyways. I do share his shivering this time around, it's just like when Yuuhi sent me to that damn mountain after I flirted with Arisa-san. Which I totally didn't meant to do, just to be clear. The only difference is, I didn't deserve that whereas dream me is, for some questionable reason, sleeping with Meiya and treating Sumika like shit. This… makes me want to chuckle for some reason. How silly… and nostalgic this feels. Has it been that long since me, Yuuhi and the pickles were in good terms?

… Yeah, it's feels like a long time ago, those days.

The blanket is lifted, Sumika's dumbfounded stare falls on me, or rather the dream me.

" *Hahaha! Good morning to you, Sumika-kun. What nice weather we're having today, don't you think?"* He even uses the same phrases I do… Well, this is my own dream after all. Kinda sucks that I can't actually 'do' anything here, though. What the hell, the trilogy.

Sumika's brows twitch, lips begin to slowly shake. Her face slowly spawns a frown strong like oil showered into a fire. I do not recall ever angering her so much… It hurts, seeing her like this. Why does everyone look at me with those same eyes as of late? Sigh…

Dream me tries to 'negotiate' with Sumika to ignore how she broke into our house in exchange for her forgetting about… ahem, us sleeping with Meiya. Which only makes Sumika more angry, understandably. Well, I know she's angry at this dream's me, but I still don't like her face.

A twitch of a brow, nibbling at her bottom lip. " *Whyyy youuuuu…"* Oh, god. Oh fuck, oh shit. Sumika's gonna DMP us. Well, at least this is just a dream. It won't hurt me in any- " *You big, stupid idiooot!"*

**WHACK** !

**BOOOM** !

**BLAM** !

My stomach turns as her fist impacts with my jaw, a drill splintering my intestines, forcing them into my throat. I can feel my eyes rolling back into my head, my head rolling into my neck. A second after, the wind surrounds me as I'm launched out of the window, like all the times the girls send me into the skies, everything growing smaller and smaller, the twinkles of the stars becoming visible.

"SONO CHI NO KIOKUUUUuuuuu-" I scream, before fading away into relaxation and darkness.

…

After regaining consciousness, and somehow finding myself back at the same place where I was punched like all the times this happens, I again am made to follow this dream's me routine. He is really rude to Sumika, I was never like that. Also, I don't recall the Hiiragi district being in this good shape. Sure, as of late a lot of work was done, but

this road looks well kept, the sideways have no broken tiles, and there's no military patrols going on or anything. It feels so refreshing for some reason, this leisurely pace we walk in.

Sumika walks ahead of us, insulting us, or rather dream me, saying we're vile, depraved and some shit. As he tries to explain himself, she keeps asking us what was up with Meiya, and dream me says he doesn't know her. Why would he lie in such a way? How did she even got into your bed if you don't know her? Makes no sense.

I know I never got to actually talk with her, but Mana-nee did say she liked my pies much. This dream makes absolutely no sense.

" *Owiie* !" Sumika yelps, bringing me back to the dream.

Hey! Why did he punch her?! One thing is a flick to the forehead, but a punch is-

" *Sumika, pop quiz. Yesterday's dinner was…"* What's this about dinner?

" *Delicious* !" She says with a wide smile, charming as always. She truly does look better when she-

**WHACK** !

" *Owiie* !"

And he did it again! What's wrong with him?! Why is Sumika just going along with it? That's… sad. I don't like this, why would you hit someone so close to you? Sumika, retaliate!

And anyways… Why are they going to Hakuryo Base? This hill goes there, so why are they climbing it? Why are there this many young people going up the hill? What a weird dream.

…

The base ain't gonna be covered in fire again, right? I mean, my nightmares always tend to go back there… I try to take a breath, but my body doesn't answer. Seeing them bicker again over the key to our house, even if he's being too mean to her, is sort of relaxing. Sumika doesn't seem to be burdened, and she is smiling. The feelings coming through are relaxed, comfortable. They ease my fears as me and Sumika walk together back to the base.

… Until he punches her rather violently, which makes me mad, but then shortly after she retaliates and everything goes black as the pain pierces our stomach like a drill.

Ugh… Why do I also feel pain in this dream? It makes no sense… I mean, he deserved it but I have nothing to do with this. What the hell is going on here?

When I open my eyes I find myself in a classroom, some girl with large and exaggerated glasses scolding us for being late. Wait, is this where I study? No, I never went to this place. But they were going to Hakuryo Base… Oh, am I studying with them in this dream? Maybe… it would have been for the best if I had remained with Sumika all those years ago. Yuuhi… doesn't want me around anymore and the pickles hate me now. I can't help anyone in the Royal Guard, I'm just a burden at this point.

It does make me wonder what's up with this dream, why it all feels so real. Hakuryo being a school… I think it used to be one, a really long time ago. Kinda odd how I remember that.

Returning my attention to the classroom, everyone around us starts to scream, having a collective seizure for some reason. It makes me want to stand in attention, but no BETA are nearby nor is there an alarm blasting. Wondering why the hell are they freaking out, I spot a gaze of azure smiling at me by the blackboard. Meiya stands in a pose, giving her greetings to the class.

Why does she have a sword on her? That's illegal, only Royal Guards can carry katanas. What is wrong with this dream? And yet,

why do I find myself wishing to laugh at this? She does look to be joyful, I never got to see her face to face but she always seemed to be rather displeased at something, always sober and serious. Wish Mana-nee had let me see how she reacted to the presents, now I probably won't ever get to send her anything again. Sigh… It would be nice if she could someday smile in this way in reality, maybe she'll find actually good fellows that can help her, unlike someone who can only send her cheap food every now and then. Still, seeing her shiny and happy is making me also feel jolly, if only a bit.

Unlike dream me, who is shaking as he again sweats an iceberg out of his back, I feel myself embraced by sunshine's warm grasp, dragonflies dancing into the garden of my mind, happy buzzing resonating from my chest. Though, it is weird. Why do I feel what this dream's me is feeling? Shouldn't I be dreaming about myself? What the hell, times four.

Meiya slowly comes closer, apparently coming to sit by our side. She's smiling happily, as Yuuhi used to do all the time before becoming the Head. She stops, her gaze fully focused upon us. Folding her arms for a moment, she gives us a nod.

" *Takeru, I am overjoyed at the prospect of being your 'class mate',* " Meiya says, to the rest's shock apparently. So this is a school… But why would she be here? Wasn't she supposed to guard Yuuhi or something? This dreams makes no sense. Still, she's happy, so that's enough.

Dream me seems to stutter a question, and dream Meiya asks us to call her by her name. Which seems to make dream me all the more nervous, his heartbeat and breathing as upset as a rabbit being chased by a wolf, yet I find this so relaxing. It would have been nice to meet Meiya openly, to train with her.

" *You have my gratitude,* " Meiya gives us a bow, for some odd reason. *"Last night… was simply exquisite. Feeling your warmth as I slept brought me great pleasure,"* She smiles widely, as pure as water from a mountain's source, rivaling the incoming sunshine.

…

Wait, what?

I… I… I did **what** with you?! T-T-That's illegal! I mean, if it were Yuuhi or Sumika I could sort of understand, but Meiya? I haven't even talked with her! Why am I having wet dreams about Meiya? And why after the fact?!

Why am I… also getting flustered as this dream's me is? I mean… It's not like I dislike Meiya but…

The odd dreams I've been having weren't like this, it was mostly an unpleasant feeling overloading me in them. Yet… Why do I find her smile so adorable?

… How weird. But it feels good. And a bit lonely, knowing I'll wake up and it's back to the silence.

The dream goes on for a long time, snippets of situations getting shown to me. An army of chefs coming into the classroom, me being in some sort of submarine watching fish with a girl I think I've seen before, then seeing an art exposition and… crashing myself against a wall thinking the painting of an elevator was indeed real. I think that actually happened before when I was little, though.

I also get to see Mana-nee in a dress similar to the one Maya-nee had when she lived with me back home, as well as those Three Idiots that used to help her take care of Meiya dressed like maids, and a raven haired girl giving us yakisoba sandwiches, that other girl with the glasses sharing with us a neat yet small lunchbox. It's all so simple, yet so heartwarming…

Seriously, what is wrong with my brain? Like, of all the things I could dream of, who are these people even?

… Also, what's up with these simulators? Why are they training to pilot TSFs? And what are even those models?! Still, it's all so fun,

like how everything used to be. Maybe I'm experiencing some sort of homesickness for a time that won't be coming back?

The calm life goes on… The happiness seems to never cease… As if bubbles were surrounding me, reflecting light and colors around, as if I was relaxing on a warm bathtub. I don't know anyone in the dream save for Meiya, Sumika, Mana-nee and Takahashi-san, but it's so relaxing, like laying on my back onto the grass while enjoying the sunlight.

Simply enjoying the moment, basking into the warmth, letting the silence and the wind pass me by. Yeah, it used to be like this… before this fucking war started…

My nose twitches, catching something in the air. My eyes snap open, recognizing the scent of burning, the distant sound of creaking wood falling to blaze.

Grass meets my hands, I find myself on the hill with the large tree. Standing up, gray clouds emerge from the city, rings of fire running through the street. And Hakuryo… completely engulfed by the searing grip of the BETA.

And yet, somehow, the glare of the fire does not come with fiery warmth. It makes me shiver, cold hands again running all over me. My exhalation visible, breathing growing slow, shallow, the stomping, freezing pressure on my shoulders piles and piles up.

I blink and what's around me changes. Sumika and Mana-nee standing before me with the afterglow as their cloak, no smoke or damage in the city that's in the background. Sumika seems to be near breaking in tears, whereas Mana-nee is sporting a dead serious expression. It all glitches and corrodes, shifting between the one in a maid outfit and the one garbed in the red dress of the IRG. The fifteen minute warning she gives me, one where the dream's Mana-nee is talking about choosing Meiya or Sumika for some odd reason. Then, the one from reality, where Mana-nee admonishes me for

wanting to stay in Hakuryo Base, when she threatened me with no longer being part of their family if I turned my back to Yuuhi…

No, to the Shogun. To Her Highness.

"Right… They're no longer who I knew them to be, they changed."

" *You shall be stripped of the honor of carrying my House's emblem on you henceforth."*

A voice I recognize, a shiver down to knees. Turning around, the royal purple, the glowing red of the Takemikazuchi stands over me.

Aiming the barrel right into me.

"Ahahaha… What? You're not happy with leaving me behind?!"

Blizzard rushes out of the nuzzle, leaving a white haven over the hill. I roll on the ground, avoiding the ice.

"Is that how it is, then?! You're gonna support that damn bastard that abandoned Uncle Koetsu, your fellows, just to look cool?!"

More and more ice beams follow after me, tumbling the tree, white mist raising from the grass. The red glare never releases me, the barrel remains seeking me.

"This isn't… You're not like that! Yuuhi, snap out of it, dammit!"

" *I know not of who you speak. Lower your armaments or I shall be forced to strike you down in the Empire's name,"* she says, far more colder and somber than I've ever heard her being.

Knees shake, frozen in place and not because of the ice. Mumbling an answer, stumbling as I gape, my sight grows blurry, my eyes warm as I cry.

"What the fuck? Is that it? You're just… throwing me away? What of… *What of us, all we shared together?! You're throwing that away*

*too?!"*

No hesitation, no wasted movements. Another shot, a shard of ice hits and explodes near me. Losing balance, my heels slip. Back on the grass, I start to roll down the hill. Arms to bark, nose to rock, face to spikes, I roll and roll, pain all over.

… Urk. It hurts… My neck feels as if it were being strangled, air leaves my lungs and I suffocate. Ugh… It's as if I had needles coming into my mouth. Legs don't answer properly and I slip a few times as I try to stand. Clawing at the ice, propelling me off it, shivering and shivering, I run away from the mist.

Only to find roots of fire growing through the ground, dark smoke rising from the maw. Nothing is left of the city, save for a giant cradle of ashes and sparks. Hesitating for a moment, until more ice explodes behind me, I run into the molten magma.

The cold recedes, I'm suddenly growing more and more warm, suffocating. Air barely comes into me, my steps grow harder to focus as my feet sear in pain with every passing second. The dark thicket of smoke that walls around me swirls, patterns that resemble faces come into view.

" *Please, you've done more than enough. Look after Kaori for me,"* Saki-san's crying face returns to me.

Clamping both ears with my palms, I rush through the smoke, almost tripping.

"… *Pull the trigger, Bro. You gotta survive,"* Jouji's hand trembles as he hands me his red bandanna.

My eyes strain as I cry, as the smoke overflows. Rubbing my head, it hurts to breathe, thorns encrusted into my neck. The cold hands run over my shoulders, down to my chest, and I cough, and hack, and wheeze.

" *It buurns!"* The echoes from my nightmares start to come up through the smoke again.

The munching, the electric shocks, the wings of fire. Smoke claws scratch at my face, at my ankles, at my wrists, trying to sink me into the hellish tide.

"No! Shut up! Leave me alone!"

Feeling blood on my lips, slicing pain on my legs, I run through the smoke, slashing it as I go. The echoes follow me, ingrained to my shadow, rivers of fire growing, the roots thickening, the heat almost taking over.

Running, stumbling, losing breath as if I were an overloaded turbo, it's getting hard to keep my eyes open.

Everything grows blurry.

I can't… breath well… Head hurts… so much…

A feet falters, falling asleep on me. Growing limp, bending at an impossible angle, it sends me down into the ground.

It's cold… but I can't feel myself shivering anymore.

Trying to crawl forward, some fingers don't react. Remaining stuck, extended like spider legs.

Legs don't answer, hands barely move, head hurts, ears ring… and everything grows so cold, so distant…

What was I even trying to do? Why even bother? It ain't like anyone needs me…

Sumika's gone, Jouji's gone, the Pickles don't care, Maya-nee hates me, Mana-nee left, Yuuhi cut her ties with me, Masahide-san and Uncle are gone…

… Hahaha.

I couldn't… even save anyone. All I did was make everything worse… Why were those voices calling out to me within the smoke? Like I could do anything about it to help them. Who would even hear me out?

All I tried, all the babel towers of papers I readied were worth nothing… No one even considers me a fellow anymore. Maybe… I should really just… close my eyes… Why even stand up? I just wanted to…

" *This time no harm will come to any of you, here or there!"*

Huh?

Flickers of light, cerulean and warm.

" *This is the only thing I can do to truly carry on, to cut all my lingering regrets-"*

The voice continues to speak, raising and raising. The cerulean fireflies rest on me, making my fingers twitch and shiver, a shock running through arms and legs, waking up.

" *I don't know what I do or how I'll do it, but I'll sure as hell struggle with all my might to make a positive change and stop all this shit!"*

Screaming, yelling inside my head. Air coming in, and out, and in, and out. Despite the quake in my wrist, I force palm the ground and try and lift myself. A leg gives up on me, almost sending me to kiss the ground. Wobbling, it takes a long while for me to raise.

"Yes, that's right… All I really want is to give our future a smile. To make up for my mistakes. Haa… Haa…"

Limping as I hug my shoulders, the white smoke walls over me, surrounds and accosts, whispers and yells, screams and sounds of gore. The small lights keep me warm, faintly, but it hurts just to walk.

By myself, what can I even do? How am I supposed to help? Like hell I'll bow down to that bastard that abandoned Uncle… That's not the future I wanna build, but everyone's on his side. What can I…

" *So what if I'm the fool?"*

A lower, yet harsher, voice. This time, the flickers of fire grow beyond my body, scattering the clouds of ice away.

" *All I want, all I care about is to protect her. That's all. And to that end-"*

Rings of fire spawn on the ground, reactivating my legs, thawing the frost, acting as my guide in the hazy and cold mist. Palpitations rising, clawing at my heart as I walk, dampness blurs my eyes for some reason.

" *I don't mind being the one in the 'wrong'. If there's no tolerance for differences of opinion, there's little reason to negotiate, ain't there? If we're the evil ones even if we do nothing… Why should I hold back, when the future they want to bring about means the ruin of anyone who disagrees?"*

Stomping the floor, starting to walk properly, starting to catch on speed, I straighten up myself. Yeah, ain't that the truth. In front of such radical views, there's no discussion to be had. Politics are nothing but the continuation of war. And when there's no more words, there's only violence.

We soldiers are the last rampart, the last line that must not be crossed. Like Masahide-san said, we're like an extinguisher, ideally we should never be required but we're necessary in cases of emergency.

But what happens when one of us starts to avoid the rules? What happens when the chain gets corrupted? When any and all propositions you forward are met with hostility and shouts?

*Only an idiot would try and negotiate with someone who's aiming a gun at your face. When words run out, there's no reason to hold back.* Even when they claim the few good news are due to them, when it's the other way around… After all that happened, all I really want, besides all this war and cruelty…

Looking up, I find the stars. Clawing at them, my breath gets caught in my throat. That image, that nightmare of Yuuhi's bloodied face begging me to pull the trigger on her surfaces again.

All I really wanted to… I all I want to do… *is to keep you safe, to give a smile to your future…*

Without Yuuhi, people will lose all hope. Only she can deal with the required politics and shit, to try and negotiate for good terms, to stop the bastards that try and make business with the tragedy.

Why was I hesitating? What am I scared off? Failing? What's that? Just another sin, another stain to my life? Even if me going for broke went poorly, even if no one finds me useful…

… *Why should I hold back when her life is on the line? I should just… stop playing by the book, meet their trickery with fire.* If no one will listen anyways… Why leave the shadows uncontested to them? *If they want a dirty war, then they shall have one. I'll burn them down to cinders… I won't lose anything else from grasp…*

"Are you certain that is a wise decision?"

"Huh?!"

Through the smoke and mist, a small shape walks towards me. Her cerulean eyes, her silverish white hair, and a pair of bunny ears come into view. The little girl is garbed purely in black, her complexion is as cold and pale as the clouds of ice. She stops a few feet away from me, staring.

"Um… Who are you, little girl?"

"I see… So I resemble a little girl to your current psyche," she muses, closing her eyes and nodding.

"Uh, did I say something odd?"

"Oh, no, it is not that. I was merely- Ahem." Running a hand into her hair, she then straightens herself, looking into me. "Are you feeling well, Shirogane-san?"

"Eh? Ah, well… Better than before, yes. Overall… I still feel a bit groggy," I admit, scratching the back of my head, feeling a faint pain on the lower end of my ears.

"Is that so?"

"So, uh, who are you?"

"Do you not recognize me?" I blink, stare at her features for a moment, then shake my head. She closes her eyes, grasping her chin. "I see… I suppose you can… refer to me as Kasumi."

"Huh. Kasumi… Do you have a surname?"

"It is unimportant, my name shall suffice. Do you recall ever meeting me?"

"No, I don't ever recall meeting a real bunny girl in my life."

"Wh- I am not a- Sigh…" Her shoulders sag, a hand rubs her forehead. "In any case, are you certain you wish to stand and return?"

"… What?"

"If you lay down now and close your eyes, perhaps the flow could grant you peace, in a way."

"What are you… saying? Am I… dead?"

She holds my gaze, silently, before slowly shaking her head. "Not yet, no. However, there is an outcome, a… branch, you could say, in which you perish in this particular day. The circumstances are different, yet the echo could be replicated."

"Huh? W-What?" Staggering, grasping at the air, for a sec everything spins on me. "I'm about to die?"

"… There is a possibility, if you allow the current to take you. It is true that… perhaps, it is too painful for you to continue to stand every day. You've already done enough, Shirogane-san. You do not need to struggle anymore."

"So you're saying I… should just shut up and die?"

"O-Only if," another voice raises, hesitates, "if you want to."

A small face peeks from behind he shoulder of the bunny girl. Another girl, even smaller, looks at me, unblinking. The dark garbed one sidesteps, the white one stumbles forward as her support vanishes from place. Grumbling and stomping the tip of her shoe while glaring at the dark bunny girl for a moment, she gulps and takes a step forward, watching me intently. Light brown eyes meet mine, directly and piercingly, a glare that resembles an avalanche. Yet, she says nothing, instead tugs at the edges of her frilly white dress, that looks like a goth loli design or some shit. Her short hair kept in place by two clips in the form of folded bunny ears, her eyes flee mine again. Kasumi chops her shoulder, the little girl squeals.

"U-Um…" She starts, scratching the back of her head as she looks up. "You… You do not want to surrender, right?" She asks, staring again, Kasumi face palms and sighs, heavy yet short.

"… To be honest, I'm really scared right now. I… I don't think anyone really needs me, and maybe it'd be better if I just gave up," she looks down, squinting her eyes really, really hard, bending the edge of her dress. "But… But I don't wanna let things end like this. I don't know

what I can do, but this isn't how I wanna let the final curtain fall on me. So no, I won't die today, little girls."

My answers seems to make the one in white glimmer, smiling a moment after. "Heh, I told you he wasn't gonna give up, Kasumi-nee," she says, raising a small fist towards the one in black.

Who shakes her head, rolling her eyes. "Siiigh… Shirogane-san, may I ask what is your plan going forward?"

"Bold of you to assume I have a plan, bunny girl."

Her bunny ears cascade, the one in white gives me a narrowed gaze. "Then, what do you plan to do from now on?" She asks, the bunny ears flapping for a moment.

"Well… I know I'm not very useful, but there must be something that can be done. I still believe small acts of compassion are worth gold, even as everything keeps on falling on our heads. Like Masahide-san taught me, even those tiny mercies will bear fruit at some point. If we don't try to lend a hand in times of need, we get the darker for it. And things are already bleak enough. So, well, while I don't know if anyone really believes in me anymore…" I take in air and exhale, the thorns, the shards, the pressure off my chest. Staring into their eyes, those little eyes that remain focused on me, I swallow the sigh I was about to release. "I think looking for whoever thinks like I me is all I can do, and work from the ground up until one day I can start making a positive difference."

"And what happens when nothing happens?" Kasumi asks, the other girl frowning, groaning at her.

"Well, I guess I'll keep hacking at it on my own…" As I've been doing lately, to no effect. "But even if no one listens, if I'll never see the people I loved again… I'll live to protect that peace we once had, to stop this goddamn war for good. No matter what happens or comes at me, I refuse to keep living like a coward."

"And if these efforts are fruitless?" She asks, tilting her head, flapping her ears at me. "You should know dissidence isn't tolerated in the IRG."

"While that's true…" feeling my neck tightening, I slowly inhale, cross my arms, and meet her gaze straight ahead, "I'll do what I gotta do, even if it only confirms the ill words everyone says about me."

"And if you find yourself alone and without allies?"

"Hmph… In that case…" heat in my gut, in my stomach as I exhale through gritted teeth, " *I'll despair after I'm dead. If I'm gonna lose it all, I rather keep on fighting until the end instead of dying like a coward."*

"Yeah!" The one in white shouts, nodding as she waves both tiny fists up and down. "There is no point in decreasing your own morale before giving the fight. While it is quite fair to affirm that those around you would rather seek perfect homogeneity, you must face your own matters in your own terms. Regardless of the pressure your peers may place on you, there are some fights you must give for your own sake," she nods twice, a small smile in her face.

"… I guess you're right. You're rather articulate for a little girl, though."

"Wh- I'm not little! I'm-"

**CHOP!**

"Do not be stupid, please," Kasumi says, after the swift delivery of a chop to the head of the other little girl.

"Grr… You're horrible," so she pouts, small embers coming out. "Anyways," she says, rubbing her head, "please do not be discouraged. I'm certain there is something you can work towards. Just, well, do not put yourself in unnecessary risk, please. There is a thin line separating bravery from recklessness, you'd understand,"

she says, giving me a small bow, then remains staring, staring, and staring until I give a nod out of reflex.

"Sigh… Merely know that what lays ahead for you is a truly perilous, truly arduous road," Kasumi says, giving me a frontal look. "You truly might be heading towards an unalterable fate."

"Yeah, things do be feeling like that at times," I nod, giving out a sigh. "But, you know, I really… miss the peace we had. I know things won't ever be the same, but even if only a little, I wanna restore a sliver of that peace to Japan."

For myself, to atone for all my fuck ups until now. For all my friends that died, just to keep the BETA at bay. And for all those that will remain afterwards, like that poor little girl from Kyushu and her friend that are about to be sent to work in the factories. As I am now, I'm basically worthless. Worse than a zero on the left, because I have a cost for the army. But now, I'm no longer a little kid. I can try to help, even if no one listens or cares.

… Sure, it hurts a lot. Sure, I wanna cry everyday. Sure, I can't even stomach my rations well lately. But if things could be even just half as nice as the dream I had a while ago… Even if it takes a long while- No, because it's gonna take me a while, I gotta start to make a little more effort everyday.

"Even if no one in the IRG finds me useful, that is enough of an answer. I won't limit myself to being a tool of the system, because people are depending on me now. So, well," scratching the back of my head, my brows curve, I cough and feel coldness on my shoulders, "I'll try to start with small things from my position, to stop the overwhelming stance some jerks have in the ranks. And if that doesn't work out, well…"

"You could…" the one in white whispers, lips curving as she plays with her bangs, "try to join the UN. I'm certain someone there would welcome your services."

"Sigh.. The UN Farces are more of a mess than the IRG, and that says a lot." Just remembering the ruckus that came after some soldiers in the IJA refused to speak in the international language, retorting with 'English can eat shit' instead, is enough to make me wanna puke. Instead of cooling things down, those idiots from the UN wanted to escalate everything. Raiho-san, of all people, had to calm the tide back then. "Honestly, I dunno if they work with the yanks or not, but I can't really trust such a large organization that has a sloppy chain of command. Like, really, forcefully trying to take over the shelters, demanding we become refugees by force? Even I am not that stupid, and I do plenty of fuck ups on a daily basis." If not for that elegant woman, that the IJA soldiers of our shelter recognized as 'the Reaper', shit would have hit the fucking turbine and it would have come down to blows.

"Well, but," the frilly dress is bent, her lips twist into a pout, she remains staring straight into my eyes, "you could lend your help, what you know of the IRG."

"Interfering in his decision is unwise," Kasumi retorts, narrowing her eyes, which causes the one in white to groan, thump her feet on the ground again. "That being said, do not fall on the pitfall that the UN is wholly evil. While certainly ruthless and pragmatic, there are those who would… desire the same outcome as you in that place."

"Well, I guess no tree gives only rotten apples," I nod, scratching my head. Taking in a deep breath, refreshing my lungs, I cough a bit, taking a step forward. "Thanks for the chat, little girls. But… I think it's better if I start to wake up… however it is I do it."

Kasumi nods, "I do agree. Best of luck from now on, Shirogane-san. Please, do not be discouraged at what may come to you. And," she grips her dress, looking away, "do not let the echoes of these nightmares delve too deeply on your ears."

"… I'll try, but I dunno if I can endure them that well."

"Just, please…" the one in white takes a step closer, joining both hands, "don't punish yourself over events beyond your control. Even if what you see pains you to great lengths… do not lose your drive, please."

Getting closer, I pet her head. She twitches but doesn't pull away, instead she closes her eyes while I ruffle her hair. "Thanks. I know I might be too emotional at times, but I guess I gotta man up at one point. After all, if I wanna give a smile to their future, I gotta be willing to keep rolling the dice through the ones."

"… That's not true," she says, opening her eyes, sharpened. "If… If you really want that then, don't lose your own smile. Please, work towards making your own future smile, too."

"… My future, too? Huh… After all I've done, I don't think-"

"Failure doesn't make you any less deserving of happiness, Shirogane-san," Kasumi says, patting my shoulder. "If you forget what joy is, you won't be able to truly take into account the feelings of others into your plans. That is, I believe, your greatest strength. That despite everything, you stubbornly hold onto your desire for peace," she smiles, bright enough to dispel the fog that surrounds us, while nodding.

"… Thanks, really. I… Thanks," wiping my eyes, I take a few short breaths. When was the last time someone even cared about how I felt again? Since Shura's Dance?

"Um… Err…" the one in white steps forward, arms slowly opening, stuck as if lacking oil.

Realizing what she was trying to do, I nod and open my own arms. She quickly dives into me, embracing me tightly, patting my back, rubbing up and down.

"Please, don't lose heart, no matter what it is you see," she says, whispers, pleads, almost. "You might… face many cruel truths,

things you cannot compute, but please do not lose yourself in the pain. Please…"

"I… I won't. Um, thank you, really," patting her head, she again closes her eyes. Remaining in place for a moment, she slowly, as dawnbreak, pulls away, then hugs her own sides.

At first, trying to reach out to my face, then recoiling back, two steps, three steps, she gives me a bow. "So, well, best of luck from now on."

"Sigh… I am gonna need it, I guess," smiling at both of them, I take a few steps forward, waving back. "Well, thanks for cheering me up. Goodbye, little girls."

"That's wrong!" The one in white scolds, pouting.

"Huh? What is?"

"Ahem," Kasumi sends a hand to her hair, a gaze to the other one before taking a step towards me. "If you'd like to meet someone again, saying 'Goodbye' would be inappropriate. In such cases, you must say 'See you later', correct?"

"I, well, yeah… See you later, I guess," I nod, waving again. This time they do wave back, the one in black giving me a small smile, the one in white also doing so, yet both eyes and lips squint and contract as if saddened.

Turning around, walking forward, more ice spikes meet my feet. The frozen air surrounds me, blinding me in white.

Barely able to lift my legs, elbows on my chest, palms over my lips. Like a blanket the cold envelops me, seizing all of me even through my clothes. It gets harder to breathe, to move my limbs, kind of feeling restrained by something, bound fully.

Those echoes start again, the explosions, the eternal wasteland. The odd woman that's devoured by a Soldier-Class, the big lady that falls to the stormy sea. Yuuhi asking me to shoot her, Sumika remaining still in a hospital bed as the flat-line beeps with no end.

I know there's little to be done. I don't know what I can do. I am lost in the fog, both now and in real life. But even if there is no road to follow, I do have a compass with me.

"We… wield the sword not to further our own interests… but to protect the powerless. That is… the code of our style. And what has to be done, is not what anyone else has done… but a road that will be forged with my own hands!"

Even if I'm called names, even if the rest of the IRG thinks I'm not worth my rations.

Even if I end up cold and all alone again, even if I'll never recover the bonds I've lost.

Even if I end up as the bad guy for the rest, the one who goes against the current and causes dissidence.

All I really want… *is to see you smile, to see you blossom and be happy.*

*So I'll keep pressing on against the whole world by myself, if that lets me… see that smile will remain safe and sound…*

*August 5th, 1998.*

*(In a private room of a hospital reserved for the IRG.)*

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Slow and steady is the awakening, not so the refocusing of the senses. Everything remains blurred to the soldier's eyes for a moment, no blinking can ease the fogginess which has him captive.

Faint beepings reach his ears, he cannot move to his will. Merely opening his lips ever slightly has oxygen, warm oxygen entering him. The mask put in place doesn't allow him to raise, barely even to move his neck. Hands are also restrained to the gurney, tubes whose end is covered by a small amount of white cloth connect his arm to some metallic stick he cannot see very well.

Groans leave his lips, minute movements do not make it any easier for him to find comfort. Heart rate accelerates, the unknown unnerving him further, the weakness in his limbs, the lack of answer from them injects further concerns into his still dizzy mind.

As if to relieve his confusion, the door to the room opens slowly, a slim figure squeezes itself through a minimal opening, making no noise in the entrance. Sporting a small curling ponytail, her shoulder length hair curling inwards, Tsuhi Yasomaga steps into the resting room of the soldier, still wearing the gray dress her station bestows her in the IRG.

Slow steps at first, a sunken expression barely drags itself upwards to leave a folder or two on a desk. She then looks at the bed, blinks in quick succession, and her features rise and grow tense. Eyes as wide as her lips, she remains frozen until the soldier gives out a small groan which spurs her to hurriedly approach the bedside.

"T-Takeru… You're awake?" He nods, barely. "You can tell… who I am?" Another nod with a groan, brows slowly curving down. "Do you feel well?"

He tries to speak, only to end up coughing as the mask continues to feed him oxygen against his will, only allowing him to squeeze half a word out. Yasomaga quickly goes up to the controls for the device, first checking his blood pressure and body temperature in the nearby monitors, only then releasing the mask as she breathes a sigh, deep and long.

"So, um… Are you feeling well?"

" *Cough*… Kind of. Where am I?"

"You do not recall?" He squints his eyes then shakes his head, she sighs then propels his head upwards, readjusting the pillow below him. "Your Zuikaku was struck down, and your cockpit broke off." Slowly sitting down besides him, both hands crush each other, she cannot meet his gaze. "You ended up falling into the sea, and due to a failure on your suit, you almost drowned. Due to, well, the loss of heat you endured… and all the stress you had built up due to not sleeping for days on your duties, you came down with a severe case of hypothermia."

"Was I… grave?" He asks, feeling like he had heard something similar just moments ago.

She nods, silent for a moment as she shifts, as she gulps. Almost drowning into her inner woes, still unable to meet his gaze. "Yes, despite having the helmet on you almost did drown in open sea."

Flashes of Fort-Class come into his sight, the dangerous maneuver he tried to pull, like he had seen in a dream, seemed to be successful for the most part. Except his watermelon was hurt by the acid, and the ejection sent him into open sea instead of towards land.

"The mission- *cough…* What happened to-"

Placing a hand over his shoulder, massing him gently and carefully, she nods, "Worry not, there were no further losses of ground nor cities. Albeit dangerous, your maneuver did stall the Forts for long enough to allow the UN to regroup."

"I see…" He closes his eyes then, resting fully onto the bed.

"… Takeru? Takeru, are you still awake?" She calls out, almost quivering, ice darts into her heart, only to sigh pure relief as he groans and opens his eyes. "Um… How are you feeling? Can you move?"

He blinks, trying and easily lifting his arms as much as the bindings allow, fluttering his feet as if trying to swim. "Feel weak, faint… but not hurt or anything. Why am I here?"

"Did you even listen? You… You weren't even shivering anymore when we recovered you," she whispers, looking down to hide her eyes, crushing her knees in the grip.

"I don't get it…"

"You almost died, your pulse had vanished and you weren't breathing. You… Hic… I thought you were going t-to…" a few tears try and leave, she wipes them off, unable to continue speaking.

"So I almost died, huh…" again, something tickled the back of his head, trying to recall why he felt like he was having Deja Vu. "Am I alright now?"

"Eh? Ah," wiping her face with her arms hastily, she nods in equal speed, "yes, you should be safe by now. The doctors said you had already recovered the right temperature a few days ago, but… but you weren't waking up…" lips quivering, again she hides her eyes.

"How long… has it been?"

"A week, almost."

"Huh… Is everyone fine?"

"Yes, we suffered no casualties, thanks to you…" she then grips her dress, purses her lips. "Um, Takeru, do you… remember how you were working before the mission?"

"Um…" closing his eyes, narrowing his brows and lips, he gives a nod a moment later, "I was dealing with the reports in the shelters and my office… lending a hand in the kitchen… and keeping the children company, I think?"

"… I see," she clamps her lips, wishing to ask further, not knowing if he was yet well enough to press for such answers.

Their talk is interrupted as the door opens once more, this time harshly and quickly. In long steps, a shape garbed in crimson enters the room, the strong purple of the glare making Yasomaga's hair stand on edge.

"2nd Lt Yasomaga, how is he faring toda-" Amato's eyes widen, mouth remaining open when she sees the soldier returning her stare. And in petrification she remains, stillness in her mind, further in her soul.

" *Cough*… Good day, Raiho-san," he tries to say, not loud enough as usual, slowly raising his right hand to salute.

"You're awake?"

"Uh, yes. Either that or you're sleeping," he retorts, narrowing his eyes.

Not finding it funny, Amato frowns yet fumbles with her words, pointing a finger at him, then grabbing her lily hair with both hands. Folding both words and arms, she instead slowly walks up to the bedside, Yasomaga standing hastily to allow her to sit in her position.

"… Since when?" She whispers as she sit down.

"He was already awake when I arrived, Cpt, ma'am," Yasomaga answers instantly.

"I see. Shirogane, how are… you faring? Any pain, anything that feels off?" He shakes his head slowly, she swallows a sigh. "Is that so? Did you awaken long ago?"

"No, just a little before Tsuhi came in. She filled me in what had happened."

"Do you… recall the events that led to your Zuikaku being shot down?" She asks, leaning closer, staring.

"Sort of, but it's all blurry."

"I… I see," she inhales, crossing a leg over the other. Once more she looks into his eyes, steeling her glare. "Shirogane, may I inquire into some matters now?"

"Yeah, what is it?"

"… Why did you not request any assistance with your duties?" She asks, frowning.

"I did, I've been trying to help out for a while but…" he looks down, sighing, "you always shout at me when I give you my reports."

"I… I was not aware you were the one fielding all the reports on your own. Why did you not notify me you were left alone in the shelter's detachment?"

"I did… I asked you if you thought I was doing well, remember? And you told me… I was worse than a zero on the left." His gaze then sinks, closing as he slowly breathes out.

Amato feels a noose on her neck, the vice grip tightening. "I… I had thought you were only tackling your original duties. Why did you not report the matter thoroughly?" She asks, voice rising, magma as well within, burning her throat.

"Ma'am, please mind you tone," Yasomaga reminds, pleads as she bows down. "Takeru just woke up moments ago."

Glaring at the girl, then sighing harshly and shaking her head, fingers dive into the dress, pressure in her head, small flickers of pain in her forehead. "Why did you remain quiet?"

Under the pressure of the stare, the young boy lowers his, coughing getting the better of him for a moment. "You always said I wasn't

doing enough, I didn't want to bother you."

"Do not give me that!" Almost raising to her feet, hitting both thighs with strength enough to hurt, she frowns and lets her teeth be seen. "No one sane would even dare to try and handle as much paperwork. It was a folly to even attempt such workloads for a single day," she leashes out, lungs tightening, hands wringing.

His sight closes shut, trying to recall the oath he had made, beginning to falter, fear disturbing his breathing. "I… am nothing doing enough, you always say I don't do anything meaningful. Something that anyone can accomplish holds no value, right?" He asks, rhetorically, causing thorns and darts to pierce Amato's neck, her palms and knuckles growing red.

"What nonsense are you spouting?" She seethes, hands shaking, fully frowning. "You lied to me about the injury in your forehead the day before the mission, did you not?"

"Eh? Um… I don't remember," he admits, truly not recalling much about the last days he had been awake. Due to the lack of sleep and the ensuing hospitalization, a void had been left in his recollections, you'd understand.

She did not seem too pleased with the answer, however. "Then, what of your daily duties? You… You were the one in charge of preparing my meals, were you not?"

"Y-Yes… I know you don't like them but I… was doing my best…"

"Care to enlighten me as to why they were larger than they should have?" She inquires, eyes blazing.

Which begin scorching his composure, subtly shaking, hands drying, losing heat. "Um… I, well, was giving you half of my rations, since you're always staying until late in the office, doing stuff that matters. Everybody says I don't even… deserve them anyways… At least they're being put to better use?" He suggests, trying to smile.

It only invigorates the pyre. "Do not dare to jest on this matter, Shirogane!"

"R-Raiho-sama, please do not shout. He has just-"

"Silence, Yasomaga," she glares, sending the girl recoiling away, gaze crumbling to the floor. Sighing hard, rubbing her forehead, she again gazes at the young soldier boy, who was trying to still hold her gaze despite feeling the scratches of the billowing smoke all over. "Shirogane, you also have been causing some discussions in the shelter, have you not?"

"I… I only wanted to keep the people safe," he says, barely nodding, cold hands embracing him from behind, tickling his ears. "Some officers from other fellowships come and go as they please, they want to keep the civilians caged inside the walls all day. I… I can't simply stand and watch as-"

"And why haven't you reported that?!"

"Eh? Ah, uh, I- I did but you don't read-"

"Because you've remained quiet about it!" She fumes full fire, feeling sick to her stomach, losing breath at the thought of anyone causing harm to the shelter's people or to the relation with the IJA soldiers there stationed. Even more at the piling pressure the boy must have faced, as the lone face of the Koubuin fellowship standing his ground. Even further when recalling her venomous words towards him. "How foolish can you possibly be? Refusing to eat properly, missing sleep while tackling an entire office's work on your own, patrolling and facing other officers by your lonesome… Can you not see the fruits of your own efforts?" She asks, frowning, still fuming.

So he looks down, taking her anger to heart. "I… I'm sorry… I just thought to try harder… to be useful. Even if I'm alone, if I keep trying-"

"There is only so much an individual can accomplish," she shakes her head, ruffling her hair. "Why did you even decide to tackle such a workload in the first place?" She asks, raising a brow, folding her arms, concern showing its eyes within her tone.

He, however, cannot see it. Eyes closed, bolted to his hands, the echoes of her scolding still fresh in his ears. The echoes of nightmares creeping closer, up his back, the blindness of white he suffered before has him shaking, coldness enveloping him. "I just… wanted to make a difference, to keep the peace in the shelter, to help the little kids. I'm not enough, *I'm never enough when it matters the most. So I have to try harder, to not fail again.* But, well, even without the accident in the mission I'd have fainted anyways… Haha… ha…."

"I do not find it amusing, at all," Amato sighs, still frowning. "My apologies for having shouted," she says, giving a minute bow.

Sniffing, holding himself in check, sighing deep. "No, you don't have to apologize, for real," he says, causing both of them to cork an eyebrow. "I mean, you were always right in the end."

"Hm? Regarding what?"

"… I should have been the one who died that day," he whispers, closing his eyes. *"If Masahide-san were here, he'd have made such a huge difference. Nothing would have gone wrong in the shelters, the offices would have remained safe and well staffed. Compared to that, all I can do is hope for the best and push on by myself. Sigh…"*

"… What?" She says, gritting her teeth. Blazing eyes is what the young soldier sees, literal fire as her head rears backwards. Images of tempest flash in her mind. Pages torn in brutality, scribbles as chaotic as the oceanic collapse, clouds and typhoons left in the pages of the soldier's personal diary. Recalling the last entry, the flat-line that echoed during treatment, and all that she had neglected further invigorates the already fiery temper of Amato, spurring her to raise from the seat. "Don't you dare to utter such words!"

'For you have nothing to be ashamed of' is what she wanted to say next, to express apologies for the blindness she chose to employ. Instead, however, her insides hollow, the fire freezes, and once more she stands in petrification. In a way, for her it is like staring into a mirror, a mirror to the past.

Both hands shield his head, quivering, upon her harsh swing of a hand when she raises. The veneer of the soldier vanishing, the echoes overflowing, the boy shuts his eyes tightly, quivering in cold. "D-Don't hit me, please!" He pleads, clawing at his head.

"W-What?" She barely manages to stutter back.

"I'll… try harder, I won't hesitate anymore. I'll do my best to m-make a difference…" shaking again, sinking into the white blindness, into the forest.

"I… I am not reproaching you, Shirogane," she says, barely managing to touch the edge of his shoulder, causing him to flinch away, still shielding himself from both hits and shouts. The reflection hurts her eyes, she bites her lips. "I… I apologize," she whispers, slowly placing a few fingers on his, pulling them away from his head. "I was not aware of… all you were handling. It was my folly, and I should not have been… reprimanding you as I did."

"B-But those who cannot contribute are-"

"Stop," she orders, placing both hands over his shoulders. "You've been fielding more reports than anyone else, and watching over the shelters mostly on your own. Can you not see what you have accomplished thus far?"

"… You never really praise me, everyone says I'm not working hard enough." Looking down, shutting down, inwards, he claws at his arms. "I'm just a burden, aren't I?" *Yeah, like always. Never doing anything that matters, no one can rely on me. Just like how I left them alone at the end of Ouka. They? Who are 'they'?*

Suddenly, there is softness. Slowly bringing her arms around him, Amato pulls him closer, careful not to disturb the tubes still attached to his arm. "You're nothing of the sort. I've made many mistakes, I… have been releasing my frustrations on you, truth be told." She admits, biting her lips as she runs a hand over his dry hair. "Being all day in the office has unnerved me, and it is why I was unaware of your efforts. Forgive me, I shouldn't have placed such heavy burdens on your young shoulders."

"Eh? So… you won't send me away or anything? Aren't I useless?"

"Don't be ridiculous… I'm telling you, that was uncalled for. I am apologizing, so take it to heart, Shirogane. I… will endeavor not to let my temper get the better of me from now." She swears, her hold over him tightening. "So, while I appreciate your hard work, do not keep such things away from my notice. I… I'm sorry, truly."

And for a moment, he merely cries softly.

Every wail sends further knifes into Amato's lungs, the mirror wishing to crack and send the shards into her neck. Once more, like many moons ago, she starts to feel tiny grains of rice, many grains of rice engraving into her knees, her very bones. Swollen, hurting more and more she was made to kneel over the dry grains, the pools and ponds of red that beneath her skin formed, her arms raising in defense as the young soldier had done moments before upon the yells of her father, the dejection she had now imitated and thrust upon the boy.

Her inner affliction, her own oath towards her underling, her apologies to her brother are short lived, however. Her thoughts are snapped cleanly when her fingertips meet wetness on his back. And all air is lost within her when she sees the glove coming up stained in red, red like her dress.

"What in the Heavens… Shirogane, can you turn around?" She asks, placing a hand on his shoulder. He nods, slowly, and tries to move despite the bindings. The white of the hospital garb was now

drenched red, even the sheets had a large stain on them. "… What is the meaning of this?" Eyes widening, teeth gritting, she pulls at his garb, to the soldiers confusion. Upon removing it hastily, she finds a large open wound on the left side of his chest, and many more small scars littering his backside.

Freshly carved into his body, the wounds ooze blood yet do not hurt the soldier, who cannot understand why Amato had deprived him of modesty nor why Yasomaga was paling more with every passing second. Of course, it is but an ill turn of events, that they had to come check up on him shortly after the… beginning of the integration occurred.

It did not stop the quake of anger, the frown that spiraled out of control in Amato's eyes. "Who did this to you?"

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"Look at yourself! You're bleeding all over!" She yells, and the sight of blood gives a momentary flash of vertigo to the young boy. "What happened here? Who hurt you so?!"

"I… I don't know… I can't… Ugh!"

Fire, wings of fire. Two bodies in a gurney, or two pieces of charcoal perhaps. Not understanding, his breathing grows shallow.

"Yasomaga, what is the meaning of this?!" Seeing his confusion, Amato stands and approaches the girl, who was assigned as his guardian.

"I-I do not know! Takeru was fine yesterday," she reports, standing in attention, fearful of the advance of the Red Lighting upon her person.

"Do you take me for a fool?! Answer me, what is the cause behind those scars?! You were watching over him until visiting hours were over, weren't you?" She asks, invading the girl's personal space, almost emitting a heatwave off her person.

"Y-Yes, I was, Raiko-sama. I, um, I only allowed Maya-sama to see him before light's out."

Amato's eyes blaze dark, grabbing the girl by the collar, demanding an explanation for the missing report on this matter, on what transpired during that visit.

And so, neither notices the clawing, crushing grip of both hands upon his nape. The mumbles, the whispers, the twitch in his eyes. Memories flowing back, faster and faster. Molding into what he now knows, the twisting nightmares grow taller, distorted, toxic.

The ports of battle, the repression of civilians. It aligns with the death of Kurosawa, and he bends and bites his lips.

The dismissal and aggression he felt from the one who at one point was his stepsister, reflecting emotions he cannot comprehend towards the Takemikazuchi that gave chase, aiming a blizzard his way.

In the silence of his mind, trying to endure, a face popped up. The face of his friend, who he had lost to the Fall of Yokohama.

And it all comes crashing down like the tidal wave within his memories, his composure, his temperature, even his skin tone which pales more and more. It all crumbles as a memory comes to him, what preceded their union at a critical juncture. Yet, now knowing she was, perhaps, trapped by the BETA…

… the cruel truth she revealed to him back then only serves to sever any and all semblance of reason away from his mind.

Amato and Yasomaga halt their discussion as he cries, as he pulls the tubes off his arm, throwing the IV to the ground. Yet, their steps halt and a void is imprinted on their stomachs, when hearing the draconian war cry that from his lips surges forth as those little, tiny worms squeeze their way down the throat of his friend.

A dialyzer falls and break into the tiles, the monitors also follow suit.

Blood oozes still from his open wounds, further from his lips and eyes as the memories fall upon his mind, as he once more recalls all his mind.

And like the thunderstorm within this Black Lilith, in image of the dark dragon he thrashes about, crying non-stop as he does, undoing what near his hands lie, not finding solace, the flow of reminiscence not stopping.

Hands that binds, shouts that beg for calmness are met with further thrashing. Strong enough to send both of them flying towards a wall, to then punch, and claw, and rip the sheets to shreds, to tiny, tiny pieces. Just as his Takemikazuchi did to that same friend, when finding her abandoned in the JFK Hive. Perhaps, making the link subconsciously is what spurs him to send the chair flying towards the window, to shatter it in a thousand pieces.

And crying and weeping, he struggles against the myriad of arms that try and restrain his outrage. And even outnumbered by a factor of five, they still are just as useful as a wooden rampart against a typhoon. Yet, within the heart, he's sinking into the deep sea, further and further below, where no light truly does reach. The storm inside him knows no end, as voices and people he now knows only spur forward memories of days he could not, did not wish to recall. A slice on his throat, skull-shattering pain in between his brows.

And, even as everything spins and fades, as the anesthetic dulls his mind into slumber, there is one last figment, one last gaze he meets which compulses further tears.

" *Sumika-san is dead. Your fight is already over."*

A pull on my shoulder, the vision cuts off.

Her cerulean gaze wavers as she takes in a deep breath. "This was plentiful… We've interfered enough."

"… That's not for you to decide," I turn away, closing my eyes once more, shapes swirling in the dark.

"What exactly are you hoping to achieve with this observation?" She asks, as dry and monotonous as always.

"… Really, I don't know. All I'm certain of is, I want to stay by him, even if as a mere observer."

"Sigh… You know there is no way in which Shirogane-san could avoid Lucifer."

"I'm not forcing you to watch, am I?" I look back, frowning, tapping my forearm.

She grimaces, looking away. "I can hear the echoes from your mind."

"Simply stop stalking me then."

"It will only hurt you more," she says, turning around, walking towards the exit. "I doubt he'd be able to fully recall everything, as he is now Shirogane-san won't be able to avoid-"

"Shut up and get out of here already," I fume, turning away, closing my eyes.

Zoning her out, zoning everything out, I return to my observation.

He now lays resting on the bed, Amato stomping over the nurses in her demands to know what had hurt him. Breathing regular, regaining his usual color. While within his mind perhaps much chaos will remain, his aura isn't scattered. Sturdy as an oak, I should not be surprised.

And yet, I do admit she has a point. Furthermore, it is somehow ironic. You, who was once referred to as the silver blossom, might truly resemble such flowers. Known as the white chrysanthemums, symbol of nobility and loyalty.

… And as what flowers are offered to caskets during funerals. It is almost hilarious, white chrysanthemums can only bloom from October to December, too. Sigh…

Despite it all, his vital signs are stabilizing. With enough time and support, he'll walk again. Now that he has exhausted what excess G-Radiation he absorbed due to the laser irradiation, the memory inheritance shouldn't be as harsh and sudden.

… Still, what am I hoping for here? Even as we spoke, he was hesitant, scarred. Resolute by the end, but by his lonesome what could he accomplish?

And yet, gazing at his sleeping face, at the calmness that thankfully sets in, all I can do is extend a prayer, howl towards that distant Earth you are in. Hoping whatever meager effect I can leak to you can aid your sleep, even if only slightly. The blazes within your soul are yours to tame, and in no small amount I have only caused further distress to you. If that dark dragon we met on our way to you a moment ago is any proof, you were more hurt by that incident than me. Physical injuries heal with time, emotional ones… are not guaranteed to.

It is saddening, that this is all I can hope to do. Just watch, silently. Simply watch, as you're mistreated, as you continue to maim yourself, as you push yourself into hospitalization. Now that we are away, I cannot even grant you the respite of an embrace. Truly, what am I hoping to achieve by remaining watching?

Sigh… Shooting stars truly are sad entities. Burdened with hopes and dreams, fated to be forgotten as fast as they flash through the skies. However, I do not wish to turn around and forget. You might have fallen to the ground, you might be burning, fading even, but I refuse to simply forget you. I waited for so long, and against all odds, against all probability, my wish was granted. Thus, despite being only able to send some meager echo, a faint wish of protection to you, I won't abandon you, my shooting star.

Even if I can only accompany you in dreams, even if this is all I can do to repay you.

… I'm not asking for another miracle out of you.

You do not have to take the sword once again if it pains you.

Much less prevent or overcome Lucifer, there is no need for such lofty goals.

Even less to truly recall everything, and face another war over the Alternative Projects.

And wrapping my arms around my body, recalling your embrace and our brief time together, I simply watch you sleep. If you are listening, if could allow me to be selfish one last time, all I would ask, all I would wish for… if you could grant me only one final request, then just… just please…

"… Please stay safe, dad."

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*A/N: I won't have another chance to do this, so here goes:*

**YOU NEVER SAW IT COMIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIING!**

*Now, stupid joke aside, this was the grand twist I've been building towards since the start of the rewrite. Leaving many hints towards the fact that Takeru being a parent would be a relevant plot point was one of the hardest things for me to do, since as the writer I thought them to be obvious and I've been second guessing myself on whether the reveal was going to work, if it would have any impact at all on my writing's own merit and not solely for the connection with canon material.*

*The one cool method I thought to use was to have the narrator use turns of phrases or expressions that only Takeru or her mother use, maybe hoping it would blur in the background and end up assumed*

*as my own narrative voice. SirGaraf was the only that pointed out one of such turns of phrases, so at least the repetition was obvious enough to be noticed. Other small things were how he's referred as a **d** ark **a** rmed **d** ragon, an iconic Yugioh card that is always shortened to DAD, and a few other moments scattered about that put to question him being a parent or alluded to it somehow. Same with the title of the chapter where he regains certain memories, **D** espair **A** fter **D** eath.*

*There are other little funny things hidden in the titles and I honestly wonder if all of this foreshadowing was too cryptic to work properly or if anyone figured parts of this puzzle before this chapter, like who the mother of the narrator is or how DADkeru was going to be a thing.*

*I'd like to know your thoughts on the foreshadowing, to see if it's worth it for the way forward. I know many have voiced their oppositions to flashbacks or detours from the 'main' events, but at least in that way you, the readers, are aware of all the pieces. I dunno if leaving things to implications, more with my cryptic way of using foreshadowing, would work out so as to not cause confusion, as the parts with the narrator have been thus far before this reveal that it actually isn't a third person narrator but the PoV of Keru's daughter.*

*As for why I put this twist in an already charged story, my most favorite part of the trilogy is Unlimited's ending. I cannot state how much I love and hate Song of a Distant Earth.*

*Ever since I received my first piece of harsh criticism in the OG chapter 31, I've been thinking on how to turn around the overwhelming angst Takeru faces on a chapter by chapter basis. More than anything, the lie that he believes in, that he never saved anyone and never really contributed as much as the rest, the ghosts that he refuses to let go of. So, learning that he had indeed saved his lover, that he saved his child's life more importantly, seeing it with his own eyes instead of just being told of it is what I thought would be the best catalyst to change his mindset, to become his pillar of*

*strength amidst the never-ending stream of setbacks he's been facing in the Reversal timeline.*

*This in turn sent quite the chaos into the storyboard, into how to line up the events and references, and I've been juggling how to make it all work since the end of 2020 more or less, since the OG chapter 59 that kickstarted the 'The Days Before' arc. I dunno if this twist will work, if it was actually obvious this was coming to everybody, or if it'll be too random and land like a cannon ball on a lake.*

*In any case, whether the implications this has for the plot and Keru's actions from now on are clear or not, whether this was a decent payoff for this Mind Dive mini arc, the tone has been set. I hope those reading now can at least catch a glimpse of where this is heading to, and why the conflicts of views and objectives will occur.*

*That's all on my end, sorry for the rant. Updates might be few and far between as I work on some sidestories, IRL stuff has me without much free time lately. But any new chapters for my stories will come out during Sundays from now on whenever it is they're ready for posting.*

*As always, thanks for reading. Stay safe.*

*Zuoriel*

# Riding the Undercurrents

" *She drifted off to the warmth of the masses*

*and I woke up desiring to dream her*

*Some time ago, I thought of writing to her*

*that I never learned to elude the booby traps of love*

*I won't be sending ashes of roses*

*nor will I avoid any secret quickies*

*From that love like light music*

*Nothing shall free us*

*Nothing there is left*

*Nothing else…*

*Nothing else there is left"*

De Música Ligera, by Soda Stereo.

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[6th Arc: *Trust & Tolerance* ]

*Chapter 78:*

**Riding the Undercurrents**

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*December 4th. A few minutes before 8 AM.*

*(Underground Command Room.)*

**[Yuuko]**

---

A deep breath, a long exhalation, not inhaling for a few seconds. The void lingers, accompanied by the light rush of both heels and soles, of white coats and dark dresses. One final glance at the monitor of my laptop, a quick scan through what pop ups were highlighted, nothing is out of order, there are no errors in the system.

"Professor," Yashiro calls out softly by my side, giving a court nod when I gaze her way, "the preparations are completed. We can proceed with the meeting on your word."

"I see." I then scour the whole room, the complexion of those around me.

Banners to war, horns about to be blasted, smoke already within their eyes foretelling the blows soon to come. At long last, it is time to officially request the start of operations for the Project. For those who have stood since the start, like Isumi, or those who joined afterwards, like Radhabinod, it is the time to give back the change loaned from comrades long gone. To place their coin where it matters most, and win the long shot that it is the first victory in human history against the BETA. A tower of coins we have, from both those present and those who entrusted their shares to us. Even then, it is overshadowed by the Monument's shadow, wavering as the foundations threaten to slip further with nothing but the dismissive wave of a hand from HC.

"… Did we heard back from Daikuuji Corp?"

Yashiro shakes her head, shoulders sagging. "No, it seems their setbacks have not been resolved."

"Make a note to request an appointment with them in the short term."

Even if this serves as a bluff, I will need their expertise for when it is time to fine tune Model D. According to Shirogane, only due to Model

D's specifications and superior capabilities was the Kashgar Raid successful. It will take time for America to accept my terms, time that should be used to lay down mines with what little the G-Sun Project bestowed us with.

… Speaking of. Licking my lips, folding my arms and sighing, I hunch closer to Yashiro and whisper. "Any news on his condition?"

A shiver, a shake of her head, both bunny ears falling down and down slowly as little snow pearls to the ground. Only that her complexion is already fully covered by the bountiful frost, paling and cold.

I see. So you're still somewhere in dreamland, huh.

Sharply returning myself upright, I clear my desk of clutter as the rest of the staff deals with the order to prepare the transmission. Curling, crushing a ball of paper and shooting it towards the trash bin, swaying, slamming a folder open, flickering through the pages to find the right one, and lightly hitting the keyboard with a fingertip as the OS lags a response to ready all the assets and diagrams, slowly chipping at my bottom lip.

"XO Kouzuki, please do not be so distressed," Motoko-nee says, slowly coming up to me, expression tight as she ruffles her hair. "All the material has been reviewed thoroughly, we're as prepared for this as we feasibly could."

"I see, as expected. Return to your position, Chief Researcher Kouzuki. The meeting is due to start any second now."

She sighs shortly, her eyes lingering on me for a second as I busy myself with the laptop. Barely whispering her agreement, she slides or slouches back to her seat. Everyone else takes a few odd seconds to finish their task, all standing ready in attention then. I look at the crew, who raises their hands and signals the green light.

One final deep breath, rolling my shoulders, cracking them, the coins on them. I give the nod, the bar bells toll. It is a second, half a breath, what it takes for this curtain to raise. The beeps of machinery, the signal coming to the monitors, the whispers right behind, the creeping cold that embraces my backside, the reminder of all prior shows.

This time, however, will be different. I have a wildcard up my sleeve… even if he's out cold at the moment, the fruits of what intel he brought should allow me to enact my part of the pact as expected. After all, I now hold no hope for an agreement with the Americans. As faint as the expectation was, there could be a possibility, one could make a case with all we have to offer. Yet, he has given me the forewarning, and thus, my hand now has shifted accordingly. It is all a matter of seeing… whether that 'accident' in the XM3 trials will also be required.

All the monitors gain life and light, the gazes of the guests now coming in, the regal and imposing offices flaunting the emblems and flags of their respective faction. Some hurry to their seats, others give faint nods in early salutation, a few dally with their drinks of choice. Two in particular are fully focused on my features, aimed my way as a killer arrow would. And in perfect rehearsal, all of us here present step forward and give a court bow.

"Good day, ladies and gentlemen. Yokohama Base thanks you for attending this meeting," I say, then raise back up, take further steps forward, take the spotlight's dare. "Now, let's not waste time with the introductions, I'm certain you already know who is who. Before anything, allow me to thank you all for the support shown to Alt IV in the last few months, despite all the pressure that, certainly, you too have endured. I assure you, your time and money have not been misplaced. Well then, as the Executive Director of the Fourth Project, allow me to begin the presentation of what advancements this base has produced in recent months."

Nods meet my words, further focus, tightened and compacted postures on the seats. The Prime Minister behind his desk and a

retinue of advisors in nearby sofas await in complete neutrality under the Sun's Circle that sways in the light breeze of early morning. The five members of the UN Japan's High Council are seated in half a circle with sharpened expectation in a completely closed-off room in light cerulean with the large flag I also have hanging in my office, the representatives of the UN's Security Council are also seated in a similar manner though with a far more sober facade. Then, we also have the patrons from the Shogunate. All four Heads of the Regent Houses seated in their grand offices, windows showering rippling daylight on their backs, alongside their Shinpan retainers in protection, all of them gazing upon me with that same veiled threat and thin smile that never leaves their faces. Her Purpleness is no different in this occasion, despite the relaxed and soft demeanor she once more endows embers yet remain within her eyes, as could be said of some of her retainers that besides her stand.

Our little matters shall have to wait, however. I signal Pyatkh and she sends the images to them while I walk in front of the wall that's bathed with the same projected diagrams. Some of our guests look perplexed, others simply furrow their brows at the apparently unrelated data I've sent them. *Truly, they do seem to be as lost as penguins in a desert. And poor penguins, they are in front of a sandstorm.*

"Let's start with the key matter of this meeting," crossing my arms, standing upright and returning the spotlight's glare, the vast enmity of this theater. "As of today, Alternative IV has entered its last stage." A few people's shock was palpable, other's simply tensed their features. Slowly as a moving cloud, I pace in front of the wall, gaining a small smile for the spectators. "As a matter of fact, tonight I plan to activate the 00 Unit at long last. Yokohama Base is proud to announce that we are already making the necessary preparations for the eventual operations to come."

Halting my steps, I scan what within the monitors lies. Some shifted on their seats, looking expectantly at me. No whispers, full focus on myself this time. A captivated audience, albeit still judgmental.

Giving a minute bow, then I cross my arms, purposely looking away from them while busying a hand with a strand of hair, lightly nibbling an edge of my lower lip. "I do apologize for the lack of reports these last few months, however I finally had worked past the main operational problem we were facing, thus decided to wait until I had conclusive proof of my success before notifying this matter." A slow breath in, restoring the poker face, it's time to call and show my bet. "As the Vice Commander of Yokohama Base and the Director of the Fourth Project, allow me to briefly present you all with the recent developments that my research or its prior material has produced. With all of these together along the 00 Unit, I am confident to say that Alt IV is now able to officially begin its operations before next year, if the approval for an incursion to Sadogashima is given."

I look at all the monitors, gauging their reactions, their hands. A certain someone looks too appalled by the news, fingers shuffling through nothingness. The gazes of most of them, however, are filled with stars of delight and clouds of distrust, stuck between raising or folding. Tending towards the latter if I had to guess. It's understandable, my research has been stuck for many months. To hear me now saying I plan to take on a Hive most sound really farfetched to them, a valiant yet pointless death cry.

"Excuse, Vice Commander," the Head from the Takatsukasa family speaks, leaning slightly forward. "You speak of retaking Sadogashima, of completing the 00 Unit, however, what is the data you've sent about? This is in no way related to your project," he notes his displeasure through narrowed eyes, a raising chin. Meeting small nods of approval from a few seated by the PM, of some of his 'fellows', the imposing iron wall of the Imperials hesitates not in calling a bluff.

Most unlucky for you, I am not lying nor exaggerating in the slightest. *Yet, you shall regret that opposition in due time. Spit out as much venom as you please, the chain does not only tugs in one direction. This time I won't be selling myself short on-* No, focus, concentrate.

"What I've sent you is data regarding a few projects that have been completed in the last few hours and others that are close to reach their final testing phase. I know it might seem unrelated, yet all in due time," I state, giving the man a side glance then coughing and facing back to the wall with the diagrams. "All of what I'm about to show you has to remain confidential, after all. So, let's begin with the reports of what Alt. IV has produced in these last months. First of all, allow me to present to you a new operating system for our TSFs, the XM3."

Despite giving them only a summarized explanation, all of them are bewildered, to put it mildly, at the numbers and footage I'm showing. There is however something to note, the intensifying glare of Her Highness and her retainers as the test battle with Gekishins is shown. I assume, they recognize his patterns? So this world's Shirogane truly did pilot as recklessly as you do, huh. Tension overflows the one with lily hair, I believe the representative of the Amato House if my memory is not failing, before a small argument in whispers seem to start with the turquoise-haired retainer of Her Highness.

Once the brief summary ends and I answer some preliminary questions, Isumi steps forward and gives her report as the Captain of the Valkyries, noting the differences they felt at first, and a short explanation of all the new movements they could do with it once they had gotten used to the OS' quirks, all the while the respective footage plays. I do have to note the small delay, her fingers seeking to undo the formation, to break the stance in attention as her final opinion is requested.

"Despite being favorable, it is hard to ignore the strain the system could cause in our units," she says from her stomach, raising her eyes to face, to endure the entire theater. "It would require a detailed training methodology to not abuse the extra liberties and warn pilots not to attempt reckless maneuvers with their craft. However…" a momentary break of her gaze, veiling itself, persevering despite the ongoing downpour coming onto her, "our last trainings have proved

that the XM3 can allow TSFs to perform patterns not available with our prior configuration. I believe that, if given the proper time to devise a doctrine based on it, the XM3 OS will bestow us with many advancements and boons never thought possible," she affirms, facing ever forward.

No further questions are requested of her, thus she bows and steps back. Taking her place, giving her a minute nod as we cross gazes, I cough and slowly proceed.

"As you can see, the research of Alt IV allowed me to create this OS. It was merely meant to be a test for what I had built at the moment, but never did I think these would be the results. The thorough testing of the prototype has taking its fair share of time, thus delaying this meeting and my reports," I give a small bow, signaling the crew to halt the projection on the wall. Walking, stepping forward, lunging forward, I steel my tone, raise a blade to the spotlight. "Alt IV has produced an incredible upgrade for our fleet of TSFs and, since I believe it to be a necessary addition to the A-01 STF, I request to the UN and the Empire to allow Yokohama Base to conduct a test run for the XM3 OS."

Eyes widen *like kitties hearing thunders*, smiles folding and fading to sobriety, hidden by hands as they whisper to one another. Before what lurks within the fog, before the vipers in the bog decide to lunge forth, I cough and cross my arms, pressing on through the wires and warnings.

"The ideal scenario I hope for would be to host the test with pilots from the frontlines or the high nobility against units stationed here in this base piloting Gekishins, as the one in the footage I showed you moments ago. I believe the XM3 is key to the success of the Sadogashima incursion, so I desire the STF at the least to be allowed to officially deploy with the OS on the missions that will come. Also, since the XM3 lacks any data in actual combat, I wish to test the difference in performance between our current OS and the XM3 in a hard stress test, one could say."

As much as I don't care about following regulations to a T, I can't just sortie the Valkyries in an official mission with the XM3 without notifying it to the UN's HQ. If they notice a difference with the data link, it would bring me a lot of unnecessary bureaucratic problems. The bait is enticing enough, I doubt they'd fold on this offer.

"I think it's clear this is something we need to roll out ASAP," a gray-haired representative of the EU thus says. "If the intel is to be believed, then adopting the OS would equal not only a boost to the culling operations' rate of success but also possibly lower casualties in both the Eurofront and the Suez Canal frontlines. At the least, I concur it warrants consideration."

"Now, let's not be hasty," the Prime Minister speaks up this time, closing his eyes while stroking his thin beard. "While the numbers are indeed impressing, they are in the end just that. Numbers of an untested OS obtained in an isolated testing phase. I do not think it wise to pull valuable pilots from the frontlines for such a test. And while important, I believe Yokohama Base has more pressing matters than the testing of a new OS. We still have not heard a thing about the 00 Unit or its estimated performance. On that hangs the approval for the request of an incursion to Sadogashima, Vice Commander," he finishes, narrowing his eyes, interlocked fingers retreating closer to his chest, hiding yet revealing his hand. Huh, so that's where you stand…

"Kurechika-dono," Her Purpleness softly speaks, slowly entwining her fingers together, brandishing a small smile, "I believe all those gathered here would gain a great benefit from supporting the notion forwarded by the Vice Commander," eyes focusing back to me, to the monitor showing me perhaps, her stare lingers, I return a faint nod while rolling a strand of hair on a finger. She slowly continues. "If the IJA could adopt the XM3, it certainly would aid the survival rate of our troops, letting our soldiers protect our shores more efficiently. And that's without taking into account the possible boons the OS could provide to the war at large. The data provided by the A-01 STF

bequeaths bountiful proof of its potential, wouldn't you agree?" She asks, never losing the small smile, the softspoken tone.

Sakaki rearranges his glasses, his throat constricting as if swallowing a sigh. "Your Highness, according to the reports, the TSF's joints wear out much more faster with the use of this OS. We are barely keeping up with the demand of spare parts, so even if this OS would allow us to attain a higher performance, it would come attached with a much higher maintenance cost making the adoption moot since our units would still be out of commission, stuck in already filled maintenance bays." Taking a pause, leaning back on his chair, the wave, that dismissive wave of a hand as his eyes close. "We also cannot ignore that it would take a significant amount of time for our surface pilots to learn how to make the most out of this OS. Furthermore, this meeting was supposed to-."

"If you excuse me, Prime Minister," I address him, smiling a bit, picking the edge of a card to drop, "Yokohama Base has developed a new simulator unit to aid both experienced pilots and fresh cadets to adapt to the XM3," I state, and am followed by more tension, whispers, *more kitties and thunders,* more Yashiros in front of carrots. A small groan, a low flap of the bunny ears, she looks away and I almost chuckle. A fast breath in, coughing into a hand restores my composure. "We also have developed a few programs that could be used in the training of future cadets more efficiently. Pyatkh, Yashiro."

Both nod and send the next batch of intel, the little sims' performance. And this time, all of them are surprised. Except for the members of our HC, of course. A preliminary explanation from myself, burrowing terminology from your little odd reports, followed by Isumi's thoughts on the machines, despite once more almost showing some manner of dejection, blinking fast and looking elsewhere as she details the results the STF has procured thus far. It all causes further silence, an echo in the cave. And while it is pleasant to bewitch an audience in such a manner, utter absence of sounds is not what I expected. A few whispers, some reread the intel

forwarded, a few garbed in blue allow fissures to break the mask of composure they endowed. Clay falling to dust, the first sparks finally raise forth.

"XO Kouzuki, how and when did you devise such advanced machines?" Another one from the EU members of the Security Council repines, a hand sending what little hair fell on his forehead backwards. A look of utter bafflement at the data of the consoles, a slight frown my way for said same reason.

To think this entertainment hardware would turn into such a valuable tool. And they haven't seen it in action with their own eyes yet. If the Valkyries' performance is flooring them, I can't wait to see how they'll react to your-

…

Well, assuming you ever decide to wake up, that is.

Sharply inhaling, crossing my arms and clawing at my elbows, I return the harsh and tight gaze for only a moment. "That is my secret, as it is tied to my research. As I've been saying, I tried to produce results away from the 00 Unit while I was stuck, these are merely the results of me getting out of my 'researcher's block', you'd understand. While I do know it is quite fair for you all to be taken aback, I believe this is nothing but the baseline of what boons the project should give as results, after all the support and funds you have graced it with," I say, giving a smile, a faint bow to ease the rising tide.

Upon their inquisitive stares and further queries, I again briefly explain to them the functions of the MMTS and the WMTS, retelling the small speeches Shirogane had done to convince me of the usage of the games for training recruits. Morooka joins in, giving his own spin amidst a question, perhaps something you had told him during the interrogation, easing the stream, calming the tide, both those in the Security Council and the Empire's HC lower their banners and cease the questions.

"So with these machines to aid Instructors, I assure you that the adoption of the XM3 will proceed smoothly. And we may gain many benefits from using the sims to train cadets with all of the other programs we have developed for them, if there is interest in said functions. Of course, if any of you has an idea to develop another training program I didn't think of, I'm more than willing to hear you out later."

"Vice Commander, if I may," the Head of the Ikaruga House speaks up, annoyingly slow, with that trademarked thin smile never wavering, "I cannot help but to notice that, in the documentation thus provided, these inventions are recognized as Imperial tech yet the patent belongs to the UN. Could you cast some clarity to the motives behind this arrangement?" He asks, stirring the storm, opening a gateway to thunders.

Sighing short, brushing my bangs to hide the minute squinting of my eyes, I stare back to the disquiet within the audience. "Because while they were developed with Japanese parts and machinery, the funds and test personnel belonged to the UN, and through their development we used resources and intel belonging to my research for the completion of the units. Thus, the machines fall under UN jurisdiction even if they were made with Japanese tech," I state, fluidly and not faltering at the glint of blades garbed in red, at the minute cracks in those in blue. Not like I can let them know the HC took them from Shirogane, that would spill all the mess the CCSE brought us out in the open. "Do not worry, my ideal plan would be to give the Empire a year of exclusive use under a trial stage, if you agreed to cooperate in their mass production and there is interest in what these sims can accomplish. As much as I'd like to make more of these, we don't have the time nor the hands for it." This will be a nice gift for you all, if you take my side. My neck isn't so stiff to not bow a bit when it benefits me, I do want them to stop being so hostile towards the UN after all. Hopefully with this, you can all start to-

"Excuse me," the American representative of the Security Council spoke up, breaking my inner monologue with the loudness, the

booming of a smacking hand onto a desk, "if the machines belong to the UN, why do you suggest to give the Empire the machine's exclusive use and producing rights without first doing a bidding for their licensing rights? The US would be more than willing to mass produce the simulators, and regardless of their usage for the new OS I believe the technology of these sims holds merit on their own," he nods my way, firm as a rock, clear as dawn. Huh, unexpected but not unwelcome. "We have the industries to quickly make thousands of these in a matter of weeks, going by their schematics. We could arrange a test run in many bases on our country and in South America with ease to boot," stopping to look at his peers seated besides him, gaze sturdy and not faltering, "I believe the rest of you all are in agreement that we are the most-"

"With all due respect, sir," Ikaruga interrupts, coldly and calmly, without even changing his blank expression, "these machines are a Japanese invention. Thus, it is only natural that they should be tested where they were created. There is no need to perform a bidding, as I'm certain the rest of the UN would rather have the machines tested and delivered in a timely manner as opposed to the coming bureaucracy that would delay their adoption should a bidding be required." The American glares at the screen, probably at Ikaruga, the other members of the Council and HC tighten their expressions, shift in their seats while looking away, eyelids descend and call curtains to their intentions. Ugh… This always happens. "I do, however, think that the Empire should have a percentage of ownership over them, albeit a small one, due to its contribution to their creation. My fellows, I believe a mere 4% isn't much to ask? What do you think?" The other leaders of the Regent Houses compact in their seats, some members of the HC also groan as they grasp their chins, share whispers.

A small argument ensues, a desire to host a bidding over proper UN channels on one side being met in firm opposition from the proposal to hasten the production of the units by granting the Empire the production rights, along a small percentage of the earnings as Ikaruga proposed. This isn't unexpected, but it's still bothersome.

Shirogane did want to give the Empire a small percentage according to Morooka, and he did try to make that happen during his negotiations along Mitsuko-nee, but the UN's Undersecretary came with the news that the UN wants total ownership over the consoles. Even I would have it hard to give them a slice of this cake, I can't waste my favors on this. Furthermore, this is only a small detour, another piece forward. Allowing animosity to brew over this when we haven't even gotten to the actual talks of Sadogashima will only make the negotiation go south.

"Your attention, please," upon hearing Her Purpleness' voice, they all quiet down. She coughs, a simple nod before speaking. "While I understand my fellows' wishes, I believe it fair for us to not perceive any monetary gain from the new simulator units. Let this be a show of goodwill from the Empire to the UN, to prove to all of you we are more than willing to start contributing to the war efforts." A sharpened gaze, *fire seems to be about to roar out of her.* Yet, she gives the cameras a nod, the silk restored to both features and tone. "Representatives, I do not wish to keep pushing our burdens onto the US. We have already asked much from your nation during this year. Certain I am that you are most upset at how the XFJ Project turned out, and at the words some of my fellows spoke during that time. Please, allow us to shoulder this endeavor. The Empire of Japan will deliver these simulators to the UN, and we shall perform their test run to correct any possible defects they may have, or to improve them with the data we gain in this year. We will share all that we obtain from the testing of course, and we shall bequeath the UN a polished product according to the standards they require. Please allow the Empire to prove its worth to you all, as the host nation of the Project it is our duty, a duty we shall take in pride. Kurechika-dono, could you perhaps arrange a meeting with the heads of our industries? I believe we should all have a talk at large some other time, if there is interest for the sims."

The Prime Minister agrees, not wanting to oppose her this time. The representatives also quiet down, knowing that refusing the Shogun would mean getting into a lot of trouble. I didn't choose this day to

reveal these things on a whim, nobody would want to start an argument when Alt IV has entered its final stage. And as expected, now that she is vying to make the test run a reality there is a small shield covering me this time. The UN representatives give some more compliments to the consoles, giving their agreement to see their worth at a latter date yet without tying it to the XM3, as I had expected.

"Ahem…" Let's take this tide to calmer waters before they start bickering again, those tense features in the IRG monitors won't remain underwater for long. "Now, as you all already know, part of the XFJ Project has been assigned to Yokohama Base." A few more raised brows, a few stares losing luster and interests. "I now would like to inform you that the railgun has reached its testing phase," and now, tension and widening eyes again fill the audience, surprise at the twist of scenery in the play, at me raising over my own call.

I signal Pyatkh once again, the data is sent to them. Her Purpleness seems pleased, and the people from the UN cannot hide their shock despite attempting to do so. Hide your lips all you want, the quick flicker of their eyes between each other and their laptop's screens can only mean one thing. However, the four Heads and Sakaki seem to be intently devouring the data, despite the echo of unsheathing coming from the sobered expressions in those monitors.

"Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to present to you the Test Type-01X EML-Railgun. Allow me to explain the differences briefly as you read through the documentation," I say, pacing closer to the wall where the diagrams are projected. Coughing, taking a moment to ascertain they were all ready and in attention, basking in the murmur of the audience, I begin the explanation. "When compared to the standard railgun, the Test Type-01X model was shrunk in size due to the change in its ammunition. Now it can carry seven hundred payloads of 90mm ammo. However, as you can see," I wave to the wall, the diagram shifts, their lips and cheeks contract while mine relax into an honest smile, "its power has barely been affected. I am proud to announce we are close to finishing its first working

prototype, there are only some small touches left that are being handed as of now by the crew. I would like to test it as soon as possible, in live combat of course. When there is another BETA incursion from Sadogashima, I ask you to allow me to deploy the A-01 STF with the weapon in support," I state, staring straight ahead. This time, all the five Heads and Sakaki agree to it without any arguments, the HC's members also approve the notion timely.

"Excuse me." Another representative, I think from France going by her accent, speaks up as her eyes seem to narrow, focusing and strengthening the stream coming from within. "When and how was this weapon built? I was under the impression the original model was destroyed in Kamchatka a few months ago."

"I suppose I could show you the details," I cross my arms, looking at Pyatkh once more. The dates and progression of the railgun's development are sent to all of them, a small concession in truth. "As you can see, the UN accepted to cooperate with the Empire in this mutual endeavor. Special thanks should be given to 1st Lt Takamura of the Royal Guard, who pushed for this joint project to be a reality and has been giving the Alt IV Research Team many good results in the short time she has been assigned to my base."

I don't like giving free praise like this, but mentioning the IRG will please the nationalists present here. And she did give me better results than I expected, with her help to Tamase and the rest of the squad during their trainings. For Marimo to allow her presence, it means she is capable enough. It looks like your little hunch was proven correct, Shirogane. She did a fine job as a supporting teacher thus far.

Coughing, pacing to a side, I continue. "Having access to its black box, we were able to build a working prototype much faster than before thanks to the data produced during the XFJ Project. Sadly, we didn't have the resources to rebuild it as it used to be, so compromises had to be made as you can see in page seven, where all the comparisons with the first prototype are. Due to a certain research on my end, the process could be streamlined and with the

full cooperation from 1st Lt Takamura the production of parts found little to no setbacks or delays."

"Might I ask if the weapon is also under a UN patent?" Takatsukasa inquires, leaning forward.

"Considering that both parties were involved in this, the EML-Railgun is a shared property of the UN and the Empire," I retort immediately, crossing my arms.

I don't want to deal with any more nonsense, so giving them 40% of the royalties is not such a big deal. The UN also doesn't want to keep antagonizing the nobility for such small matters, that's why they accepted this arrangement. I'm sure they would like to gain access to the railgun, and if they can mend their relations with the Empire while they're at it, it's killing two birds with one stone. Even if embers remain buried within the ashes, all it takes is a small spark to cleanse all the tension in-

" *Takeru-san said… he had doubts about you, about an incident that would happen soon. That's why he didn't want to wake up."*

…

"So would the prototype be ready for testing as of now?" Sakaki inquires, untying the chains that threatened to choke me.

Coughing, they refuse to break away, bending and twisting and coiling over my stomach instead. Taking a moment to swipe my tongue within my mouth, cleaning the bad taste, I nod as I look back at the monitors. "It should be ready for its first stress test this afternoon, if nothing out of order occurs. And if we confirm it works as it should, I would like for it to go through the necessary bureaucratic channels as fast as possible, to allow for its deployment during an eventual incursion into Sadogashima. And as opposed to its prior location, we have here a way to quickly recharge its most vital energy source." They all narrow their eyes, knowing I'm talking about the Reactor. We really would benefit from being able to extract

more ODL from it. Maybe Shirogane was right, we should try to capture Sadogashima's Reactor too. "As you can see, there are many advancements made in the recent months. Which is why I believe there is no better time to begin the formal operations of the project."

They all again sink in whispers, shrouded in fog. Requesting another opinion on the subject, Radhabinod steps up and gives his impressions about the weapon, about how he sees it could change the tide of a battle when used wisely, his own posture towards the requested assault. Questions are answered and the representatives agree that the weapon is promising, but that in their opinion the Mk. 57 of the EU is the more versatile weapon. They do, however, agree that its destructive power seems to be a bit above it, since many Mk. 57s would need to use all of its 120mm ammo to dispatch such a large number of Destroyer-Class as the railgun could, even if it has better range and it still had its 205mm remaining.

In the end, each weapon has its own advantages. The railgun is better fit for a defensive role, so its perfect for our coastal defense strategies, or for a machine like the XG. Unless we managed to make a bigger, sturdier TSF who could move with it without losing speed. On the other hand, the Mk. 57's versatility and lightness make it the obvious choice for culling operations, where the railgun's weight and the need to remain stationary when firing it could endanger the mission's success and the pilot's life. It's also much easier to mass produce. However, thanks to having the Reactor here, we might be able to use its spoils to increase the barrel life of the railgun. The Mk. 57 does not belong to the UN though, so they might want to push for it to have their own weapon, since the EU refuses to share the licensing rights of their new gun. Oh well, it's done and that's what matters. Now I can focus on making the ones for the XGs. Mitsuko-nee will handle the negotiations, and I rather focus on polishing the model we have built already for what is to come.

"Now then, let's move onto the next report. As you could see during the footage beforehand, the Gekishin used during the trial employed far more dexterity than what baseline we have as of now. However, that was not only due to the XM3," I pace to the wall, new diagrams flash onto it, my shadow obscuring some of them. "A certain realization brought these ideas to me, so I would like to present you all the new parts we have developed for the F-4 and F-15 alongside a brand new stealth system, as well as the results we gained with these and the Type-00C using the XM3." The hammer ain't stopping anytime soon, get used to it folks. *Now that I got my game on, there won't be any breaks for a while.*

To say they were surprised is an understatement. Even Her Purpleness was shocked at the performance of the Kagerou Shirogane piloted during Niigata, even if it was formally during a test run. Of course, the HC and all the representatives lost their minds at the intel we gained during the runs the Blood Squadron has been doing with the modified Gekishins based on Shirogane's Shin Gekishin, and the Prime Minister and the four Heads simply didn't believe it as they all started discussing what was shown to them with those nearby.

It is understandable, however. Between the new parts and the XM3, the Gekishin obtained better numbers than our base Kagerou, and the Kagerou was almost on par the Shiranui, even though Shirogane's F-15 was still using prototype parts back then. Of course, the real surprise came with the results the Valkyries obtained with the Type-00C through the XM3. Simply put, the Type-00C could stand toe to toe with the Berkut or the Raptor, going by the numbers without the stealth. And while testing is still necessary, I believe that with the stealth however it should have an an edge over a Berkut in the hands of a skilled pilot. Before, it would be an uphill match dependent on both pilot's skill. With the XM3 and stealth capabilities, however, the Type-00C would have the clear advantage.

And if only you would wake up, these reports would be thrashed in a heartbeat if they demanded more out of us.

Cleansing my throat, enduring the cackle of the heavy chains, I step forward, face them once more. "I'm sure you all realized this by now, but with these parts and the XM3 we have a simple and economic way of enhancing the worldwide frontline. Certainly, all the Strike Eagles would welcome some of these parts, and even if they didn't, the XM3 by itself should be a giant boost in performance as you can see with the limited data we gained through our tests. The same for all the F-4 variations that are still in use in the African front. That's without taking into account the stealth capabilities we could give them too, if you allow us to proceed with a test run and you find the results satisfactory."

"Forgive me for doubting you, Vice Commander," the American raises his voice once more, pinching his nose as he shakes his head, "but you say you could best the Raptor? The battlefield dominator, the TSF that has yet to be defeated? I find it hard to believe. And while it is incredible on its own, I don't think this stealth system can compare to that of the Raptor. Also, while it seems promising, the XM3 has not enough hard data yet. Arranging a trial run seems rushed to me at this point."

"Is that so? For me, it is imperative to bolster the STF's capabilities to allow the 00 Unit to proceed with its intended objective. I must insist on this matter, unless, of course, my prior request for the XG line is accepted."

He frowns, shaking his head as he sighs. "I do not think the US would be willing to fork over the Hi-MAERF Project for any of your current offerings, XO. While impressive, none of these advancements match American tech already available."

Tch… These proud Americans can't accept so easily that someone made something better than them. Well, I'll just have to prove it to them. You're gonna beg for it, be sure of that.

"Of course the stealth system doesn't compare, it is in the earliest stages of its life." And I saved my best pieces of tech for myself. "But considering all the setbacks the Lightning II's production is suffering,

I'm certain the Eurofront would be interested on these spoils Alt IV has created, even if only on the sensors, antennas and chaff missiles. All of the tech devised thus far along the XM3 is in need of actual hard data to back their performance, that's why I'm asking to perform an official test run. However, if the UN doesn't think they're worth it, I won't waste your time any further. The licensing rights can go to the Empire, if there is any interest."

"But of course, I believe such advancements would be welcomed by our industries," Her Highness follows up on my trail, nodding in clarity. "All of us are in agreement on this notion?" She asks, her retainers agree immediately and all four Heads also do in unison, a small delay coming from the PM and his advisors.

"Now wait a second!" The French woman shouts as she slams the desk, her cascading hair flowing to a side due to the haste of the movement that also sends her mug to meet the floor. "If the US doesn't have a need for the parts that's on them, but at the very least I assure you that France will be more than willing to make a bid for them."

"In the Queen's name, I can confirm that Britain would also be interested in acquiring this stealth system and new OS," the small British woman affirms immediately after, a faint and small nod afterwards.

And with that, the representatives start arguing among themselves again, with Mitsuko-nee and the other members of our HC trying to calm them down, only for the four Heads to interject, saying the Empire should have exclusive access to the parts too. Well, at least the discord should open a few gaps for me to strike at.

Of course America doesn't want another stealth system to exist. If they are the only ones who produce stealth tech, they can control how powerful the other nations' stealth capabilities are. So long as everything else is under the Raptor's level, they can always win against another army of TSFs. And if the F-22A is ever beaten… They have another one hidden behind the curtain. Not that I want to

see an F-23 getting deployed. I do not want to see the American Special Force getting involved in this theater, thank you very much. However, if it is to seal the patent under their own shelves, they'll try and wrestle the parts to their hands. While perhaps cooperation with them could happen, to mix and match our stealth systems and doctrines side by side, I highly doubt such an arrangement can happen. Those who support a TSF-centric doctrine are in league with Prominence, after all. I rather not mingle with them more than necessary, or with the ripples they come attached with. I rather not have to resort to any 'Hail Mary' tactics, if possible.

"I believe you can all negotiate on your own at a latter date," Mitsuko-nee cuts in the argument of the Security Council's representatives, who sigh and look away from each other, echoes of dissidence still rumbling in their tight postures and gestures. She crosses her legs and hands before continuing. "Considering the Empire already has expressed their desire to acquire the license, I believe all of us would benefit from allowing Yokohama to hold this test run. Both for these parts, the small simulators, and the XM3. It would clear all the doubts we currently have, and grant the STF a most needed edge for the Sadogashima mission."

"Now, let's not get ahead of ourselves," the Prime Minister again protests, giving small little hits to the wood before pushing his glasses up. "The goal of this meeting is discussing the state of Alt IV and whether or not it's ready to begin its operations before we commit to a mission on Sadogashima, not to be making bids over new pieces of tech. Vice Commander Kouzuki," interlocking his fingers, what ailing venoms do lurk behind his eyes, enough to pale his complexion, the grip of shade over it, "could you proceed to give us the report on the 00 Unit? On that machine's performance hinges the success of the project, after all."

"… Well, if you insist. Just let me clarify something. All I've shown you thus far is deeply tied with Alt IV's success. As I said before, I plan on taking on the 21st Hive before the end of the year so it's in my best interest to improve our firepower as much as the timeline

allows. So by presenting the XM3 and all the other developments that my team has produced, I was giving you all an idea of what cards are available to us. I would like to avoid another Swaraj from happening under my command, you'd understand," I spit out in sincere poison, glaring, threatening. The men and women from the UN grimace but nod at my words, the older ones from the four Heads do so too, Her Highness sighs as she slumps in slow dejection. Sigh… Glad we can all agree in that, at least. "But if you're so impatient, let's cut to the chase. First, these are the numbers of the A-01 STF before and after the XM3 and their change to the Type-00C. This is the current power of Alt IV's vanguard." Pyatkh and Yashiro send the data, with some footage of their trainings playing behind me as I slowly pace to and fro. "Now, as you all know, for security measures I can't show you the machine or detailed data about it, but here is the report about the 00 Unit's expected performance once fully tuned."

I nod, Yashiro fiddles with the keyboard, filing the comparison of the expected performance between the revamped 00 Unit and the old prototype, though it still is only the bare minimal intel. Motoko-nee proceeds to take the spotlight, detailing some of the reworkings she had to tackle, some of the advancements she has produced in the last month. Tying this to the parallel work of the feedback interface, as we did when designing the auto-translator for the datalink structure, allows her to deflect most questions by keeping things professional and using technical terms, buzzwords, and the usual annoying manner of jokes she tends to do, despite the seriousness required.

She takes a step back once she's done, giving me a nod, a faint smile. I merely return the nod, feeling the air seeping down my throat, fighting the grip of the chains, the rocking of the coins. "As the report should have indicated, I will make the 00 Unit perform various tests in due time to evaluate its capabilities and modify the planning accordingly. Which is why I would like to acquire the XG line as soon as possible. I shall be updating you with the clear numbers after it's activated and running. While we do have other means to perform the

mission, I believe the XG to be the best machine we have at our disposal. I will insist on the transfer of the Hi-MAERF Project to Alt IV command until the last possible moment. I also would like to inform you I would like to capture the Sadogashima Hive without completely destroying its core, if possible. Considering how vital the resources we could extract from it are, I believe we should try to push for its capture. Of course, the mission's success comes first, but I would like to have another core to further push my research forward."

As I finish speaking, the members of the HC started discussing about how feasible it would be to capture a 'core' and then the Shogun asked the American about the possible terms of the transfer, and the man responded, fuming a barrage out and very harshly, that there were no plans to hand over the XGs. This caused the four Heads and the other representatives to start arguing, this time more heatedly, and my mention of instead choosing to rely on Imperial tech through the prior project handed to Daikuuji Corp only added fuel to the pyre, rising to cover all the offices in thick smoke, shrouding it all in combustion. In pressure towards the US' representative, receiver of more volleys than he can safely deflect with mere words without risking a slip up. Sadly, Mitsuko-nee and Her Purpleness placated them before things got out of control, before the cracks in the facade gave away.

Thanks to this, though, now I know where everybody stands, which color they hoist behind the forced neutrality. I clear my throat as they start to calm down, bringing the attention to me.

"Since it's possible that the XG line is not transferred to us, I began to take my measures to make sure we use the 00 Unit's capabilities to it's fullest. If the XG does not come to us, we have plans to not only redouble our efforts alongside Daikuuji Corp but to also develop a new program to link the 00 Unit to the XM3. This is only the theoretical data, but allow me to show you all… the IST," I turn around as I whisper, narrowing my brows and holding my breath captive.

"May I ask what is the acronym meant to represent?" A member of the HC asks.

"Sadly, it'll have to remain secret for the time being," I immediately counter, narrowing my eyes, pursing my lips and gagging on nothingness.

No way in hell I'll say out loud what it stands for. 'Instant Stunt Transfer', Shirogane what were you smoking when you thought about this name? Sigh… I thought he was kidding when he asked me if it would be possible for the 00 Unit to control more than an XG at a time, but I was not expecting you to suddenly want to have it command a squad on its own.

Pacing again over the edges of the spotlight, breathing in to dispel the small displeasure, I slowly continue. "Think of this protocol as a revamped and enhanced Slave Mode for our units. As you all know, the 00 Unit is a machine with unparalleled processing power. Someone on the base suggested me the idea of improving our AI and asked if it was possible to somehow reliably use Slave Mode on the frontlines one time. And that idea is the basis of this protocol. What the IST does is allow the 00 Unit to link itself with the data that's shared through the XM3's datalink to control a group of TSFs, pinpointing the best possible movements and actions for each of them in real time. According to my calculations, the 00 Unit is more than capable of controlling the XG line of the Hi-MAERF Project, so a group of TSFs shouldn't pose a problem to it. Through the IST, however, it could simultaneously control an XG and, let's say, a squad of TSFs by itself due to the enhancement of the mainframe required for the usage of the XM3. Using all the accumulated data of our best pilots at the same time, it could use the TSF under its control on a level on par with one of our ace pilots while sharing said data through the link to the pilots escorting it," I retell in my pacing, simply flowing down the river, causing them all to shift and whisper, ponder and wonder as if seeing fire or open sea for the first time.

… I still don't know how do you come up with this stuff, but I'll be damned. If this does work out and we gain access to the XG, there

will be little to nothing getting in our way. All I need is… *well, for you to wake up and be safe, first of all.*

"Vice Commander, this is a real possibility? The 00 Unit can… control a Squad of TSF and make them perform equally to a piloted Squad?" The American's voice was almost dry as Yashiro's when she eventually regained consciousness, yet not pale and cracked as she was, like an empty patch of sand.

Everybody else was simply too shocked to speak up. This is on a completely different level to our current AI, who can only replicate the movements its loaded with, and even then it lacks the quick thinking and reaction of a pilot. Who would have thought that mock battle with the Valkyries back in October would end up spawning this? Honestly Shirogane, you scare me sometimes. *So stop daydreaming already… and come back to me. We have a lot of work to do, don't we? I even have good news to give this time.*

Sighing, ruffling my hair, I then nod. "Yes, though I still need to test the protocol to see the extent of its usefulness, whether it is feasible to employ in live combat. What I'm saying is, we might not need to waste more human lives on the battlefield if this becomes a reality. With the XG and a capable fleet of TSFs at its escorts, the 00 Unit can probably recapture a Hive by itself if we drive it to its full capabilities. Of course, we still need to support it with artillery and some strike forces to clean the Laser-Classes, but we could finally start retaking Hives without risking the necks of our ace pilots on orbital dives. This is the reason why I wish to insist for the Hi-MAERF Project to be transferred to Alt IV command."

I look up, extend my arms in half a circle while taking perhaps a rather dramatic pose, flashing a daring smirk to the spotlight, the storm and thunders that block my way.

"Simply imagine what the 00 Unit could produce with both the XG and the IST working at the same time. Yokohama Base has the XM3, the simulators, the railgun and a few things more to negotiate for the approval. The sooner we test this, the better results Alt IV will

produce." As the representatives were about to speak up, I raise my hand, a single finger that waves to silence them as I take a step back, and another, before folding my arms and freezing my expression. "But let's not get ahead of ourselves, I'm sure you all need time to consult this in your respective offices. With this, my report is finished. So, allow me to ask you once more, I wish you all to give me the authorization to perform an official test run for the adoption of the XM3 and the new parts of the F-4 and F-15 as soon as possible. Also, besides this matter, I confirm we at Yokohama are ready to perform an incursion to the 21th Hive by the 24th of December at the earliest. Thus, as the Director of the Project, I request the agreement for us to proceed with the mission and the required preparations."

I say, never lifting my eyes off the monitors, not even blinking as I leave the silence hanging. Some of them start whispering with the assistants they had with them, others drink and remain silent, all look away from the monitor.

"My fellows," Ikaruga speaks up first, drawing first blood as he tends to prefer, "I believe it's in our best interest to allow a test run to occur. If the Hi-MAERF Project is of such importance, we should do all in our hands to allow Yokohama Base to forward a compelling appeal. I myself am also very interested in the stealth tech they have produced. It is clear we have at our disposal a way to become one of the strongest armies in the world with these advancements."

A few of the representatives didn't like that comment. Of course, we do not have a positive image, and us becoming 'stronger' might sound as if we were going to start doing whatever we wanted again, ruling by royal decrees like during 1999. I wonder, what do you think of those days, Shirogane? If you served under Her Purpleness in this world, as Yashiro seemed to confirm, what reasoning did you have? Your actions thus far are the opposite from those that squadron performed up until Lucifer. You wouldn't… *be thinking on leaving to her side, are you?*

The American speaks up, rebuking Ikaruga, saying we should focus on first delivering results and cooperating with the UN instead of having delusions of grandeur, slicing the performance of the parts and OS with the sheer edge of his wording of choice. While I sigh and shake my head, the man and the Head of the Saionji start arguing. The young man states the Japanese parts could make our Type-00 reach a greater performance to that of the Raptor. Ikaruga adds in complete sobriety and stillness that no one can deny that the technology is Imperial, even if it's under the UN, and that the Empire should have priority in its adoption over the other armies, to better support Alt IV of course, for no other motive than that, by the Heavens no. The Shogun has to raise her voice to pacify the argument that almost spirals into shouting.

If only they knew most of this comes from the head of someone who comes from another world, and they haven't seen the Shin or the new weapons yet. *I'd like you to present those on your own, to gain the well deserved credit you've earned. Little I can do if dreaming is more appealing, now can I?*

"Ikaruga-sama," Sakaki speaks as silence is achieved, not losing the clashing waves within his eyes, still unwilling to unfold his cards, "the representative was clear. They have no intentions to trade the project and are not interested in the technology developed at Yokohama. While the others might be inclined to acquire the license, it is most foolish to think that we could be on par with the other armies when we're struggling to procure our MDF with Shiranuis. Debating such topics on this occasion is most foolish, when said matters belong behind curtains. We should focus our discussion on how accurate the given numbers are, and how they could enhance the performance of the 00 Unit compared to what's available now. I would like to see the 00 Unit performing a few tests with our current tech before committing my agreement to these test runs," he states, again tapping his glasses, casting a sideglance my way. Some men on the HC nod along some retainers of the IRG.

"Kurechika-dono, it is most foolish to oppose the development of Imperial technology," Ikaruga retorts, finally losing the smile. "If these inventions make their way to the worldwide frontline, much honor will that earn our nation. The Vice Commander was a member of the Imperial Research Institute, and she's the one behind all of this, after all," he says, nodding my way, and sadly I must return the courtesy. Of course he mentions I was on the IRI. Because that is what allowed me to be here, to have gotten this far, sure. Resisting the urge to roll my eyes, I instead curl a strand of hair as the man joins his hands and leans forward, gaining a larger, almost vain smile to his features bathed in daylight. "Looking forward, I believe the Empire can reap many spoils from cooperating with the UN in such crucial developments. Think of all our nation could gain from this. This is a one in a lifetime chance to regain our footing in the world, to prove to the UN that we are more than capable of becoming the vanguard of the Far East Front, a promise that seemed to have been lost after the rueful events that led to the Invasion. I see no reason for you to oppose the notion to support the XO's requests," he calmly says, as usual, despite the frozen shards which sharpen upon the monitors, the blizzard that follows from the retainers by him standing.

Shaking his head, once more he taps his glasses. "While what you've said is true, this isn't the time or the place to-"

"Excuse me," Her Purpleness stops them once more, this time beginning to frown, "I do agree it is foolish to be making bold plans for the future on this meeting. However, this is indeed a prime chance to prove our humble nation's worth to the world. Both with the success of Alt IV and the licensing of this technology, we can finally start to return all the favors we have received since the project was assigned to the Empire, since the invasion happened. I believe all of us want the A-01 STF to be as powerful as it can be. Them failing in their mission is something no one herein present wishes for, I'm certain."

She narrows her eyes, raising her chin, taking that venomous tone and hailing a banner to war as she did in our prior talk. All those from

the IRG and our HC seem to have understood the message, nodding in agreement. Ikaruga, on his end, seems a bit miffed as he leans on a hand, not raising the habitual smile. Sakaki, however, rests a few fingers on the bridge of his nose, inhaling and inhaling for a second. Probably, his thoughts dwell in concern over our Sakaki. Perhaps, that is what mainly fuels his opposition to my project now. Or shouldn't it be the other way around? Hmm… I can't believe I never asked you what was his stance on the worlds where I failed, I was so certain the PM's support was lost to me. *And now… you won't even open your eyes.*

After a short pause, after the bright smile raises like dawn, she continues speaking. "If by allowing a test run we can clear the uncertainty the UN has about these new developments and through it prove we wish to sincerely cooperate again with the international community, then I see no reason to not support this notion. Certain I am that all of us wish to clear the air between us, that has thickened since the XFJ Project suffered the loss of both prototypes last September, so let this be a first step towards mending our link. I ask you, my fellows, to also give your blessing to the proposal of XO Kouzuki," she requests, staring in serenity yet unblinking, firm and focused. The four Heads agree to it, and the Prime Minister does too later along the members of our HC. She smiles and thanks them, coughing afterwards. "Representatives, I would like to ask you to consider coming to watch the testing when it happens. It would make the negotiations much easier, and I'd be liking to show you my gratitude for your continued support towards both the Empire and Alt IV despite all that has transpired since the invasion in the '98. I offer you all a room to stay on the Imperial Palace as honor guests, should you agree." While the four Heads didn't like that much, the representatives agreed to give an answer along the official announcement of the test run.

Thank God she's on my side. Without her calming the waters, the four Heads and the representatives would have ruined this all with their constant bloodlust and bickering.

Once the talks are diverted to what did I have in mind for the testing runs, I give them a rough detailing of the matter. They all seem to agree, or find nothing noteworthy to comment on. Upon my inquiry towards the authorization for an assault on Sadogashima, both Sakaki and the Shogun ascertain the Empire has the required manpower to support the notion, the HC lending credence to the claim. The Security Council merely requests the documentation to go through the official channels up to their desks before giving me an answer, but that is an answer in itself.

They gave me the okay to forward the documents, despite the noise that will make through all the middlemen involved. There were no hand waves, no side glances, no doubtful words. The coast is clear, and the approval is as good as signed. Siiigh…

Rolling my shoulders after agreeing to their proposal, I give them all the final pieces of data regarding the small progress on Alt IV and on my plan to retake Sadogashima, saying I'll be sending an official document to the UN's International HQ shortly after the meeting ends. I do wish they hand over the XG soon, but there is little I can do on that front until the XM3 can prove itself worthwhile to the US. I'll let the Shin and the weapons be a surprise for later, no need to spend all my cards on this table.

… Hopefully Shirogane will already be well by then. It would be… in the project's interests to have him on the field during the XM3's test, to showcase the full extent of the developments made thus far. And to placate Her Highness, of course.

The usual formal goodbyes are said once most words ran out, after agreements and plans are debated for the date of the trial run. Once more, all those besides me bow and thank our superiors and patrons for their presence, shortly after most of the monitors go dark. The others in the room take their leave on my order, saluting me and departing to wherever it is they should be.

I sigh and rest onto the desk, rubbing my forehead for a moment, enduring whatever crawls right beneath the skin. Yashiro comes

closer, offering me a cup of coffee that I gulp in one go, and then goes to the controls and confirms the connection is still truly cut and over. Motoko-nee gives me a nod, leading the way out of the room.

Finally, the last stress test of the 00 Unit before we digitize Kagami. I would like to allow her to say some parting words to Shirogane, but he is out cold and there is no more time to waste. Even then, I need to take a peek at the railgun's mounting and first boot up. Also, arrange that meeting with Daikuuji and oversee the weapons he was handling are still proceeding as expected.

Sigh… Today will be another long day. When was the last time I slept more than four hours again?

… *At least I had a short rest a few days ago. You could try and wake up already, couldn't you?*

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*Same day. Some minutes after 7 PM.*

*(Right by the elevator, B22F.)*

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The door opens, we stride out of the confines of the four walls and into the hallway. Checking my PDA greets me with the scheduled reports from Marimo about the cadets and Suzumiya about the Valkyries, as well as the docs Takamura sent already. The railgun did start up nicely, I like the singing ring it gives out as it charges up. The heat was growing in expected levels, so she and the team believe it can fire without any setbacks. A good result, at the least.

"Professor, won't you take a moment to have dinner?" Yashiro asks, trying to match my pace.

"No time for that now. I'll eat once we deal with the activation of the 00 Unit."

"… But you probably will end up scanning and going over the numbers all night long," she repines, the fast echo of her short steps chasing my shadow. "It will only take a moment."

"Half an hour is what it'd take, between the request, delivery, and me eating the dish, if I hurry that is. It's too much time wasted, the 00 Unit and its tuning should take precedence for now."

"But shouldn't you-"

"Alright, fine," I stop, feeling her face bury itself in my back as she softly collides into me. Turning around, finding her rubbing her nose and puffing a cheek, I stare into her eyes. She takes a step back, looking down. "Let's make a deal. I take some time off to eat if you tell me what you saw in his mind, in utmost detail."

"… I believe you should speak of that with Takeru-san in person," she whispers, rubbing both hands together as if clasping a lone rope.

"Sigh… You do realize hiding things from me is not a wise move, do you?" I play with some strands of silver hair in between my fingers, weaving them, coiling them around my index as I lean closer, whispering. "Yashiro, you know what is at stake here."

"He… He promised he'd come back."

"And what if he doesn't? Then, we need the 00 Unit active ASAP. And we need to account for what… losses of memory we have to take measures against. You confirmed that there were no two Shiroganes, that it was him and only him. What is it that you do not wish to disclose?"

She looks up, lips folding in. A lone star left in her eyes, yet she then embraces both shoulders for a moment. "You knew and didn't tell me. That's why he was so hurt, why he-"

"No, Shirogane fainted due to a catalyst used by 1st Lt Tsukuyomi and Her Highness, which spurred memories back to him. What was

the memory that hurt him the most? Was there some sort of monster chasing him or something?"

She twitches, petrified. "If… If he doesn't wake up soon, would you… pull the plug on him?"

"Huh?"

"I asked if," she looks up, straight into my eyes, a tiny pigeon shivering under a storm, sill trying to fly, "if you would pull the plug if he doesn't wake up soon."

"Excuse me, why are you asking me this?" I get closer, she winces. Realizing I had pulled her hair, I uncurl the strands over my fingers but remain staring, returning the stare. "Was he thinking I'd do something of the sort?"

She nods, holding my gaze. "You two did argue before the last memory recovery, after all. Professor, you are Takeru-san's ally, right? He can count on you, right?"

"… That depends on why are you choosing not to tell me what you saw."

"Well, some things are very scary…"

"Yes, you said that already. Sigh…" Raising back up, shrugging as I ruffle my hair, I turn around and walk towards the medbay again. "Can you at least tell me why is he doubting me? Some sort of effect his Royal Guard self is having on his goals?" Perhaps, wanting to side with Her Purpleness now, hmm?

"… Takeru-san thinks he's alone, that's why he doesn't wanna wake up."

"What?" I look back, her gaze is dragging itself over the floor, steps so delayed I'm gaining ground on her even when slowing down.

"He thinks he's alone, and that I shouldn't help him because you and Sumika-san need me more, that he understands you… would protect the project instead of shielding him any more. So he doesn't know what to do, and wants to think about it more," she finishes with a sigh, expression dry as ice, fallen and sunken like my reflection on my worst days.

"… What? But- How- Why- What does that even- No, why is that what he thinks?"

Scratch me off the table, why is he not trying to gain Her Purpleness' support? Is it the same with her, then? I mean, to admit she has a stepbrother would place a few questions on her shoulders. More so if Shirogane was involved in that covert squadron as I believe. For him to hoist doubts towards me, does he think our prior agreement is not worth anything? That I've used him only to gain Her Highness' support? She should have made it clear to him with the way she argued with me how important he still is for her, and I highly doubt he'd abandon Kagami even in the worst case scenario.

"Yashiro, what else did he say?"

"I… I won't say anything else."

"Huh, is that so. Why would you not?"

"Takeru-san… should talk with you about this, in private. He was hurt much, and there are things I-" she coughs, features constricting as if wanting to puke, "that I believe only he can properly convey to you."

"That only he can convey? What are you-"

" *If I said yes… Would you laugh at me?"*

Ugh… Why do I have to- It can't be about that, can it? Yet, we did argue a bit that day. Doubting me, wondering if I rather pull the plug on him… Perhaps, thinking on our words about how to deal with

Kashgar? No, even if we disagree, he wouldn't turn his back on us, not while his world is-

…

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Is that it? Do you think… I'd hold you hostage over the safety of your world? Would I do that? Maybe? No, if it comes down to stabilizing the 00 Unit, I would… have to send him back to a branch of his home world and hope that Kagami's data leaks into this world after a balance is made. Sure, it might enhance the ripples of causality and the effect the conductor has on this timeline but that is nothing we can avoid. Plus, the easier the data flows, the faster the 00 Unit can do its job. Even if you have to dirty your hands again… you should know I can mend those timelines. You worked with another me, didn't you? I am not going to leave your services unpaid.

… Maybe, he truly holds some reservations towards me over what transpired in his last experience?

Why are you hesitating? Sure, I did… keep stuff from you. I already apologized, and I said there won't be any more secrets between us, didn't I? You should know I do not utter such words lightly.

Stomping forward, I cross my arms and close my eyes, sighing from my nose.

"I… I don't think he hates you or anything," Yashiro says, her steps indicating a jog to reach me. "Takeru-san is merely… afraid."

"He has no reason to. And if he does not trust in me, then it is on him. Whether he wakes up or not, what we have to do going forward won't change."

"You won't reconsider things if he asks you to?"

"Why would I? He should know our situation doesn't exactly give us any leeway. And you," I stop and look back, her rush halts in a

heartbeat, her breath caught in her throat, "should also be aware of what is ahead of us."

"I-I know, Professor. However, is it truly, um, impossible for you to consider anything else?"

"… What are we talking about here?"

"You seemed to know what I meant with the incident Takeru-san is worried about," she takes a step forward, flapping her bunny ears. "Can't you try and find another way to deal with whatever this is?"

"… No, I may not have that luxury. And we are not talking about this," I turn around, resuming my march.

I need stability, certainty that nothing will happen while we are away in Sadogashima. In truth, the island will remain under UN jurisdiction, the Hive will also remain under our care for the foreseeable future. If the mission Shirogane showed me is any proof, retaking Sadogashima will be arduous enough. Reclaiming the G-Elements will have to wait until after the battle has finished and no BETA remain within the Hive, if we can also avoid the attack upon the base. Those G-Elements will, hopefully, go to the reserves for the XGs. Even if some, a little in honesty, is given to the Empire, the island will most likely turn into a research complex, more so if we manage to leave parts of the core unhurt instead of blasting it all away with the particle cannon.

And if that happens, that is a spark enough to incite a certain domino effect. I already received the call to aid in the relief efforts for the volcanic activity present in a mountain range. I know you said we should try and avoid this incident, to appeal to the Shogunate, but with you regaining your memories we already have a bridge to Her Highness. Using the cards we're dealt, preying upon the opportunity presented by this tragedy should allow us to gain the full support of the Empire, to quell the disquiet that lurks in the Capital.

… He wouldn't be letting his *feelings* for Her Purpleness blind his mind now, would he? Even if he did say once that… he did not want to prey on others as he saw another me suffering after losing Alt IV, there is little reason for us to not arrange the board we require for a successful mission. America won't stay put, and I rather not have them pull anything while we're busy in the island or after it. *Once the Empire exhausts its forces, all that will remain in top form is the Capital Defense Garrison led by Sagiri and the IRG. It is obvious why the Americans would try and make a move now, or why they'd agree to the incursion to Sadogashima without trying to be part of it, letting the Empire deplete its might on the mission.* If we lose, the Empire will have little choice but to accept a return to the Treaty in fear of a possible BETA attack. If we win, our forces will already be spread thin. And when we're sent to the Cheorwon mission with the Kyushu garrison, the only other force that would remain in healthy numbers…

You should know the board as good as I do, Shirogane. Why are you doubting me? Is your desire to bring peace preventing you from doing what must be done? If so, I can see why I should, perhaps, pull the plug on you. But I do not believe that is the case, he knows what is at stake here.

… Why? Why not wake up and talk to me? What could be worth risking your memories from vanishing from other people's minds?

Sigh… Well, at least Yashiro did say he would wake up. He's merely conflicted, confused. Once he gets his act together, we can have a talk, a mature and calm talk about what we want out of our partnership, of how to proceed going forward. Worst case scenario, if it proves difficult to tune the 00 Unit, I could try to send Yashiro into his mind again and drag him back by force. Him hating me… is only a small, a tiny price to pay.

Reaching the medbay, I swipe my ID Card on the lock. A moment of wait, the numpad opens and I input the password. From red to green, a beep echoes, the lock gyrates and I walk forward. The door

opens and the smell of synth meds overflows me, the rows of white beds that are empty fill the view.

Going to the far end, where only he should be, I quickly reach the monitors and find-

A flat-line echoing about.

Blinking as my steps halt, I throw a gaze to the monitors. A line remains undisturbed in its stretching, the beeping continues to resonate. A sharp breath in, a step closer, the machine shows no errors. It says… his heartbeat is…

Slamming the curtains away, I gape as coldness embraces my back. Yashiro gasps behind me, and my hands claw and bend the white fabric, pulling it down and down.

"What… the hell?" I close my eyes, rub my forehead, and look at the bed again.

There's still nothing under the sheets, the cables and sensors left dangling above them, the IV no longer in function and with both tubes also rolling to the floor.

I move the sheets, turn around the pillow, and I find nothing. Going to the beds nearby meets the same result, no matter how much I look. Walking back to the bed where he should have been, I notice even the uniform I had left in case he woke up is gone.

Shirogane's gone.

He really is… gone? Did he choose to? Or took too much time and the pull did this on its own?

"P-Professor, maybe you could try and call the doctor?" Yashiro asks, pulling my wrist.

"… Then, why didn't she report that he had already woken up?"

"Eh? I, uh, I don't-"

"He left, huh. He just up and vanished, is that it?" I punch the bed, kick at it, the monitors.

My jaw hurts as if I had been keeping my breath underwater, the lines of pain spreading up to my ears.

Smacking the system off, the echo of the flat-line doesn't leave my ears even after the screen goes blank.

Short and shallow breaths do little, little against the void in front of me.

Procuring my comms, I quickly dial up the connection.

"Yes, Homura speaking," she answers, taking too much time.

"This is Kouzuki. Homura, did something happen to the patient in B22F?"

"Patient? Um, XO, what do you speak of?" She asks, voice a bit hoarse and low.

"I had assigned you to watch over a patient in need of care today, he was in B22F."

"I, uh, err…" she stalls a reaction, groaning for a moment. "My apologies, ma'am. It seems to have slipped my mind?"

"… Slipped your mind, huh." Are you making fun of me? Hilarious, isn't it. Yes, this is all just one big fucking joke, ain't it.

"S-Sorry, ma'am. I shall immediately-"

"No, don't even bother. Forget I said anything." Quickly cutting the connection, stuffing the comms into my pocket as I turn around, my steps blast to the door, cursing the heels for not letting me speed up further.

"P-Professor, where are you going?" Yashiro says, raising her voice in a plead for me to decelerate.

"To my office, for the readings on G-Radiation. If he slipped off to another world, then we need to start the countermeasures."

"B-But he said that-"

"Then, where is he?" I stop and walk back to her, meeting her stare. She quivers, and looks down in silence. "Yes, that's right. Let's just… get this over with." I sigh at the stare, the hand that lightly pulls at the edge of my lab coat, at what dampness builds up in her eyes. My comms beep, I press the button as I sigh, seeing Yashiro's dejected, crumbling expression as I pull away. "Kouzuki here."

"XO, would you have some time?" Marimo, huh.

"What is it now? I am rather busy."

"I only wanted to ask a single question if-"

"Out with it, what do you want?"

"About Shirogane's situation, I wanted to know if-"

"There are no updates, and there will be no updates," I spit out, turning on my heels and resuming my march.

"Huh? Wait, what do you-"

"Marimo, I don't have a single fucking femtosecond to waste right now. So please do me a favor and don't ask me about this again. Are we clear? Yes, thanks. Later." I cut the call, rolling my eyes, as I chop the elevator's button and, thankfully, the door slides open immediately.

"Are you certain it was wise to react like that?" Yashiro asks, entering the elevator and coming to my side while a hand rests on her chest that tries to ease the rhythm of her breathing.

"It is what it is, nothing we can do except damage control," I sigh, resting against the wall once the ascent starts. All of this work… to be this close… and now you're gone, just like that? Without even trying to talk with me, you just turn around and leave? "Yashiro, do you… not sense anything?" I ask, half resigned as I run a hand over my face as a sudden hold binds me, as the heavy chains cackle at me, at the coin that left my shoulders.

She looks down, joining both hands, complexion turning grim and solemn then tight, lips quivering. I shake my head, patting hers, ruffling the thin strands of hair on my fingers while I close my eyes and simply gape, to let the vile air in me leave. This void in my stomach could really use some dinner right about-

**SLAP!**

Her bunny ears perk up sharply, making me flinch. Eyes widening, mouth opening and closing in quick succession, mumbling something under her breath, she pales to the point of looking like made out of paper, folding on herself.

"Yashiro? Yashiro, what are you seeing?" I grab her shoulders, crouching to meet her gaze.

Which is unfocused, again piked and cracked as her hands form a lock on her stomach. And as she subtly shivers, as she avoids my eyes for some reason, she whispers in such a tiny, tiny voice, "The… forest. I can hear it, I see… that forest, and the- The dragon is roaring."

"Huh? Wait, what are-"

She tugs and pulls and tugs at my arm, yet her eyes remain scarred. Yashiro looks down, unwinding her own breath, choking my arm, sinking into the sea as she mumbles dragon and forest under her breath. Until she says something else, losing further color from her face.

"And that evil fox, too."

# Jester of the Masquerade

*Chapter 79:*

**Jester of the Masquerade**

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Walls surround it all, wobbling and flickering like candlelight. Every part of them, every brick reveals shapes and sounds of another place, colorless and see-through in their texture. A few torches grant meager light to the damp and narrow hallway, exposing more signs and visions in the structure.

Traversing the dungeon takes its time for the soldier, who finds not a single item nor valuable in the place. Only the visions that with him walk defy the deafening silence, the wails of doors in need of oil. The edification itself takes on a labyrinthine structure, staircases reversed from the ceiling that descend to no end in sight, spiraling bridges which coil upon each other, and shifting corridors from which there is no exit, only dead ends. Time had lost its meaning long ago, yet as cold seeps through his clothing, as it sticks to the skin, he cannot help but to wonder if there is any pattern to the roads ahead, above, and around.

Reaching a balcony after a large trek, gazing at the myriad of pathways under the simple candlelight causes a sinking grip to take hold of his insides. It is all too large to recognize a start much less an end, a method to the madness. He likens the winding ways to spaghetti, even some hallways do raise in a helix as if beckoned by a fork of reversed gravity. Sighing, he rubs his arms, fighting the cold, the shake of his tired legs. Allowing his rear and palms to rest on the stone tiles, in silence he admires the expansion that weaves and entwines in a seamless and endless pattern, gaze growing slack, chin faltering as if nodding off.

A sigh once escapes, he throws his back to the stone and veils his sight. Knowing the torch is soon to fade away does not spur haste to his movements, as the paths have not been merciful thus far. It is tempting, to try and jump from one to the other, to rush through it all to the end, if there is one.

He stands in slow motion, unmaking the fire with his own boots. Little point there is to trying to make out the patterns when he does not know the way in the first place. No one does, truly.

Along the shapeless hallways he walks, curling and bending and twisting at times, stretching and slowing down at others. In the darkness, only the rough shapes within the bricks act as guidance. The small bubbles which remain out of reach, out of sight yet ever-present in the back of his head. As he runs his fingertips over the rugged and cold rocks, the temptation to pull and take them with him manifests in his scratching, in the lingering of his palm over the damp wall. Sighing once more, smiling at the kaleidoscope of faces which surrounds him, he pulls away and continues his walking. For those memories shall always be by him, even long after the ones featured in them become as cold and immovable as the stones which these formless candle-walls make.

Walking upside-down in a coiling bridge, he spots a thin thread of light ahead. Finishing the circle of the bridge, a set of stairs descending he finds, illuminated by torches. The way down is uneventful, save for the walls turning to a solid rock formation, no longer reflecting moments of days past. At the end of the road, the cave expands in erosion, a small and calm road of clear water coursing through it. And beyond it, a large and regal chest adorned in gold and jewelry rests atop an ornamented altar, basking in the candlelight.

Splashing his boots in the water and carefully stepping over the rocks, he raises a brow as he approaches and circles the chest in question. Throwing small pebbles does not seem to trigger any traps, so he sighs and slowly grows closer. It takes some effort and force to lift the heavy lock, all to find the inside mostly empty.

Save for a small book of pictures, the images thus reflected on the walls. Lifting the old, tattered book makes some pages tear away from it, fluttering to the ground. Coursing through the pages proves to be as arduous as walking the hallways. Regardless of the oddity, he can't help but to continue onward. And while lingering on every image for a moment, the coldness seems to finally be lifting its grip on his person as he begins to hum a tune to the swing of the pages.

Little did he know, when he barged into a private state aboard an extra large limousine, about what would soon follow. Instinct had overtaken him when giving chase to some of them, to a rooftop despite his wounds, to the shopping district despite the reprimands that would fall on him, to a secret lab in his utter ignorance and stubbornness.

Confusing and threatening is the way forward, yet despite not knowing the way, somehow, he had always found it. Even when he looked away from it, away from the colossal waves, awaiting a hand that never reached out. Far easier it would be if answers could be provided on demand, if a hand was always at the ready to act as a guide. Yet, the path then taken would not be one's own, would it? The pressure of the second and third step is excruciating, as much as breaking the habit if you ever stop. Equally foolish to try and take the same road twice, for yesterday will never be tomorrow.

Wiping a lone tear, he closes the book and returns it to the chest, closing it afterwards. The soldier returns to the river, splashing and making ripples as he follows the small stream of water, finding an exit to the cave after some time. Looking back once he makes it outside, a castle fills his entire view, a castle in the shuffling shape of a crown, a small chain of spheres filled with constellations shining above it.

Standing over an abyss, perhaps floating would be more accurate, the castle emerges from the void, through the clouds. A myriad of roads and shapes deliver themselves to its gateway, waves coming and going about the shore in the color of the midnight sea,

glimmering stars reflected in the surface as those celestial tears flash above the crown.

The towers of the edification rise and melt into the dark, the spiral bridges stretch to the point of vanishing from view. Thin, frail, almost sinking into the nothingness it stands over. Making sense of the curved, spiraling shapes that bend at impossible angles sends a small wave of dizziness to the soldier when staring too much into them, reminding him of times when trying to decipher parts of the jungle of calculus someone used to always reference. To him it all could be abstract and surreal, the odd crown-castle itself was only filled with never-ending labyrinths and, by the looks of its exterior, said corridors truly did meet no end, only merge together in an infinite loop.

The thought gets a chuckle out of him as he embraces his shoulders, wondering if he would have felt as he does now should he had always kept his memories on every single reiteration of his journey. Perhaps, it was for the best that he always returned to nothing on those first attempts. Maybe, starting over, even if it never truly was from zero, was what had allowed him to focus more on what is, what actually was, rather than on could have been, the roads he would never walk again even if in the same soil he stood upon.

And even then, in his unawareness, he probably was conscious of what had been, if only through hunches. Understanding the infinite extension of possible roads is beyond his capabilities, it would be as pointless as trying to grip onto air or shackle a river. And yet, he smiles at the winding roads that know no ending, at those that end lost within the darkness of the crown. It allows his features to relax as he rubs his legs, inhaling into the clear, saline air of the sea that greets the shore to this castle. Staring at the shower of stars that course through the unlimited paths, fighting a journey that refuses to change, there he stands in silence, in admiration of the complexity, of the reiteration. Taking one good breath he then departs from it, never looking back.

Nothing concrete is left in his hands, his ankles sink into the waves, causing a small ripple to meet the incoming tide of crystal clarity. And in between the blue waves and azure skies, the soldier walks to nowhere in particular, away from the castle and its infinite roads.

For within the void, the silence is where the deepest echoes resonate in one's soul. Long lost peers, people you've forgotten for many moons, words that had been stuck in your chest.

And despite the lack of any clear cut answer, despite having no idea which path is right, the soldier never looks back to either the castle or the stars above, marching ever forward with a destination etched behind his eyes. A flag that shall guide his steps amidst the confusion, a motive behind the actions sparked by what the unalterable complexity of the castle reminded him was truly worth safeguarding within his own crown.

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*December 4 th , near 9 AM.*

*(Training Field.)*

**[Meiya]**

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Slow sips of air I take in while blinking, the distant circle all I can see. Pursing my lips, drying them and the front of my teeth, I rub the trigger for a moment before pressing the confirmation, sending the small shock into my forearm.

Sighing and wiping my forehead, I raise from the ground and meet a glow which eclipses the incoming daylight.

"You managed to hit the target, Mitsurugi-san!" Tamase loudly declares, a smile blossoming in defiance to the descending temperature.

"Is that so?" I accept the binoculars she offers and search for the target. My shot landed on the outermost circle, yet it did meet its mark. "Sigh… So I finally can ascertain a hit to the 800 meter mark, huh. Now it's a matter of replicating this in the simulators," I mull, holding some of my hair as I look upwards, to the fleeing and formless clouds, to the faint outline of the sun that shines through them.

"I still do believe it is a good result, after all the effort you've been doing," she insists, nodding yet not meeting my eyes, minding her words. "Considering the support systems we have in our TSFs, I'm certain your mid-range will improve much from now on."

"Yes, thank you," I return the nod, gaze fleeing to the unassuming soil, the mounds and idle targets in the training field. "I do hope that is the case. Regardless, thank you for the tutoring, Tamase," I smile her way, she hurriedly waves her hands to either side.

"N-No, it's no big deal, really," she insists, almost making herself smaller. "After all, you did cover me when the guards came to, well, clear the air with us," scratching the back of her head, gaze as dull as the ground, clouded as the sun is now, she proceeds to, unnecessarily, give a bow my way.

"Sigh… There is nothing to thank me for, they were indebted to an apology," I state, the echoes of the shootings from the others coursing through the air.

"Still, I'm grateful you stood by me then," she again bows down, both tone and sight not fighting the shrouding of clouds. "And anyways," she grabs an elbow, looking upwards again, "I did owe you for when you tutored me before."

"Hm? From before?"

"Come on, remember how I never managed to even score a draw in our CQC practices? You once advised me to try and wrestle a victory in what few hits I could deliver, and taking on the mindset has aided

me much. Not only for CQC, but to conserve ammo during mid-range fighting now that we're practicing in the sims."

"I see," I merely nod back to her smile as she goes prone, ready to take her shot.

Raising the binoculars to my sight, all I see is our assigned target as Tamase delivers a hit to the bullseye, to its very center. Upon my confirmation, she lets out a heavy sigh and follows it with a strong gulp, fingers coiling and uncoiling in quick succession. For someone that always excels, the pressure of the peak must be toilsome. And for her case, it must be doubly so. With the singing of thrusters and the trails of smoke from TSFs dancing in the clouds above, we continue our assigned training.

Sadly, my first shot was my best. I missed my mark against the 800 target on all follow ups whereas Tamase only missed the bullseye in one occasion. It was still plentiful enough to have her gaze stumble to the ground, posture giving in to the weight of unseen boulders and whispers.

A whistle echoes, sending shivers and eliciting perfect straightness from my posture. "Squad, assemble!" Little does it take for us all to stand before her, she gives us all a once over, hands on her waist. "Report your results."

It would seem Ayamine and Sakaki are once again tied in their efforts, neither seem antagonistic nor is there any change in posture or expression when they report the results this time. Yoroi managed to remain ahead of them, as well of myself, and Tamase still is the only one who can attempt to land a hit against the 1100 meter mark. That is, so long as you're not here, of course.

The Instructor nods, scanning our faces, for long enough that a break in the clouds allows a thread of direct light to shower over us. "Very well, decent progress. You may refresh yourselves, I await you in the classroom in half an hour. The morning training is now over.

Dismissed!" she states, we stand in attention and salute, she returns the gesture and departs.

"Siiigh… Can't believe I still can't hit the 800 mark regularly," Sakaki repines, tapping her glasses as she slouches towards a water tap.

"Gotta keep on trying. Small steps every day," Ayamine says, arms folded as she nods to herself.

"Yeah, but it kinda sucks that we still can't do something as simple as this," Yoroi shrugs, shaking her head and leaning on a wall. "Kinda hard to believe we can pilot already but still fail at the drills from basic."

"It is no failure to persevere in front of repeated setbacks," I say as I pass them, going towards the next water tap. "In comparison to previous results, we are showing improvement. There is nothing to be ashamed of." After all, there are times that, no matter the time you pour into an objective, someone will simply best your efforts with meager commitment.

Pushing the button a bit too strongly, the water hits my nose, I flinch away and cough before attempting to drink once more. How foolish of me, to still allow myself to be riled up by you. Yet, no amount of water cleanses the sourness that in me lingers. Wiping the dampness off my face, I sigh from my stomach and step away from the tap.

"I do agree with your words, to some an extent," Sakaki says, rolling up her shoulders, making her BDU flutter as she does. "It is still rather frustrating to see our sniping pale in front of Tamase's, however."

"If we were sent in a mission and she were incapacitated, I don't think anyone could match her eyes," Yoroi affirms, bending over to refresh herself.

Such words cause Tamase to compress herself as if suffering from the cold. "That's not true, I'm sure you could make do somehow. Especially now that we're piloting, the support systems can probably aid your sniping much."

"Still a bother to rely on the machine," Ayamine says, eyes narrow. "That didn't save us yesterday, it won't save us in the battlefield."

All of us look down, silence falling like dusk. How insensitive can someone be, to again bring this up. However, truer words couldn't have been spoken. Merely relying on the automated systems shan't allow improvement to flourish. If only you hadn't attacked Tsukuyomi, we could see this mock battle as a learning step. Now, instead of bestowing a tailwind, all it serves for is to remind us of the empty spot you left, the sorrowful events that in the hangar transpired. Even when you bested both cousins… all the spoils we are not capitalizing on due to your folly…

"Well, today is a new day," Sakaki says, voice raising, echoing a bit in the void of the track field. Taking some steps forward, turning around, her twintails curling over her shoulders, that finger once more traces circles. "I know our first sim run without Shirogane-kun didn't exactly end in success yesterday, but there is no point in lamenting what's already done. Are all of you on board with doing another nightly training after dinner?" All of us nod, she smiles. "I see, good to hear. Let's leave that talk for the PX, though. We do have quite the lectures left for now," she turns around, joining her hands and extending them upwards.

Yoroi once more tries and engage us in idle talk as we walk to the changing rooms to return to our fatigues, Tamase commenting on the earlier news instead of joining in the puns. Sadly, I cannot share their sudden optimism. To think that another evacuation is being considered, despite there being little to none volcanic activity. Why can't the government not respect the wishes of the people to remain in their rightful land? I wonder, what did you think of such an announcement, Sister? Was the press conference announced for tomorrow your own doing, or born from pressure of the

administrators? And anyways, the army should strive to safeguard the people's wishes. It is unjust for-

"Hey, Meiya-san," Yoroi calls out, now walking in front of me, "what did you think of the poll?"

"Eh? Ah, my apologies, I was not paying attention."

"Oh, I see. Anyways," never losing the smile, she practically continues to overtake us on the hallways, as if propelled by a tailwind, "I was saying that this season of TV Mangas is really competitive, so there was a poll asking viewers which one would be the most watched by the end. I don't think there are any big releases until April next year so, which one do you think will win the title of better manga of the year?"

"Ah, well… I never really watched much TV Manga…"

Grandfather said dallying by the TV was unproductive, so we only ever saw documentaries or the news channels. Furthermore, I do believe that it detracts from the experience. Why not simply read the manga instead? Grandfather did enjoy reading with me a few, Samurai X was a marvelous experience to share with him, for example. The closeness of a reader cannot be replicated through a TV show. Also, waiting for the next episode is quite certainly torture. Albeit, the same does occur at the end of a tome in certain occasions. Cliffhangers, they must be one of the greatest sins a writer can commit.

"I think Drake Sphere Z is easily the holder of the title," Sakaki says, nodding with a shrug.

Ayamine surprisingly nods as well. "It's hands down the most popular, don't think there's anything that can match it."

"Well, I see why you'd say that," Tamase says, tapping her fingers, "but I think Tarot Catcher Cherry Blossom can be a good rival for the

top spot," barely whispering, resembling more a minuscule purr, her steps wane a bit as she steals gazes at us.

"No shot frilly dresses can best the martial arts," Ayamine affirms, nodding to herself.

Which oddly causes Tamase's cheeks to balloon slightly. "Y-You don't know that. Cherry Blossom is really popular with the kids!"

"And the fujoshis," Ayamine retorts, frowning. All the rest grow silent, faces gaining heat despite no longer being outside.

"What is that supposed to mean? I have literally never heard of the term."

"Oh, those are the women that- Mmmmgh!" Yoroi is restrained by Sakaki, who binds upon her like an iron maiden.

"Don't ask, Mitsurugi. Please just don't," she then says, still maintaining her steadfast lock over Yoroi's being, who seems to be sinking upon herself the more blue her skin grows.

"Well, if you insist…" I relent, arms folding.

Sakaki sighs, releasing Yoroi who then gasps for dear life, skin regaining its proper color. She merely scratches her head along a light chuckle upon our squad leader's reprimands over 'sensitive' wording. This does somehow remind me of that one time when I asked Takeru about that special milk he had, and how strongly he refused to let me taste even a sip of it. Most unfair that is, Takeru. I was even asking sincerely and humbly then. Compared to his recent actions, that feels like such a distant memory.

Which one is the real you? The light-hearted and smiling comrade? The ruthless soldier that maimed the chasers in the CCSE and drove Tsukuyomi to true aggression?

Shaking my head, I sigh the blockade in my lungs, once more playing with my hair. "In any case, what is this 'Tarot Catcher' about? I've heard Drake Sphere is supposed to be based on a folktale, however I haven't the faintest of how one could apprehend esoteric cards."

"Oh, no, actually, the cards are magical," Tamase says, eyes glimmering once more, giving small hops as we resume our walk. "So, you see, she has to catch all the members of the Tarot and convert them from the seal of the previous owner to save her city."

"With the help of a plush lion and a totally straight angel," Ayamine deadpans, making a slow gesture with a closed hand which makes Tamase quiver, face set alight in either embarrassment, anger, or perhaps both.

"Ayamine!" Sakaki shouts, features contorting despite the flush that also permeates her face, the slow rocking of her lips.

"Why are you raising your voice? And anyways, celestial beings have no gender, do they?"

"Tell that to the writer and the rabid fans," Ayamine shrugs, brows narrowing.

"Did you… have a bad experience with this manga?"

"Well, no… The trope just annoys me, since some of my neighbors in the slums were, uh," she scratches her head, lips twisting in, shoulders compacting, "a bit too much into those types of characters. The walls were too thin and I rather forget those sounds, honestly."

"What type of sounds? What exactly are we speaking of?"

Yoroi opens her eyes wide, nodding as if in understanding. "You know, the male characters that the fujoshis-"

"Can we stop talking about that?!" Sakaki asks, paling as she facepalms, Ayamine nods and looks away, Yoroi chuckles dryly.

Tamase quivers in place for a moment before clearing her throat. "B-But you know, the last season has been really nice, going from the comments I've heard from the channels. I do somewhat miss having the time to watch it now," she then sighs and deflates, only the specter of her soul following us as she slumps to the tiles. "With how things are as of late, the show is the only way the story has to finish now that printing new material is impossible."

"That is right… It has been harsh, knowing one cannot pick up unfinished stories with the state of the nation as it stands."

Such simple a luxury, the joy of reading, has been denied to my people. And even if in the future the Empire regenerates, who knows how many literary pieces will remain forever unfinished? Our own literature will certainly be influenced by the deep marks of the invasion, as much as the scars of the world war marked the generations that after it came. That is… if we manage to remain standing, if our spirit endures these toilsome days.

"Well, I do wish we could at least be allowed to have a personal radio," Sakaki admits, playing with her twintails. "I could definitely use some background noise while reviewing my notes," she sighs, Ayamine nods.

"On that we can agree," so I nod too as my arms fold.

I have no complains about the selection of channels available in the PX, yet I am rather… hesitant to trust the veracity of a single source of information. But of course, obvious it is that Imperial stations would be banned in international soil, to avoid any possible political discourse to seep into the troop. Even so, would allowing a single channel besides the UN's one be such an impossibility? All that is allowed for us to select otherwise is the kid's channel, they are basically keeping us blind. Usually, I'd have no complains but now

that this 'eruption' is being forwarded so heavily through all programs in the main channel…

"Still, Drake Sphere is taking the top spot, no doubts," Ayamine affirms, throwing a punch to the air, then places both wrists together, throwing them back and then forward, making claws with her hands for some odd reason. "Your magical girls can't do nothing against the Kamehadouken," she then smirks to Tamase's groans and squeaks.

"Ayamine, don't bully Tamase," Sakaki scolds, sighing and drawing circles again.

"I only said the truth," she shrugs, still smiling.

"We'll see about that, Ayameanie-san," Tamase retorts in unexpected tension, sharpening her gaze.

"Nah, you're all missing the obvious winner," Yoroi affirms, turning around to grin at us while walking backwards. "The second cour of Gettezinger Wing will definitely give Drake Sphere a run for its money!"

"Gettezin… What?"

"A TV Manga about a robot protecting Japan from cartoonish enemies," Sakaki notes, tapping her glasses.

"More like pro-Eishi propaganda," Ayamine retorts, rolling her eyes.

"That's not true," Yoroi retorts, eyes blazing. "Gettezinger is the ideal a pilot must strive to be! Sure, in reality we don't get any miracles in battle with something like the Zero OS to have our TSFs transform into a super robot like the Gettezinkaizer…" hunching momentarily, her backwards walking doesn't stop even as she raises and smacks her chest, "but it shows how important it is for everyone to do its share for a common goal. Gettezinger is the combined efforts of everyone in the show, that's why it's so strong. Because it carries the

torch of the Empire, the fire of dreams towards the future every pilot must protect."

"That does sound compelling," I nod, Yoroi seems to gain sunshine around herself.

"Well, but remember it is a kid's show. The story-line isn't particularly a masterpiece," Sakaki notes, tapping her glasses. Once more drawing circles, her brows sink down and almost connect. "Realistically speaking, there's no way the dinosaurs or Abe-no-Seimei could stand a ghost of a chance against a real TSF."

"Dinosaurs? Wait, by Abe-no-Seimei, are you referring to the actual real life figure?"

"Yeah, the real one," Yoroi smiles and nods in quick succession, Sakaki and Tamase both sigh in unison, Ayamine gives me a narrowed stare. Oh, that's right… Yoroi does like to go into tangents about machinery, and here I am enabling her. The halo of sunshine growing behind her lithe shape, faster than suppression fire do the words flow out from her mouth. "You see, there is an arc when a portal to the past is opened, when its explained how the Gettezinger rays turned some iron into the alloy used for the machines, which is clearly just souped up Super Carbon, and why they have such crazy tech in the show, and then they have to fight the demon army of Abe-no-Seimei before-"

**THUD!**

Yoroi bumps into an MP, due to having been walking backwards, lost in her speech. Hurriedly turning around and giving a bow, her voice freezes back to her usual. "My apologies, sir!"

"Tch, can't you see where you're going?" The man says, unnecessarily loud, endowing a tightened expression.

"Must be truly nice, to walk as if you owned the place," a woman spits, venom slithering through her tongue. "What did we expect of

that American's comrades?"

Coiling my hands in silence is all I can do. Such words did follow our steps yesterday, and Yoroi's miss would obviously be met with such hostility.

"… My apologies, I was not paying attention, sir," Yoroi reiterates, bowing down once more.

"Heh, wish I could be as carefree as a cadet again," the man says, giving us all a glare. "Of course, I didn't get the privilege to enjoy an officer's quarters back then, not to have delivered a Takemikazuchi to my doorstep."

"Yeah, we had to make due with refurb Gekishins," the woman folds her arms, brandishing fangs which drip of acid. "It's a shame the new batch doesn't get to learn proper humility, running on the hallways as they please."

"If you'd forgive me, we were not running. My comrade merely bumped into you, and she has already admitted to her mistake," I fold my arms, they glare at me.

"Oh, is that so?" The woman frowns, curling a strand of hair. "So you can have the *freedom* to bump into others and think a mere apology is enough to excuse your misconduct?"

"I did not-"

"We apologize, ma'am," Ayamine says, stepping forward and bumping my shoulder, bowing down by Yoroi's side. "We were simply lost in our discussion over the news of late."

"It was our miss, and it won't repeat itself. Please do accept our apologies, sir, ma'am," Sakaki follows suit, me and Tamase joining in.

"Tch… Whatever," the man waves, then pinches his nose as he walks away. "I was getting sick of the yank stench you give out. Just make sure you don't go around tackling your superiors, rookies."

The woman chuckles, also covering both lips and nose with a hand, coughing forcefully. "Well, what did we expect of these guys? If they thrashed the guards, some lowly MP aren't worth their respect, right?" And never losing the aggressive tint in their eyes, they slowly depart to the adjacent hallway, yet remain throwing glances at us.

Ayamine grabs Yoroi's shoulder and makes haste into our way to the changing room, away from their sight. No one says anything, Yoroi merely gives all a deep bow, fingers molten together in a prayer of apology, gaze dragged on the ground on the rest of the walk.

Sigh… All because of you. If we already had motives to be singled out, your folly has only made the animosity all the more strong. Loath I am to admit, this shan't be the only time altercations such as this will occur. Any excuse will be plentiful to try and spark an argument. It only proves I am right, and he should apologize to Tsukuyomi in the open as the trio did to Tamase and the rest.

… That is, whenever it is he returns. The Instructor said not a thing on the subject yet.

"Sigh… If only you hadn't attacked Tsukuyomi…"

"Hm?" Ayamine sends me a glare, unblinking.

"What?"

"You…" gaze narrowing, her hand leaves Yoroi's shoulder, crushing invisible rocks. "Are you blaming Special-kun for this?"

Imitating the expression, I scoff and look away. "It is obvious, isn't it? They not only mentioned him, but before his outburst Yoroi's miss wouldn't have been met with such hostility."

"Oh, so you're also blaming her?" She asks, the lines of fire in the frown deepening, intensifying. Yoroi looks up at me for a second, before once more turning her gaze to the ground, petrified into pure stone.

"I did not say anything of the sort, she was absentmindedly walking backwards and that was a mistake. Her apology wouldn't have been refused if not for… the particular situation we all are being made to endure," I state, arms folding, fully returning the stare that remains scanning me.

"Ayamine, Mitsurugi," Sakaki says, low, tapping her glasses, "if you start again, I will notify the Instructor of the argument."

"I was not starting anything," I turn away, nibbling at my bottom lip.

"Uncaring."

"What was that?"

"Didn't knew you were such a flaky comrade," she says, shrugging.

"You two, I told you to stop!" Sakaki orders, hitting her own thigh repeatedly.

"Not my fault she throws us under the bus without faltering," Ayamine spits out, turning away, patting Yoroi's shoulder and hastening both of their steps.

"Wait a- I did not-"

"Mitsurugi," Sakaki places a hand on my chest, shaking her head, "let it go."

"Wh- You… You certainly do not think I-"

"Stop, now. I am really going to inform the Instructor if any of you continues this argument. Ayamine dropped the issue, don't let your temper get the better of you," she says, staring straight into my eyes

until I nod. She then pats my shoulder, sighing. "I know how you must feel, and even if you are right about this, there is no need to voice it out. Shirogane-kun will also be subjected to the same treatment as us, even if he apologizes for his actions."

"I am aware. I just…"

"L-Let's do our best to ignore the whispers," Tamase says, quivers more certainly, as our eyes meet. "We should make sure not to do anything wrong, and people won't have any real motives to reproach us."

"Sigh… I suppose that is the sole card left in our hand at this point," Sakaki shrugs. "Anyways, please remember not to start any arguments."

"I shan't. My apologies," she nods and us three hurry to the changing room, which Ayamine and Yoroi had already reached.

… Still, it does not change that you are the root of this state of affairs. Even when you almost bested Tsukuyomi, when you could have been a fellow… Why?

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*Same Day. Around 06:30 PM.*

*(Simulator Room.)*

**[Marimo]**

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"So, do any of you have any explanation for today's pathetic results?" The five girls drill their gaze to the ground as I stare at them. I can only sigh and shake my head at the silence.

Yesterday was the same, they failed their simulation thoroughly. I had thought that giving them some respite this morning would do them good, but the afternoon training found the same setbacks. And

this last run met the same result, unchanging as the weather. Though, it's not like I don't know the reason behind their increasingly depressed mood, and I can sympathize.

Still not a single word on Shirogane's condition, absolute silence. I can't blame them for being worried, for the whispers and gazes that on their shadows linger to affect them, but for the situation to have gotten this far inside their heads?

I might need to let go off the Reaper for a moment, I wouldn't want to deal a killing blow to their morale. They were having such a good streak, for it to be demolished so completely despite the decent result of the mock battle, all things considered. Yet, being soft won't prepare them for what awaits. Yuuko won't show them no respite if they ever falter, their moods cannot be an obstacle for their duties in the STF.

Tamase and Yoroi haven't retorted at all, except for apologies. Even Ayamine has kept quiet, despite the friction I expected to see between her and both Sakaki and Mitsurugi. To further pressure them would not be wise… but reality is not particularly merciful. I suppose, it is a lesson they must learn, that they must have apprehended already, that they require for whenever it is they join the STF. I am not aiming to scar them, there's no need to go as far as I did with Isumi. All I want is for them to toughen their skin, to return my stare even if all they have to offer is an admission of failure. Be brave and show some grit, my students.

Inhaling sharply, crossing my arms as I take a stomp forward, I let the air and my voice boom from my stomach. "So no one is going to even try to speak up? What's up?! Didn't think I had trained a bunch of pansies. Is your performance so lacking it doesn't deserve even words of defense?" I glare into their eyes, which flee mine in a heartbeat.

Tamase and Yoroi hang their heads even lower, hands subtly shaking. Mitsurugi and Ayamine burn away, lips compressing and swallowing the defeat. C'mon, don't let me trash talk you!

"Instructor, we're all… stumped on the start of Level B," Sakaki says, stepping forward despite the tension in her voice. Atta girl, if the leader doesn't step up, who will? "We have never fought against so many hostiles before, so we're all… having quite some difficulties with the mission."

"Alright, I can accept that explanation. Every team gets stuck at some point," I nod, taking a step back, softening tone and expression. "Now, how do you explain your lacking attention and coordination through the development of the scenario? Frankly, you all were making splendid progress thus far, yet to see your formation crumble so easily is sending some… doubts to my prior assessment," I narrow my eyes, giving them all a side glance. Instead of raising in support of Sakaki, the other four can only lower their gazes further into the sea, drown in shame.

"We… have had our difficulties coordinating as a single element against a team with an advantage," she affirms, tapping her glasses. "If someone is to blame, I am the sole responsible. My plans… might not be the most appropriate for this situation, and that is causing our formation to not adapt as well as it should," she states, breaking eye contact.

I thought she would blame Ayamine for not following her set of rules or even Mitsurugi for the charges she continues to do. Well done, Sakaki. I suppose you truly are past placing the spotlight on the mistakes of others, instead trying make the most of the situation while shouldering the responsibilities thrust onto the leadership you have. I nod back, she returns to the line despite not dulling the paralyzing grip of tension which binds her.

However, the others have also been off. It is not solely Sakaki's miss, and a team that overburdens their leader is bound to crack apart. While I would like to compliment her for having the balls to take the blame for the team, the others need to start putting some effort into supporting her statements, too. They were making such good progress too, and that mock battle was surprisingly not bad for a

couple of amateurs against Royal Guards. If only Shirogane hadn't got injured…

Ruffling my hair, looking at the sims I sigh. "I think you all know that punishments are given to the squad as a whole. I commend you for the change in attitude, Sakaki, however, you sink or swim as a group. Tomorrow, you'll have to run double the laps before the mock battle at noon," I announce, the color seems to take a bluer shade on their faces, nodding despite the paralysis they all seem to be enduring. "I expect you all to get your panties in place and start delivering good results again, and soon. You should review your strategies together to find a breakthrough in what has stumped you. That is all. Dismissed!"

"Um, Instructor…" Mitsurugi speaks up, taking half a step forward, "could you allow us one more try on the mission?"

"Hmm… Are you all in agreement?"

"Yes, ma'am," they all retort in unison, giving a bow.

"Sigh, fine. We can perform one more attempt, but only that. Failing the mission will earn you five more laps to run tomorrow. Do you accept the terms?" They all nod, tightening their expressions and postures, phalanxes about to advance. I nod with a smirk, they all smile and thank me.

They salute, but Yoroi then steps forward towards me. Not meeting my eye she speaks up in a shaky voice. "Instructor, uh, may I ask if have you received word about Shirogane?" The rest fixate their gaze on me, looking like abandoned puppies, the luster present moments ago vanishing like coffee in front of Yuuko.

When did they become so dependant on him? They weren't like this before he arrived… I mean, it's not like I haven't noticed their change in attitude after the CCSE, but still. I am glad Shirogane pushed them to improve, and seeing him sharpen his already exquisite skillset was a pleasure to behold, even if he was also a natural on

the cockpit. But he didn't teach them the most important thing: how to fight without him.

If Arai suddenly disappeared one day during our piloting training regime, I would have felt off too. The rapport that's built between comrades is one hell of a drug, when someone you're used to work with leaves or dies, it isn't easy to find another you're comfortable with so quickly. They're experiencing that right now. And after the whole mess it caused, the rumors and all that crap. That's why I cannot entirely blame them for the failures thus far. Level B is a step up in complexity for the missions, what with the hampered datalink and multitude of sniping TSFs. And Shirogane was the central pillar, the playmaker of their team. The covering cloak that safeguarded Ayamine's and Mitsurugi's charges, the baton that signaled the tempo of Yoroi and Sakaki, and the shield that ensured Tamase could have the space and peace to land her shots.

And now he's gone, and they can't deal with the void.

I would like to know what was of him, but Yuuko refuses to tell me anything. He was supposed to be on the infirmary on B5F, but she moved him somewhere else and I can't access his data. What the fucking hell is she doing to him?! I knew he had an S5 lock when he arrived, and parts of his data were still locked, but to not disclose his situation in the slightest?

I can only heave a sigh and shake my head. "I have received no words. I will try to ask around for anything, but even then there should be no need to worry. Shirogane should be returning to the squad soon enough." The relief in their eyes is palpable, their postures lose tension. Well, let's give them a little poke. "I'm sure you all miss Shirogane much, seeing him in the suit during training. Those abs and that butt must be a nice motivation source for you, am I right?" A flinch, a flush, clogging on their throats remain their voices, except Ayamine who just glares back while the rest dig their gaze to the ground.

Sigh… You have no idea how much I envy you. To be young and passionate again. Enjoy these feelings while you can, girls. One day he might really die, and maybe you'll regret not voicing your affection for the rest of your life. Just like me, but in the end it was going to be pointless. Sigh… Being alone is what suits me best anyways.

"Instructor… Please do not mock us." Mitsurugi looks up, unsheathing her glare, vanquishing the emotions. "We all are merely concerned over the state of cadet Shirogane, nothing else," she states, nodding to herself. I would believe you, if not for how much you in particular stare at him.

"Come on, loosen up a bit," I smile at them, shrugging lightly. "You all have been fighting like a barrel full of shit, and it's not because you lack the skill. He isn't dead, he's just recovering from the shock. Don't let this get to you, some comrades will be sent to medbay more times than you'll be able to count, believe me," I say, low, they all nod and sober up again. "Well, let's get on with the training. To your units!"

Without the waste of a second, they turn and hurry to the sim assigned to each. Rubbing my nose, I can only sigh again. I am not expecting any change in this last run, but hopefully they can get used to his absence with more drills. Even after he returns, I should keep Shirogane from enabling these bad habits that came to light. Hmm… I know, let's have them all fight together, as a real squad. No point in repeating isolated battles, and I'm not too confident I'll be able to properly focus on two battles at the same time for too long this late.

Sitting back at my post, quickly prepping the settings takes me no time. Surprisingly, they have no qualms with my idea, asking me only a minute to debate their strategy. And so, deciding to spectate during the early portion of the mission, I push the buttons, the green light filling my monitor, those five faces submerging in tension as the starting sign goes up.

Five pods are roaring in the rather empty room, the remaining soldiers idling by deciding to head to the PX. The dots start to stop their advance, heartbeats escalating. Once again, unable to break the lock of the aggressors.

"04, stop breaking formation!" Sakaki shouts, trying and failing to grant cover to Ayamine's advance, resulting in a hit to an arm, a loss of a rifle.

Instead of compacting their formation, cover each other's flanks, Mitsurugi rushes forward once again, spraying her shots pointlessly. Despite shooting down one aggressor, she is easily overpowered and forced to retreat. Again trapped in a narrow area, she, Ayamine and Sakaki have been disconnected from Yoroi and Tamase, who cannot grant cover or support as they're trading volleys with the second flight of hostiles.

"I was only acting as a vanguard should!" Mitsurugi raises her voice and shield. "You have not given me the appropriate cover thus far, 01."

"Even if you're the vanguard, you have to remain close to your allies! We have to retreat and regroup with 03 and 05," Sakaki orders, firing missiles to facilitate the tactic.

"What are you saying? If we break through the blockade, this flight will fall!" Mitsurugi protests, insisting on the aggressive idea. "03 and 05 possess the skill to handle their adversaries at mid-range, retreating will only have us pincered!"

"02 kinda has a point," Ayamine says, low, "but we can't simply head to meet their aggro like this. I suggest a hit and run approach to regroup afterwards," she suggests, dropping her blade and finding the rifle she had lost. At least she's starting to cooperate.

Mitsurugi protests, the buildings they're hiding behind begin to crumble. Yoroi and Tamase are forced to flee, the lack of coordination separates them further from the other three. Sigh… It's

always those seconds, those precious seconds that in real life would cost you your life.

Taking off my headset, I pinch my nose while inhaling slowly, wanting to cough. "Can't believe you're all doing worse than last time. Seriously, this is all Shirogane's fault."

"What is my fault now?"

"Wh- S-Shirogane?!" I jolt up, and to my surprise I find the messy chestnut hair and eyes returning my gaze, a brow raised in puzzlement.

He then stands upright, his rather long hair fluttering as he salutes me with a small smirk. "Good evening, Instructor. It's been like three months since we last saw each other. How's it going?"

What the- How is he- Why didn't I get a- No, focus! I cough as I stand up, pressing the buttons for the simulation to proceed without my input. Waving my bangs and straightening myself, I stare into him, his cheery expression does not change in the slightest.

"Shirogane, first of all, how are you feeling?"

"I'm fine, thanks for asking, ma'am."

"I see… I suppose you've suffered no lasting injuries?" He shakes his head, bangs fluttering. "Was your hair always this long?"

"Huh?"

"Your hair, it's down to your shoulders. I do not recall it being this long." Also, what is up with that odd headband he's wearing?

"… That's what you're concerned with, Instructor?" He gives me a side glance, brows narrowing.

"Ahem… Well, matters not," I might be misremembering, after all. "In any case, I assume you were sent here to train?"

" *Vice Commander Kouzuki* sent me to watch the evening training, and left to your judgment if I should join in the sim runs. I'm here merely to stand and show myself, basically."

"Is that so? Then, let me cut to the chase." I take a step closer, narrowing my eyes, aiming my barrel, the scythe at him. If there is any doubt on what transpired… "What happened during the mock battle, Cadet Shirogane?"

"I got triggered by the words 1st Lt. Tsukuyomi said to me during our fight."

"Triggered?"

"Uh, really angry, I mean. She kept taunting me, saying stuff she shouldn't have. After she knocked me to the ground I hit my head hard, and then I snapped. And when I tried to attack her seriously, my body couldn't take all the G-Forces of my movements, apparently. I won't make excuses for my behavior, I made a miss and caused the base unnecessary problems," he then gives me a deep bow.

His voice did not falter, but it lacks the usual cheer, the energy he always exuded. Almost as if reading a script. When returning himself upright, his composed expression meets mine in silence, not losing the small smile.

With the explosions in the monitors as the sole background noise, I merely nod. "I see. Then, what exactly happened to you? Anything I should know of, possible injuries, any further punishments, or where you were so far. Since you were taken off the medbay in B5F I assume you must have had some… complications?"

"Oh, kinda. Turns out that jumping off a cliff ain't exactly a good idea, you see."

"What? Wait, what are-"

"Luckily there was enough snow to break my fall, otherwise things would have gotten ugly for real," he continues, unabated, giving small nods to the air. "And that we landed close to that cave that connected to the way back, too. A nat twenty, that was."

"Excuse me, where and how did-"

"And don't get me started on the mess that came with those twin babel towers of cake. I could feel my body giving up any and all hopes of a healthy life in front of that. Seriously, that was like dooming me to having diabetes."

"… Shirogane, what exactly are you talking about?"

"I'm answering your question, ma'am, of course," he smiles, arms crossing. "My time away was rather eventful, you see."

Blinking erratically, I cannot compute his words. Only an explosion in the monitor breaks me away from the incoming headache. "So you're telling me you, somehow, dealt with all that while incapacitated? Perhaps, you should have remained resting if you were made to face such excruciating trials in the medbay," I mock, shrugging, narrowing my eyes.

He simply nods, scratching the back of his head. "Should have stayed chillin' there according to Kouki, but you guys would miss me if I did. So here I am, with no more continues to spare. I know things won't be particularly smooth from now on, but I shall not allow any whispers to bring you or the squad further problems, Instructor," he says, poker face in place as he salutes me again.

"… Shirogane, while I am thankful for the last phrase, the rest makes absolutely no sense at all. Is this some kind of joke?"

"No, you ordered an answer out of me and I obliged. However, the orders from *Vice Commander Kouzuki* supersede yours, so all I can do is give you a random answer instead," he says, breaking eye contact. "If you want to know what was of me and why was I not

allowed to rejoin the squad today, you are free to request the report from the *Vice Commander*, if you so desire."

"Sigh… You could have said she forbade you from speaking, you know?"

"She didn't do that, though."

"Then, why-"

"I'm being," he smiles, shrugging, "careful. So," he turns to the monitors, "looks like they're having a hard time, huh."

"Well, it is obvious. Level B is where most cadets face their first roadblocks, after all."

"So what made you say their performance is my fault?" He raises a brow, staring.

"Because their cooperation dropped faster than a brick thrown into a lake since the mock battle with the guards. Now that you're not there to cover their flanks, their formation is crumbling. Even some of their moves are less polished than before, losing luster, speed, and precision. It's as if their lessons were slipping from their minds when inside the cockpit." I sigh, shaking my head as Tamase gets shot down. It does happen at times to rookies, they zone out and their mind goes blank. Learning to fight the freeze reaction is a must, however, so these training runs are not completely pointless.

"… Slipping their minds, huh," he comments in a whisper, features tightening. "So Instructor," he looks back at me, straight into my eyes, completely firm and sober, "should I remain watching the training?"

"Are you suggesting… you wish to join in the run?"

"If you so allow," he smiles, standing in attention.

"… Do you have the permission for it?"

"I wouldn't be here otherwise. Of course, you can contact the *Vice Commander* if you so desire," he gives a little bow, that small, almost creepy smile never vanishing.

It's odd, Yuuko wouldn't omit such a detail. Sure, she does tend to 'forget' to mention stuff to me but something like this deserves a report. I suppose, she did tell Shirogane about it and he's merely being… careful as he mentioned. His skin tone is even, there are no motes or redness to it. No eyebags, no delay in his words or gestures, truly polished and refreshed. Perhaps a bit too well, for how he should be after such a crash. And that smile, the mini smirk that refuses to leave, the stare that dives into mine and nowhere else, refusing to let go.

"… I assume you will be allowed to take part in mock battles from now on?"

"I do not know. *Vice Commander Kouzuki* did not mention that to me, I assume I might be losing the chance to properly pilot as punishment for my miss," he affirms with a nod.

"Is that so? Well, there's little to be done. It is rather late already… but if you have been given leave of medbay, let's have you make up for the time lost. You may go to get changed into your suit," he nods, smile widening, "however," I place a hand on my waist, raising my voice and chin, for the few onlookers that have not stopped staring, "due to your folly, I shall have you attempt this mission on your own. Also, I will not tolerate any misconduct from now on. Are we clear?"

Without even gaining tension, without changing his posture, he salutes me. And gains a wider smirk, showing me his teeth, as his eyes narrow and tighten, clashing waves within them. "Of course, ma'am."

Saying nothing else, he turns on his heels and exits the sim room in a jog. I glare at the eyes that snooped about, sending them packing. Sigh… Well, at least he's back and uninjured. Even if his spirits seem a bit too high, Shirogane might be trying to cheer himself up

for all I know. Frankly, I cannot imagine how Yuuko must have reprimanded him once he woke up. Thinking twice, he didn't refer to her as 'Sensei' even once during our talk, did he? The reaction to my last words… is perhaps how he might be feeling inside as of now. I can't believe he came up with such a tale upon my question, though.

Rechecking on the mission, seeing they were again on the losing side sends another sigh down my throat. Idly watching the monitor, I pick up my comms and search for Yuuko's personal ID. Calling her own unit is only in case of emergencies, but I believe I deserve a small report as of now. Though, time might be something she's lacking right now, to have chosen to send Shirogane just like that.

The tone rings for a moment, before the line picks up. "Kouzuki here," Yuuko says, sober and still. Stinging like snow hitting my face.

"XO, would you have some time?" I ask, slow.

"What is it now? I am rather busy."

"I only wanted to ask a single question if-"

"Out with it, what do you want?" She hurries, barely restraining the blizzard.

"About Shirogane's situation, I wanted to know if-"

"There are no updates, and there will be no updates," she spit out, almost hateful.

"Huh? Wait, what do you-"

"Marimo, I don't have a single fucking femtosecond to waste right now. So please do me a favor and don't ask me about this again. Are we clear? Yes, thanks. Later."

Only the empty tune echoes into me after the angered retort. No wonder he choose to play dumb, when Yuuko grows this sharp and cold there is nothing to be done. I assume, something delicate is

going on behind curtains and has upset her greatly. Shirogane might be related to it, perhaps not, maybe she simply sent him back due to not having time to properly explain anything to me. Maybe she simply moved him to another medbay to prevent any altercations with other soldiers. Having to 'waste' time on Shirogane when other more delicate issues pile on the timetable must have caused her a headache. In which case, Yuuko's venomous words must have been reprimand enough for Shirogane.

Turning my attention to the training once more meets me with a new and more compact formation, a diamond pattern to their flight. No longer having long range options now that Tamase is gone has forced them to try and pierce through the pincer together.

A few volleys meet their mark, ammo is running low in complete opposition to their heartrate. Windows are blasted, specks of glass flutter amidst the gunpowder and pitch-dark smoke. Fire follows their foot-marks, preying upon their shadows. Missiles rain down, preventing their advance, a ring of fire surrounding their every flank.

"Looks like them rookies are havin' a rough time," someone comments, looking up I find a light blue gaze and a hand raising in a wave. "Hey, Instructor. How's everything today?" Hayase says, cracking a smile.

"Sigh… I suppose you can guess."

"Stumped on Level B, huh," Munakata chuckles, drinking from a small can. "I guess even your best cadets will face such a challenge at times."

"Everyone does, really. I only hope this doesn't stall them for long," I say, rubbing my forehead while stealing a glance at the monitor, the advance of the blue dots. "So, what are you two doing here?"

"Just bored," Hayase shrugs, finishing her can, crushing it and throwing it towards a bin. "Our trainings are done for the day, and we just got a lot to think about."

"We were hoping to borrow the sims for a moment," Munakata says, then looks to the monitors, grasping her chin, "but I didn't think there would be still someone training this late."

"They get points for persevering," Hayase nods to the monitor. "Still, I do pity them. At least the Reaper didn't have us train until this hour," she chuckles back at me.

"Honestly, perhaps I should have," I return the smile, shaking my head. "Might have done something to mend those manners of yours, Hayase."

"Oh, Instructor, don't be silly. You can't improve what's already perfect," she says, giving little pats to her biceps. "You and I both know I shall forever be your number one pupil."

"Heh, I wouldn't be so sure. Someone did thrash you really badly a few days ago," Munakata says with a smirk, raising a single brow as she slits her throat with a thumb, which obviously makes Hayase seethe for a second.

"Wait, really? Hayase, someone bested you?"

"Eh? Ah, w-well… It was a draw, in all honesty," she says, curling a strand of hair, compacting her posture.

"Still, to have driven you to such lengths… I am amazed, honestly."

"If only she had relied on her comrades instead," Munakata comments, resting on Hayase's shoulder, poking the outer rim of the closest ear. "You truly should have done something about this gal's addiction to close combat, Instructor."

And again, they start to argue. At least Hayase now has someone who complements her well, even if it infuriates her. Despite all that has happened since then, to see you two can still joke about a defeat is a small consolation. Perhaps, one day, these five will see this day in the same manner. Despite the fact that they're almost out

of ammo and- Oh, now Mitsurugi got shot down. Well, I suppose this shall end in another loss.

Looking up as my two pupils watch the monitor amidst their bickering, I spot Shirogane as he comes closer, trying to adjust his headgear to not catch onto his hair or conflict with the headband he still has on him. For some reason, his steps freeze when seeing Hayase and Munakata. Taking on a more sober expression and in slow motion he approaches, keeping a mindful space between himself and the two women.

"Hm? Who're you?" Hayase asks as she sees him.

"Isn't he… Oh, the sixth guy from the squad, right?" Munakata nods, ruffling her hair.

"Yes, that's me," Shirogane replies, barely audible. "Good evening, 1st Lt Hayase, 1st Lt Munakata," saluting them, his eyes do not fully meet theirs.

They return the gesture, Hayase with both brows corking down. Before she blasts forward, eyes widening. "Ah! You're the one who bested my record in the sims!"

"Yes, that's right. The hotshot here might truly take your number one spot, 1st Lt Hayase," I remind with a smirk, giving a light pat to Shirogane's arm as I start configuring the sim unit for him.

"Mmgh… We'll see, we'll see. Anyways, you, Shirogane."

"… Yes?" He replies, still minding his tone and space.

She smirks, flashing him a gun with a hand. "I sincerely hope we can one day cross strikes. I owe you quite a debt, you see."

"A debt?" He raises a brow, tilting his head.

"In all honesty, we should probably thank you," Munakata says with a nod, no second layer to her words. "Thanks to that superb showing

on your first sim run, we seem to be close to rehabilitating Hayase here."

"Oi, mind your words, you traitor," she spits out, eyes roaring in storm.

"You… still remember that?" He asks, blinking fast, features relaxing.

"Of course I do!" Hayase bursts forward, again flexing an arm, making a gun. "One of these days, you and me are gonna have a match to see who's the real top scorer of this Surface Pilot Academy, Eight-kun."

Coughing as I stare to dispel her usual aggro, she gives a minute nod in apology. However, when I look back at him, I find him chuckling lightly and losing the smirk, instead replaced by a smile, small, honest, as he no longer stands in attention and lowers his guard.

"I see… It'll be a pleasure to spar with you, if we ever get the chance to," he nods, with the usual cheer back in his eyes.

Which sends starlight into Hayase's, who lightly chuckles. "Heh, I knew you and I would see eye to eye. Still, compared to that day, you do look kinda…" she bends and tilts her head, staring at him from different angles, "different. What's up with your hair?"

"Oh, so you like guys with long hair. I didn't-"

"Shut it, Munakata!"

"You two, keep it down," I remind, both of them give a little nod, Munakata giggling, Hayase groaning. "Shirogane, don't let them intimidate you. These two are always like this."

"Haha, no, it's fine, really. And about the hair, I'm just too lazy to cut it, that's why I, uh, have the headband in place, too," he admits, poking the odd, mechanical-looking add-on.

"I see… So, you're going to train at this late hour?" Hayase inquires, smirking a bit as she taps her lower lip. "I like your moxie, kid. Lemme see if you besting my record was a fluke or not."

"If he breaks another record, should I tell the Captain-"

"You're dead if you do!"

"Hayase, really, don't be so hostile," I sigh and shake my head, she nods an apology. "Furthermore, he's going to be taking on the mission on his own due to… certain circumstances. Don't make a bet out of this."

"Wow, really? But I…" she scratches her cheek, stealing glances at him, "I thought both sides had chosen to apologize to the other. Hey, you're really being punished?" She asks, getting closer.

"Why do you ask?" He counters, not minding the intrusion on his personal space, not changing his expression a single bit.

"Well, if you are, then that means the Captain- I mean, the UN is admitting to-"

He starts to chuckle, halting her spiel with a raising handwave, making Hayase and Munakata both share a puzzled gaze. "I am only being punished for being a fool and letting things escalate. Do not think too hard about it, please."

"Is that so?" Neither of them seem to buy into his words, sharing another pondering look.

"In any case, Shirogane, get to unit number six," he nods, giving a salute to the two of them before walking his way to the unit. "Sigh… You two, you better not delve too deep into his situation. Even I didn't get any answers thus far."

"Huh?! Really?" Hayase recoils, gulping.

"Yes, Shirogane was prohibited from mentioning anything, and me delving for a simple answer ended very poorly. Give him some space if you see him on the hallways, please," I ask, both of them immediately nod back. I return the gesture with a smile as I finish the setup on Shirogane's sim. "So how is Isumi faring?"

Munakata chuckles dryly. "The Captain is as immutable as ever. It seems an important mission for us is in the horizon, so our regime was made more severe from today onward."

"Kinda feels like we're back at basic under you," Hayase comments with a smile.

"Really? Is she overburdened at the time?" I know Isumi can be too harsh on herself, on her plans and ideas, but she never, and I mean never, has gone as far as I did during my training drills. And to make both Hayase and Munakata voice the admission to the enhanced intensity, what manner of course has she devised?

"No, it's not that," Hayase scratches her ear, as if unsure on continuing. "You see, the Captain lost a bet and the new methods we're testing are a bit, uh, how to put it…"

"Unorthodox and quite savage," Munakata says, in complete sobriety. "Frankly, we were expecting to run into you either in the PX or the hallways, and wanted to ask for your input on some maneuvers we're having trouble with. We, uh, thought to be making decent enough progress, until we ran into a certain roadblock a few days back."

"I see… I suppose I can give the control logs a look, if Isumi and Yuuko gave you permission."

"Sigh… Thank you, Instructor!" Hayase beams at me, Munakata instead gives a bow. "We can't share everything with you, but there are a few pages we did get the permission for. Can we pass by your room tomorrow before roll call?"

"Yes, I do not mind. Oh," the red alert sounds, the last of them was shot down. "The exercise has finished. Cadets, you may disembark," I speak as I shut off the units and projection, sighing as I see Ayamine hit the unit and Sakaki grip at her face, the rest merely unable to even lift their chins.

"Should we give you some space?" Munakata asks, I nod and they move out of sight, back to the rails.

I move to meet them, all of them stall their descent from the sims. Slow and unsteady are their steps, even more their gazes. I don't know what is in worse shape, the virtual pincushions their TSFs ended up as or their current expressions. Standing in a line, forcing the hands to remain by the seams, the gazes locked at an invisible target, they await my words as I scan them, one by one, top to bottom, leaving my eyes on theirs for a second.

"… Well, I certainly didn't expect you would best the course in this attempt," a flinch, lips regressing, eyes wishing to squint, "and there is much you did wrong in this occasion. There is little else to comment on, save for the fact that I believe you should already have the answers to the problem you are facing in this mission. Try and think from your comrades' point of view, hasten your decisions, and you will clear all drills that remain in your way. That is all. Dismissed!"

"Salute!" All of them do so, relaxing, sinking once I return the gesture.

"Now squad, there is one last matter we must tend to," I say, arms folding, and all of them stall a reaction, looking at me. "As you were partaking in the training, Shirogane came to announce his return to the curriculum."

"Huh?! Really?" Sakaki asks, almost stuttering.

"Instructor, was he unhurt?" Yoroi comes a few steps closer, hands joined tightly.

"Did he receive any punishments? Or injuries?" Tamase follows right after, staring unblinking.

"… Where is he now?" Ayamine inquires, looking around, then silently holding my gaze.

"Alright, calm down! Back to the line!" They again form up, not regaining their stiffness, still staring in worry. Siiigh… "Shirogane was not injured, and seems to be fine. He cannot disclose whatever kept him away today, nor anything regarding what could have been arranged between him and the guards. However, since he has missed a day of training and was feeling up to the challenge, he is now in unit six at the ready to partake in the same course you've been taking thus far."

"What?!" Mitsurugi's eyes contort, breaking formation. "Instructor, I do not believe it wise. If he was kept in medbay for an entire day, allowing him into the sim is-"

"A few hours won't truly make any difference, Mitsurugi. If he was given permission to come by, it is fair to assume he is well enough to resume his training. Also, this is a sort of punishment for him," I say, endowing a colder, slower tone. "Since his actions have caused this squad too much trouble already, I believe having him train on his own at night to be a fitting arrangement." And it will keep anyone that thinks he's moving on without repercussions.

"… Ma'am, that is not a wise decision," Ayamine retorts, eyes narrowing. "To single out a member of the team will only work to the detriment of the whole unit. We sink or swim as a unit, thus I believe continuing to train together would be in our best interests," she says, firm and unwavering, even in front of my direct stare.

"… That is fair. However, individuals can also be punished on their own. Do no think you can shield yourselves behind your unit, you shall be held accountable personally if there are repeated issues of misconduct. This is merely my way to test Shirogane, nothing else.

Now then, you may retire to the changing rooms or stay here and watch his run," I nod their way, returning to my seat.

All five of them huddle close and debate, Ayamine again saying something or the other as she moves away which causes Mitsurugi to try and follow after, raising her voice, yet is restrained by both Tamase and Yoroi jumping in front of the volleys. Their ruckus calms down as they realize there are a few onlookers, deciding to remain close to watch, then left to suffer through whatever Hayase and Munakata are saying in dares when they approach, both wearing smirks. Sigh… Please don't add fuel to the fire, you two.

Putting my headset on, everything in sight is in working order. A moment of checks and confirmations, I bring his unit into the view. "06, are you prepared?"

"06, all green. Ready and in standby," he nods in the projection, a sharp, piercing tint to his eyes as he grips the controls a few times.

"Alright. The course is due to start in T minus One. Be at the ready," I tell, he nods and, again, gives out a small smirk.

Only after the initial beeps resonate, only after his dot blasts away towards the enemy do I realize he had a particular choice of loadout on his virtual Fubuki.

Two blades held in a reverse grip, a single rifle in the pylon which was active and ready to fire.

"This is my life, a survival that knows no end," I hear in a tune over my headset. The smirk in place, a gentle swing of his head, Shirogane sings.

Even as the enemies all fall upon him, he continues to press on through the fire downpour. Singing out of tune all the while, he slices the aggressors in twain, no hesitation in the approach.

From a barrel roll into a bounce on an enemy, altering his speed in zigzags, drawing arcs over the smoke, landing behind the chasers, his blade falling upon them like curtains. Those who try and prey upon his shadow find the pylon's stare transfixed onto them, even the fleeing ones cannot match his tempo.

Not a single speck of damage, save for the one he inflicts onto the frame with his piloting. Not having used even half of his fuel thus far. And yet, his eyes are almost closed. Squinted, downcast, as if he were, perhaps, watching an old photograph. The singing turning into a whisper, a sigh giving out.

Hayase remains fixated on the monitor, slack-jawed and wide eyes even as Munakata shakes her shoulder, also looking slightly disturbed for some reason. The other five simply stare, as gargoyles atop a castle.

I, too, can only stare as my mouth becomes dry and air fails to reach inside. Not at the violent mirage that conquers the danger zone, but at the lone tear that drips from the fallen expression Shirogane makes, letting out a repressed howl through gritting teeth as his spinning attack rends an element apart, as his reverse grip grows intimate with cockpits and engines.

As he slumps into the seat once the mission is over, hiding his face from view, I take off the headset, shut off the projection. And choose to allow him to rest, until he tames the hiccups in his breathing.

# Nidhogg & Freyja

*A/N: A lot of stuff coincided in this chapter so it got really long and tedious at times. I decided to place all the 'infodumps' here to avoid bringing it all up at other times, and bring the story to the point it was before the rewrite faster.*

*I concur maybe not all it was 'needed', but decided to roll with it just in case some stuff wasn't clear enough. I know the pacing is slower than a snail, but I hope what little milestones are ahead don't feel out of place. On one hand, I managed to minimize a lot of the explanations from the OG Ch 51 so I'm happy. On the other, this is still over 20k words, so yeah :/. It kinda sucks seeing I can't write shortform to save my life.*

*Also, a small warning. I don't think I can make Yuuko justice. I've tried, I've thought hard about the characterization, but I am not happy with the result and I know canon Yuuko wouldn't let things play out as they do. I don't think I can write her better as I am now, to find credible reasons for her to go along with the plot more than anything, so brace yourself for some OOC-ness from her. I decided to just roll with it and stop fretting over Yuuko, if I ever manage to grip onto a proper voice for her I'll try and fix the dialogues then.*

*That's all for now. Thanks for reading. Stay safe.*

*Zuoriel*

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*Chapter 80:*

**Nidhogg & Freyja**

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*December 4th. A few minutes before 8 PM.*

*(In front of the changing rooms.)*

**[Marimo]**

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"-and that is the whole theory behind my spinning attacks, ma'am," Shirogane ends with a nod, still standing in attention by the exit of the changing rooms, back to his fatigues.

My feet move backwards on their own as I rub my forehead, running a finger across it as I sigh the cloud of needles from myself. There are some parts I do comprehend of the explanation, but the whole 'stun-lock' on the sensors was beyond me. To his credit, all those savage maneuvers truly did meet their mark. If Shirogane had a more robust TSF at his disposal, I fear to imagine what could he come up with. If there are any leftover Takemikazuchi units from that unexpected delivery we had before when he eventually joins the STF, he might end up committing war crimes against the BETA.

Isumi, you have my condolences whenever it is you're left dealing with that. At least I only have to oversee Shirogane under his cadet regime while he has locked jump thrusters and a base Gekishin at this disposal. Merely thinking on what acrobatics he could try even with a Shiranui is enough for fissures to crack up once more on the back of my head.

"Still, with a theory backing your moves or not, attempting them with a Fubuki against so many opponents was madness. If you are still allowed to partake in mock battles, you are forbidden to engage in these maneuvers of yours, Shirogane," I order, folding my arms.

He nods, a slight delay as his features compact in dejection. "Understood, ma'am."

"In any case, you truly did break any and all records we had for that level," I admit, sighing.

What few onlookers remained in the sim room simply were left speechless, and the other five also lost their voice at the utter massacre he caused in the simulation. Even Hayase was completely

flabbergasted at the results, although I believe the evil stare she and Munakata were giving him was unwarranted. It was almost as if they had seen the ghost of an old nemesis appear before them.

"To be fair, I did try and fight to the best of my abilities," he says, raising a finger as he nods. "You could say I… remembered something important, and decided to try and see if I could bring myself to," his eyes veer upwards, but the ceiling is not what the steeled gaze is looking at, "burn everything in front of me to cinders."

"… That is quite the, ahem, violent turn of phrase, don't you think?"

"Doesn't make it any less accurate, though," he counters as he nods, scratching an ear.

"While that is true, you do realize such aggressive patterns will only garner further attention onto your person, right? As effective as your run was, you fought as if you were out for blood, Shirogane," I state, holding his gaze.

That then burrows away, shoulders and lips sinking and sinking. Until from beneath the beaten expression raises steeled tension, a sharp inhalation, once he meets my stare again. "Well, can I be level with you, Instructor?"

"You mean, honest? Feel free to speak as you will," I nod, he sighs and returns the gesture.

To then fold his arm and tighten his face further, releasing the pin of his temper. "I don't give a fuck what a no-name random character may have to say or think about me. I'm gonna keep doing what I believe is best to deliver victory in the battlefield."

"Your cadet course is not a battlefield, Shirogane. And even then, I am not training you to be a killing machine. Such a high-speed line-piercing approach cannot be replicated by an element, and even if it worked out in the sim, it is only worth as a last gambit for when you're out of options. I understand the frustration you might be

feeling at this turn of events, more considering what transpired during the CCSE, but do not let your vision become tunneled into a single road. That is not… a mindset you should embrace, believe me."

"I stand by my words, ma'am. And still, better to have the out for those scenarios, right?" He retorts, standing stiff, never lifting his gaze from mine. "After all, I never know when my superiors will ask me to volunteer to hold the line on my own."

"… What?"

"Surely you know what I'm talking about, *Major Jinguuji,"* blazes behind the thicket of smoke, the same torn and burning expression I saw in the mirror… when I was lost as the Reaper… "My superiors won't hesitate to accept any 'volunteers' that want to depart to the frontlines, even if it means leaving a lone soldier to hold the entire firmament on its back."

"… I did not know you were aware of my prior rank," I inquire, leaning forward, eyes narrowing, their backside hurting for a moment.

"I'm not holding anything against you, ma'am."

"Is that so. Then, why bring this up?" Why use the same words… I employed back then?

Yes, I couldn't reject any volunteers to send to patch up the vanguard since I had to coordinate the troop's movements, I couldn't risk myself to be shot down and leave all of them on their own. Not even once did that work out, I knew I was sending them to their deaths. I guess, that's where my nickname came from. The call of the Reaper, the strike of the scythe, Jinguuji's order to assist the vanguard.

… When was it that I simply started thinking it couldn't be helped and kept on sending numbers at the BETA just to reach the arbitrary goal

of the mission? When did I stop thinking on keeping them alive? When was it… that the same scorching expression that I'm gazing upon started making its way into my comrades' faces and mine?

But how does he- No, why does he know? Was it all a mere coincidence he used those words? Or Yuuko… did you tell him?

Not relenting under my stare, unblinking and stoic, the pressure slides off him like water off a cliff, failing to erode anything at all. "Because I believe these moves are necessary for the future," he affirms in slow words, giving the wall a small hit. "These 'savage maneuvers' are what could make a difference in the frontlines, I believe. So I'm going to continue to employ and hone them, until I can reca- recommend others to imitate them. Regardless of whatever whispers may brew about me, I ain't going to back down from this, ma'am. So, I must insist that you grant me permission to employ them during the simulations, at the least," he asks, bowing down.

"… And if this course of action causes you and the squad further setbacks?"

He smirks again, scoffing lightly. "Don't worry, Instructor. If I fall, it'll be on my own. Be sure of it."

"Even if the squadron doesn't suffer any repercussions from your actions, you, as a soldier, should know that-"

"And you should know who brought me here, and what duties lay on my shoulders, ma'am."

"What? Excuse me, what does that mean?" I shoot a gaze across the nearby area, only finding Yashiro awaiting us to finish down the hallway. Still, I slash the distance between us, lowering into a whisper. "Shirogane, is this also related to your special missions then?"

And he looks down, heaving a sigh. "I cannot tell you anything, ma'am. But there are certain… metrics, let's call them, that I need to clear in my personal missions. For what is expected of me…" frowning, eyes set alight, "to ensure tomorrow never becomes yesterday, there are a few things I need to achieve." Sighing, throwing his full weight against the wall, he looks at me, or rather, in my direction. "Mastering the spins is but one of such objectives. As badly as this might sound to your ears, I cannot allow the opinions of any third party to impair my performance. So, if you forgive my bluntness, I do not give a single fuck about what any other soldier in this base has to say about my attitude or performance. They're gonna have to beat me in a cockpit before I change my ways."

I backhand the air, exhaling through clenched teeth. "And what of your career? Your records will be affected by this way of acting. Surely you are aware of how detrimental this will be for you."

"Instructor," he chuckles, yet as he smiles a few teeth sink onto his bottom lip, "you and I both know I most certainly won't be alive to see 2002 start. The STF does have a shitty survival rate, after all."

"H-Huh? What… did you…" I gulp, it feels as if it were pure ice. His eyes don't waver, the almost battered expression leaves after a slow shake of his head. "… How much do you know? And why haven't I received a report on this?"

"Because you won't be getting a report," he answers immediately, regaining the usual cheer to his small, almost corporate, smile. "This business is exclusively between me and *Vice Commander Kouzuki*, since it is the only reason why I came to this place, why I'm still here." Leaving the wall, back to a formal posture, he then gives me a bow. "So please don't feel obligated to show me any deference. There's no need for you to concern yourself with me, even though I thank you for the time you gave me to, well, get myself together after my run, and for having escorted me here."

"Sigh… I couldn't simply let you go on your own with how you dizzy the run had left you," I again rub my forehead, turning away to walk

in a small circle for a second. "And Yashiro came personally to look for you, so I assume another mission is already on your tab. You will have some free time to speak with your squadmates tomorrow, I assume?"

"If *Vice Commander Kouzuki* doesn't send me flying to another world," he notes with a nod.

"You believe that might be the case?" I stare, he again shrugs while making that battered expression.

"The cards are on the table, Instructor. If I don't draw anything that saves me, do you think she'd show me any mercy?" He whispers, looking down, crashing down.

"This newfound attitude of yours doesn't have anything to do with the Royal Guard, does it?" He closes his eyes, saying nothing even if I wait for a moment. "Look Shirogane, I know you have your special missions and you cannot speak of them, and the fixation the guards have had with you is abnormal, yet if there is anything you believe I could do, do not hesitate to tell me."

"I don't think you could change the *Vice Commander's* decision, ma'am."

"Even so, you're too skilled a recruit to let you go over a mistake in a mock battle. It's-"

"Ma'am," narrowing his eyes, again endowing the corporate smile, "as you told us at the end of the CCSE, there is no evidence that supports me not being an aggressive element. And just like then, you should simply limit yourself to following your orders."

"Cadet, you will not interrupt me while-"

"Then, why didn't you warn me of the report you were going to send regarding the refusal to take my squadmates' testimony back then?" He takes a step forward, glaring as if seeing BETA.

"I was under orders, cadet. You should know that there is purpose behind every directive issued by the XO."

"Then keep following your orders, *Major,"* he again goes to rest onto the wall, both hands behind his head. "All of this, all that has gone wrong is on me. If I had been smarter, none of this shit would have happened. There's no reason to concern yourself with the problems of another, after all a soldier should not push its burdens onto others," he states, spewing air from his nose as a bull, frowning as if surrounded in the Red Zone.

… That damned phrase. I know they need to steel themselves, they need to know how to deal with the regulations that with this position come… but I never intended said line to be used as a crux to abandon someone to their own issues, for anyone to isolate themselves within their own mind.

"Taking responsibility and refusing a helping hand are not one and the same thing, Shirogane," I affirm, louder, a lump of coal burning the base of my neck. "Also," I take a step closer, my shadow blocking the light from his neutral features, "do not be as foolish as to think you're required to take everything on your own, you are part of an organization for a reason. If there are any issues regarding other soldiers harassing you, no matter their affiliation or rank, you come to me and I'll see that they don't cause any problems twice," I nod his way, tensing my expression as he raises a brow.

"What, you think you can simply ignore the *Vice Commander's* orders without repercussions?"

"It's true I cannot dissuade the XO if her decision is set, but I do not believe she'd discard you or welcome the notion of you, or anyone really, being harassed or hurt. It would set quite the awful precedent, and this issue is no longer only about you, Shirogane, but about how this base chooses to deal with whatever troubling views its crew might harbor."

"An individual's problems are used to bring forth the cracks in the overall structure, huh…" For some reason, he smiles faintly, playing with a strand of hair.

"That is right. I understand your concerns, but they are unwarranted. Also, I assume you know… how starved we are for pilots."

"Well, kind of," he shrugs, scratching his head, still not meeting my eye.

"Then, I want none of this contrarian act from now on. You are part of this base, and it is the duty of your superiors to take notice of whatever interpersonal issues you might be subjected to. If you are deemed the root cause… then your concerns will become truth, but I choose to believe in the temperance you've shown since the return from the island. So cadet Shirogane, ensure you remain acting in a proper manner befitting of the goals imposed by the XO, and that you desire to achieve."

Looking down, inhaling slowly, he gives me a quick bow, a ripple in his voice. "Thank you for the gesture, Instructor. If it is something I believe can be shared, I'll try to find the time to consult with you."

"Good. Now then, while there are a mountain of questions on my mind, Yashiro is waiting," I sigh, seeing the girl again move those odd bunny ears while staring, stealing gazes our way, "so I will only ask one last thing. Shirogane, what are you allowed to tell me of what transpired when you, well, attacked 1st Lt Tsukuyomi at the end of the mock battle?"

"… And why would you be asking such a thing, Instructor, ma'am?" He inquires, his features solidifying as he stares back.

I can't help but to dry my mouth at the forced manners, the death stare he's giving me. It's almost like a reflection into days long gone. "Your squadmates were present when your Gekishin was brought to the hangar, were you told of what transpired then?" He shakes his head while raising a brow, so I tell him of that little mess. We both

sigh at the outcome. "They had a small argument over what had truly transpired later, and the pressure of the whispers and stares clearly showed its marks in their trainings today."

"You think they don't want me around anymore?" He asks, looking down, again giving little hits to the wall.

"No, that's not it. I believe they'd welcome your return with open arms, honestly. Still, I doubt they'll keep their inquiries quiet after your stunning performance in the sim. More so if you continue to employ such violent patterns of piloting. While I do not believe it will become an issue, I am concerned about how some of them might react if you, well, state as you did before that you've no intention to change your ways."

"Lemme try and guess. You think Mitsurugi is gonna snap at me?"

"Sigh… Yes, I do. Even if not openly, I do believe she will make her stronger opinions known to you. Can you have a talk with her, try and find a common ground?"

He looks down, hiding his hands on both pockets, resting on the wall again. "It's all up to her, but I will try to explain myself as well as I can, from within my boundaries."

"That is all I ask. You didn't really aim to hurt 1st Lt Tsukuyomi back then, I'm certain."

An eyebrow twitches, he winces. "You should know no plan survives a battle, ma'am. Sometimes, you end up pitted against situations you never thought of, hurting people you didn't meant to… but that's how the dice rolled, no one is to blame. Not me, not those who stood against me." Placing a hand on his cheek, rubbing, mending it, a single teeth digs into his upper lip. "After a cannon ball is fired, it can only keep going forward. Whether it hits an ally or an enemy, it's all the same to it. And there are times… when all you can do is light the fuse and move onward, no matter what stands ahead, even if it's an ally."

"That's a rather… somber take, for a cadet. Are you not regretting this turn of events?"

Cracks and fissures remain open all across his face, he looks down and his long bangs hide his eyes from sight as again heaves a sigh. "It doesn't matter what I say after the fact. People will believe what they want to, my words be damned."

"… Would you like to talk of what happened? You did say she spoke words that riled you up, right?" I ask, taking a step forward, trying to pat his shoulder.

He hurries away, as if my hand were a scorching oven, still wincing. "It's fine, don't worry about it, ma'am." Taking a second to inhale deeply, he stands in attention and salutes me. "I cannot make any promises regarding my… explanations for the squad, or if they'll be enough to appease Mitsurugi in particular, but I won't let my presence be a detriment to the training. I'll remain as silent as a shadow if that's what it takes to keep the peace up. All I ask is that you allow me to polish my new tactics, when it is possible."

He remains in place, not faltering upon my stare, not even as I raise my chin and dive into his eyes does he relent a reaction. So I nod, returning the salute. "Fine, I suppose. I shall be waiting for you at roll call tomorrow morning then, cadet. You're dismissed."

He smiles one last time, turning around and going his way to the stairs. His march remains undaunted as Yashiro tries to catch up, caught off guard by the end of our talk and the speed of his steps.

… What the hell happened to cause such a reaction? Shirogane did have moments of seriousness, when his gaze would sharpen and cut deep. The end of the CCSE being the clearest one, for example. Yet, the almost scarred manner in which his eyes constricted, the knot he was fighting as he spoke, what happened to you in these days?

… Yuuko, you wouldn't truly forsake him, right? Even if the guards asked for retribution to fall upon 'the traitor', we can't afford to lose such an ace recruit. Even less when the IRG provoked this whole affair, asking to partake in our mock battles and with a Takemikazuchi, to boot. But considering how she answered to my call, and Shirogane's reactions as we spoke more than anything, there is something that went very wrong of which I am not aware of.

… Is simply watching over him all I can afford? Even as he seems about to fall down the same hole I fell in? Again, only able to do what I can, what's in my hands' reach, never extending forward.

'It cannot be helped.'

'There's nothing to be done.'

I… I do not want to create more Reapers, that's not what we require for the future. Those meager justifications won't do anything for my cadets, simply making them killing machines is not what I want to do. Shirogane might have brought up some fair points, but simply letting things play out is not wise.

… There is so much I don't know about him, when you think about it. Shirogane said his stay is tied to the reason why Yuuko brought him here, tied to the success of his missions. And to that end, he is willing to burn any and all bridges around him to cinders, it seems. I suppose, you're not her 'special protegee' for anything. Whatever these missions entail, I can only pray for things to turn out for the better as I remain vigilant. Because you were right in one crucial matter.

No matter how much I try, not even the Reaper can stand up to Yuuko, no, XO Kouzuki. On that battlefield, you are alone. And no killer piloting will save you from her gavel.

---

*A few minutes later.*

*(In the Elevator.)*

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The door slides close, leaving the two of them alone in the shallowness. Alone with the prickling of small droplets of coldest, minuscule pokes of spiders to young Yashiro's neck, who cannot lift her stare from the floor.

All the way here, the soldier didn't even stop to wait, didn't decelerate at all in his stride. Shrouded in a faint mist, his thoughts are obscured to the assistant.

So her fingers dig into her dress as she steals gazes. " *Why? Why won't he talk to me? Is he mad? Does he now think like the mean Royal Guard did? Why did he even leave the medbay on his own without contacting us?"*

Merely peeking at his boots reveals a shrouded dark, a veil in protection. The soldier's mental guard is up, carefully picking his thoughts to avoid Yashiro from sensing anything else from what she already had witnessed. The faint shapes, the silhouettes of the wasteland, of the greenery of the forest flash for a second on her mind as she tries to scan, as her eyes linger for too long.

A slow ruffle on her head shuts off the flickering visions, a finger draws circles near the bunny ears. "Why so tense, Kasumi-kun?" Shirogane-san asks with a smile, softly petting her hair.

Hesitant upon the usual cheerfulness, her hands twist and tug at her dress. "Um… Takeru-san? Are you- How are you now?"

"Sorry for having made you wait," he chuckles, tracing a strand of hair to its end, patting her shoulder afterwards. "I'm okay, all things considered. Has everything been fine over here?"

"… No," she then grabs and pulls at his arm, enduring what echoes the physical contact causes. "I was so worried you would not wake up, the Professor was so upset you didn't return, and then you just

leave the medbay on your own…" her tense features slowly relax as he sighs, giving a small nod in apology. "You are unharmed now, right?"

"Yeah, don't worry," he nods, again petting her head, a single finger tickling a cheek, trying to soften the fallen expression of the assistant. "Sorry again, for having made you see all that shit."

"No, it's… fine. So, um, did you find your answer?"

"… Yeah," he says, hand retracting from the hair, sight seeking the ceiling of the shallowness.

"You're… still on the Professor's side, right?" She asks, staring, enduring the visions.

And then, silence. His eyes close, and he leans on the wall.

She lightly pulls at his arm, he remains quiet.

So young Yashiro lean on the soldier as the gears rotate and continue the elevator's descent.

"I guess it's all up to the *Vice Commander* now," he says through his teeth, not masking the embers within his lips.

"The Professor was really worried about you, she again grew all crimson when she saw you were gone from the bed," she insists with many consecutive flaps of her bunny ears, gripping his wrist.

"Well, can't exactly blame her for that. After all the time I… Uh…" His brows cross, eyes narrowing as his lips twist. Scratching his head, Shirogane-san looks back at her. "Kasumi, how much time passed since the mock battle?"

"You… don't know?" He shakes his head, she flaps her ears as the hold over his hand tightens. "Then, why did you left the medbay if you didn't even knew how much time had passed?"

"Because I wanted to find out what was going on here, and see if people still remembered me, of course. So, how long has it been?"

"Sigh… Only a day."

"Wait, for real?!"

"Yes, that is all. You seem… to believe it would have been longer. Why?"

"If you had gone through all that, you also would believe more time had passed. I guess my will really was enough to bring me back quickly," he sighs, but the relaxation lasts a moment. "Then, that would mean… Hm, I might've exhausted my reserves, dammit."

"What are you talking about?"

"G-Radiation," he mentions, unconcerned.

Which causes a flinch, both limiters standing in attention. "Huh?! But that's a secret the Professor hasn't told anyone… How do you know of it?"

He smirks back as he plays with young Yashiro's bangs. "Kasumi-kun, you do remember I told you that I looked after you during my first loops, right?"

"Did another me tell you, then?"

"Well, more like I found out as I helped you sort out reports for the Yuuko we supported in a previous life," he tells with a smile, a faint shine to his gesture. "All the quantum bullshit considered, I assume the radiation mentioned in the Nucleus' papers is this one, right?" She relents a nod, he groans as he looks up. "I see… So that was right, then. While I'm here, guess I can 'recharge', in a way."

"… So, um, what happened after you took me out of your mind? What did you see?" She once more pulls his arm, yet he shakes his head.

"I told you before, right? Yuuko and Sumika need you more than me."

"You don't trust in me?" Her shoulders sag, eroded by the sobriety of his voice.

"I don't wanna put you in a pinch," Shirogane-san quickly retorts, again softly kneading her hair. "So don't try and look into my mind for answers, please."

"… I'm your friend," She gets closer, staring into his eyes, into the barren wasteland.

The soldier holds her gaze captive, expression unchanging. "Then, let me handle my cards on my own. If you really can do anything for me, let me play this game on my own terms."

"This isn't a game," those slim fingers wrap around his hand, strongly, stronger. Yet it makes no difference to either his posture or his complexion, the barren and grim stare that truly does resemble the bloodstained wasteland we traversed. So young Yashiro's lips quiver, not knowing what to say to spur a change. "I… haven't told the Professor of the forest in detail, or of what we spoke by the hill. And I won't disclose anything-"

"Alright, stop," he says, patting both of her shoulders. "Kasumi, thank you, really."

The soldier smiles in radiance, getting closer, closer and playing with her bangs, parting them away and getting even closer. As his figure covered her entire sight, young Yashiro feels a small, minute contact in her skin, a light dampness to it.

A kiss to her forehead.

Softly, tenderly, for only a second, only a peck.

His eyes remain hardened, burning once they cross gazes again as her fingertips unearth and explore the spot where his lips had been moments ago. "But you really should not go against the XO's orders. Leave the discussions to me, Yuuko doesn't need more things to worry about."

"So you are going to argue with her…" Her stare sharpens, he gives a final pat to both shoulders.

"Can't be helped. She ain't aware of what mess we're in," Shirogane-san sighs sharply, getting back up and shaking his head.

"I don't think you being a Royal Guard can bring you so much trouble, Takeru-san. I believe the Professor still values you much, even if the Shogun would become your enemy she will protect you."

"It's not who I used to be but the reason for why I became like that."

"… The younger Takeru-san seemed to hate the UN during our talks in the wasteland. Are you… opposed to remaining here?"

"No, but you gotta see beyond the surface," he sighs again, hunching over. "The mirrored patterns can only mean one thing, and that… is what I gotta fix."

"You mean how you said you had become a member of the IRG in another world to protect that mean squadmate?"

He gives Yashiro a narrowed gaze, scratching his ear. "You really do not like Meiya, huh."

"She's rude and forceful."

"Siiigh… But yeah, that's what I'm talking about. I… did join the IRG in another world, that's what more or less cements my doubts into certainty," he affirms, arms folding, expression hardening into a rampart once again.

Again pulling at his sleeve, Yashiro's eyes seek his. "However, why would the Professor not welcome your concerns? It's true she didn't want to reveal what this third incident you warned her of is, yet if you're open and clear with her I'm certain-"

A soft hold descends upon her hair, a bit rougher than before. "You leave that to me, Kasumi. Okay?"

A beep echoes as the assistant was about to protest, the door opens and he exits to the hallway. Not slowing down and keeping the lead he had on young Yashiro, she cannot resume the thread of conversation until they arrive to the door of the Professor's office. As Shirogane-san raises his hand to knock, the entrace slides open on its own. Taking a second, a sharp breath, the colors in his aura shifting and turning, taking on a darker shade when his expression grows grim, he steps into the office followed by the small steps of the assistant.

Only the soft operative sounds of machinery fill the office, the scientist's back is turned to them. She slides to the small table, leaving a mug with coffee on it, the red and white cup Shirogane-san has always been given by her. Not meeting their eyes, still and stalwart as a towering wall of dry ice, her aura remains completely dulled and obscured to young Yashiro. The Professor slowly sinks into her chair, leaning back comfortably and staring. Coiling and unfolding a strand of hair, resting her face onto that hand. The pierce of the gaze, the unthawed blizzard aimed at the soldier and only at him, just as that fox would within the Black Lilith.

A slight descent of her eyelids, she looks at the assistant. "Thanks for bringing him here, Yashiro. Welcome back, I suppose," she says, barely gazing his way. "I assume, since you went to train and all, that you have no lasting injuries."

"No, no injuries to speak of," he says with a slow nod, before folding his arms. Then, giving a quick scan to the room, his brows lower and collide. "… By the by, have you eaten dinner yet?"

"What? Oh no, we are *not* doing this again," she lightly hits the desk, starting to frown. "Shirogane, do not try to change the subject here."

"Kasumi, did she eat dinner today?"

She shakes her head, looking down. "No, she refused since there are more pressing matters on the timetable," a short sigh is followed by both shoulders eroding, even more as the scientist glares into her eyes.

"Huh, what do you know. Yuuko and skipping meals, name a more iconic duo," he shrugs, both brows jerking up for a moment.

"… Cadet Shirogane, this is hardly the time for your quips," she tells, venomous. "I'd appreciate if we could hold a mature talk about what happened before, and of why you left the medbay without notice."

"Call for dinner and we can talk stuff out as we eat, two birds with one stone," he suggests, pointing a finger up.

"I am in no mood for your jokes now, Shirogane. Sit down and-"

"Should we skip the argument and proceed to getting you princess-carried to bed?" He asks, eyelids low, as low as his voice, as the groans of the scientist as she pinches her nose.

However, the little bunny ears perk up, unsure of what to make of the odd tint in the Professor's aura, or of the strange mix of both dark and yellow within the soldier. "Takeru-san, what do you mean by 'princess carry'?"

"You see Kasumi-kun, mommy Yuuko was being naughty a few days ago, refusing to have her nightly meal," he says as he smirks while nodding, spurring tense contortion in the scientist's complexion and widening shock in young Yashiro. "So I had no choice but to take her to bed and negotiate a ceasefire of her stubbornness. So if that's what it takes to make the *Vice Commander* eat her dinner then-"

"Okay, stop," she warns, force palming the desk, sighing short yet deep. "We are not having this conversation now. And you, cadet, will abide by your orders and start answering my questions. Must I remind you of what's at stake here?"

"The tuning of the 00 Unit, the success of the missions that will come," he says, eyes closing, before he once more gives a small smirk, "and the caretaking of your health."

"I said, we are not-"

"Sorry, but going by your eyebags and tone, I bet you must have not slept yesterday," he asserts, hitting the bullseye, making the lines of tension ignite further. "So what's a light meal as we platicate, *Vice Commander* ? After all," inhaling slowly, his features grow grim to match what in front of him lies, in the room and his objectives, "we do have a lot of sensitive stuff to talk about."

She eyes him frontally, unfaltering, the hand under the desk tugging and gripping at her skirt, at both the rejection that comes off the soldier's expression and at the immutable posture he endows. Not finding any of the usual cheer, not having expected such refusal or composure from him, she takes her time, sweet time, to ponder what to do, what he had said thus far.

"I suppose I can allow myself dinner, once I'm done with what duties remain for now. So do sit down, Shirogane. I won't repeat myself," she affirms, he sighs. "Yashiro, you may retire."

"Huh?! H-However-"

"You have duties to take care of. Motoko-nee needs your support in the cylinder room, and I… have my hands full at the moment," she says, once more focusing her full armory upon Shirogane-san.

Who looks back and smiles, ruffling young Yashiro's hair. "It's okay, Kasumi. I assume this means it's time to activate the 00 Unit?"

She barely nods, minimizing her shoulders. "Yes, the Professor has decided we should do that now."

"Which is why I'd welcome you not wasting our time now, Shirogane," she reminds, taking a sip from her mug. "Surely, you understand what takes priority in this situation?" She eyes him sideways, he rolls his eyes.

"Um… Professor," young Yashiro braves a look upward, into the stoic and unchanging stormclouds, "you will let us try to speak with Sumika-san one last time, right?"

"Depending on Shirogane's answer, that is," she says, looking away. "Now, on your way. I'd welcome some privacy."

"But I can try and help you two understand better what-"

"Considering the cadet's stance, I rather you not suffer any harm, Yashiro," Kouzuki states, stare unmoving.

"Harm? What are you insinuating?" The soldier asks, arms slowly folding.

"You see, when scanning the area to find you after you left the medbay, without notifying your legal tutor of it," she halts, sending him a sharp and venomous stare, "Yashiro felt a slight pain at the vision she saw. By the way," she then leans forward, fingers interlocking, "perhaps you can tell me what these dragons and foxes are about, Shirogane?"

Ignoring the pyre of magma, he instead pats young Yashiro's head. "Did you see any of that shit again?"

"Sorry…" she whispers, "I couldn't help it. I think you were in the simulator then?"

"Sigh… Don't worry, I'll try not to let those thoughts get to the surface again. You be careful when scanning me, okay?" He twirls a strand

of silver hair, she nods.

"Well, let's not waste any more time. Yashiro, go to Motoko-nee, now," she orders, waving to the door. "This talk is between me and Shirogane, you're needed by Kagami," the scientist so states, grabbing her mug and bringing it to her lips once again.

"However, I can-"

"Kasumi," he again pets her head, his hand falling to its back, "if it's time to activate the 00 Unit, then you won't get another chance to talk with Sumika."

"I will still help you tune her as best as I'm able," she states, firm and bright.

He smiles, nodding back. "I know, but it won't be the same. Believe me, the 00 Unit won't be like the Sumika you've been talking with all this time. You will only ever get this chance to talk with her again. Please Kasumi, go and keep her company, okay?"

"… Alright. But please do not get upset, the same goes for you Professor," she says, flapping her bunny ears, which causes the scientist to roll her eyes as the rim and bitter coffee meets her lips.

"Don't worry," he smiles again, waving down in comfort, "we're not going to start arguing or anything. Mom and Dad just need some alone time to talk."

A forceful choke, coffee floods the desk, and luckily misses the papers. Wiping her mouth with a handkerchief, the scientist glares forward. "Excuse me, since when are we 'mom and dad'?"

"Arbitrary, right now," he deadpans.

"Takeru-san, you're, legally speaking, not even an adult yet," Yashiro counters, giving him a side glance, an unwarranted serious expression in her complexion.

He chuckles, again playing with her bangs. "Don't be silly, Kasumi-kun. Going by all my loops, I'm probably older than the CO."

"I don't think you'd make a good parent, though," She notes, puffing a cheek at him, causing the Professor to chuckle dryly.

"Now, that's just mean. Search your feelings, my young Dersh Bnnuy. You know I'm telling the truth."

"I wonder about that," the scientist rolls her eyes as she wipes her desk clean, and takes her stained lab coat off. "Someone as irresponsible as you would truly be a disastrous father figure."

"What are you talking about? I give Kasumi lots of emotional support, right?" He pats her back, recalling their games and talks.

The bunny ears lower, she taps her fingers together, a gently poke as the images flash through her sight. "While that is true, I really… can't see you as a father, Takeru-san."

"Then, who's gonna support the rise of our overlord and savior, Dersh Bnnuy? I know I may have no sugar but I can totally be your daddy."

**CHOP!**

"Stop teasing me, Takeru-san!" She complains, releasing a volley of suppression fire upon his shoulder, roses in full bloom over her cheeks.

He merely laughs it off, the scientist expression softens for a moment as she watches. "Anyways, for real," a block to the chopping, a clasp on her shoulder, a finger lifting her chin, his eyes diving straight into hers, "give us some space, Kasumi. You don't have to see all that a second time, and there's stuff you shouldn't hear, too," he says, sobering up, a minute glance to the scientist that then relents a slow nod.

"… You promise you won't cause an argument?"

"I've no intention to," he nods, not looking away, clarity shining through his aura.

"Okay then. Um… Please do not argue. We're all… on the same side," she flaps her bunny ears, trying and giving both the most menacing glare she can muster at the time.

Both nod back, so she slowly makes her way to the door. Taking one final gaze back, Shirogane-san waves at young Yashiro while the Professor has her eyes again fully locked onto him as she drinks what little was spared of the coffee. She returns the wave, hesitantly stepping outside and going towards the cylinder room.

Shirogane-san sits in his usual spot, arms crossed, not taking the mug left in front of him. He returns her stare, saying nothing. She remains watching his expression, standing to make more coffee. The viper in her eyes does not lash out nor regress as she sits down.

She says nothing, observing his features, drinking slowly.

He remains with a poker face, posture and features not fully relaxed.

And for who knows how long, silence cloaks over the office.

They hold the other's stare, expressions unchanging, frozen. Frozen as the silence that permeates the room, as the cold gust of December that blows outside at the moment.

The coffee each had was slowly making less cloudy steam, lying as still within the mugs as their eyes have been.

Rolling her eyes, she shrugs. "Are you planning to have us do a stare contest until the heat death of the universe, Shirogane?"

He smirks, crossing a leg. "At least I have something nice to look at."

"Ha ha ha, very funny," she shoots him a glare, resting both arms onto the desk. "Well, if you don't feel like talking, let me be the one to start. Why did you refuse to return alongside Yashiro?"

"Didn't felt like it," he says slowly, expression and aura unchanging.

While her face remains stoic, there's a tiny, tiny flare of dull red around her hands as she interlocks her fingers, as her ankles cross. "Why did you depart the medbay on your own?"

"To see what day it was, and if people still knew who I was here."

"… So you were aware of the risks posed by your little nap."

"Little things compared to the problems at large, ain't them?" He asks, shrugging, the same repugnant mire of the forest flashing for a moment all over his body.

"Shirogane, I assume you know what issues you vanishing could have caused with Her Highness. If she lost any memories-"

" *Vice Commander,"* he slowly counters, entwining his fingers, dulling his face to perfect poker, "you and I both know Yuuhi is little more than a figurehead these days. And I assume, even if she had tried anything to get me off the base, you already have set mines to ensure she doesn't causes you any issues."

She frowns, a veil of crimson falling over her entire person. "Oh, my apologies. I was not aware you had such biases towards Her Highness in your mind."

Again frosting over, he looks back at her. Saying nothing, simply holding her gaze. As if time were standing still, his gaze remains on her. It sends a small shiver down her spine, the lack of emotion in his features.

"… Why did you not wake up sooner, Shirogane?" She asks, louder, while leaning forward.

"Because I had to make sure of something, that's all," he relents, low, shaking his head.

"Really, now? What is this about roaring dragons and evil foxes, then?" She inquires, a few fingers on her chin.

"Nothing you should concern yourself with, *XO* . It has nothing to do with Alt IV."

"I will decide that myself," she immediately counters, bumping a fist onto her chin, not lifting her stare from his. "Shirogane, I order you to speak. What made you run with the risk of vanishing from this world?"

"… I refuse to answer."

"Are you insinuating you won't fulfill your part of our pact?" She asks, remaining stoic, yer her eyes start to widen, the empty and primal stare of the fox overlapping in her features.

"Sigh…" Yet, rather than intimidated, Shirogane-san simply rubs his forehead as he slowly shakes his head. "Our pact is only about Alt IV, *XO* . My personal business has little to do with the project, thus I am not planning to disclose that intel unless there is an incentive for me to do so."

She raises a brow, the hold on her chin tightening, the mist falling upon her. "… So you are refusing an order from me, huh. Didn't think you'd take Her Highness' side, to be honest."

"Heh, Yuuhi's side?" He cackles, teeth shining as they're showered in light. He leans back onto the sofa, throwing an arm onto the backside. "Did you get drunk on an empty stomach, *XO* ? I ain't wearing IRG colors, am I?" He again simply smiles through the cracks of the wasteland, the repulsive corruption from the bog that echoes in his aura and mind.

"Shirogane," she hits the desk lightly, tracing the rim of the mug with her lips before drinking, "I'll have you know Her Highness was truly concerned over your status after you fainted. We already discussed the repercussions her animosity towards us could cause. So if you do not tell me what you spoke with her about, what caused you to faint, and why you refused to regain consciousness despite knowing the risks, I am going to be left with little choice but to pry the answers out of you," she glares, flares and sparks could be bursting between them at the moment.

"Hehehe…" And yet, the soldier starts to laugh, quietly at first, more heatedly afterwards. Unable to compute the reaction, the scientist merely stares in puzzlement until the laughing turns to coughing. "*Cough*… Haha. Come on, *Vice Commander,* get real. You already know what happened, don't you?"

"Excuse me?"

He faces her glare frontally, still smiling. "You already knew since the CCSE I was actually a member of the IRG in this world, that there was no 'another' Takeru. That's why you called the memory sessions a 'recovery'."

"… Well, I admit that I had a hunch," she relents, a slow spin on her chair. "Your words after you returned from the CCSE only made it more plausible. So," she stops, again looking at him and nowhere else, "are you still on my side, Shirogane?"

"That depends," he says, lowering his posture. "Kasumi said you seem rather opposed to my warning about the third incident, I assume you already know Mt Tengen will erupt soon."

"… So it is the same mountain in this world, too," she notes, nodding. "Yes, I already made a pact with Her Highness to lend a hand in the relief efforts."

"… That you have no plan to actually commit to," he adds, and sprouts a frown in her features.

Then, contorting her body, a hand aiming for a certain drawer, the blizzard of her stare never lifts from his. "You… You seem to not be particularly pleased, don't you?"

"Could you confirm or deny my previous words, *XO* ?" He asks. "Without resorting to guns, if at all possible," he then adds, shrugging.

"And if my words do not please you?"

"Is your decision on this matter counter to our pact, *XO* ? If it isn't, why so serious? You aren't hiding anything else from good old me, are you now?" Shirogane-san again smirks, placing both hands behind his head, leaning comfortably against the sofa.

Their stares once more crash and clash, opposing tidal waves swallowing and devouring each other. Just like that mega tsunami, that oceanic collapse as everything faded into the abyss. The constricting vines which crawled all over, the tiny spiders that seeped under cloth, the heat of the chasing breath belonging to all the twisted monstrosities within the bark.

"So, what's the matter?" He asks, growing sober as he straightens himself up. "Don't tell me… *XO*," his voice sharpens, dripping venom, "you didn't order Kasumi to scan my mind from outside while we speak, did you?"

She frowns, going to finish her coffee first, unable to clear the clouds in her expression. "… Considering your negative, that is one of the little cards I have left to play," she shrugs, then heaves a sigh. "But no, Yashiro has refused to disclose what transpired within your mind. Considering what you… might be thinking, I rather not risk one of my most precious assets to be hurt by whatever lurks in your memories. But thanks for letting me know how you think of me, cadet Shirogane," she glares, frosting to the core.

"I'm merely concerned over what Kasumi could see, that's all."

"And why would you be? Is there something you're wishing to hide, mmh?"

"She already had enough during the mind dive, *Vice Commander.* Please don't force Kasumi to scan my mind, if at all possible."

"I assume this means you will start answering my inquiries, then? What was that about dragons and foxes?"

"You and me, basically," he tells with a shrug.

A brow twitches, eyes and lips narrow. "Excuse me? Who is which?"

"I was, according to Kasumi, a dark armed dragon at one point. You, within my mind, take on the shape of a fox."

"… Huh," she says, not amused in the slightest at the term, leaning back, almost fully freezing. "So that's how you see me."

"To be fair, you always were dropping Chekhov's Guns all over the place during my first loops and back home, too. Not to mention you do tend to laugh very, uh, intensely at times."

"… Is that so. What are these guns you speak of? Some sort of tech you haven't mentioned yet?"

He gives her a sideglance, remaining silent for a second. "It's a term used to refer to hiding things despite saying them outright. Like the whole deal with the 'memory recovery' sessions."

"I see… Was all of the mind dive that taxing on her?"

"No, at least not all of it. I think she enjoyed the fireworks and the other stuff we saw at first, despite the mess that came afterwards," he says, relenting a sigh as the mask drops for a moment.

"… Fireworks? Okay, just what on Earth happened during the mind dive?" She demands, tapping the desk with a finger. "Shirogane, speak. Now."

Breathing in sharply, he folds his arms. "… You still haven't answered my previous question. Do you plan to heed my warning about the third incident?"

"… What has you casting such doubts on me, Shirogane? I believe I had told you there would be no more secrets between us after we've dealt with this little matter of your citizenship," she inquires, leaning forward.

"Are you forgetting how you left me on the phone with the fucking Shogun without warning? By the way, thanks for trying to hype me up but, really, I rather you'd have been honest and told me straight up you wanted me to speak with Yuuhi then and there."

"I was not attempting to deceive you. I meant every word I said back then, and my proposition still stands if you wish to remain on my side. Her Highness caught me off guard, I was not expecting her to call so suddenly nor to spur another shock into you," she affirms, speaking the truth and nothing but the truth, clear as the night sky.

Which eases his breathing, if only slightly, as his arms relax by his side. "I see…"

"Your position in the base is all but secured, let me inform you. Her Highness is wishing you to regain your citizenship, and made a point to warn me of how I should handle you. It seems you two were *pretty* close, hmm?" She asks, narrowing her eyes.

"Not like you didn't knew that already," he shrugs, sinking under the bog's cover.

"I only had a hunch. So then, what was it with that date she mentioned? What caused you to suffer another breakdown?" She asks, leaning forward even more.

"… Are you sure you don't already know?"

"Shirogane, I'd like you to stop this contrarian act. Unless you could enlighten me on the motives behind your rejection towards your ally?" Tilting her head, never blinking, always scanning. Despite the tension in the hand that remains hidden, despite the pit on her stomach at the extension of silence he puts her through yet again.

"… If you recall, we knew 'this world's me' was part of a secret squad, the Swordbreakers."

"Yes, I am aware. I was… thinking you could have been a member of said squadron, and it's why-"

"Save the explanation for later," he hurries, waving a hand down. "Considering I 'inherited' memories during the CCSE, in a place without G-Radiation, those images I saw could be nothing but my own memories, going by your theory."

"Indeed, that's how I- Wait a- Did you just say G-Radiation?" He nods, unabated under her wrathful stare. "When and how?"

"You do remember I've worked for another you in who knows how many timelines, right?"

"And, why, pray tell, you haven't mentioned that at all until now?" Again giving little hits to the wood, scratching the edge of a paper, she holds his gaze.

Yet, Shirogane-san shrugs. "Because you never asked me for help. Anyways, between the few memories I saw and what you knew of my life, you must have seen the similarities. The oddly mirrored results of his life and mine. And knowing of Shura's Dance, and how similar it must have been to what I showed you of Iceberg, you came to the conclusion that, somehow, this world's me wasn't a separate entity at all."

"… Perhaps."

"Oh, come on. Can we be honest with each other, *Vice Commander* ? Otherwise, we might as well just stop this."

"Sigh… What are you getting at? I understand that you could be upset at me hiding things from you, but, believe me, there is no mistake in this. I cannot understand what series of events caused this but you are, in fact, this world's Shirogane. Or, to be precise, this world's Shirogane was the next 'incarnation' you took after you tried to jump through the timelines back in your world. Just as you said you lived two years in ignorance of what lives you had lost, all the evidence points to you having been living in that same manner in this timeline." She tells, arms folding, compacting, compressing, even more as he remains silent once again. "Ahem… So I assume my hunch was correct, going by your reactions. I know you must be in shock, but I assure you there is nothing to fret over. No matter how close you were to Her Highness or what acts you did under the IRG, so long as you remain on my side I can cover your trails, Shirogane. And if it's bringing you pain, we can repress the memories now that we can attain your citizenship and Her Highness' blessing to you remaining here."

"… So all's going according to your little plan, huh," he says, low, looking away.

It sinks rusted iron into her throat. "Sigh… You should know what's ahead, Shirogane. I only acted as I did to create an anchor for you in this world, to ease your link with this reality. Now, all that's left is you tuning the 00 Unit to stabilize your world and allow Alt IV to attain success. All our efforts thus far were for this moment, weren't they? Unless, of course… your loyalty belongs elsewhere?"

Again, silence. Simply staring at her, expression tightening.

Giving a little hit to the sofa, he exhales through clenched teeth. "Why don't you cut the crap and get to the point? You should know what I'm getting at, *XO* ."

"… Are you wishing to return to the IRG?"

"Ha! Fuck no. You think I'll leave Sumika alone now of all times? You wound me, *Vice Commander*," Shirogane-san then, dramatically, tugs at his chest while making a pained expression, slumping onto the cushioning.

She rolls her eyes, a hand going to her forehead. "Then, what is it with you now?"

"I already told you, and there's no way you don't know. Yeah, I was again made to live without my memories, or without being conscious of them to be precise," he sighs, his sight taking an emergency landing, hunching a bit. "And if I figured this out, you also must be aware of it. My life isn't the only thing being mirrored right now."

"What?" She blinks, starting to gape. The words repeat in her head, his complexion does not waver, something starts to ring in her ears. "Excuse me, what do you mean?"

"Come on, stop playing dumb," Shirogane-san straightens up, slowly resting a leg on top of the other before starting to retell the small realizations he had before, all the similarities the world he is currently in has with his home world.

With every word, a crack spawns in the ice wall.

With every sentence and affirmation on his end, more and more does the air leave her lungs, does her sight grow dull and gray.

With every link she also confirms through his words with the intel she knows, her hands claw at the desk hard enough to leave permanent markings on it.

"So as you can see, for some reason, this world has an uncanny resemblance to mine," he finishes, sober and low. "And considering how long the highway was active, sending data into the multiverse, it ain't odd to assume this world took it all in and merged with that."

"… That's impossible," she says, holding her face as she looks upward, lost in thought. "Causal leaks cannot change events that have already occurred."

"Then how the hell did I arrive into this world? What is your explanation?" He asks, leaning a bit forward.

"I was… Ahem… I assumed your data leaving your world caused a reset through a paradox, which made all worlds also return to the respective point in time from which the paradox was solved, since all worlds are parallel. And, just as you did before, you overwrote the 'Takeru Shirogane' of this world at some point."

"… You do know I can only see memories I myself lived through because there was a link with the worlds I was in before. I had no link with this world whatsoever beforehand. Why are you not willing to tell me the truth, *Sensei* ?" He asks, smirking.

Something in his tone stockpiled nothingness in her gut, a slow raking below her ears starting to move upwards. "I am not hiding anything. If your will was certain and you had all the G-Radiation you absorbed after firing the particle cannon at Kashgar, then it is likely you would have been able to transfer your data even if only as metaphysical information. Then, when the world was reset after the exchange, it was assimilated into the being present in this world."

"And what of all the coincidences I noticed?"

Now, she's the one who remains silent. Running a hand into her hair, grasping and gripping, her previous idea slowly begins to melt like a sugar cube. Within the depths of the thought currents, the soldier's words start to gain hold, despite the pushback that common sense still offers.

She heaves a sigh, starting to spin, closing her eyes. "You are being serious, aren't you?"

"Of course," he immediately answers. "There's no way my world ended up fusing with this one, right?" He asks, out of caution,

Which causes her to wave a hand and groan. "Of course not, that's just not possible. I… do admit you raise fair points, however." A leg seeks the ground, halting the spin. She rotates back into his sight, interlocking her fingers. "Shirogane, did anyone in your world start to forget you after you regained your memories?"

"Nope. Neither Maya-sensei nor Yuuko-sensei forgot the plans we had made, and my parents also remembered me until the day I left. What about here? Did anyone forget me already?"

"No, not as far as I'm aware. Motoko-nee did forget you spoke with her on the phone, but that's about it, I believe."

"I see… So it's the other way around on this end, huh."

"Hm? On this… What does that mean?"

"That one time, when I ran away, people started to forget me instantly as soon as they started to think about me. On this end of the highway, looks like things are the opposite. If people don't think about me, then memories related to me will simply leave their minds. Now that I think about it, that might be why you went and told the squad I got sent to the frontlines last loop, huh," he nods to himself, realization dawning on him despite all that he already knows.

"I… see," she lowers her face onto her entwined fingers, eyes lost in the expansion of a blank page. "Then, does this mean we can have an easier access to the conductor's pull? If such a change came into the timeline due to your transfer, seizing and manipulating the data leaks might actually become possible," she says, a small smile raising like the sun, clearing all shadows and coldness.

Until she meets his glare, grim and still. He says nothing again for a moment, before shaking his head. "You're sure faster than a starting

line coming out of a horse. Sadly, I'm gonna have to refuse this idea of yours."

"… Why? You do realize it would mean you could tune the 00 Unit into proper human behavior with much ease?"

"By sacrificing another Sumika to causality and risking the ripples from worsening?"

"I can mend any issues that may arise, be sure of it."

"Tell that to last loop and the destruction of my home. We can't make causality's ripples get any worse, *Vice Commander.* Much less now that we both are aware the highway is affecting this world as it did mine beforehand."

"Yes, but you didn't have *me* then, did you? And anyways, a minimal mirror of actions is nothing to be concerned about."

"… Yuuko, I'm being serious," he says, dull and low, facing her gaze, not blinking under the prominence of the light she emanates with the minute frown. "These aren't some small mirrors, everything is exactly the same."

"Sigh… I'm telling you, there's no way it can be anything other than a small assimilation of leaked data. Also, it can only have started after August 5th when the conduit was formed due to the G-Bombs. By the by, why did you freak out when hearing that date, Shirogane? You sort of avoided that topic, for some reason," she asks, tapping her chin with a finger.

"Sigh… That's the date when I got my memories back, when they freed the highway. The date when I became whole again, as it should have been after the conductor opened up here. That's why I could return to my original form as I was before the transfer."

"Then, why didn't you retain your memories of being a Royal Guard?"

"You already know, don't you?" He says, grimacing as he looks at a wall.

"So… Kagami's wish…" he nods, shrugging. "I see, I assume you no longer were who she wanted to meet by Lucifer," she relents a nod, standing up to make more coffee. Staring at him while she fills her mug, leaving it on the desk she then goes up and grabs his, throwing the already cold liquid away, pouring more back and basically pushing it into his hands. "However, if what you say is true and I had actually undershot my assumption, does that mean your, uh, relation with the Shogun is equal to yours with Mitsurugi in your world?"

"… Not entirely, no," he looks away, closing his eyes as he takes a sip.

"And? What are you to her?" She presses, grabbing her mug, resting onto the desk, staring and staring.

"I was her stepbrother for a time, that's how I remained under their care."

"Is that so… I see, that does give their reactions a whole new meaning. I assume, you are not against regaining your citizenship?"

"… *XO*, do you know what was of me after Shura's Dance?" He asks, barely audible, hands lightly shaking as he chokes the mug.

She slowly places a hand on his shoulder, giving it a few pats. "I can imagine. If you desire to scream or curse at me, feel free. It was my decision to abandon Hakuryo, after all."

"Sigh… What would that achieve?" He shakes his head, her hand off his body.

"It won't change the fact that I ordered that mission. If you have any concerns over my… posture towards the war, let's clear them right now. I did ask you to take responsibility for whatever would happen after the mock battle, and as you know-"

"Yeah, even if it's small, you can't risk upsetting the IRG. Look, I ain't holding a grudge for… what happened after Shura's Dance, for real."

"… Does that mean you remember that clearly?"

"As for the point I was making-"

"Shirogane," she grows closer, tilting her back, mere centimeters left between their gazes, "do you clearly recall those events?"

"Clearly? No, it's more like, you know, actual memories from a few years ago. So-"

"Then, who were you? You were… part of the squadron that cooperated with us during the '99, right?" She asks, again grasping his shoulder, lips tightening.

"Sigh… That's the real reason why you've been pushing me to regain my memories, ain't it?" He shakes his head, pressing his jaw as if crunching small ice cubes. "To manipulate me to gain the Shogun's support, and more allies in the IRG."

"If you are upset, feel free to-"

"I'm not, I'm not."

"Oh, sure. This isn't you being mad in the slightest," she rolls her eyes, taking another sip of coffee, restoring his personal space.

"Sigh, I'm not, really. It's thanks to this we might still have time left to not screw it up, after all," he tells, slow and dejected as he sighs again, slowly taking another sip.

"Alright, if you say so. Will you regain your identity, then? Or, perhaps… you rather remain 'dead' to return to that squadron you were part of?" She asks, staring, something stirring inside at his repeated silence.

"… I wasn't part of the Swordbreakers, *XO* . I was their Captain," he says, looking up and nodding at the scientist.

Who nods back slowly, again gaping. "Wait, you? You were… their leader?"

"Yeah, just as it was after Iceberg."

"After- What?! But you didn't remember-"

"I'll tell you in detail later, if I deem it necessary," Shirogane-san again waves down, pointlessly trying to appease her blazing impulse of questions. "Thing is, I ended up in the IRG after the Babylon Disaster, appointed as the head of my own squadron. So yeah, even that is a mirror caused by the leaks. Do you know what that means? Those worlds still exist somewhere out there."

"Well, of course they do. I assume they cannot be reversed, since they are a possible state of the original conductor you were during those loops you took. If any branch had to be reset after the conductor vanishes from it, that would make your efforts to make Alt IV succeed be moot in the end," she affirms, finishing her drink.

"And, what else does that tell us?"

"You still insist on this idea?"

"Humor me. You wanna know what I recalled and have me play to your tune? Then be a darling and help me see if my hunch is spot on, honey," he says with a smirk, chuckling as she frowns, undaunted as a tree under a storm, unshakable by the threat of thunderbolts. After all, it would only serve to ignite him into blazes.

"Since when are you allowed to refer to me in that way, Shirogane?" She inquires, taking a step forward, a hawk about to dive.

Yet, the soldier merely shrugs. "I never was, I'm just teasing you back. I thought we were on the same side, aren't we?"

"I am not certain I welcome these… liberties you're taking. What is it with you? Do you again miss that other me you worked with?"

"To be honest, yeah, kind of."

"… What?"

"Why the shock? I always could speak with the other Yuukos without fear of her keeping important stuff from me after a certain point. Sure, the Kashgar mission was the odd one out, but otherwise I always felt like she heard me, even when she disagreed. Now, though," he sighs, arms loosely rest on his knees, a cold raking at the base of his back, "I can't really say that."

"I have been as honest as I can be, you know?"

"Then, stop dodging the issue about the possible threat of the highway already."

"Sigh… I am not. Just… Why now?" She asks, shaking her head as she ruffles her hair, keeping her hands busy. "I had assumed you would be rather upset at me, all things considered."

"Look, I can sort of get why you left me in the dark. Still would have preferred to be worth your trust, but what am I gonna do now? Other than joking to not lose my chill, there's nothing to be done."

"Well, some terms are not appropriate for jokes, Shirogane. What, did you want to call me honey or something?"

"At one point, I did."

"… Huh? If this is another joke, that's going too far."

Pursing his lips, he scratches the back of his head, looking away. "What? You already know I, well, close with another you. Trying to make small jabs and shit is what I always do to remain on good spirits. I know you might- no, you will never see me as she did, but all I'm asking out of you is to humor me just this once, as payback for

not telling me about your plans." Inhaling deep, restoring his posture and the shine to his smile, he looks into her eyes. "Surely you're not gonna snap at me for something like that, right honey?"

Hands wring for a second, before she massages her ear while rolling her eyes. "… Fine, I suppose I can do that little, if you miss her that badly," she returns the smirk, yet the heavy sigh he gives out halts the dismissive waving of a hand she was about to make, dulls the tension in her features. "So long as you don't reiterate this little joke, I'll let it slide. Are we clear?"

"Yeah, yeah. Feel free to laugh at me, *XO."*

"I won't, nor do I think less of you for it. Just don't call me like that again, joke or not. My name is all you should require, Shirogane. Now then…" Slowly, the Professor strokes her bangs, looking up, piecing what he had said thus far, trying to ignore his stare.

After a moment of silence, she starts to pace in circles, tapping her chin, eyes locked onto the ceiling.

"I believe that when you began the transfer, you did so with the will to reverse the effect causality had on your home, right?" He nods, leaving the mug on the table, his full attention on her. Leaving the silence hanging on purpose for a moment, enjoying the attention, she smiles as she plays with her hair. "That is, then, your core wish upon which your will exerted pressure to leave. However, Nucleus or not, you couldn't have returned to the past of the world where you saw Alt IV to fruition because the will of that world's Kagami was already fulfilled and neutralized by the 00 Unit of that world."

"… By the by, how did that even happen? I mean, that's what ended up making me lose my memories when I returned home, right?"

"I assume, yes, since she might have desired to spare you the suffering of carrying the knowledge," she nods, eyes veering to the whiteboard, going up to it and poking certain calcs. "I think she must have observed the variables in the wave-functions of that world and

how the non-local influence generated the Conductor, and then neutered the link so as to prevent any further loops from occurring in that world. However, while that only severed the direct link of your home branch and those alternative branches of worlds, it must have taken a severe toll onto her capabilities. I believe you told me the 00 Unit wasn't at full output after the base was attacked?"

Shoulders and expression fall, he relents a short nod. "While it seems I had managed to let her truly inherit all the memories and become as human as she could be, we were running against the clock for Ouka. I doubt Sumika was at the top of her performance then."

"I see, it makes sense. So the 00 Unit might not have had enough power to observe the precise variable to sever the link and push both worlds back to their original, non-interactive placement in space while also not erasing you completely. As an entity tied to the Conductor, once it is severed you would, well, disappear from the world. With your home world getting reset to a point where its Shirogane wasn't gone, no more disturbances would be left. But I suppose… she still wanted to let you live, despite not desiring to leave you with the guilt of the war. That's the only possibility for the turn of events that happened in your world, I doubt the 00 Unit willingly left the ripples unchecked."

"I see…"

"By the by, I am not saying you are to blame for-"

"Don't, I get it," he nods back, hardening his features despite a sigh. "It's all just part of what I gotta do to honor their lives and put an absolute end to this mess."

She starts pacing around again, nodding in relief to see not a single crack in his eyes or tone. "Well, is there anything you'd like to ask about this point before I move on?"

"Actually, there is," both hands come together as if trying to lift a wounded comrade, eyes closing. "Sumika was who made me into a conductor in the first place, so wouldn't her death make me disappear from the world? You know, since she is the source of what actually ties me to reality? I always thought it was weird, how I still existed after she died."

"Sigh… Yes, Kagami is who made you a Conductor to begin with, so as your 'primal observer' she was the first cause of your existence. However, since the condition for her 'wish' wasn't fulfilled by her death, the 00 Unit had to observe your existence's roots and undo the pull that anchored you to that world after she was completely tuned. As the heir of Kagami's feelings the 00 Unit is the only one who could have done that. But even after her death, so long as there were people whose thoughts and feelings worked as an anchor for your existence, you would remain tethered to reality until either your or their deaths. Nucleus or not, as an anomaly you cannot remain 'alive' without a primal observer watching over you, Shirogane."

"Hmm, I see. Guess that means we got lucky I took a nap before activating the 00 Unit."

Sighing short yet heavy, a narrowed gaze remains on him for a moment, only leaving as Shirogane-san raises a brow, unsure of what to make of the Professor's silence.

She leans on the desk, hitting it softly with her heels, again gripping it a bit too tightly. "Anyways, if the 00 Unit became stable as you said she did before the Kashgar mission, it would have been able to completely reverse the effects the original Kagami made on your existence when the G-Bombs dropped, provided it had time to replenish and work at full output while focusing solely on that task. Going into detail of the quantum variables and non-local forces involved would take me too much to explain, so that's all I'm willing to say on the matter."

"Okay, got it. So, the 00 Unit could, theoretically, mend the ripples and stabilize me, either here or in another world by erasing the

memories of my loops. At least, she did manage to fix the world I was in last loop."

"Hm? How do you know that?"

"You said it just now. If the conductor's issues hadn't been fixed, then I would have been pulled straight back to that world when attempting to transfer myself, right?"

"Well, I suppose… The conductor and the points in time it existed in should be locked from any outside influence, yes, that much is true."

"And nobody has remembered anything about that world yet, either. Despite me being a stronger Nucleus and the highway being wide open as of now, too," he notes as he nods, pointing a finger up, waving it like a baton.

"And you're certain of that because…"

"Because of you."

"Me?"

"Yeah, if you, the person who I spent most of my time with, the one who is more likely to hold a desire as strong, if not stronger, than the one the other Sensei held in that world, haven't had a single vision of what happened in that world yet, then that timeline must be truly free of leaks," he concludes, nodding in clarity, still as a pond.

Which causes her to get closer, another arrow rain coming from her gaze. "What exactly are we speaking of?"

"I'll tell you after we're done with this discussion," he smiles, gesturing for her to continue, which causes a small groan from the Professor. "Now, if I couldn't go to that world, how did I end up here, in a world I had no ties to?"

"Sigh… I told you, as a Nucleus, you can link yourself with worlds that could be seeking your data. So if it wasn't the original world you

looped in, then-" she stops all of a sudden, words and steps, a hand raising to her mouth which widens along her eyes.

"… Uh, *Vice Commander* ?" He asks, furrowing his brows at the statue the Professor has become. "Earth to *XO Kouzuki*, do you copy? If you don't reply, I'm calling you honey again for the rest of the day."

"Your funeral," she retorts, eyes blazing.

Which makes him whistle lightly, moving his brows up and down in quick succession. "So you do listen while brainstorming, huh."

"Of course I do. But really, again insisting on calling me like that? Are you that lonely, Shirogane?"

"Sigh…"

"Come on… Wipe the dejection off your face, this instant."

"So," a hand on his neck as it circles, he looks away, to the rows of papers he had arranged before, "did you figure something out?"

"I might. But, just to be sure, you did think to return to that specific world as you made the jump, right?"

"Well, I was thinking on my comrades, to be honest. It was what tied me there, after all. Guess even they forgot about me, in the end."

"They?"

"… You and Kasumi, the only ones who could actually remember who I was, had been. If they, the ones with the strongest connection to me, didn't think of me anymore, then it's obvious the transfer failed," he sighs, leaning back, resting his neck against the cushioning, his legs extending limply and hitting the table. "That's kind of the reason why you baited Yuuhi so hard, right? To make them think about me as someone who is alive instead of dead, to

have them aware of my existence in their thoughts instead of fading as a distant memory."

Looking at the apathy of his slouched form, she nods as she again crosses both arms into a sailor knot. "Precisely. You had mentioned once how you stopped having dreams of your home world when you got into a relationship with your squadmates, so procuring an anchor for your existence was a priority. And I still believe you regaining your citizenship and identity would be for the better."

He looks up, again with the battered smile as he nods. "And I get why you did it, and I'm thankful you thought about how to stabilize me. Still, that aside, this leaves a hole in the events after the transfer."

"Does it really matter so much? Why can't you simply accept the events turned out in this way due to causality rearranging itself after your data blasted away from your world?"

"Because if there was no way I could have transferred myself to the world I was in before, well…" a slow nibbling on his bottom lip, eyes which sink under the horizon, dusk to his features. "After everything was said and done, I should have disappeared. And yet, somehow, I ended up back at square zero in a world that seems like a mix from mine and the one I looped in. Why do you think that happened, *Vice Commander* ?"

Again going up to the whiteboard, she starts drawing circles and lines on it, with words of 'Home', 'Conduit', and 'Shirogane' at some parts. Three circles, one for his home world, one for last loop, and one for the current world were united by a few lines, dates and numbers marked within their perimeter.

"Well, when you activated the transfer, since there was no conduit formed and no 'observer' trying to pull the Nucleus towards it to allow the possibility of 'Takeru Shirogane is alive' to manifest itself there, there was no way for you to materialize in that world's past."

She then crosses the section between the numbers 1999 and 2002, before sending an arrow from the Shirogane dot to the upper part of the 'BETA World' branch.

"I suppose one could make a case that the memories made in that world would allow you to remain there, now that you're a stronger Nucleus, if your will was strong enough and a link could be formed. As you said, however," she grimaces, rubbing the underside of an eye, "it seems that world's Yashiro and myself have either forgotten you, become radically different to who they used to be while you knew them, or have left your memory as something that belongs firmly in the past. Thus, without them having you in their thoughts, you couldn't form a connection regardless of your will or the energy employed."

So, she goes and crosses the line uniting the upper part of the 'Last Loop' world ball with the 'Home' world ball. Essentially leaving that world isolated to its own devices, no longer affected by outside influence, set in its ways forevermore.

"Furthermore, if that had actually happened you would have appeared in a place relative to where the transfer occurred and not in your 'room' as you once described it and, by extension, it would have taken a significant amount of time for your data to flow and materialize into that world. I think that was your world's me's plan."

"But it didn't work out, so my data should have gotten scattered, seeking a link… waiting for anything, anyone who was still thinking of me," voice crumbling like the Oder-Neisse Defense Line in front of Destroyers as he looks down, sighing heavily, holding his left wrist, choking it for dear life.

"It also means whoever is left in the worlds post-Babylon also don't remember you, possibly due to forgetting you existed shortly after your death," she tells, making a cross over the sign called 'ALT V' with more vigor than it was necessary. "Do you believe there might be anyone who still remembers you in those worlds, by the way?

Some lover you made while in the IRG, perhaps?" She teases, tip of a finger on her lips.

A sharp frown, a frontal stare. And then, silence.

"… No, there's no one worth remembering there," he finally spits, poisonous magma and the clouds of toxins all at once.

"I see… Well, anyways, Shirogane, you tried to will yourself to that world, universe, tree or however you wish to call it. True or false?" She asks with a light smile, getting closer, pointing the marker to his nose.

Eyes squint as he fiddles with his hair. "True?"

"However, the conduit that allowed you to appear in all branches of that original world was gone. So, you cannot go into either the worlds after Babylon or the world where you lived to see Alt IV in action immediately, your data would have to first completely flow into them for you to manifest yourself there. True or false?"

"True."

"Then, as you said before, you had an affinity towards a specific parallel world. However, what if an exceedingly similar world also was trying to 'pull' your information towards it?"

"… You mean like, a branch of the world I always looped in."

She smirks, clapping once. "Almost. Think of it as a twin instead. The theory indicates that the Nucleus can link itself if there's a source seeking to 'connect' with it. So, while you cannot link yourself to the world that you looped into, there is another path available to you right besides it. The world in which history proceeded as it was meant to be."

"The… Wait, a world where I never appeared? Why would I end up there?" He asks, following her steps back to the whiteboard.

In it, she draws a line from the Shirogane dot to the 'Current World' circle, back to its lowest point. "You see, I believe there was a split in our timeline when the G-Bombs dropped. Branch One, where a link was successfully formed and you ended up appearing on the 22nd of October two years later, altering the events that would come however slightly. Branch Two, where the link wasn't formed and the world continued down its predetermined path."

Pointing to the 'Loops' and 'Current' balls, she then makes a small reloading icon in between them, linking it to the crossed-out ALT V.

"You overwrote the first world when you returned to the 22nd with every repetition, be it with or without memories, effectively making an alternate branch within it, so to say. And that first branch and its successive branches haven't been reset as we said before. The only world that was reset was yours, where no conductor was formed. So, theoretically, you could link yourself to the future of those timelines, if someone who still held you in their thoughts existed. As you said, however, that did not happen." Looking back to gauge his reaction, Shirogane-san had a downcast expression, a tiny flower enduring a downpour, but was still focused on her explanation, which spurs a small smile in her. "The difference during the transfer you attempted was that there was no clear, strong link with your world to draw you in. You forced the window to open, and in doing that you were subject to forces beyond your control."

"… So I should have ended up drifting through the void, getting scattered all over again," he concludes, grimly. Her nod only causes his hands to rake the palms, his eyes to close for a moment. "However, if there was no one who sought a link with me, even if unconsciously…" he suggests, scratching the back of his head, "why did the highway bring me here?

"The important part here is that those worlds had already made a Conductor appear and then they were brought back to normal, without being reset. There was nothing tying you to them, nothing calling out for you. The other branch, however, never managed to form a conductor. One could say that, as soon as your data tried to

break into that world, or subset of worlds to be more precise, you, as a Nucleus, were drawn to the world that never had a Conductor instead due to the unfulfilled desire of Kagami. And alongside you… all the scattered data you say this highway drained from your world might also have come into the world. That is as far as I can go using logic. As I said before, leaks cannot change the past. Even if your metaphysical data was brought over to the branch in which Kagami never found the way to spawn a conduit, there is little that can explain the similarities that you've noted this reality has with your world."

"Then, what? You're saying it's all just a coincidence?"

"Well Shirogane, what is reality?" The scientist smiles, tilting her back as she grows closer.

"Huh? Reality?" His eyes squint, lost as a penguin in a desert.

"I think we should have had a conversation like this in the past, when I sent you back into your world for the theories to complete the 00 Unit. A group of possibilities, what we call reality, is nothing but the collective determinations of every being that observes and resides within its boundaries." She then points again to his nose, nodding shortly. "In this case, you were the 'primal observer' that wished his relationships to be 'true', and as such, the chain reaction to effectively make that a reality, based on the data you had carried with you during the transfer, created this rewritten world."

"… For real?"

"Unless there was another observer which watched over you and had access to energy equivalent to the detonation of many G-Bombs, this is all I can deduce. If the highway you describe the ripples as could affect your world so rapidly, it is not odd it could have far more drastic effects once a proper link was established. Basically, causality seeks balance, to integrate events and data into stability. In a way, the world just reorganized its own data, along the data that came from your world, to 'reach' a certain wavelength and

assortment of events that would satisfy the 'Truth' condition of the observer. Since the effect dictates the cause, let me use this example. A photon, when observed, can only exist in one state. The cause, being observed, generates an effect, being in a certain state. In this case, the relationships and situations, which would be the effect of many other causes, force themselves to be 'true' and the causality rearranged the events when this timeline was modified to make them exist. Sadly, this is as far as I can theorize. I cannot fathom how or why the past was changed, unless… Well, the possibility that this is actually another loop created after a reset does exist, and if Kagami's wish was not granted then when the timeline was reset all the data leaked regarding your world got mixed in, trying to satisfy the Cause of Truth both you and Kagami desire."

Sighing hard, she rubs her forehead as she rests against the wall for a moment. Washed over by the rush, the beating on the back of her head after the sudden stream of thoughts, little jolts course through her arms, her stomach as she inhales. The numbers, graphs, and possible links graft a pleasant conclusion, to the point where she extends both arms upwards to allow the stream of jolts to run across her whole back, eliciting another slow, deep sigh.

And with spirits replenished, she once more opens her eyes, tilting towards the sofa. "Was this explanation enough to please you, *darling* ?" She asks with a smirk, that quickly vanishes as she sees the dead-serious expression Shirogane-san has as he whispers under his breath. "Shirogane?"

"… Hm? Sorry, was lost in thought. You were saying?"

A cheek slightly puffs for a second, she hastily looks away before blasting towards her chair. "Nothing, I said nothing." Sitting into a spin, both hands rest on her stomach. "So then, now that we finished this long detour, I assume your motive to inquire into this was to have me realize the possible repercussions you being linked to the IRG has for you?"

"In a way, I guess."

"First of all, is your situation in the Swordbreakers similar to what you went through after Iceberg?"

"No, that's only half of the mirror."

"And from where comes the other?"

"From the Valkyries."

"… Huh? But you said a moment ago no leaks-"

"No leaks are coming to this world from there, so the only similarities that can exist are those already attached to me," he shrugs, an eye closed. "I assume you remember our… collaborations during 1999?" She nods, eyes narrowing a bit as she starts to spin. "Unlike what I went through in the IRG, the Swordbreakers were a secret squadron. Almost like a STF of the IRG, one could say. Down to the TSF I used and all, really."

"So you were not part of a secret unit after Iceberg? What was of you in those worlds?" She asks, staring.

Shirogane-san shakes his head, his weight falling onto the armrest. "Does it matter?"

"I gave you a decent explanation, didn't I?" She demands, stare unfaltering.

So he sighs, scratching his head. "No, I was made into… some sort of public icon."

"You? A public icon? Wait, but, a commoner?"

"Yeah, believe it or don't. Not to brag or anything, but I was the best pilot in that world save for maybe Marimo-chan and Major Walken."

"Huh, is that so. Who is this Walken, by the way?" She asks, looking elsewhere.

Which immediately makes him chuckle. "Bet you already know, don't you?"

"Why do you believe so?"

"Since you seem against heeding my warning towards the eruption, you may be thinking on… capitalizing on the opportunity to bring stability to the Empire. After all," he frowns, hellfire erupting within his eyes, the same draconian expression he endows while piloting coming forth, "you cannot attain Heaven without going through Pandemonium first, right *Vice Commander* ?"

A frown in reflection, air is swallowed harshly as the spin stops. She holds his gaze for a moment, grasping her chin. "How do you know that phrase?"

"… Wanna guess which squadron of the IRG was sent to aid us in Sadogashima last loop? Wanna guess which House had the order to look after you while you were in Sendai? Wanna guess…" inhaling through closed teeth, a hand rubs the space between his brows as both neck and jaw tighten, compress, fail to move, spread lines of pain, "who was the one that took your orders to the letter during Shura's Dance?"

"… So that's what this is about," she notes, leaning back, staring down at him. "You wouldn't be getting blinded by… some loyalty you still hold towards Her Highness?"

"No, I'm blinded by own desire to stop the same tragedy from repeating itself. And to that end, we cannot feed the conductor any more chances to screw us over."

"Tragedy begets opportunity, Shirogane. If the conductor's flow can be accessed with much ease, if this highway can bring certain data to us, then all the more reason for us to capitalize on this. The events you went through in those worlds won't repeat themselves, this timeline is already too different."

"… Did that stop Marimo-chan from being thrown headfirst into a meat grinder?" He asks, seething to the rim.

"… Pardon?" And seeing the honest fury causes the question to come to life in her mind.

A momentary dizziness, a news report, sickness and heaviness to the stomach, and a bursting fountain of crimson created by the imagination.

"Causality gives no fucks about the state of the world, it only integrates events in search of balance," he says, trying to douse his mood, release the pin. "And as I told you all those days ago, I am here to find a solution to the war. So *Vice Commander Kouzuki,* " he stands, slowly walking up to the desk, never lifting his gaze from the now bloodshot stare, disturbed and alert, "you wouldn't be planning to spark up a coup d'état, are you?"

"… I assume this is what the third incident is about?" She asks in stillness, submerging underwater, meeting his gaze in perfect poker.

"Answer the question."

Sighing hard from her nose, she clicks her tongue. "This was how you met the Shogun in your last experience, wasn't it? I assume, you failing to account for the eruption was the trigger. However, by your account, Sadogashima could proceed smoothly afterwards, even the XM3's test was held despite what frictions I am meeting at the moment."

"Correct."

"And you're accusing me of starting the coup now? Why would you reach such a conclusion, Shirogane?" She asks, also standing up.

"First, it was awfully convenient that we found the Shogun. Even if you are the leader of Alt IV, I highly doubt the Empire would have given you the intel. Someone gave the order for Chief Yoroi to leak

that to you, and I happen to have a hunch on who that was," he affirms, hands choking themselves. "Second, everything went a bit too smoothly. The Valkyries' skirmish blocking our escape at the right time, the fighting that breaks out to force Yuuhi to flee, even the defeat of Major Walken in his Raptor and the incident that ruined it all."

"You're operating on assumptions, Shirogane," she reminds, tapping her forearm, squinting her eyes. "Do not underestimate my network of intel. Also, even a Raptor can be bested in the right circumstances."

"Hard disagree. I've seen those beasts fight in inhuman conditions after Babylon, no shot a base Shiranui could stand up to it in a fair fight. Something, or someone, screwed up the Major's Raptor."

"… How odd, seeing you defend an American," frowning intensely, she looks away.

"I've seen him fight myself, I know how good he is. Also, he was the only one I recall that actively tried to lend a hand to keep the peace, even if only for the US' interests. And finally, there's the third and most important point of all."

"And that would be?" She asks, lunging for his gaze.

Which then crumbles again, to pieces, to atoms, as he rubs an eye strongly before giving a punch to the air. "… That I died during the original coup."

"… Excuse me?"

A step forward, she can start seeing herself within his eyes. "You're under the effects of a leak, aren't you? I bet the same happened last loop."

"Wait, what did you- Ah… Are you saying these ideas are-"

"The tachyons from the Yuuko of those failed worlds, that are answering to your desire to reach perfect stability for the Empire. Just as it happened last loop, considering you got to the point of throwing the papers of your dear theory at me once, I can understand why you're on the receiving end of this leak," he sighs, shaking his head ever so slowly. "And when I do make it out of Iceberg… if a certain condition is not met, then I try and stop the coup that occurs in that future. And I fucking fail, and get killed because of it."

"… I see," she inhales slowly, rubbing her head, falling into her seat like a fish out of the water. Coughing for a moment, the Professor's back is assaulted by a rain of wax, small stings crawling up to her neck, wanting to delve under the skin. "However, that outcome did not come to be during your last experience."

"The highway wasn't as active as it is now, and that world was far different to this one. By the way, wanna hear something crazy?" He smirks, pointing with a thumb to the map of the Empire reflected in one of the monitors by the wall. "This Japan really does remind me of the Empire after the Babylon Disaster, what with its sky-high nationalism and borderline fanatical views of the Shogun and the IRG. Bet that was part of why I snapped as I did during the '99," he extends his arms outwards, spinning on himself as he moves back to the sofa.

"Still," she hits the desk, raising her voice, her eyes to meet his, to glare straight ahead into his sight, "we are aware of the data and possible outcomes. Those events won't repeat themselves, because I can negotiate for a proper deal."

"So you're not even denying it now, huh."

"What? You think I'm below sharing some favors to reach my goals? I have gotten my hands far more dirtier than this, Shirogane. I have-"

"What's this compared to abandoning Hakuryo, am I right?"

"… Take those words back, or else."

"Why? That's what you're thinking of. That's why you keep moving forward, to not let the sacrifices you've made up to this point 'go to waste'. Sunken cost fallacy, I believe it's called."

"I'm not giving you another chance. You take those words back, *now* ."

"… So you've already made up your mind on this," he closes his eyes, nibbling at his bottom lip with a single teeth, shaking his head, glaring at the floor.

"Then, what the hell should you suggest I do? Let the Americans overthrow the Shogun and cause an even larger uprising? Remain neutral and let the insurgents actually seize the power? The fate of this planet lays on my shoulders, I cannot- We cannot falter, come what may."

"Exactly," he returns the crossfire, a whole particle cannon. "The future of the children that are to come is at stake here. And I ain't leaving it in the hands of the nationalistic assholes that ruined us after Iceberg, and neither should you. You now know the highway is active, and what consequences it could have to leave it unchecked or to try and spur more leaks to come into this world."

"First, all you've shown are emotional arguments. Second, if the conductor is as active as you claim, then anyone with a strong enough desire could begin to inherit memories of those failed worlds. Not acting would place us at a disadvantage, when we are the ones that can reap the most benefits," she reminds, again palming the desk.

"It's not an emotional argument, it's the proof you need to see," he aims a finger at his chest, chuckling, "after all, what better proof than my fuckups when I ran away? There were no BETA to replicate the data, yet causality found a way. If the data of that future starts to manifest here, it will all try to be integrated into the world. I already

regained my memories late back home, I ain't letting it all happen a second time." He takes a step closer, staring straight into her eyes. "But I admit, my own selfish desires matter little when pitted against the planet itself. So let me tell you *Vice Commander*, the conclusion of my debate as I slept. I'm going to propose to you a choice, that you can think on for some time."

"And if my answer doesn't please you?"

"Heh, that's the catch. There is no answer that screws me over this time."

"Oh, really? What if I deem you a threat and decide to nullify you?"

"Good luck tuning Sumika by yourself, then," he shrugs, smirking again.

"Sigh… You really are doing this, aren't you? What for? What are you after, Shirogane? Is it to keep Her Highness safe? Vengeance on Ikaruga?"

"… Huh? What, you weren't listening?" He shakes his head, rolling his eyes. "I am here to stop the leaks, and save my world. Whether this world wants my input, that's on your hands. I am already dead as far as this world is concerned."

"So why are you so opposed to… well, my plan to make use of the situation for the better of our plan?"

"Sigh… You really weren't listening, huh."

"I'm being serious here! You should know I can handle any negotiations that could be required. If your concern is that the power could shift to the Shogunate, then all we need to do is safeguard the Prime Minister. If you want your precious Shogun to be the one in power, we can try and parley with the IRG. But we cannot allow America to try and stage an incident, do not forget Alt V is still looming over our heads!"

"… Question, were there any G-Bombs in my world?"

"What? Why would there be?"

"Then, could the same amount of death caused by the BETA and the massive bombing be replicated in my world if enough time passes?"

"… We can regulate the amount of data we share to other worlds, thanks to the Nucleus' theory and the 00 Unit. There are no risks whatsoever, Shirogane."

"Besides the data that has already been integrated, that is."

"What is it then? Are you still hesitating on bloodying your own hands? Weren't you the leader of this secret squadron that's feared by most in the Empire?" She seethes, clawing, crushing the blank papers under her grasp.

"I've been telling you, we should not push our luck any further when it comes to causality. After all, to incite an incident is to open the gates for anything to go wrong. But debating over it is kinda pointless, so I'm going to give you your options, *Vice Commander*," he says with a smile, giving her an exaggerated bow. "Option number one! You listen to my advice, we neuter the conductor first chance we get, and we then continue to work towards a solution that doesn't involve gunshots in the open."

"That sounds extremely optimistic, doesn't it. What failsafe do we have in case of a possible coup sparked by other forces?"

"Me."

"… Huh? You?"

"What's that look for? You do realize you are in front of the Captain-in-Chief of the Special Investigations Brigade of the IRG, right? If you help me stage Ikaruga and whatever idiots from the IJA that wanna start a civil war, I can easily wipe the floor with 'em all."

"So then… you are willing to regain your identity? Will you still work for me then?"

"By you, that is," he replies, an honest and small smile shining through. "However, this does run into the problem of time. A proper investigation will take its moons, and the integrated data might play against us, especially now that Yuuhi must be wanting to get me back."

"Hmm… And then? How do you assume you'll prevent all the other leaks and effects from going off?"

"Oh, that's simple. If you were under custody from the IRG in my first loops, all we need to do is have you being safeguarded by them instead."

"Heh, you think they would want to willingly support me, much less protect me?"

"Uh, again, hello," he deadpans, waving a hand. "Takeru Shirogane, it's a pleasure."

A frown, eyes close and she sits down again. "… So it's all that easy, huh. I just listen to you and everything solves itself?"

"No, because listening to me means no coup. So there is a risk something might go wrong. That's where option two comes in. You can let the coup happen, without involving yourself."

"Why would I do that? I would lose the chance to act preemptively if- Wait, you have the knowledge of the events already."

"Bingo! That's right, I already know what's gonna happen, who's involved, and what's the landscape like. So, if you believe the coup has to happen no matter what, while I still insist we cut the data leaks ASAP, we can try and move within our boundaries without risking any ties coming to us. Let me remind you, the world Post-

Kashgar needs you standing strong, and the less dirt people have on you the better."

"Hmm, I see," she ponders, spinning on her chair. "Yet that leaves us exposed to differing events, unless you're willing to return to the IRG, which also comes with its fair risks."

"Precisely. Me being here does play against you, since I've no plans to make peace with the radicals if they are mirrors to those I've met in my loops."

"Damn it all… You truly cannot be dissuaded on this?" He shakes his head, hard. "Is there anything you desire that I can grant you?"

"No, nothing is worth the risk of seeing everything burn in front of me again."

"Sigh…" A sudden heaviness assails her head, forcing the Professor to support it with a hand, breathing with her mouth open for a moment. "Alright, fine. Is there another option?"

"Yeah, and that's the funny one."

"What does it entail?"

"You kill me."

"… Pardon?"

"You kill me. Bang bang," he says, making a gun and pointing it at his own chest.

"You are not being serious," she states, inhaling sharply, holding his gaze.

"I am, actually. See, there's no way for me to return to my world without it getting screwed over by causality. The only way for that to happen is to erase what made me a conductor in the first place, but there's no way I can bring myself to erase Sumika. And leaving me

here will work against you if your best option is to again side with Ikaruga in support of the coup, to screw the CIA's attempt to take the power. So let's make this easier for us and honor our original pact, I tune Sumika for you, you mend the leaks and neuter the conductor after you see that the data you desire is active and integrated, and afterwards…" sighing heavily, hands dangle and waver in the air as he looks up at nowhere, eyelids almost veiled, "you erase me, so that my memories can't be used as a magnet to redirect causality back home."

"You are not being serious."

"Huh? I am, this is what's-"

"Stop fucking with me!" Blasting up, again smacking the desk and causing a tower of papers to collapse, she breathes raw lava back at him. "Do you think I can handle Her Highness if you ever disappear?"

"… I'm sure your friend Ikaruga already has a plan for that."

"Do you think I support every thing that bastard wants to do? Why do you think I cut my ties with the IRI?!"

"Then, option three is out of the question for you?"

"… Look, we can make this work. All I need is you being open about what you know and-"

"No, I won't risk it."

"… So you don't trust in me, is that it?"

"I do trust in you, wouldn't have told you as much if I didn't. But I can't reveal anything else, because I don't think it's a good call. I've told you what I think, now the decision is in your hands," he says, then turns around, walking to the door.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"To the cylinder room, we already took more than enough time. And there's little to do by continuing to talk," he says, low, shrugging, dragging both feet and gaze. However, the door remains locked, so he has to look back.

Back at the undaunted frown, the sentry in warning. "What are you not telling me, Shirogane?"

"Huh?"

"You wouldn't have gone to train with Marimo if this was your priority, you'd have come to the office immediately or would have used Marimo to contact me. Was that whole detour… for something else?"

"… I dunno what you're talking about. I've been as honest as I could right now," he deadpans, poker face in place.

"Speak, now. Are you testing me, then? Trying to see if I'm on Ikaruga's side, *Captain* Shirogane?"

"… You know, it's the first time I'm called like that, and it feels so wrong for some reason," he admits with a nod, his insides revolting as a toad swallowing a lighted cigarette. "But no, I don't need to test your character to that extend. Because I already know you, all I'm seeing is whether you believe me worth your trust."

"… Really? I don't intend to doubt you, since you did raise quite some fair points," she says, walking off her desk, through the sofas, getting closer again to his personal space, seeing him and nothing but his eyes. "Yet, it is rather odd. You haven't mentioned a thing about what happened in the mind dive. What are you keeping from me?"

"… You wanna know?"

"Oh, no, I'm completely okay with you keeping more secrets from me," she rolls her eyes, slicing a glare into him afterwards. "Speak,

cadet. What is your true goal? Refuse to speak and…" her hands slowly raises, her fingertips grip the neck of his fatigues.

Yet, under the brunt of her dry ice stare, he chuckles. Even after she applies pressure to her grip, as she frowns and her expression contorts and tightens, as the tide pulls back into a colossal wave, the soldier quietly laughs.

"Well, if you insist… All I really want is to prevent tomorrow from becoming yesterday."

"… What?"

"I'm done with the loops, Yuuko. I'm done with putting everything in someone else's shoulders and hope things somehow work out. I ain't leaving it to chance, so I want a clear cut answer. But there is no point in chasing after something that doesn't exist here, yesterday will never be tomorrow. And more importantly, we are running out of time."

"Even if the eruption is close to happening, surely you are aware that there are other methods that can be used to light up a spark."

"I'm not talking about that. I'm talking of the Nucleus' pull."

"The Nucleus? You say… your own memories are still leaking into you?"

"Well, kind of. I don't recall everything clearly from Iceberg onward, so that is still clogging the highway. But the worst of it all is, I'm not the only Nucleus here. Everybody can be one, if their desire is strong enough. And I know at least two people who are being locked into a leak. Here's a hint: both have purple hair," he says with a smile, chuckling again.

"… Me and the Shogun?"

"Bingo again!"

"So my hyperfixation on my theories is… a sign of the leaks affecting me? Where is your proof?"

"Right in front of you," he points to his nose, nodding once. "You see, when I came back with my own memories, all I had was a burning desire to stop Alt V. It was legit all I thought of, even in front of my squadmates and all." Sighing, he hunches a bit, falling as if an engine of his had been hit. "I never recalled anything of our lives together, all I cared about last loop was to stop Alt V. It was bad enough I lashed out against Kei and Meiya in the PX, giving no shits about it too. Ironically, it was during the coup that I got my head out of it, maybe due to some subconscious thing triggering in me when I… couldn't put myself through risking someone's life. Maybe the way in which Sumika's wish blocked some of my memories allowed me to not lose it during the coup, but still, until then that was all I could think of."

"And you believe I also suffer from this link? From the tachyons I cannot get away from?"

"Yeah. All you can think of is to succeed, and nothing else. That's literally the description of how the leaks work, and I know this isn't something you really favor."

"Oh, and why do you think so? I am being serious about my ideas."

He takes half a step closer, seeing his reflection below the fire in her eyes, smirking back at it. "Then, why didn't you propose a coup during the Invasion? You know, when America had no influence in the Empire and the Diet's image was below the subway? Siding with Ikaruga then would have let you be on the good graces of the new authorities… but you instead remained supporting the UN and the peacekeeping efforts through what was left of the nation."

"That was…" she pulls at his clothes, undoing a button, nibbling at her lips. "You know the situation back then was completely different, I wasn't who I am today then."

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean you couldn't have gone down that route, though. And yet, just like last loop, the risk of running against the deadline, of an incident resulting in an American intervention, and who knows what inner negotiations you're dealing with, is sending you down this route. Where the only solution to the desperation you feel now is echoed from those ruined futures."

"So, what? If this plan was successful in your last experience, why- Wait, you said-" Eyes open wide, she lets his neck go. "Her Purpleness is also affected by a leak?"

"What, you think the docile and warm Yuuhi prefers to be abrasive all the time?" He shrugs, resting against the door. "Look, I know she has her temper, but Yuuhi would never compromise her standing or position for anything. Just like you back then, she ignored my warnings. So, care to guess why is she being so insistent as of now?"

"… Are you really only her stepbrother, Shirogane?"

"Technically speaking, I'm not even her stepbrother anymore," he notes, a finger up.

"Answer the question. Who are you in her eyes?"

"Of Yuuhi or Her Highness? Because that difference matters, a lot," he spits out, starting to hit the door with the back of his head in a slow rhythm. "Yuuhi probably holds me dearly, I'm still family to her. Her Highness, though, will only think of me as her bodyguard and pawn. What does she want from me, I honestly don't know," he then shrugs, returning the Professor's gaze frontally, nodding once.

"I see… And why haven't you said anything of the mind dive?"

"Sigh… I won't talk about that, not even if you insist."

"Huh, really?" A step closer, a hand to her chin, eyes to eyes. "You will tune Kagami, correct?" He nods. "And, what of these memories

you recalled? I assume, you now remember what was of the future up until Iceberg and this… original coup. That means you also remember the world in which… you supported another me, correct? If you can tell me anything from that, perhaps we can gain further boons down the line, don't you think? You could… *be my right hand,* as you could have been in that world."

"… Until the leaks have been neutered, I don't think it's wise to play with this fire, *Vice Commander* ."

"You haven't called me as usual all this time, you know."

"Would you prefer me calling you honey?" He teases, raising a brow.

And is met with another step forward, an unblinking stare. "If I let you, will you tell me all you know? Will you stay and fight for- with me, Shirogane?"

And for a moment, they hold their gazes in silence, breaching the other's personal space, with only the tickling of the clock as their company as their exhalations tickles the other's chin.

"… I suppose there is a fourth option available," he relents, looking away, hiding both hands in his pockets.

"And that is?" She asks, not moving an inch.

"Do you remember the poem I told you about?"

"The poem? You mean, the one about you and the silver blossom?"

"Yeah, that one. If you can manage to remember on your own who wrote that poem to me, I'll tell you everything."

"Everything?"

"Yeah, for real."

"Huh, really? Even the size of your friend down there?"

"If that's what you wanna waste the question on, be my guest," he shrugs, rolling his eyes. "But I'm being serious here, Yuuko."

"So that world's me was aware of who gave you that poem, and considering the state of affairs you've described when giving me the pass… Was it some sort of couple's song or something?"

"No hints," he sighs, pinching his nose. "If you do manage to link with those feelings… then I will know we're on the same page. That's all."

"Hmm… There's nothing else attached? No calling me honey, no condition or anything?" She asks with a light smirk, poking the wolf.

Yet finds a small grimace, a deep sigh, a punch to the door. "Enough teasing, *Vice Commander.* If and when you remember, then we'll continue this conversation. For now, we have other matters to tend to."

"… Very well, you do have a point," she strides back to the desk, her finger hovering over the button. "Shirogane?"

"What?"

"You're certain there wasn't anything more to what transpired within the mind dive?"

"… It was all a reflection of what used to be, not what it is now," he relents, compacting his shoulders.

"So you don't see me as some sort of evil fox, *Captain* of the Swordbreakers?" She frowns grimly, looking back at him, a single eye scanning, debating whether to pounce, to lunge.

Yet he chuckles and smiles, "Did Kasumi tell you what happened to the evil fox during the dream?"

"No, she refused to tell me anything."

"It disappeared along the dragon, enveloped in its tight embrace."

"… What?"

"After all, I am aware that you're not her," Shirogane-san again shrugs, giving out the battered smile. "So I know holding onto those feels ain't the right thing to do, it ain't fair on you. Don't worry, *Vice Commander.* This dark armed dragon already knows he's alone."

"… I am still your ally, you know?"

"Yeah, but I can't fall on the same mistakes again," he admits in a low voice, running his hands over both arms, licking and twisting his lips, gaze distant as if looking at the stars. "So, please don't ask about this, *Vice Commander.* "

"Sigh… Shirogane, you do realize I can deal with anything that might bring you harm, do you?"

"Not against this, you can't really do anything to help me on this matter."

"And what, pray tell, are you afraid of?"

He looks into her eyes, before crashing down again.

Inhaling sharply, hitting the door, placing both hands behind his head, tugging at his scalp.

Fighting the cold cloak that falls on his back, the blazing binding on his stomach, and that ticklish poke in the underside of his armpits, Shirogane-san merely sighs heavily.

"… Of falling in love again, and calling upon the leaks attached to those feelings."

# Tuning Duty

*Chapter 81:*

**Tuning Duty**

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*Some moments later.*

*(Cylinder Room.)*

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"So you're the famous Shirogane, huh," she says, giving the soldier a once over. "I'm Motoko Kouzuki, Chief Researcher of the, ahem, Robotics isle of this complex. It's a pleasure to meet you," extending a hand alongside a friendly smile, she returns the firm shaking.

"No, the pleasure's mine. So, was the headband really recording stuff all this time?" He asks, rubbing his now free forehead, staring at the small tiara-like machine that the researcher had connected to a nearby PC.

"Yes, that is its primary function. Although, XO Kouzuki was who designed it so I cannot guarantee it worked as intended," she affirms with a lazy nod, a smile towards the predatory gaze her sister was unleashing from a distance. Looking back at him, she takes half a step closer. "By the by, did I truly speak with you during a phone call before?"

"So you did forget," he notes, nodding as his hands return to his pockets.

"Well, nothing to be done, I suppose," she shrugs, walking over some extra cables in the room towards larger machinery. "Now that I did meet you, maybe this memory leak will stop temporarily."

"Why?" He asks, slowly following behind, towards a large pod that reminded him of his last mission in another world.

"Sight is the most powerful of our senses," she says, the green glint of the screen bathing her features as she starts some checks. "It solidifies much of our experiences, and more can be said through gestures than sounds at times. Wouldn't you agree?" He merely nods, extending a leg to not trip over some wires.

Finally making it to the side of the pod, he can then see the vessel that will become the 00 Unit, cables attached to parts of the body, sprouting like loose nerves, overgrown roots.

Hands wring for a second as he inhales until his stomach cannot take it anymore. *"Don't worry, this time I won't force you to overload. I'll do things right,"* he then sighs, placing a hand over the glass that separates them.

Through the beepings and other sounds that envelop the room as of now, a set of footsteps grows closer.

"Do you think you can speak with Kagami, Shirogane?" The scientist asks, getting to his side and staring.

"Yeah, it's the least I can do," he replies, still looking at the sleeping machine. "These bindings are enough to contain her, right?"

She nods immediately. "I took your warning seriously. Even if it starts to thrash about as soon as it awakens, the 00 Unit won't be able to hurt itself or any of us," she whispers while leaning just a bit closer, so that her sister doesn't hear. "You do have a plan to stabilize it quickly, don't you?" She inquires the doubt, breathing slowing as he nods back.

"The first step should go smoothly with the help of the bunny right there," he says, looking to the cylinder.

"You mean Yashiro?"

"No, the other bunny," he points to the small keychain that still remains hanging over the cylinder, as the stars he once placed for Christmas were.

"Hmm, so that odd rabbit will work as a crux for her to focus on some core memories? How much progress did you make with this method in your last experience?" She asks, eyes set alight, getting even closer.

As the soldier deflects and satiates the starving inquiries of the scientist, young Yashiro scuttles and waddles among the cables. The cylinder now has a few add-ons attached to its base, scanning modules which resemble the special equipment present in the Mindseeker's shoulders. The small yellow threads between the two gave some respite to her worrying, however the fog which still clouds the scientist is still a small thorn of concern for her.

Once the checks and preparations on her end are finished, nodding to Motoko-san, she then walks up to the still debating duo, bunny ears perking up at the rather gentle and simple way in which their auras flow. There is no stiffness in the soldier's posture as of now, neck and arms loose, movements slow and careful like a cloud. The scientist herself is, while standing as straight and imposing as usual, also with her spike shield lowered as she stands mere centimeters away from him without a compact posture or lines of displeasure in her complexion as she shares whispers with him.

A faint shiver envelopes the assistant as the echo of his mind filters into hers, a vision of herself trying to teach Sumika how to do Cat's Cradle despite the blank stare and mechanical gestures she returns. Her steps stop, the tip of her toe stuck under a cable, almost sending the young bunny to the ground. Small flaps of her ears and the slowness of her movements prevents the fall, she heaves a sigh and approaches them again, this time with her sight following her steps.

"-and that's why I think using games and books to bring her memories from the ground up is a better call," she hears him

conclude, arms folding as he gives quite the confident nod, eyes meeting the scientist's, clear as the night sky.

Yet, those violet eyes grip onto his, delving deep like a knife through butter. "And in the scenario where your ideas do not hold water?"

A small flare of dark, a short and shallow exhalation. "We'll play with what cards we got. And if it gets to that, I'd welcome you readying the floodgates first, *Vice Commander* ."

"Of course I will," she retorts immediately, tone and gaze still caustic and firm, yet Yashiro tilts her head at the small knot of yellow brewing around her stomach, at the tiniest curl on the edge of her lips.

"Um, Professor?" She calls out softly and the duo takes a hasty step back, putting some space between them as they notice the closeness of the bunny assistant. "All the preparations are completed. We are ready to start at your signal."

"I see. Good to hear," she ruffles her hair, looking away as if bored, dulling her aura with a shrug.

"We can… speak with Sumika-san, right?" She asks, stealing gazes.

She nods, patting the girl's shoulder. "Do not exert yourself. Remember that she will feel your emotions due to the psychic link, and if you stress over the matter you'll fail to establish a connection. Also," she looks back at her soldier, narrowing her eyes, "remember to not disturb Kagami's heart."

"Easier said than done…" he relents a sigh, a downcast gaze onto the cylinder. Yashiro nods in agreement, gripping the edge of her dress.

"Just don't send her into shock," the scientist tells, gazing into them while raising her chin, staring until both nod. "Well, let's get on with this. I'll be overseeing the last checks to the 00 Unit, just in case.

Motoko-nee, how is the equipment?" She asks, walking towards her sister.

The soldier steps towards Yashiro, petting her head. "Feeling ready?"

Bunny ears flap down once, she nods. "Whenever you are. I'll do my best to give you as much time as possible."

As slow as a parting page, they walk to the cylinder's side. Gradual like the vanishing of the afterglow is the tingly feeling, the presence of an ESPer on the soldier's mind. Looking up at the santa rabbit, a second to inhale, another to hold the assistant's hand, he closes his eyes.

After the initial shock, the momentary darkness, faint light gleams at the distance. It is not direct, there is no warmth. The distorted brightness would resemble the glare of the sun when observed from below water.

However, there is no clarity to the surrounding area. Thickened, taking on a greenish-tint, the aquatic expansion seems to know no end. There is simply water, and nothing else.

Focusing on how her eyes always looked, letting the assistant bask into his mind, share his effort, the soldier slowly feels movement to the vision. Cutting through the waves, piercing the fog that reigned over the tide, surfacing near erupting landmass and greeted by darkened storm above. There is only chaos for a moment, the stream and gale pulling in all directions. It takes them a moment to regain quietness.

"Sumika?" He calls out, causing the waves to roar tall, the gale to subside for a moment.

"Take… chan?" An almost broken whisper calls out, submerged.

"Sumika, I'm here. I can hear you."

"Takeru-chan? Are you there?!" Pain assaults his eyes as the storm seems to surround, to envelop and tower over him in its core."Are you alright? You're not hurt, are you?" And despite that, the desperation overshadows even the thunders that surf through the sky he can now see.

"Yes, I'm fine now. Um… Thanks for worrying, Sumika."

"Thank God… You're alright…"

"Um… How have your talks with Kasumi been lately? Did she show you something else?" He asks, sitting atop the waves, looking around for her shape.

"Yes, she showed me a few more moments. It was… nice to see our old school and all," easing up into calmness, the thunder cease their concert. "But, but…"

"What is it?"

"It feels odd…" she says, voice shivering. "I dunno how but it's… something's odd…"

He sighs, assuming she must be somehow reacting to all the extra equipment added to the cylinder. "Are you in pain?"

"No, not for now… Um, Takeru-chan, you seem… sad. Did something happen to you?" She asks, the waves once more beginning to dance, to collapse upon themselves.

"Sigh… I'm fine, for real. But I need you to hear me well, Sumika."

"W-What?"

"I remember you apologized to me last time we talked. But in reality… I should be the one to apologize."

"Huh? W-Why? I mean, you're not… You're not-"

"Heh, wanna hear something crazy? Turns out, I am the Takeru you always knew, Sumika. Sorry, for having made you wait."

A tall wave, knockback onto his senses, a whirlwind which binds all of his body, hiccups come to Yashiro's breathing as she struggles to maintain the connection.

"It's a lie! Takeru-chan is dead!"

"Then, you're saying you giving me a spinning top as a present didn't happen?" He asks, trying to fight the thrashing of the water.

"I-I did, but… but that was…"

"Didn't I used to tease you about how you didn't like to read Binocchio all the time?"

"Yes, you did… but I… I know you're not-"

"And what of the RPG books we always played? You're telling me you rolling three nat twenties in a roll didn't happen? If so, I want my candies back," he smirks at the expansion of tempest. "It took me awhile, but… I'm back, Sumika. Sorry, for leaving you alone all this time."

His sight spins, propelled upwards like spout. Sent into the sky, amidst the falling rain and the crashing waves, it all seems to grow and grow more by the second.

Yet, as he relieves those moments, the one time when he decided to gift her the santa rabbit, their first culinary accident when they thought it was a good idea to put both white and black pepper to the sauce, the never-ending conga line of bullshit strategies they came up with for their games, their shared Christmas celebrations, the bickering over the smallest things, even the promise that could never be, the birthday present that will remain forever lost, it's as if the storm, the gale and whipping waves were closing in on him, walls of

water extending through the clouds, the reflection of memories of days gone by shimmering in the crazed surface.

"… You're alive?" She finally asks, the aquatic prison standing still as a monument.

"Somehow."

"… But I saw how you died. I saw them- those damn-"

"Sumika," he yells, extending his arms outwards with too much drama, "it's okay. I'm right here, and I'm fine."

However, the storm roars once again, blossoming into utter chaos. "Those BETA… Those fucking BETA! I'll kill them all! I'll tear them all apart! I won't let them devour you again! I'll devour those damn bastards! And the Royal Guard too, I'll kill those fucking assholes! No one is harming you!"

"Wait, the Guards?"

"I saw how they hurt you! They abandoned us in Hakuryo! Those damn-"

He screams and kicks at the stream, no amount of focus on what good times they had shared can break the torrent of dark which creeps from the sea, not even as the assistant grits her teeth, slowly starting to undo her limiters, seeking his arm in support.

"Sumika! You don't have to hate them anymore! Please, listen to my voice!"

"I'm sorry," once more broken, like the cracks in the sky that begins to sink upon itself, "I'm so so sorry Takeru-chan. I'm sorry…. I'm sorry… I'm sorry…"

"Sumika-san, please don't apologize. You've done no wrong," Yashiro says through a whisper.

"NO! It's not my fault!" However, little did it do to ease the rampaging tempest from slugging them both around. "I didn't want that to happen! Stop! Don't touch him! Noooo!"

A slight pain on his arm, a tickle on his ear. "Takeru-san, it hurts… I don't know if I can keep this up for much longer."

"Sigh… Just let me try one thing more," he answers back, looking up into the eye of the storm. "Sumika… It's okay, me disappearing wasn't your fault."

"… Huh?"

"I was there because I wanted to. Your wish didn't make me disappear, it just sent me away for two years."

"Takeru-san, what are you-"

"No… That's wrong!" Shrieking, crying, crumbling, both her voice and the tempest could be one and the same. "When I saw you I… I didn't recognize you, and then thought of how you used to be, and then you were gone, and I didn't know what-"

"If you hadn't wished that, I might have died, you know?"

For a moment, the scenery from atop the hill surrounds the waves, the panorama reflecting and bending at times.

"So don't apologize. It's thanks to you that I'm still here."

"But what I asked… but you were gone and-"

"Look, even I'm not entirely sure how the hell that happened, but what it's true is that the wish you made then is what has kept me alive thus far. So thanks, Sumika."

"Takeru-chan… Do you hate me?" The sea, like her voice, starts shaking as the waves clash against one another.

"Why would I hate you, silly?"

"Because of me, you had to die. If I wasn't there… you wouldn't have disappeared, I made you go away, I couldn't-"

"Please stop blaming yourself, you did nothing-"

"Yes, I did!" Her scream overpowers the peaceful memories, the sea once more darkens as bolts start to strike at the water walls. "You did your best to save me, I saw you trying so hard to keep going. I did my best, I really tried! But they- those bastards… and then you were gone, just when I could catch a glimpse of you… If I hadn't been there you wouldn't have gone to fight, you wouldn't have died… It's my fault, it's all my fault…"

"Come on, now. Sumika, please," he walks up to the tempest, resting his hand on it, a shiver, pain on his palm, "I am here, right now. And I'm telling you, it's alright. There's nothing to apologize for, you did nothing wrong."

"Yes, I did! You wouldn't understand, Takeru-chan! I… I… They… to me…"

Thunders break lose, the typhoon sinks, brine and a reversed waterfall raising to the sky. Recognizing the tone, the creaking, breaking, crushed voice, the soldier leaps into the stream, his thoughts almost fading from the assistant's scan.

Yashiro can only stand still and seek, only discerning rough serpentine shapes slithering underwater, a myriad of smallest hydras coiling over the ocean whole, filling it all up, twisting and separating the tide unnaturally until the current turns red, redder. The implication lost on her, the repulsion she felt within the forest stalling the motions to have her dive any further saves her from seeing the cruelty.

And like a lotus slowly spreading outwards, a cyclone splinters the sea. Fingers pressing onto the back, pushing, pushing against the resistance, pushing until the heart is out of the prison. Spirals of

shards raise to the stars as it all shatters, slowly subsiding, falling as slowly as bubbles in the air.

Behind the empty shell, the void mask of the firmament, a tiny shooting star blazes through the storm. A halo of light descends through the gap in the sky, feathers of starlight gently parting the clouds away and revealing celestial tears raining down. Each and every droplet, a moment of joy, a moment of laughter. Upon contact with the filthy sea, they spread crystal clarity onto the waves and a refreshing and cold breeze towards the spectating Yashiro. All shadows retreat to the pit, the slithering monstrosities melting back to the abyss upon contact with the starlight.

Floating above the still burning remnants of the shooting star, he holds a wounded shape, hands and legs dangling like a puppet with its strings cut.

"I'm sorry… I'm sorry, Takeru-chan… I forgot about you, I became a BETA… I'm not-"

"Sumika, you're not a BETA," he says, holding her closer. "Look at the sky, are all these memories not yours?"

"But… But I'm no longer-"

"And I'm no longer the quirky little kid I used to be, right? Doesn't mean I'm any better or worse. The war hurt and changed me, too. But that doesn't make me like those monsters."

"But who would enjoy what they did to me?! Only a BETA would!"

"Then, does that mean that you don't want to talk with me and Kasumi anymore?"

"Huh? N-No… No, don't leave me! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" She convulses, shaking her head, hitting his chin.

"I'm not leaving if you don't want to. So, do you want to talk some more?" He whispers, slowly resting the frailty on his chest.

"Of course I do! I… I don't wanna be alone, I don't want you to go away!"

"Then, that's proof enough. Sumika, you are NOT a BETA. You're human."

"Huh? H-Human?… B-But I… I let them-"

"If you were a BETA, you wouldn't want to talk with me. Because the BETA want to kill humans. So, since you still want to see and talk with me, you're not a BETA. You're a human, you're one of us. You're our Sumika," he says, pointing to the sky, recalling little moments, small arguments, tiny pranks.

Simply holding onto each other above the still sea, under the shower of constellations.

Despite the freight train that continues to slam onto their psyches, the tiny glass that within their throats burn, both the soldier and the assistant remain firm, seeking to cover the frailty with what little calmness they could bestow to it.

Along the gentle rocking of waves, the lazy sprint of the wind, and the glitched reflections of other days upon the water, in between those azure skies, the gleaming stars, and the cerulean waves, the three of them simply stood in silence.

"So Sumika," he slowly begins, taking a pause, a rather long pause, while shuffling his words a few times over, "I need to tell you something."

"… What is it?"

"Sigh… In just a few minutes, your pain will end."

"… It'll end? Am I… gonna die?"

"… Yes. See, we're going to try to transfer your mind to a body made in your image. I… well, I'm not sure how this works, honestly. But at the very least, your torture will end."

"A new body?… Huh? B-But… Takeru-chan, you said we'll be together… Am I… W-What's gonna happen to me?" Her voice grew weak, anxious, ripples, shadows within the sea.

"I don't know. But the only way we can kill the BETA is by trying to get you into that new body. L-Let me try to show you what should happen once we do." Small glimpses of victory, moments of triumph, and the standing ovation he once received as a survivor of the Kashgar raid play out along the waves. "With this, we'll be able to start purging the BETA for good. I know it doesn't make this any better, but you're our hope, Sumika."

"… Me?"

"Yeah."

"… I can help to… kill them?"

"To save others," he corrects, embracing tighter. "And this is all we can do, without risking something worse happening," a small celestial shard falls, revealing the eternal wasteland of salt for a second.

And then, silence.

Only the rocking of the waves, the odd star glimmering into the sea.

"Many times I tried to call out to Kasumi, to tell her to kill me," she says, monotonous, exhausted, so very tired as she leans onto the warmth of his presence, the lingering stare of Yashiro. "I couldn't endure it anymore, I just wanted to disappear. I enjoyed our talks, but I missed her so much whenever she went away. And then, one day… You came here."

Slowly, very slowly, light starts to timidly peek over the horizon, signs of dawn besting the dark blue up above.

"When Kasumi showed me images of you, parts of your words… I was so happy, so confused. Even if you felt different, you made my wish come true. I was able to see you again, to hear your voice. S-So… if you need me to die, if my life will help you… Take it," and looking back, the torn expression smiles with dawn's first rays basking behind her. "Just please… Don't die again. Don't forget me. And… and kill all those motherfucking bastards! And don't trust in the Royal Guard! It was all their fault!"

Patting the head, enduring the searing, he whispers, "Sumika, I got it. I won't let my guard down. So please calm down, yes?

Gulping hard, inhaling sharply as knives rove under her stomach, Yashiro reaches in, diving for a moment. "I won't leave Takeru-san alone, I'll ensure he remains safe. I promise. A-And… forgive me, Sumika-san. We… We can't do anything to save you."

"That's not true!"

Once more, the sun raises tall, blazing the sea away, blossoming into a vast field, a field filled to the brim with wildlife. The small little part of the hill where they used to play when they were younger, where they would idle the time waiting to see 'Saunty Claus' fly through the sky.

"Eh? W-What do you-"

"You both saved me, Takeru-chan, Kasumi. You gave me back my light, you let me be someone again, to talk and have some notion of time once more. Thank you… Thank you… for granting my selfish wish, for being here for me, for believing I'm human, for being so kind to me. Thank you, Takeru-chan."

"No Sumika, thank you. Thanks for… enduring so much," he whispers, swallowing further apologies, choking himself in the

process.

Reaching out to touch upon the frailty, Yashiro's breathing is unable to imitate the composure of the soldier. "I will miss you much, Sumika-san. I won't ever forget you, I swear."

The link starts weakening as emotion overcame them both, everything growing blurry, the sky dimming.

"Thanks, Sumika. S-See you later," he says, slight dampness in his eyes.

"Hic… Even in that you're the same…"

"Huh?"

"The last time we talked, you gave me a hug and didn't say goodbye. You said that you would definitely come back… Hic… Thank you, Takeru-chan. For coming back. And Kasumi, thank you… for being my friend these two years."

The small, battered smile bathed in faint sunlight is all they can see, unable to reply. The shaky, almost mechanical effort to raise a wounded, tattered hand and wave away, standing alone amidst the grass.

"… Goodbye."

Their vision returns to the room, both fall to my knees in slow motion, supporting each other. The soldier wipes the light wetness in his eyes, giving Yashiro a one-armed hug as the girl silently wept, shaking and shaking.

"… We did what we could, Kasumi."

"I know… but I'm still going to miss her."

A few pats to her back, ruffling her hair, a minute or two of silence until their legs restart and both are able to stand once more. A pit left

engraved in their stomachs, Yashiro coughs a few times, hoarse and dry, whereas dad simply rests a hand on the cylinder, wincing, nibbling at his bottom lip.

"Are you ready, Shirogane, Yashiro?" The scientist asks as she grows closer, wearing a perfect poker face.

"Yeah… Let her die like this, please," he whispers, walking away, letting Yashiro go to her required position.

"… Not like I needed you to tell me that," she hastily turns around and goes to the computers.

A whirring resonates through the room, lights begin to shine in a patter. Slowly, the liquid in the tank starts to swirl, to shine brighter. The equipment that resembles the Mindseeker's parts starts the scan, rotating around the cylinder, the soft whirring intensifying at times.

The minutes slowly pass, the equipment keep rotating, the numbers simply raise on the monitors, the areas slowly changing from blue, to yellow, to green in the confirmation screens. Nothing is said, no movement is made, all four of them remain waiting for the deed to be done.

A light beeping echoes, the circling starts to slow down until it ceases, the whirring also stopping.

" *Vice Commander*, is the digitalization-"

"Yes, the scan is done. Now all that's left is… killing Kagami. If you don't feel like-"

"No. I said I'll be by her side until the end. Do it."

All he can do is claw at his fists, to try to untie the knot that still holds a freezing grip over his throat, keep the tears at bay.

The scientist inputs a code on her terminal, the liquid starts to leave the tube.

The noise of it all going down somewhere is the only thing that is heard in the room.

Slowly the cylinder is depleted, so slowly, so simply, so gradually.

It's nothing but a percentage that decreases in a screen.

Nothing but a taskbar slowly reaching completion.

It is nothing but a slow descent along the liquid.

Until there is nothing left.

And so, right now… at this very moment, before his very eyes…

"… *Sumika died. Just like that."*

Dad's knees threaten with buckling as if Destroyers were charging at him, and he has to claw and grip at his legs. Once more, the cloak of cold falls upon his limbs, the stiffness, almost unresponsiveness assails him for a moment before Yashiro pats his shoulder, leaning on him. Both heave a sigh, wincing at the emptiness, at the lack of the usual cerulean gleam that fills this room.

"Motoko-nee, please take Kagami's remains and incinerate them right now," she orders, voice and features immutable as the weather.

Motoko-san goes up to the cylinder, presses something on it's base, and part of it opens up. She puts Kagami's remains on a small plastic box and leaves, also heaving a sigh upon her hurried exit.

"Shirogane, Yashiro," she calls out, waving her head towards the pod, "let's start the 00 Unit."

"Sigh… Yeah, let's," he barely finds the strength to reply, slouching his way forward.

"Don't worry, Takeru-san. Until the end she was happy," Yashiro says, squeezing his arm a bit.

"I see… You okay now?"

"… Yes. I'm fine." She gives a nod, burying the hints, the desire to stare back at the void in the room.

"You two," the scientist raises her voice, giving them a frontal stare, trying to shift gears, "help me get it in the UN dress before we start it up."

They release the 00 Unit from the cables on the pod, slowly pacing the safety covers over the sections in the limbs, and with some effort and coordination it is quickly dressed in the formal attire. Yashiro opens a small briefcase, taking out the ribbon that the scientist then ties to the long red hair. On her signal, the soldier reconnects the main cable that goes behind the neck and rechecks the bindings were fastened once more. He raises his thumb, the scientist walks to the main unit and begins to input the confirmation for the process, once more whirring reverberating all over the place.

Yashiro grabs onto him, watching intently the sleeping features while he pats her head. Numbers and odd symbols flash in the small screen on the pod's outer side. Once the screen shuts off, the noise ceases alongside it. The scientist gives the okay, gulping and taking in a deep breath, wanting to walk closer and do the honors herself yet finds her knees quivering, hollowness within.

As dad presses the red button, all of the pod's screens start shining in some form of patter, a flowerstorm of beeps fluttering about. It all lasts a second, and no errors come up in any of the screens.

Seeing everything in green, the scientist sighs, oh, so heavily. A second to restore air to her lungs, clawing at the supporting structure of the terminal, she takes sharp, long steps towards the pod, inputting the final code.

The cable on the neck snaps off on its own, the pod shuts down.

A small jerk, the chest raises.

And slowly, very slowly, the 00 Unit opens its eyes.

It convulses for a minute, lightly thrashing against the restrains, then takes a long, deep breath and falls still in place.

It remains there, unblinking as it calmly breathes in and out, simply laying on the pod without making as much of a sound.

"S-Sumika-san?" Yashiro peeks at her, hesitantly waving. The 00 Unit didn't react at all.

"Hello, can you hear me?" The scientist asks, staring for a moment with bathed breath. Upon the absolute lack of acknowledgment, she takes out a pencil from her coat and passes it above its eyes. There is no reaction, at all. She crosses her arms as a sigh escapes her lips. "Shirogane, you didn't see the 00 Unit's activation last time, didn't you?"

Dad shrugs with a wry smile. "No, I ran away like a coward the day before. I only know she- Uwah!"

The 00 Unit's upper body raises from the pod in a flash like a mummy from a sarcophagus in search of grave robbers, scaring the three of them to the point of causing them to step back. It then remains like that, not blinking, not moving, sitting on the pod.

The scientist gazes at her soldier, who nods and licks his lips, gulping and then coughing. "Hello. I'm Takeru Shirogane. How do you feel?"

An eye twitches.

"… Hello?"

Again, the same eye twitches. The lips start to quiver, breathing gaining momentum.

"Sumika?"

"… Kill."

"Huh? Oh shit, here we-"

"I'll kill them all!" His arms wrap around the wish for revengeance that erupts forth, the resistance enough to hurt the soldier for a moment until he could readjust his grip. "Kill! Kill! Kill!"

"Sumika, calm down! There's nothing to be afraid of!"

"I'll kill you all! You, and you, and you, and your parents too! You fucking bastards, I'll tear you to shreds!"

"Shit, not like I expected anything else," the scientist grabs Yashiro by the shoulder, taking their safe distance. "I'm going to send her into Safe Mode, Shirogane. Keep her pinned for a while."

"No, there's no need!" He screams, giving out a smirk. "Hey, Kasumi. Bring the bunny," he aims with his jaw at the little toy.

The assistant immediately hurries to take it down from its place, with the scientist's help who sighs, shaking her head at the bloody murder that the 00 Unit promises to bring forth. They then carefully approach the pod, dad aiming the 00 Unit's face towards them.

"No! Don't touch me! You'll break me!"

"Calm down, it's okay," he whispers, coughing as an elbow meets his kidney. "Hey, look there. What's that?"

Yashiro slowly raises her hands, the santa rabbit dangling from a finger. Immediately, the screaming, the thrashing stops. Left gaping, the 00 Unit stares, and stares, and nothing else.

"… Do you remember that, Sumika?" He asks, slowly, softly brushing her bangs. "It's your santa rabbit, a present from me to you. Remember?"

Eyes start to twitch, once more convulsion takes hold of her body.

He brings her backwards, resting her head on his shoulder. "I remember hearing you scream from the window that day, thanking Santy Claus for the present," he whispers, smiling faintly. "Also, remember when you came home for my first birthday? You gave me a spinning top as a present, right?"

For a moment, he remains whispering, retelling old memories. Despite the disquiet found in the breathing, in the pain apparent in its features, eventually it all starts to subside. The shift to Safe Mode was made gradually, without any shutdowns required.

"Sigh… Not like I wasn't expecting it, but you weren't wrong with her going berserk," the scientist shrugs, nodding to her soldier.

"Yeah, at least she calmed down this time. Last time it took me a few days to think of giving her something to use as a central pillar," he nods back, sighing along Yashiro.

"Well, nothing but wait and see what the data tells us. You two, help me connect her to the cylinder, we need to purify her ODL."

As they're going through the motions, sharing determined nods, placing the santa rabbit in her hands as well, Motoko-san returns from her duty.

"Oh, did I miss the activation? So, how'd it go?" She asks, arms compact at first, raising a brow at the firm nod her sister returns.

"Not as bad as I expected. We could place it in Safe Mode without any shutdowns, despite the backlash it suffered. For now, all we can do is wait until the ODL is purified and we can see what we can learn from this awakening."

She ruffles her hair, gazing at the machine, at the activated machine, allowing herself to smile as she sighs. It lasts a second, yet at the very least there are no creeping red screens or error beeps echoing in the back of her head.

"Motoko-nee, I'd like you to file in the headband's data. You don't have to analyze it today, unless something very odd pops out," she nods back, giving a tired sigh and a smile. "Shirogane, you'll be coming with me to the medbay."

"… Why? I'm fine," he retorts, folding his arms.

"We don't know that. The last time you regained memories you lost a great deal of G-Radiation, and I can't risk you vanishing again in your sleep," she states, taking a step towards him. "Giving you a full checkup shouldn't take too much time, and seeing how your radiation levels are should take only a moment."

"Uh, XO Kouzuki," Motoko-san starts to take a step, halting, then fiddles with her hair, "is Shirogane aware of, well, what the radiation-
"

"Motoko-nee, now is not the time," she narrows her eyes, all of her firepower, and her sister can only relent a nod before shaking her head. "Now then, where was I? Oh, right. Shirogane, to the medbay. I'll oversee how your body's faring myself, so do head over there now."

"Look, it's alright," he says, waving down. "I ain't gonna poof outta here, and I am fine."

"Cadet, I gave you an order," she repeats, arms folding. "Go on to the medbay and prepare for a full checkup. And you are not deceiving me," she takes a few steps, pointing at the base of his neck, "look how swollen you are, almost choking yourself on the uniform. I won't have any of your usual quips now. You're going to submit yourself to the checkup and that's final."

"… I mean, I can *submit* if that's what you want, but at least take me out to dinner first," he smirks back, causing Yashiro to tilt her head and Motoko-san to choke on a chuckle.

The scientist pinches her nose, inhaling sharply. "You son of a-"

"And this ain't a joke, you haven't had dinner yet. You should take a break to eat, for real. It's not like-"

Getting closer, again grabbing the neck of his fatigues, she drill her sight into his, whispering in a hurry. "We can have dinner later in my office while we discuss the plans for the 00 Unit and I fill you in what happened with the guards," she stops, turns him around and shoves the soldier towards the exit. "You haul your ass to the medbay, now. Yashiro, accompany him and make sure he gets ready."

He sighs, rolling his eyes as he exits the room, saluting Motoko-san as he does. Yashiro hurries after him, bowing down as she leaves. The scientist heaves a sigh, ruffling her hair, again staring at the 00 Unit for a moment. Before turning around and finding her sister endowing a small smirk while grasping her chin, drowning a chuckle.

"… What?" She asks, caustic.

"Oh, nothing, nothing," Motoko-san waves down, smiling. "Well, I am rather busy so I'll let you go to focus on the checkup," she picks up the headband and the small laptop that had started a preemptive scan, never losing her smile as she takes her leave.

The scientist wrings her hands for a moment, shaking her head afterwards. Looking back at the empty cylinder, at the sleeping machine, she allows herself to smile as she runs a finger over the glass of the pod as lights form an erratic patter, as the cerulean glow fills the cables.

"I guess I did it, huh. Finally, after so long… Siiigh. Now, all I can hope for is that my countermeasures do stop the sharing of intel… and that you can truly mend her heart, Shirogane."

---

*Around the same time.*

*(Kashgar. Original Hive.)*

**[Superior]**

---

Establishing connection… Processing… Connection established. Psychic Link formed.

"Lesser Entity 22nd, status report."

"REPORT: Unknown Entity discovered.

Through multiple interactions with Subject 597, said Entity produced patterns never before seen.

Entity established a connection with Subject 597 through recognized psychic patterns. It is believed another Psychic Entity might have been aiding it.

Unknown Entity produced similar readings to a previously met Entity. The Entity's readings are also different to that of all the Entities found on the star.

The Entity produced certain patterns recognizable in our database. It is believed it also needs a supply of energy from our systems, since its processing unit produced readings similar to that of the Worker units when they re-energize.

The Entity also showed awareness beyond its own capabilities. During the links, specifically the most recent one, it sent to Subject 597 images and words of stars that are similar to the current Host, but showing different structures and landscapes.

Final Conclusion: The identity of the Unknown Entity might be one of three possible things:

One, it is a new Lesser Entity of this star.

Two, it is the Superior Entity of this star.

Three, it a not yet encountered type of Entity."

"Report acknowledged. Cancel Connection?"

"Negative. REPORT: Damage sustained. Current output dropped below 40%. 50% of the Core's receptors have suffered irreparable damage.

Another Unknown Entity has connected to the revitalizing system shortly. No data was received.

Second Unknown Entity is not a Carbon-based Entity.

Identity conclusions are equal as the First Unknown.

A Psychic Carbon-based Entity has interacted with both Unknowns repeatedly, and has produced a higher output than past Psychic Entities encountered on the star.

Whether that is related to the Unknowns has yet to be determined."

"Report acknowledged. Cancel Connection?"

"Affirmative. Lesser Entity 22nd, cutting connection."

Analyzing data… Analyzing… First Unknown, estimated threat: HIGH. However, until further data becomes available, First Unknown shall be recognized as: Possible Superior Entity or Uncategorized Entity. More intel required, final determination pending.

Activating Emergency Orders. Executing… Setting Priority and Orders…

First Unknown: Contact and/or Capture, HIGH Priority. Sending orders… Sending… Data transferred successfully. Data sent to the

pipeline for further reviewing and cross-referencing. Note: If possibility three is proven true, Orders should be changed to: Capture, HIGHEST Priority.

Second Unknown… Analyzing… Not enough information available. Data sent to the pipeline for further reviewing and cross-referencing.

Psychic Entity… Analyzing… First results: Estimated output: 78% stronger than past Psychic Entities encountered on this star. Emergency Orders… Executing… Psychic Entity, changing threat level from LOW to MID. Setting priority and Orders… Executing… Psychic Entity: Capture in working condition, MID Priority. Sending orders… Data transferred successfully. Data sent to the pipeline for further cross-referencing

Analyzing possible outcomes… Checking available Worker-units…

Establishing connection with Lesser Entities 16th, 20th and 21st… Connection established. Psychic Link formed.

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*Next Day. Around 6 AM.*

*(Takeru's Cell.)*

**[Takeru]**

---

Zzz…

"Wake up."

Tilting to one side, grabbing what little comfort I could find, my sense feel cold and emptiness around me. As well as roughness, the stone cold firmness of the bed.

"Wake up," a soft voice whispers.

Mmgh… What hour is it? Ugh, so tired…

"Wake up."

Five more minutes… it's so cold…

"Understood."

Mmh… How nice of you, Kasumi.

… Wait a sec.

I slowly open my eyes, and a similar and different sight welcomes me. The coldness in the air tells me I'm not back in my world but…

A girl, by my side. Hair is red, not blue.

"… Sumika?"

"Good morning."

She's kneeling near my bed, grabbing the edges of it, staring straight ahead into my eyes, unblinking.

"Y-Yeah, good morning. Sumika, how did you get in here?"

The door into the detention barracks is a manual one, not an electronic one. She can't hack her way in. And the hell did the guard do when she appeared?

"I walked," she answers in a monotone.

"Yes, I know. But…" I look towards the door of my cell. It's open. And that means either someone opened the door for her or she did it by herself. "Sumika, did you come here alone?"

"Yes," she immediately answers, giving a nod.

Okay, how did this happen? She couldn't even hold herself in check yesterday and now she comes straight to my room without help? I

can't send her away or she might start having an attack. This is a new one, guess my idea paid off.

I raise from my bed, Sumika also slowly gets up, with sharp movements, and stands there staring at me, holding the santa rabbit in one of her hands.

"Um… Sumika, thanks for coming but you really should have stayed in your room."

"No."

"Well, you could have come with Kasumi to-"

"No."

I feel like I'm talking with a wall. At least she's talking, even if like a machine.

"Okay. I'll take you to your room later," sighing, I get out of the bed. But Sumika doesn't move. "Um… I have to get changed Sumika."

Don't just stand there with a blank look! Kasumi, where are you when I need you?! Well, the 00 Unit shouldn't be ready to move freely anyways. If I recall correctly, it took a while for her to do stuff properly without guidance. Unlike cyborgs and androids, Sumika needs her time. And I have to look after her, properly.

"Sumika, can you step outside of the cell for a second? Come on, I'll get ready real quick." I grab her hand and walk her out of the cell, she immediately follows. "You wait for me here, okay? No looking into the cell."

"Understood." She nods. Good, she's listening for some reason.

Going back into my cell, I see she really is standing there like I told her to. Okay, how did this happen? She went from inanimate doll with berserker mode straight to 'coming-to-wake-you-up' mode overnight? I mean… Stronger Nucleus or not, I should be sharing

intel to her as a manifestation of the conductor. Now it's a matter of replicating what I already did before, and see if I can activate my causal pull on my own.

I take off my clothes and enter the shower, taking one deep breath as I grit my teeth before letting the cold needles fall on me. I'll never get used to this, the cold drill on my head is still the same as the first day. Sigh, what wouldn't I give to go back to the warmth of an immersion bath.

After getting into my fatigues and tying my boots, I exit my cell. Sumika is still there, unmoving from the position I left her in.

"Hey Sumika, do you have the key of the cell?"

"Yes."

"Can you give it to me? We have to close the cell when I leave." She slowly turns towards me and points towards the door, also raising her arm to do so. I hadn't noticed she left the key there. "Got it, give me a sec." Closing the door and taking the key with me, now I'm ready to leave.

… But this is way earlier than usual. Well, I should take her back to the underground. This is worth a report, and I can check if they're having breakfast properly or not.

"Sumika? Let's go back to your room." I grab her hand, but then she instead grabs my arm. Her head gently falls on me like snow, expression as blank as snow too.

"No. Don't leave."

"I have to go train, Sumika. I'll go at night, so be good and wait for me, okay?" She tightens her grip on my arm, an eye twitches. "Come on, let's go." I take a few steps slowly. At first she didn't want to budge, but then little by little she starts to walk.

Very slowly, we got to the exit of the detention barracks. I hand the key to the guard, who looks at me with a giant grin on his face, nodding a few times and giving me a thumbs up as we leave. Dammit, I don't need more weird rumors to start spreading around. I should hurry and take Sumika to-

"Takeru-san?"

"Hey Kasumi. Look what I found," I smile, looking at the unyielding grip on my arm.

Kasumi sighs, giving me a small bow. "Sorry, I didn't notice she was gone. What did she do?" I explain to her what happened since I woke up, even how she apparently got to me all by herself. Kasumi's eyes widen for a sec before simply nodding. "I see. What could have caused her to act like this?"

"No idea," I roll my eyes, shrugging. "But you should take her back down there before someone notices she's here.

"No." Sumika presses herself onto me, strongly grabbing my arm as if I were a canteen in the desert.

"Sumika, come on, don't do this right now," I pet her head lightly, curling some hair on a finger, "I'll go later at night and we'll be together then. Will you wait for me?"

"Don't leave," she repeats, her hold binds me further.

Sigh… This is gonna be harder than I thought.

"Sumika-san, Takeru-san is busy. He'll visit us later. Come on, let's go back." Kasumi tries to pull her away from me, which makes her hands start clawing at me. D-Damn, it hurts…

"No, don't take him away from me…"

"Sumika, I'm not going to disappear. I'll come back to you after-"

"No!" She looks up at me, shivering, grabbing me as if I were the lone rope that's keeping her from falling down an abyss. Jaw shivers, eyes twitch, she's about to blow.

So I wrap my free hand over her, tightly. "Sumika, it's okay. I'll stay in the base, I'm not leaving." Her features relax, the hold softens slowly. "You don't worry about me. Wait for me in your room, I'll go at night to visit you, okay?"

"… Understood."

Oh shit.

She replied to me, she is actually talking with me now. I stopped the overload, this is a first.

Smiling back, I nod. "Yes, I promise. You go with Kasumi now, okay?"

I pat her back, she slowly releases my arm. After sharing a nod, Kasumi takes her towards the elevator. Sumika, however, remains gazing at me until they take a turn.

What caused this drastic change? I mean, the only change here is me… Didn't think it'd be this fast. And while this is great, it also means I need to be real careful with my thoughts. Not only to keep my own pull stable, but if she scans anything from that timeline, Sumika is definitely gonna snap.

"… Takeru?"

Hm? I look to my left. A pair of blue eyes greets my view, coming down the hallway.

"Oh, hey. Good morning, Meiya," I nod her way, scratching my head. Thank God she arrived now. A minute earlier and she would have seen Sumika.

"… Morning." Deflating like a balloon, she stares at me.

"So, uh, how's everything? I, well-"

"Takeru…" Meiya shoots a glare towards me, shaving the distance between us.

Her eyes… I wish I didn't remember those blasting eyes. Which one is it, mountain or coup?

"Who was that woman?" Meiya asks, arms slightly folding.

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

Frowning, her lips trembling a bit. "Do not play dumb, I heard you loud and clear. You said you were going to visit her room at night. Do you think I don't know what those words entail, Takeru?"

…

**Oh, fuuuuuuuuuuuuu-**

"Wait a second! It's not what it sounds like!"

"Huh… Then, care to explain what that meant? Not only you are under a strict punishment, but you also were supposed to be in need of treatment after your folly during the mock battle."

"Wait a sec, the mock battle wasn't-"

She grows closer, burning. "Who was that woman? What did those words mean? Despite your condition, despite your punishment, were you going to risk getting caught for her?" Meiya invaded my personal space, just like she did after I came back from Niigata, and stood mere inches away from me with an expression that could slay Forts.

Shit, shit, shit, shit! Of all the possible people that could have seen us… If she gets suspicious… If she tells Tsukuyomi-san, and if she then informs Yuuhi of it, and when she comes to the base she inquires about this with Yuuko, this is gonna be a disaster.

Causality, I just want you to know that I hate you. Meiya, of all people.

"And? What is it, Takeru? Cat got your tongue?"

"She's… a friend of mine."

"A friend, sure." Folding her arms even tighter, she narrows her purple fire at me. "Then, why are you going to her room tonight, Takeru?"

"Look, I can't tell you. It's… related to some official work the XO is ordering me to do."

"Do you seriously expect me to believe that?" The purple fire roars alive in her eyes. "She was pressing herself onto you, and you're planning on going to her room this night. After what happened, do you expect me to let this misconduct slide?"

Sigh.

I can't allow her to grow suspicious. Now of all times… I don't like the edge in her eyes and I like the snake in her tone even less. Going by her reactions to the talks regarding my memories, I'm sure she was told something. Even if Meiya is someone I would bet my life on, her loyalty and heart lie with the Empire. And while I'd like to believe she won't fall on that path, this Meiya has shown me before how cold she could be. That sweet tint, that gentleness from my Meiya is nowhere to be found here. So I gotta take care of this tactfully.

"Sigh… I can tell you some stuff, but you have to keep them as an absolute secret. Not a word to anyone, okay?" I have an idea, even if it's dumb. Refusing her does me no good, anyways.

"Very well, my lips shall remain sealed. I swear it on my honor. Then, explain."

"Her name is Sumika Kagami, she's a very talented engineer working under express orders of the *XO."* Last time this was her cover, so I can just tell Yuuko to use it again.

"Sumika Kagami…" She repeats the words, nodding once as she takes a step back.

"She's involved in many of the special missions I've had to work on, and is aiding me with some paperwork the *XO* ordered me to work on during my punishment."

"I see. But why are you going to her room? Surely you don't expect me to believe you work on her private quarters?"

Actually, that's what we do. The cylinder room is basically Sumika's room, so yeah.

"There's some stuff she has to hand me, is all. Nothing odd is going on here."

She scoffs, looking away. "It still does not excuse how she was clinging to you."

"Look, just, you got the wrong idea," I say, scratching an ear. Meiya folds her arms once more. "So, uh, why are you here?"

"Why, is my presence a bother to you?"

"Someone's moody today, huh."

"Wh- I am not- Sigh. Takeru, surely the Instructor told you of what has transpired in your absence," she states, stares, firm and blazing. Without even asking me how I am or anything. At least pretend some more, Your Fucking Highness.

"Yeah, I'm up to speed. So, what's up?" I lean on the wall, hands on my pockets to hide the claws they wanna turn into.

"Firstly, your flaunting during the run last night was unnecessary," she affirms, eyes narrow as her lips.

"I wasn't showing off, was just testing how well I had recovered, is all."

"I do not recall you ever employing such maneuvers, however. Also, what is wrong with your hair?" She asks, raising a brow.

"What?"

"Your hair, when did it grow so much? Why haven't you cut it yet?"

"To be fair, I haven't been in this world for, like, three months."

A frown sears momentarily, she shakes her head while heaving a sigh. "Takeru, could you please be serious?"

"I am, though. Why don't you stop camping and tell me straight up what you want to ask?" I say, returning the frontal stare.

"Fine, if you desire," clearing her throat, a hand brushes her bangs before the fire aims at me again. "Takeru, what happened during the last moments of the mock battle?"

"Didn't you say before I made a 'folly'?"

"Should I take this as confirmation, then?"

"Siiigh. You do realize I'm under orders to shut up about it, right?"

Eyes narrow, for a moment she looks down. "Are you not regretting the outcome?"

"Even if I do, there's nothing to do about it," I rest the back of my head on the wall, shrugging.

She comes closer, looking right into me. "I do believe there is something you can do to alleviate this situation. Making a public

apology to 1st Kt Tsukuyomi should diffuse the rumors, so that the pressure our squad is enduring ceases to be," she affirms with a nod.

I shake my head, her features grow tight, "Something like that is only good for saving face, the whispers will continue even if I apologize. Those who wanna look for shit won't be dissuaded just like that, Meiya."

Exhaling like a bull, she takes another step closer while slicing the air. "Do not utter such balderdash. You forced 1st Lt Tsukuyomi's hand, now it is your responsability to mend this issue posthaste."

"It's a problem because there are jerks that already had a bone to pick with me or you guys," I sigh, hitting the wall. "We should simply remain doing what we've been doing, and ignore the haters."

"You do not seem to be regretting your miss," she says, giving me a sideglance. "Do you know how 1st Lt Tsukuyomi and her crew were treated after the battle?"

"Meiya, look, I get why you're doing this but my situation with the IRG is tied to some personal business. Can you please drop it?" I ask, giving a bow, poking the shore.

The tide immediately marches forward, sudden clouds to her expression. "What is compelling such a negative from you? I did not believe you hoisted any animosity towards the guards. Why, I wonder, are refusing so strongly?"

Finding only waves of fire, I look away, crushing rocks in my pockets. "I dunno, why are you assuming it was my fault? It was an accident, caused by both of us. Neither me nor 1st Lt Tsukuyomi are to blame. It was just a chain of bad decisions on both ends, and anyone trying to make drama out of this ain't worth our time." We've got bigger fish to fry, and I'd kill for some good mackerel right now.

One of her brows twitches, she takes a long pause to inhale. Fire's still there, though. "Tsukuyomi is clearly being pinned as the culprit, forced to apologize, to bow down for an error she did not commit. And that here you are Takeru, refusing to extend some simpathy to your fellows."

"Come on, it's not like I-"

"Oh, but you possess ample time for planning suspicious escapades with low officers. It is unbecoming, having an affair with that coarse woman."

"Excuse me, what was that?"

"I said-"

Taking a step forward, almost tackling her, our stares crash. "What the fuck was that? You take those words back or we're gonna have a problem."

"Wh- You would grow upset over that-"

"She's a friend, so you better not talk shit about her."

"Hmm. Now you know how I feel regarding Tsukuyomi's situation," she then gives a small bow, not meeting my eyes. "My apologies, I let my temper overcome me."

"Sigh. Whatever. Just don't be harsh to Sumika, she doesn't deserve it. She's actually-"

"It is fine, I do not need to know," she dismisses, walking backwards. "However, I must insist that you apologize, Takeru," she nods my way, embers tamed for the moment. "Not only for Tsukuyomi, but for your own reputation as well. Even if you believe it to be an empty gesture for the rest, it is not for the officers of the Guard."

"As if me saying sorry would do anything. They'll get more pissed," I shrug, one eye closing. Sure, I think Mana would appreciate it but I

don't wanna explain anything nor answer questions. Plus, it won't feel genuine, it'll be only a corporate gesture even if I am sorry for having snapped like that, sedatives or not.

She remains watching me silently, arms sagging as her lips twist. "Takeru, within the warrior selflessness must flourish. It is key to nurture one's compassion to be your fellows' guiding light. 1st Lt Tsukuyomi did not report your illegal possession of the Minaru Kamui after the CCSE. Now, it is your turn to repay that kindness."

"And what will me apologizing achieve? They'll see it as a forced gesture, the rest won't changw their stances with a simple 'I'm sorry'. Plus, apologizing just for the sake of it would be only for my own peace of mind."

Yuuko already cleared stuff up, no one is to blame. If anything happens, I'll ask her what we can do about it. Though, I seriously doubt there's anyone stupid enough to pick a fight with Mana. Then again, never say never.

Face turns to stone, like a gargoyle. "I can't believe someone trained as a warrior would defy the code."

"Ironically, I am no warrior."

"What? Then, what are you?" She shoots, arms crossing as her lips purse.

I smile, beating a hand over my heart. "As the Japanese term given to pilots indicates, I am a guardian. An 'Eishi', not a 'Senshi'."

Again, a brow twitches. Lips quickly flap before she slaps both hands onto her waist, flamethrower active in her eyes. "A protector you call yourself yet, what is it you safeguard? You're placing your comrades in quite the precarious position, you refuse to mend your mistakes, and you act with unwarranted righteousness after your folly."

"I'm acting as I deem necessary, for what I believe is best for me and the squad," I affirm, not relenting under her stare.

Which wavers a bit, again taking a pause before she continues. "Within the warrior, there is only place for truth. If you're sorry, truly, then, why would yoy not extend an apology?"

Pinching my nose, I inhale slowly. This is the second wall I'm talking with today, it seems.

"Takeru, a warrior wields the blade not to further its own interests, but to protect the powerless," she tells, pushing her chest out, brimming with pride as she looks into my eyes. "I can comprehend your concerns over a possible backlash, but you're now only looking out for yourself. Avoiding an apology in defiance, knowing 1st Lt Tsukuyomi bears no ill will to you. Why, I wonder, would you be against resolving this issue?"

"It's only an issue because others already had problems with us. Apologizing means accepting the guilt, and confirming their suspicions. Do you think the soldiers that stand on either side will change their postures in a flash just because I bow down for a few seconds? Don't be so naive, please." If that was all it took to solve our problems the Invasion wouldn't have been a mess, the Babylon Disaster would never have happened, and I wouldn't be here.

A slight frown, threat of smoke. "What? It is only the obvious course of action, to admit your folly and repent for it. And above everything else… Why do you so adamantly refuse if you're free of blame? It is almost as if you wished to avoid the guards," she whispers, sending a sideglance, a dart into my heart.

She's not her.

Do not be an idiot.

I know she isn't my Meiya.

Don't take it personally. She's not my lover.

"… Looks like you already reached your own conclusions," I roll my eyes, looking away.

"The facts are clear. Do you believe I'd forsake my fellows to shouldering a brand they do not deserve? If you truly are free of guilt as well, is it not in your best interest to extend a gesture to 1st Lt Tsukuyomi? Isn't it for the benefit of the squad as a whole to extinguish any baseless motives that could be used against you?" She asks, getting closer again, staring silently, waiting, awaiting.

"… Again, if that was all it took to change people's minds, politics wouldn't be needed. I get why you're worried but, really, this has nothing to do with you," I sigh, taking a few steps. She extends a hand, blocking the way.

"Surely you're jesting? You should be aware of the repercussions setting such a precedent would cause, to allow blames to be placed onto the members of the IRG. If you truly call yourself a guardian, then your priority should be to-"

"… You do realize the guards were who pushed me to the edge, right? If they had let things rest, nothing would have happened." If only they had kept their cool instead of trying so hard to approach me, all of this could have been avoided. Can't really blame anyone, so better to just shut up and take it.

Another narrow gaze, lips tightly pressed together. "Huh, so you are shirking your responsibility. And to think you were chosen to wield a Minaru Kamui… Takeru, it is unbecoming of a warrior how you're acting."

"I don't remember since when I had to measure up to those values. Meiya, I'm not in the IRG."

"Wh- However… while that is true, considering your skill and the blade, if you extend a proper apology there would be no plausible

reason for the whispers to continue. I comprehend being fearful of retaliation, yet I can stand by your side if that is what you're concerned about," she affirms, eyes blazing as she again slices the air. "You also must not be wishing to allow this 'accident' from becoming a roadblock for our shared goal to reach graduation, assuredly."

"Sigh… Look, I'm really thankful for the words, but I wanna keep my distance from the guards."

"… So that is your answer. Yet you seemed quite eager to accept that officer's invitation."

Frowning, glaring, I hold her stare in silence. Long enough to make her posture shuffle. "You leave Sumika out of this. Furthermore, the authorities have already decided the outcome of this incident. There's nothing else we can do from the ground but to keep our composure up."

"Do you not have even an ounce of sympathy for 1st Lt Tsukuyomi?" She asks, again staring deep into my eyes, unblinking. "It is your duty to repay her goodwill for not reporting the blade when she found out you had it illegally."

"… Do you think me apologizing will change anything? Sometimes, keeping quiet is the best solution."

"I disagree. Your actions could do much for the atmosphere that surrounds us now, furthermore, it is imperative you extend an apology to the 1st Lt. You've no excuse, considering your past actions, to refuse such a gesture. Not only as a warrior but as a fellow Japanese, you're obliged to an apology not only to 1st Lt Tsukuyomi but to the other officers of the guard as well. An offense against the IRG is tantamount to an offense against the Shogun herself, let me remind you."

"Huh… So the guards can go around doing whatever they please, since they have the backing of their status to fall back on?" I spit out,

biting my stupid tongue after the fact.

Obviously, it only serves to ignite the pyre. "Wh- How dare you say that! You should know what the IRG symbolizes, what ideals their members strive to uphold. Allowing such friction to make nest is a mistake, and all it takes is an honest apology from you. Certainly, a meager gesture."

"… You do realize that, if *XO Kouzuki* weren't my legal tutor, I'd have been kicked out of the army by now? My words matter little when the IRG can simply sue for defamation or use the damaged databases against me."

"… I did not think you'd hoist such animosity towards the Guard."

"All I've said is the truth. Take off the rose-tinted glasses and go look outside, not all members of the IRG are white knights."

"And, pray tell, how can you ascertain that? I was under the impression that… well, someone of high station was who bestowed you the blade."

"Sigh… Think whatever you want, but it's the truth. There's some people in the IRG… that wouldn't hesitate to break swords left and right if it was what it took to reach their goals."

And no, I'm not proud of everything I did even if it was 'necessary'.

"Huh? How do you even-"

"Anyways, my situation is a bit more delicate than you're aware of, *Mitsurugi.* So kindly give me some space, let's not force any altercations. I already have enough to deal with," I nod her way and walk off.

Again the hand raises but I squeeze past it. "Takeru, wait. What do you-"

"Oh, Meiya-sama?" Someone says ahead of me. Mion, followed by Shion, stand in attention and give her a bow, yet their eyes remain on me. "Good morning to you."

"Ah, yes, good morning, you two. Takeru, this is a prime chance for you," she says, elbowing me.

"What chance? They're here to keep tabs on me," I shrug, scratching my head.

Both cousins wince for a second, quickly going back to business face. Mion idles a hand on her hair as she steps forward. "You see, Meiya-sama, we were tasked with watching over cadet Shirogane to ensure no one tries to take 'justice' on their own hands," she slowly tells, giving me a look, staring.

Her brow twitches again. "What? However, that as if you were apologizing instead!"

"More like the IRG wants me under surveillance now," I suggest with a smirk, poking the wound.

"Cadet, that is not the case," Mion retorts, solemn and frontal. "We of the Imperial Guard hold no ill intent towards you."

"If you say so, 2nd Lt," I shrug, walking again.

"Takeru, cease this obstinacy," she scolds, arms folding. "2nd Lts, please do accept our apologies. We are sorry for the most regrettable state of affairs that the mock battle brought. Isn't that right, cadet Shirogane?" She stares, and stares.

"Meiya-sama, it is fine," Shion smiles, waving a hand. "We understand, there is no need. We agreed to this task, as our share to leave this accident behind."

"Then, what has the UN done? Takeru, do you not believe they deserve your thankfulness?"

"Siiigh. *Mitsurugi,* please, stop," I hold her silent accusation, the scorching in her whole posture. "Going around apologizing isn't very productive, is it? This is only a formal arrangement to stop things from getting worse. That's why, please don't insist any more. Do you think my words will sound real when people see me being escorted by two Shinpan?"

She looks down, unwinding her ire. "I suppose there's- However, still, even if only on her quarters-"

"Please, let it go. This is my own fault, and if anyone lashes out against you or the others, feel free to redirect the flames my way," I nod her way, waving before she can reply.

The Pickles hurry a farewell, quickly starting to trace my shadow. Meiya calls out once, but I don't stop or look back. Honestly, while scouting possible idiots is required, it's not like this kind of thing is avoidable. Rumors will brew and those who believe in 'em instead of all you show yourself to be are worth nothing.

All I can hope is that we can stay on good terms. I don't expect Meiya to let this go, much less now that she's got the wrong ides with Sumika, but I can only reach out. If she again reverts to being cold, then-

"Ahem," something hits my right shoulder, Shion is staring. "Good morning, cadet Shirogane," she then flashes me a smile.

"Good morning, 2nd Lt Tsukuyomi."

"Cadet, if you desire, you may address us by name," Mion suggests, nodding from my left. "It would be confusing if you refer to both of us in the same way."

"It's fine, I'll keep quiet and won't bother you," I return the nod, Mion tries not to but ends up looking down, crashing down.

"So Shirogane," Shion smirks, getting closer, "you were told of our watch over you?"

"Yes. Don't worry, I don't intend to make any trouble."

"So then, could you tell us what you expect your schedule to be like?" Mion asks, holding her breath. Shion also stares, firmly.

It's like a cracked glass. Even if you put it together, the lines will still remain. Where before fire or clear energy came forth now there's hesitation, a cat stepping on water.

I suppose not being a jerk to you costs me nothing. Even if you've putting on a front, at least I can poke fun at you two as we used to. Their reactions should tell me enough, and I get to unwind a bit.

# Roses and Ashes (I)

*A/N: So, uh, I did it again.*

*This chapter's outline was a meager 2k words before turning into a near 30k behemot. Since I want things to start picking up speed and these events have to happen now, this couldn't be helped. So I split it up in two parts, this chapter and its twin. Part two should come out soonish, it only needs some minimal edits. I know my usual long chaps do get tiring for some, so if y'all do prefer me to try and keep my chapters around 10k words or lower let me know, though I honestly doubt I can lower the wordcount more than that.*

*Now, to answer a few questions from the comments. First, most of this story has already been outlined and sketched so I won't be adding anything else to it, regardless of TE's release or any other new additions to canon going forward. This story is about Takeru, and any other MCs that may appear will do so if and when they can serve a purpose to the plot. If not, well, they simply won't appear. And if future lore clashes with the fic, it will be ignored at large.*

*Second, I didn't have Keru accompany Sumika to the underground due to his reputation. I thought that I had mentioned that state of affairs enough times for him to react to it without bringing it up. Any possible negative reaction from a random soldier towards him could cause Sumika, who can scan minds around her, to go into an overload. Or worse, from causing her and Kasumi to be also targeted by those who have ill views of him and forcing security's hand to protect the girls.*

*Considering he doesn't want to have the IRG set their eyes on Sumika, since he is aware they forgot she ever existed, or Kasumi, who would be treated harshly due to being an ESPer and a foreigner, I thought that him choosing to keep his distance once the bunny appeared was the most fitting choice. It's his way of taking the responsibility and consequences of his actions on his own shoulders.*

*Also, since Meiya had already seen them, if Keru had chosen to go with them she would probably have reached out to stop them under the wrong assumptions, and then things would have gotten rather messy considering the state of the 00 Unit as of now. You could say Keru chose the better answer for that small little problem. I thought it wasn't necessary to spell out his motivations every time, I am trying to be more austere with my inner monologues and descriptions. Sorry for the confusion.*

*Also, as one final reminder, this fic is an AU. I won't be 'jumping to the coup', because handling that issue in a different manner is the whole point of Keru's goals right now, to avoid the ripples from bringing the wrong memories from Unlimited into the Reversal timeline. And since this is a different universe, things won't happen the same as they did during the loops. Reversal is not the story to read if you want something that fits into Alternative's canon. I won't repeat this anymore and any further comments about why am I not doing the coup or Sadogashima or any other thing will be redirected to this paragraph from now on.*

*Anyways, the wall of text got too big already so I'll end my ramblings. Thanks for reading. Stay safe.*

*Zuoriel*

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*Chapter 82:*

**Roses and Ashes (I)**

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*December 5th. Around 8 AM.*

*(Sim Room.)*

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"Correct, we are only here to stand by and ensure no disturbances occur," Mion affirms with a nod, idling a hand on her ear.

Sgt Jinguuji returns the nod, her posture still slightly tilted to a side, compact and alert. "Understood. Thank you for cooperating, 2nd Lts," she salutes, they return it right away in perfect poker. "I assume this equals cadet Shirogane won't be subjected to any further punishments?"

"On that, we have been left in the dark," Shion sighs, arms folding as she repines in true honesty. "We hoist no animosity towards the cadet nor do we wish to give this accident any unwarranted attention, which is why we have been tasked with watching over Shirogane. I suppose, any decisions have already been settled. Were you not told anything on that regard?" She inquires, eyes narrowing, focusing onto Jinguuji.

Who sighs as she shakes her head. "No, I was also only told the bare minimum. In any case, let's not make this any worse. You may remain close by, but please do not interject prematurely. Allow me to defuse any arguments, to avoid needless friction."

"That is a welcome gesture, Sgt," Mion gives a small corporate smile as she relents a faint bow, Shion soon follows. "We will, however, act as we deem fit if the situation escalates," she notes in sobriety as she raises back. "Do not worry, we shall remain out of sight during the training drills."

They nod to each other, reaching some form of understanding despite a few differing opinions that both sides understood were best left unsaid. While the cousins return to a vantage point, vanishing from the view of most present in the sim room, the Instructor returns to her post and checks the machines are at the ready. Once all boxes return a green light to her, she walks away from it, towards the soldier that was once more trying to make the headband not clash with the headgear.

"So Shirogane," she begins, giving him a once over, "it looks like you did not cut your hair."

"I had more pressing matters last night, to be honest, ma'am," he shrugs, giving a nod. "Do not worry, my hair is no impediment to the suit."

"What if I have you all train with the helmet on?" She presses, taking a step forward.

"I can tie it up, right?" He asks, raising a brow.

A small chuckle escapes the Instructor's lips when imagining the soldier with a tiny ponytail, quickly subdued and masked as she coughs into a hand. "I suppose that's true. So, well, anything you feel like telling me?"

Once more, he gives a battered smile, shoulders narrowing upon his figure, hands hugging the elbows as he leans on the rails. "I cannot disclose anything, ma'am. *Vice Commander's* orders, you see. But don't worry," he then returns a nod, face regaining its neutrality, "I believe the 2nd Lts do not hold any bad intentions. We could hold brief but simple conversations as I ate breakfast, I think I'm on good hands."

She heaves a short yet deep sigh, toying with her hair. "I see. I won't pry any further, but remember that my ear is open whenever you need it." He nods back, she smiles. "On a different note, do you still plan to continue piloting as you did last night?"

"Not all the time, but I do want to polish my skill further as I said before."

"Hmm, is that so. Please be tactful about it, there's no need to go overboard against your squadmates," she holds his gaze, he straightens up and returns another nod.

So she sheathes the scythe, looking elsewhere for a moment. " *After all, I don't want Hayase to start brewing a rivalry with you before you graduate. To think their trainings are stumped by new patterns, that seem to resemble Shirogane's. After Yuuko pushed me off the mock*

*battle, now there's these moves you need to polish, that are too similar to the logs Hayase and Munakata showed me this morning. Just what is going on?* "

Her lips twist in, she looks back at the soldier, who is again fiddling with his headgear. "By the way Shirogane, these new movements of yours are tied to-"

"My special missions, yes," he replies immediately, shrugging his lips as a strand gets caught and pulled. "If there are any issues, please do take them to *XO Kouzuki* ."

She nods, walking back to her seat, pinching her nose. " *Yuuko, what on Earth are you planning? To use Shirogane as a base for new tactics, and then have the Valkyries try and replicate his patterns? I admit he's got real talent, but still, he's a novice. And now of all times as well, why would you be on board with your protegee showing off in this manner?* "

A slow, delayed shiver runs down her spine at the possible burdens the still complaining soldier could be facing, and her gaze drops as she realizes he is still adamantly, and too stubbornly, refusing to address the scientist by name as he always had done before.

Before she can organize the currents of thought, however, a set of footsteps marches towards her position. The Instructor readjusts her headset before turning around, seeing the five cadets stand in attention, hands at the seams, chin firmly pointing upwards.

"Instructor, Squad 207 is ready to begin the training," Sakaki informs, trying not to veer her gaze towards the one that is still fumbling with his hair.

"Good to hear. Shirogane, get in line," she calls out, looking back.

"I'm on it. Come on, you little piece of-" an eye closes, his tongue regresses, a few hairs got stuck as he pulls his fringe outwards, finally setting the headband in place. He nods back, rubbing his

forehead as he goes to the line, poker face in place and avoiding his comrades' eyes.

"Ahem… Well, let us proceed to the briefing," walking in front of them, pushing her chest, her scythe out, her eyes remain on theirs for a moment as she paces. "We will once more attempt the mission that has you stumped, in two teams of three. I hope that with Shirogane's showing yesterday you all gained a glimpse of how to pilot properly again," she smirks, venom drips.

The five of them feel an abyss spawn in their gut, while the soldier returns the harsh gaze the Reaper was forwarding.

"Before the morning drills are over, however, you also will briefly spar against each other," their features tighten slightly upon the small smirk, the glint of the scythe in her eyes. "Now, I know much has happened lately, so you may have some time to debate strategies and arrange your own formations this time," she states with a nod, half to test their own progress in finding the faults in their methods, half to see how they treat the soldier now. They give the customary answer and she steps back to her small post, keeping an eye watching over the pigeons.

"Sigh… I hope we can clear the map this time," Yoroi whispers, hands clutching an invisible cross.

"We just need to react faster," Ayamine affirms with a nod. "Let's not push our luck this time."

"I do have an idea this time around to handle the mission," Sakaki says, finger upwards once more. "But first, well…" all five of them look towards the soldier, who raises a brow at first then smiles.

"Hey there, long time no see," he says, raising a hand in salutation.

"Is everything… alright, Shirogane-kun?" She asks, trying to keep her features composed, tightness still imprinted in the edges.

"More or less, yeah. Don't worry, I'm not injured and thankfully no repercussions fell on my head yet."

"… Yet?" Ayamine asks, brows almost colliding.

"You know, never can be too careful," he shrugs, chuckling lightly. "So, back to the mission, what do you guys have in mind?"

"First, could you enlighten us regarding how did you even beat it all on your own, perhaps?" Mitsurugi inquires, unnecessary banners to war in her gaze, unrequired edge to her slow words.

"You just gotta let it rip," he answers, nodding once.

"What?" Sakaki asks, and along the rest she simply tilts.

"Takeru, could you please be more specific? Certainly, there is a method to the madness," Mitsurugi requests, sighing.

The soldier gives a small smirk, causing a localized blizzard to assault their napes. "Picking up speed while running out time, going head to head, the warning comes up. You gotta fall down, meet ground to get back up again," spinning a finger, slightly rocking his head to a side, he tells in a tune. "And then spinning it out at the speed of sound, you gotta rip it off. So now the bet is on, and you become a bay of blades."

Mitsurugi tries, pointlessly, to picture the maneuver and inputs required. The only answer her mind can come up with is the number 404 and a frown. "What do- Why would- How does that even make any sense?"

He chuckles, scratching an ear. "You can check the control logs later, and ask me anything if you actually wanna try that out. I was simply practicing the improved version of the aerial charges I made during our little bout. Remember how I said they could get better?"

"Wait, is that what you were always aiming towards, Shirogane-san?" Tamase asks, and upon his nod her already gaping features extend until resembling a balloon.

"You're crazy, Monster-kun," Ayamine says with a smirk, lightly hitting his shoulder.

"You know, that might be right," he chuckles back, scratching his hair.

"And why, I wonder, would you choose to engage on such maneuvers after been granted leave from the medbay?" Mitsurugi inquires, staring straight into his eyes, trying to fish for answers, for hints.

He merely shrugs, avoiding her eyes like the sun's sudden glare. "I did my best since I was alone, that's all."

"Sigh… Shirogane-kun, please don't use those air jousting moves anymore. You could injure yourself greatly, after all," she notes as she stares, tapping her glasses.

"Don't worry, there won't be any more accidents going forward," he answers in complete sobriety, nodding firmly. Which takes them aback slightly, since only two of the cadets had seen such dead seriousness in him once before. During the CCSE, during the eye of the storm in rekindling.

"So, anyways!" Yoroi interjects, forcing a smile and the shine. "Those moves truly made the most out of the Fubuki. Do you think an aggressive stance works best for this mission, Takeru?" She asks, clearing the air, returning the talk to the mission, away from his business.

"Of course not," he sighs, shaking his head a bit, back to his neutral expression. "Simply keeping a steady pace while making the most out of the terrain should be enough, I think, even without resorting to

any crazy acrobatics. So long as we can all cover our blank spots, it should go fine."

"However," Mitsurugi cuts in, taking a step forward, "isn't the vanguard's duty to neuter the threats that appear as swiftly as possible? We are putting the mission at risk by not endowing in haste," she affirms, nodding as she folds her arms.

He smirks, raising a brow. "Yeah, and remember what happened to your clerics while we trained with the little sims when you overextended your frontline?"

"Wh- That was only one time!" She protests, lips shrugging. "Furthermore, that was only a single outcome in a modest simulation. There are plentiful arguments in favor of the vanguard advancing to scout possible enemy positions, it is in the best interest of the mission."

"Oh noes, it's almost as if the carelessness of the frontliners were directly tied to the safety of the squadron as a whole," he says, rolling his eyes.

"Quite the claim, coming from the most reckless pilot of the squad," she retaliates, undeserved pungency to her tongue.

"And why do you think I know that?" He asks, delving into her eyes, drilling a blizzard, the black fire of a dragon into the defiant azure. "You want me to tell you, in excruciating detail, what could happen when the ones at the frontline fuck it up? Oh right, I don't have to," he shrugs, chuckling dryly, "since you've been fucking things up on this mission already."

"Wh- You… How could you say such a thing to our fa-"

"Mitsurugi, stop it," Sakaki orders, tapping her glasses, holding the stalwart gaze that is left with no option but to wring her hands. "Shirogane-kun, while I do share your opinion, your words just now were unnecessary. We are all doing our best effort in the training."

"And do you think that's enough?"

"Huh?"

"Do you think 'your best' is gonna cut it when it's time for action and not words?" He asks, grimacing a bit, making them all suffer through the same cold hands he had before, Mitsurugi paling slightly. "Believe me, it won't. And sticking to ideas you know are useless is only going to get you and your comrades killed, that's why you should listen to your peers when they offer advice. A new set of eyes is never a bad thing, even if the contrast only enforces the ideas you already had."

"Well, that's true…" she looks down, clutching an elbow.

"Then, what do you suggest?" Mitsurugi asks, barely chained fire in her glare, lips shrugged. "Perhaps to have us employ the methodologies of… other armies?" She says, wincing as if smelling bodily decay.

He doesn't react, simply holding the fire at bay. "Simple, just try other stuff. Mitsurugi, you already tried holding down the line and that didn't work out. What other options do we have as a team? You're seriously telling me we can't do the wave while letting Tama and Mikoto snipe the shit out of the enemy?"

"… The wave?" Ayamine asks, squinting her eyes.

"Yeah, you know, coming in contact with the enemy, pulling back, then going forward again. Like the tide on the shore."

"I see, makes sense," Yoroi nods, grasping her chin, eyes set alight, "we simply need to float carefully and-"

"Yoroi, please cease your attempts at joking," Mitsurugi asks, shaking her head, heaving a sigh.

"Huh? But I'm not-"

"Read the mood, will you?" She imposes, a solar storm, undeserved slicing in her tone.

"Why don't you read the mood?" Ayamine counters, shrugging while clicking her lips.

"Why don't you try and participate in the conversation instead of talking through your teeth, Ayamine?" Mitsurugi asks, now aiming her full barrel at the still expressionless one.

"Because this is less a talk and more an interrogation you're making on Special-kun." She then smirks, rolling her eyes. "Don't monopolize him so badly, we could get the wrong idea."

"Wh- How can you-"

"Mitsurugi, Ayamine," Sakaki repines, adjusting her glasses, shaking her head, "stop going into tangents. Also, Ayamine is right. Let Shirogane-kun and Yoroi talk freely," she stares as stoically as a statue, Mitsurugi relents a nod along an apology.

"So, uh, about the point I was making…" Yoroi gazes at the rest, chin and posture aimed downward, almost as if requesting permission to speak.

"What did you wanna say, Mikoto?" He asks, giving a nod, a bright smile.

"Well, that the wording was very accurate," she says, voice and eyes gaining luster as if under direct sunlight. "You see, we can float carefully together until the enemy appears, until we meet a tide coming in. The vanguard opens a hole in the formation then retreats before being surrounded, going back to the shore. Then the supporters aid with missiles or other ranged options. Once the enemy lines are scattered, as the tide pulls away, the vanguard can once more advance with the space necessary to not be overwhelmed or finish off any stragglers," she finishes with a few nods, the others seeking their chins or hair to idle their hands while

pondering the plan. "I think this might work out, in all honesty. Though, I don't know if, uh, I can give such precise support as I am now…"

"Bullshit, your midrange is awesome, Mikoto," he says, winking. "So, yeah, we have other options. What do you guys wanna do?"

"Squad, opinions?" Sakaki asks, looking at the rest.

"I don't mind trying out Takeru's suggestion," Yoroi nods, folding her arms.

"Same here," Ayamine also does.

"I, well, uh, I-I'll try my best to properly support you all with my sniping," Tamase says, or rather shouts, as the blizzard did not give her feet or nape any respite.

The soldier sighs slowly at the shaky second of doubt in the sniper's reply. " *Still not committing to the discussion, not wanting to take sides and make the argument worse. It is like you Miki, to simply offer support without giving your input. Guess that's another thing to look out for."*

"Sigh… I suppose, we could try and employ this tactic," Mitsurugi relents a nod, the same constricting shock claiming her stomach as it had done when barely woken up after the encounter with the chasers.

"Then, it's decided," Sakaki nods, tapping her glasses as relaxation comes to her breathing, her abdomen. "Now, about the teams. One will be with me, Mitsurugi, and Tamase. Two will consist of Yoroi, Ayamine, and Shirogane-kun."

"Sakaki, as the second-in-command, shouldn't I lead the other team?" Mitsurugi asks, raising a brow, stealing a brief glance at the soldier.

"After all the arguments you've gotten into, it's not wise," she immediately fires off, Mitsurugi's brows twitch but her lips fold in. "Furthermore, only this formation ensures we have equal numbers in each position. You and Ayamine will work as the vanguard, me and Yoroi will provide cover, while Tamase and Shirogane-kun take care of the sniping. Any objections?" The rest shake their heads, Mitsurugi groans briefly before relenting a nod. "Well, let's inform the Instructor. This time we're clearing this mission, you hear me?!"

"Roger!"

Once announcing their formation and positions, the first three go their way towards the sims. Mitsurugi not making eye contact with the soldier, steps long and strong, straight as an arrow to avoid any disquiet to disturb her training. Tamase starts sending looks from one to the other until he smiles and gives a thumbs up, easing the girl's concerns ever so slightly.

"I hope this can turn out well," Sakaki relents a weary sigh.

"Don't worry, Chizuru-san," Yoroi encourages, despite the hold she enforces on her elbow. "Stressing yourself out will only decrease your performance, after all."

"Sigh… I guess."

"Don't sweat it, for real," he nods, arms folding. "Try giving out the orders one sec faster, and don't get married to the plan."

"What Special-kun said. One breath faster, in both moves and words," Ayamine suggests with a nod. She then shrugs slowly, smirking. "Also, just move backwards and force Mitsurugi to retreat if she gets too bitchy."

Gaze sharpens, she readjusts her glasses. "Ayamine, stop it, really. Shirogane-kun, the same for you. I know… No, I don't know what may have happened, but please don't force any altercations."

"I won't. But we can't let this mission get the better of us," he states, looking up, at nowhere, at the barren emptiness. "I figured being brutally honest would work out, even if only to ignite your spirit."

"… I know," she relents, tapping her glasses. "I know these tactics are not the limits of our possibilities. Just please be more tactful. Not only for Mitsurugi, but also Tamase."

"Yeah, I know. Best of luck in there," he smiles, thumbs up again. She smiles back, waving a hand as she walks to the sims.

"Yeah, go out there and do your worst, Cute Eyebrows," Ayamine deadpans, leaning on his shoulder.

Twin vipers spawn from hair strands, bloody murder oozes from the vicious glare she sends back. "What was that?"

"Don't be abrasive, Squad Leader," She asks, hiding behind the soldier. Sakaki grumbles and sheathes the steam while he chuckles dryly.

"Hm? Why are you growing upset, Chizuru-san? Sure, they are a bit large, but I do agree your eyebrows do look rather cute," Yoroi nods and beams back, unaware, tilting her head and raising a brow when the squad leader becomes a scarecrow made out of tomatoes. "Chizuru-san?"

"I-I won't forget this teasing, you know! You three better watch your back during the mock battles," stomping away to the sims, she leaves a slight veil of steam behind.

"Nice one, Yoroi," Ayamine smiles, making and OK with a hand.

"Sigh… I don't think she's gonna recover from the emotional damage you inflicted right now, Mikoto," he nods and sighs.

"Huh? But I only complimented her a bit," she says, arms folding as her brows cross. Taking a hesitant step closer, dragging her feet, her

eyes cannot meet his. "So, uh, do you really think our efforts thus far aren't enough, Takeru?"

Taking a second to inhale, he slowly nods back. "Yeah. Don't get me wrong, you're all crazy good. But these small mistakes could cost you your lives on the field. So sticking to the same plan over and over is not gonna let you improve, I think."

"I agree. No two battlefields are equal, and things won't play out always in the same exact manner in real life," Ayamine notes with a nod. "It's kind of counterproductive, when you think about it. Having preset missions doesn't really prepare us well for the randomness of battle."

"Yeah, it… Hm?" Both of his brows slightly lower, a hand covers his mouth. "A way to mend the missions… with a randomizer…"

"Takeru? What are you talking about?"

"Oh, nothing, just lost in thought. Anyways, yeah, trying to adapt on the fly is, sadly, what little we can try and do at times."

Their talk is cut short as the training begins on the monitors, volleys and missiles rolling out moments later. Despite the change in strategy, the trio under pressure was still meeting some difficulty. Tamase misses a few shots, it only enhances the pit that in her throat had made nest. Then, that causes Mitsurugi to try and make up for it by advancing out of tempo, undoing the synchrony she had built with Sakaki. It takes them a moment to regroup, Sakaki pulling out of the enemy's range and forcing Mitsurugi to follow despite quite the blazing protests. To say purple fire is engulfing one of the sims would be a disservice to the frustration, equally as large as the shallowness which does not surrender its grip on Tamase's breathing.

"Well, fuck. They're still lacking coordination," he says, low.

"Mitsurugi's not retreating fast enough, she knows the Leader can't match her charges," Ayamine notes, hand on her chin. "If Tamase weren't there, they'd be both toast at the moment," she affirms as a hostile, that was aiming at Sakaki's blank spot, is neutralized from afar.

"Yeah, I really don't know what we'd do without Miki-san sometimes. So, uh, Takeru," Yoroi hesitates a gaze his way, he raises a brow in acknowledgment, "how were you these days? Are you truly fine?"

"Yeah, thanks for asking," he nods, giving a small smile.

"Really? There is some redness to your eyes, and you do sound a bit, um, more drained than usual," she comments, then looks back to the monitors. "You're not forcing yourself right now?"

"No, it's just… I had to be informed of some stuff yesterday late at night, is all," he closes an eye while scratching his head. "What about you guys? Have things been, you know, messier since the battle?"

"Oh, yeah. Some jerks are giving us some nasty glares in the hallways," Ayamine notes, lips shrugging tight like a brunt brush of dark ink as she sends a look around, finding some vipers staring venom at them. "Not to mention, Mitsurugi has been a bitch since the end of the mock battle."

"Wait, really?" He asks, cold cloaking his neck. "I thought she was only upset at me."

"No, her mood took a nosedive since we saw your Gekishin enter the hangar. Mitsurugi did try to keep it peaceful, but I can't stand it anyways," she admits, kicking the rails. "She even went and blamed Yoroi for how two idiots started talking shit to us."

"C-Come on, Kei-san," she again clutches, chokes an invisible cross, finding no respite her gaze cascades down, "I wasn't looking where I was walking."

"Doesn't excuse how badly they reacted, nor her words towards you."

"So, uh," he starts swallowing a sigh, "I guess I owe you guys an apology," the soldier bows down, remaining in position. "Sorry, guys. If you rather keep your distance from me to avoid rumors, I'll walk to the other end of the room."

"… Did Mitsurugi talk some shit into you or something?" Ayamine asks, seethes as she takes a step forward, causing equal ballooning shock to come to both his and Yoroi's complexion.

"What? No, I'm merely trying to be considerate. I fucked up, there's no denying that. And it isn't fair for you guys to also be put in the same bag as me. So, uh, well, I won't hold any grudges if, say, you'd like to screen me off," he says, holding their gazes.

One of Ayamine's brows twitches, her fist start to coil. "We triumph and fail as a unit, don't we?"

"Well, yes, but-"

"And anyways, you weren't the only one harassed by the guards," she says, again lightly hitting the rails. "Tamase was also targeted, and their 'apology' felt more forced than your manners now, Special-kun."

He narrows his eyes a bit, arms folding. "I am trying, you know."

"Yeah, I can tell you're being truthful," she smiles back, resting both elbows on the railing, "unlike the guard trio. And anyways, I've seen how you are and how they acted. More than anything, I've been target practice for those air jousting moves. You didn't actually try to harm anyone, right?"

"… No, I merely… lost my cool, is all. Doesn't excuse me of anything."

"But then, in the end, there was no foul committed, right?" Yoroi asks, edging closer. "You merely failed your maneuver, but neither of you tried to harm the other. That's the end of it, right?"

"If only that halted the rumors, though," he takes a quick scan around the room and sighs at the glares that remind him of what within the Black Lilith lurks, the other two mimic the reaction.

"Anyways," Ayamine says, arms folding, "I can get why Mitsurugi acts as she does, with her possible… you know, ties and everything. But don't let her guilt trip you, Shirogane. We're with you, after all you haven't been nothing except a great help for us since you arrived. We clear?"

"… Thanks, Kei. Really."

"It's cool… but it's a bit too soon for us to be on a first-name basis," she says, dramatically wrapping her arms around her waist, looking away.

"What?"

"I think we'll need to advance our relationship further before that, you know."

"Wait, Kei-san, what are you saying?"

"If you wish to call upon my name, an offering in yakisoba sandwiches is required," she affirms, with unrequired and extravagant solemnity, while extending a hand as if demanding payment.

"Pfft… Never change, Ayamine," he nods, a relaxed smile as he sighs the tension out of his posture. "I'll see what I can do about the offering later, though."

"Very well. So has been written, thus so shall be done," she says, before reverting to the usual calm expression. "But really, nice to see

you're alright. I just hope Mitsurugi doesn't cause you any grief."

"Yeah, Meiya-san has been on edge yesterday and today as well," Yoroi nods, sighing, everything in her collapsing. "Even during breakfast she was so short and cold, not even the news of a speech from Her Highness cheered her up."

"Yeah, she had her sword on her wrist all the time today," Ayamine nods in agreement, shrugging. "Didn't think she'd be like this again."

"Again? You mean, she used to be, well, rather sharp before?" He asks, raising a brow, recalling a certain argument caused by his Game Guy.

They all remain silent for a moment, watching as an aggressor gets sniped, the one standing behind getting rammed by a shield and finished with a crescent slash. The tide turns, the trio retreats to safety, covering fire blasts holes amidst the element of AI Fubukis, stretched further by the resolute charges of Mitsurugi, backed by the shielding arrow rain Sakaki bestows.

"Meiya-san used to be very cold before," Yoroi begins, slowly. "It was clear she didn't like being in the UN, and she argued with Chizuru-san much in those days."

"Even more than me, at one point," Ayamine admits with a wry smile. "She always had good advice and one-liners to give though, despite how sometimes it really didn't apply for the moment. Being so honest and forward was something I welcomed back then, even if at times she didn't listen. Now, though," she looks back at the monitor, expression falling apart like the mangled AI Fubukis to the suppression fire, "I'd like her to, you know, not be one hundred percent set on her resolve. It's not like I enjoy arguing with her, but I can't help it."

"And honestly, I don't know what could we do," Yoroi admits, resting her chin and weight upon the railing. "I tried to clear the air at the PX with a light joke like I did before, but she cut me off so suddenly. This

situation with the guards can't be the only thing that has her this upset, however," she affirms, gripping the steel.

"I agree," he says, licking over his lips, swallowing another sigh. "But it's related, I bet."

"You got any hints, Special-kun?"

"Remember when we argued after the emergency call, before the CCSE? I think that little issue is still open."

"… Can we do anything to help?" Yoroi asks, staring.

"I doubt it. We tried talking things out during the CCSE but," he looks down, features growing tense, grim, compacted by unseen walls, "I suppose the fiasco in the mock battle reignited those doubts."

"So you saving her life from the chasers means shit to her?" Ayamine asks, eyes ready to slay.

He shakes his head, watching as the last enemy is blown to bits in an almost double knockout. "Please remember who Meiya is, and who is she tied to," the other two pale, struck down to meager charcoal by the shock. "In the end, this is something she alone can settle. I've already tried my best to fit in, and if she doesn't think me worth her trust… then it's on her."

"But can't you try to, I don't know, clear things up as much as you can?" Yoroi asks, again staring, again subjected to the cold cloak, the thought of returning to the first days of basic.

"I can't explain everything, and if her mind is set there is no changing it. That's how Meiya is," he then sighs, wincing as he lightly slumps over the rails, "for better and worse. Anyways," he inhales sharply, vanishing the lines from his face, "you think we can clear the mission?"

"Don't worry, I won't push my luck this time," Ayamine affirms, returning one slow and steady nod.

"I don't know how good I'll match Kei-san's moves, but if we stick together I believe I can cover you both decently enough," Yoroi affirms, returning a smile.

"Good enough. You two just do your thing, I'll try and snipe anyone that might target your flanks. But do tell me if you wanna change the flow as we fight, okay?" He asks, looking at Ayamine, who returns a confident and shiny smile with a thumbs up.

The sim pods cease their rumbling, their doors open. As the team walk down to the floor, the Instructor gives them a smirk while silently waiting for the six to get in line once again. Despite the favorable result, Sakaki and Mitsurugi bear serious expressions, the edges of Tamase's lips once more retract fully behind her teeth.

"Good work, you three," Jinguuji starts, a few nods to them. "While you took a few risks mid-battle, you managed to clear the level with only one casualty. Not another record breaking performance, but still, good job to finally clear one mission after three days," she presses, unblinking stare upon the pigeons.

"Thank you, ma'am!" All three reply from their stomach.

"Now then. Yoroi, Ayamine, Shirogane, to the sims. Let's see if you can measure up to the hotshot's performance of last night," she teases, curling a hair as she chuckles.

Marching to the sims, the soldier gives them a nod and a smile. Both Yoroi and Ayamine return it, spikes and thorns leaving their breathing alone, their composure restored and ready for the concert.

---

*Some moments later.*

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"Well, well, well," Jinguuji starts, her smirk not entirely false in this occasion, "color me surprised, you actually beat the other three's time. Didn't match the previous record, but still, a wonderful performance. Looks like those abs really are quite the motivator, hmm?" She teases, finger on her chin, striking the tomato scarecrows with further bolts. Except Mitsurugi, whose eyes seek his for a moment, lightly nibbling at her bottom lip.

"Really, Instructor?" He asks, eyes and brows narrowing.

"I'm not joking, though. You saw their performance yesterday, and look how better they piloted today. Coincidence? I think not. Whether it was due to you showing off or what, I expect this level of aptitude from your drills going forward, squad."

"Yes, ma'am!"

"Good. So, since we're done with this mission, let's proceed to the next drill. I was hoping to hold more mock battles, but Shirogane's Gekishin is still on maintenance so we'll make do with the sims for the time being. We'll start with one-on-one fights, Shirogane, Mitsurugi, to the pods."

"Huh?!" Sakaki gapes, clearing her throat, trying to shut off the gate. "Instructor, ma'am, I do not think it wise to pit 02 and 06, considering recent events."

"What are you implying, Sakaki?" Mitsurugi asks, leveling a stare in undeserved pungency, a flurry of thorns.

"Do we really need to have you two face each other now?" She retorts, tapping her glasses and undaunted in front of the gale of venom.

"Regardless, this is the arrangement I decided on," Jinguuji states, not lifting her eyes from the two of them until they nod back. "You are training to be soldiers, I am certain behaving properly is nothing but the minimal standard to you. Now, to the pods!" She orders, arms

folding, nodding back as the two cadets salute and go their way without making eye contact with each other.

"Um… Instructor?" Tamase hesitates to speak, words clogging on her throat. "I do not intend to oppose your orders, however, is it truly a good idea to have Mitsurugi-san fight against Shirogane-san? There are people watching, after all."

"If they cannot share training drills, then there is an issue I should address personally with both of them. Unless, you'd like to enlighten me on that subject?" She stares, unblinking.

Tamase shrinks further as she hastily shakes her head and steps back, the rest seek and peek at the other two, sharing gazes and sighs at the lack of interaction between the soldier and the samurai.

So the Instructor sighs with her nose, leaving a hand on her forehead as she sits down in her post. " *Really, I do agree with you all. Me reprimanding either of them will not go unnoticed. What are you thinking, Yuuko? Why call me for this direct order without any further details?"*

She then starts the checks, noticing the downcast, almost ashen expression both pigeons had, fallen to the ground and breaking a wing.

" *Testing both of them, perhaps? Mitsurugi's loyalty and Shirogane's composure? What in the Heavens is causing you to send such pressure to your protegee? Sigh… Please you two, don't start anything here."* She pleads, rubbing her temple as a void spreads on her stomach.

"Alright… All green. Cadets, are you both at the ready?" Both return an affirmation, she nods and restores the cloak, the empty mask of the Reaper to her features. "Copy that. The exercise will begin shortly, remain in standby."

**[Meiya]**

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A mirror to days past, a perfect reflection of our first duels. When I could only hold him off, when there was no hope of even landing a single hit.

Crouching suddenly, a shell shaves paint off my Fubuki's head visor. Exploding on a building behind me, glass and debris begins to fall. The follow-up finds my shadow, thickets of darkest smoke trailing my steps. Halting once I take a turn, gyrating my thrusters, the boost sends me to meet his aggro. All I accomplish is deplete our ammo reserves further.

… He hasn't said a thing since we started, and we have been avoiding the other's assault for quite the time already. Normally, Takeru wouldn't hesitate to reach out through the common channel, either to curse or chain odd jokes. Now, however, all that's within sight is a silent specter, the warning of an enemy engaging in attempts to shoot me down. My shield has received quite the shower, and while I could try and force a CQC clash once more-

**BEEP!**

Huh? Where is he?! The dot shows the distance is lowering, yet I cannot locate him in the nearby area. Furthermore, the dot would indicate he's-

A sharp thrust of my controls, blurriness on my sight.

It's followed by a loud crash, dust and pieces of debris flying about from a building that sinks to the depths.

**BEEP!**

Cutting through the violence, a Fubuki lunges forth. Sparks come out from my shield, its slash did not trigger the reactive armor. A push on the pedals, a frontal charge to detonate the shield onto the frame

finds me meeting the air. Gliding away with a backboost, he takes aim. My attack shifts into defense, once more punished, once more pushed backwards by his predictions.

An emergency alarm rings out, he detonated a 120mm shell onto my shield, effectively rendering it useless. Inhaling sharply, I return the fire, veering my aim as he begins to perform Kulbit after Kulbit, treating the ruins as a playground. A flicker, my pylon activates. A lunge, I throw my shield to my current blank spot. A step back, half turning my Fubuki's body, I slice half a moon towards the shadow which desired to pounce upon my back.

His rifle struck, rendered useless after taking the brunt of the attack, Takeru doesn't retreat as I had thought he'd do. Upon my step back, a crouch and a dash follow, a shrouded shape soars from below, the glint of a knife aims at my cockpit. Feeling a void on my neck as my feet instinctively stomp the pedals, another alarm reaches me. His follow up attack struck my own rifle away.

Sparks fly off, a shock courses through me as our blades meet now that we are both void of rifles. And yet, it is once again the same as our first fight, my swings barely able to halt his, the erratic crouches and jumps and bounces off the buildings. It makes my head hurt, to envision the environment around me, to try and predict it all, only to simply force another draw and remain on the defensive to avoid giving away an opening. However, I am now certain of it, this is the Mugen Kidou. The patterns, the stance, it is so similar to how my bout with Tsukuyomi was.

… Does it mean you're holding back as well? Or on the other hand, you only have surface knowledge of the style?

If you're one of us… Why? Why refuse my helping hand, my handshake of fellowship? Understandable it is you could be subjected to shame, even more so in my person, yet your attitude is the opposite of that. If this was truly an accident, why refuse to extend some sympathy to a fellow?

… Unless, of course, Tsukuyomi and Daizaburou-sifu were correct in their assessment. If you truly are a spy, *if you're a hazard to my people…*

A small window of respite, our Fubukis stand in front of each other, blades at the ready. Noticing his jump units are about to ignite, perhaps to once more force a chase, I gulp and smack the button to open the common channel.

"Ahem… You're certainly a fierce adversary, Takeru. I cannot believe you could still improve further."

…

Why? Why are you keeping quiet? I've believed in you, I've offered you my aid… If you refuse me, what does that say about you?

"Ayamine was right, however," I continue, inhaling slowly, heating my own rockets and tone. "Being the recipient of your aerial charges is truly a one of a kind experience. Was this the movement which caused your Gekishin to crash, I suppose?"

"… What do you want to ask, *Mitsurugi ?*"

Ugh… And that as well, why are you not using my name as we agreed? Are you saying… you're taking back our accord? Someone trained in the Mugen Kidou, bequeathed with one of our blades, why would you turn your back to us? That is… nothing but treason on the trust we had built between us, isn't it?

His jump units flare to life, mine imitate in chase. Seeking each other, sharply turning on the corners, dancing and circling above the ruins. Perfect parries, poignant sidesteps, shallow breaths and sighs, the battle continues.

"You truly won't reconsider extending an apology to 1st Lt Tsukuyomi, Takeru?"

"… No, I don't think it's wise for me to get close to them."

"Sigh… Mion and Shion are acting as your guardians, surely you could at least have them deliver a note."

" *Mitsurugi,* we've gone over this at morning," he says, sighing short yet heavy, tone lowering, "this is a personal topic for me so please let it rest."

"Takeru, within the warrior there is no need for masks. Withholding a minimal gesture shan't grant you no boons. Furthermore, I do find it odd. You always desired to fit in, yet now your actions are counter to that objective. Why would that be, I wonder?"

"… Could say the same about you."

"Huh?"

My actions halt, allowing his Fubuki to take the high ground of a building. Under the shadow projected by the virtual machine, I stand. He simply remains there, a sentry watching over the extension of ruin.

"Meiya, if within the warrior there is no need for masks, if no hesitation is shown upon conflict…" he slowly says, voice dry. Wait, how does he know the last sentence of the code? "Can you be level with me about what you're playing at?"

"Forgive me but I haven't the faintest of what you speak."

"Heh, for real? Remember when we requested the Instructor permission for Tama to be the leader for a day?"

"… Yes, what of it?"

"Well, you reacted a bit oddly to me mentioning I started to regain some old memories. And despite how you were after our first flying run, you immediately started being welcoming towards me again."

"I was… only doing what a fellow should. I already admitted my frustrations got the better of me that day."

"And yet, here we are again," we both groan on our end, "with you insisting I'm in the wrong. Almost as if the same reasons that made you falter to emotion were kicking in again."

"That's… I would not be pressing to this extent if you had deigned yourself to behave as a proper warrior should!"

"Again, I am a guardian."

"Then cease to employ the style you were taught! If you cannot find some meager fellowship to return an apology, you do not deserve to use the Mugen Kidou!"

A blade raises, my thrusters send me into a building, into a Kulbit, to raise and meet his aggro. Slash to slash, glass to the skies, a cyclone is born in midair, amidst the violence.

I thought you were my fellow, you truly do not comprehend how much your arrival meant for me.

Cracks enlarge in the roads, in between us, as he takes out a knife to throw at me. The manipulators damaged, my stance falters, his counter almost tumbles me down.

A fellow I could train with, someone who could share my ideas, my style. Despite your ruthless choice under the pouring rain, you seemed honest. The refusal to accept my aid, to stand composed amidst the setbacks, it was admirable. Truly, a flower finally blooming within the wasteland just as the trees on the road did last spring.

And yet… And yet, here you are. Spouting such vile wording, refusing my aid, rejecting our teachings.

It hurts, the grip enforced onto my controls, the crushing slam of my feet onto the pedals. It hurts, how my back ingrains onto the seat as

the boost starts, as the shock of my repeated slashes threatens with making me falter.

And yet, even now, even employing the same patterns that allowed me to best Tsukuyomi, there is no opening to pierce. Perfect contention, an iron wall undisturbed by petty invaders. Such skill you possess and you'd turn your back to us? After letting out tears for whoever bestowed you the blade?

Unless it was all a lie.

Unless you are a spy.

*Unless you've chosen to become an enemy of the Empire.*

"… I believed you to be better than this, Takeru. Surely, you do not plan to continue this obstinacy?" I say, malcontented to the brim, feeling slight pain on my ears.

"Says the most stubborn woman I've ever met," he lightly says, as if in jest, while bouncing away as my current of attacks lost momentum.

"Cease your prattling! I will not stand by this. A mere apology, a meager gesture is all I would ask of you. You must have seen how Tamase was, how many glares were hewn onto our backside. Is the peace of the squadron trivial to you?" I raise and point my blade, both inner and outer, taking on my stance.

And he remains silent.

For quite a long moment.

Without even leaving his Fubuki in a proper fighting pose or anything.

"… What has caused this sudden silence, I wonder?"

"Sigh… You do know that even if I-"

"This is not about what some obstinate fools will do, this is about how *you* choose to handle this situation, Takeru. Most soldiers won't dare to remain in opposition if you do extend an apology, and it would do much for our morale as a team. Considering the cousins will be following you, this incident can be turned into a show of understanding between the IRG and the UN. As it stands, however, Tsukuyomi is the only one forced to bend the knee while you remain free of guilt."

"Taking responsibility is part of the job when you have a higher rank, you know? And anyways, if the IRG hadn't reached an agreement with the UN, then I wouldn't be here. You think 1st Lt Tsukuyomi or the General simply bowed down in front of a threat?"

"Well, no, I do not. However, why would you not extend a mere apology? Is such a gesture beneath your notice, perhaps?"

Inhaling slowly, I can hear the slow, heavy exhalation. The Fubuki's stance becomes undone gradually, as if he were letting go of the controls for some reason. "Can't we let this be? Just, you know, let me take the brunt of the unpleasantries?" He requests, broken and desolate as the ruin around us. "Keep your distance if you want, but let's not make this problem even bigger. I really can't approach the 1st Lt as things stand now. We can coexist even if we disagree, right? You won't… push me out again, right?"

"I… suppose I can comprehend the reticence to approach 1st Lt Tsukuyomi, however, you can write a letter that the cousins can deliver. If it comes down to it, I can tell the message in your stead. As someone who was trained in the art of the blade, who dominates the style almost as well as I, it is your obligation as a fellow. You are… one of us after all, right Takeru?"

"… So that's what's going on here, huh," he barely whispers, the coup d'grace to the already ravished composure.

"What?"

"They told you something about me, right? 1st Lt Tsukuyomi and the General."

"… Why do you assume so?"

"Why would you ask me if I'm one of you otherwise? I see… So you play for them."

Gulping, my mouth drying, a void against which even the sun's golden light cannot fight rends my insides. The coldness of his tone, the lack of emotion… It's a lie. Tell me it is so. *You're not doing this, stop it. Why must you oppose us, Takeru?*

"I am forsworn to the Empire, above all else. I fight to safeguard the future of my nation, my people. And… I was asked my opinion on you, and given a warning. You are Japanese, you should know what a fellowship is meant to represent. Why refuse my helping hand, Takeru?" I ask, unable to bind my knees, my tongue.

He grumbles for a moment, before a light impact comes through the speakers. "No matter how much you force it, a square won't fit in a triangle. You can try to squeeze it in, you can shave its edges, break it apart, but at that point it won't be a square anymore, right?"

"… How is asking an apology out of you synonymous with such an analogy?"

"Meiya, can we be honest with each other?" He asks, in complete sobriety, as stalwart as that night in the CCSE.

"I have been honest since the beginning, however," I retort, feeling my lips pluck. "And I have been asking the same of you, as well."

"So you won't dodge the questions?"

"… I assume you also will respond my inquiries then?"

"Sigh… What I can."

"Fine. What is it that you wish to ask?"

Inhaling again, his Fubuki… drops its sword. Engraves it into the ground, only to retrieve it shortly after. Holding it in a reverse grip, a knee bends yet the thrusters remain dormant for only a second. Trading blows, finding his new stance far harder to contain, my Fubuki can only retreat further upon his frame as those odd spins begin to chain upon themselves.

" *Mitsurugi,* " he starts, regaining focus, frozen, "you think I am something I'm not, and that's what making you act in this way. Maybe, just maybe, you could take a step back and think on how I've been all this time towards you since we met."

"… Pardon?"

Something you're not?

You're saying… their concerns were true, then?

No, no, focus! To think on how he has been all this time, he asked of me.

And, well, true it is Takeru has been nothing short of the textbook example of a good comrade. However, could he be trying to divert my concerns? To strike me down from the battle to end the conversation? To try and beguile me into taking his side?

Parrying the rising attack, almost falling to the follow up as he dashes through the street, back and forth, trying to break the dam. "Whatever do those words mean, Takeru? Are you insinuating there are two faces to the comrade I know?"

Halting my advance, pressing my advantage, eviscerating a building in earnest, once again we end up locked in a parry. "Just like the IRG, you're predisposed to asking me to be someone I'm not, assuming the worst out of my negative," he says, fuming a bit. "Is it

that hard… for you to see me for how I've been thus far with you, Meiya?"

"I do not believe an emotional judgment to be worth much. Within the warrior, there is no need for masks or hesitation. One's own veneer must remain sturdy as truth itself. If there is any falsehood to how I perceive you, kindly enlighten me on who you truly are."

"… You won't even give me the benefit of the doubt?" He asks, voice cracking, his onslaught losing impulse, allowing me to break free of the parry. And yet, he does not resume the offensive.

"Sigh… I am forsworn to the Empire. Anyone who might impair the standing of my nation is an enemy of mine, more so since I was selected to represent the Empire in the UN. And when it was time for actions and not words, you faltered and chose aggression. Thus, *I must request of you to stand back and revise your posture, Shirogane. If you do not cease this obstinacy, consequences shall follow."*

He groans for a moment, sounding as if exhaling through closed teeth. "That sounds like the words someone desperate would use. You shouldn't live or die by the sword, Meiya."

"Wh- Are you casting doubts on the value these words hold? You would remain in such defiant attitude despite how all of us have welcomed your return?"

"That's not it. I'm just-"

"If that is how you think, then allow me a final query." I breath in sharply, taking battle back to him, forcing him to go into contention for the first time. "Who are you?"

"… What? You know I am!"

"Do I now? You did say I thought you someone you're not," I say, low, as I jump upon his wavering form.

However, it only takes him a crouch and a roll to regain the advantage, searing my backside, causing me to flee, to spread more destruction over the ruins.

"If their warning was correct, then I cannot simply turn a blind eye. *I am a warrior first and foremost, and thus, should you choose to oppose me, there is little option left but to strike you down, Shirogane."*

A small beep, a notification from the Instructor. Nothing comes through the speakers, it was a warning. Next time, however, punishment may rain upon me. Of course, if she sides with you, if she covers a spy, I will be forced to report it as well. All because of you. Because you refuse to be a fellow.

"What is it? Once more growing silent? Should I take it as confirmation?

" *Sniff*… Hehe… Hehehe…"

"… Huh?"

Are my ears deceiving me? No, through the wailing cries of both blades, through the alarms which flash red and notify my halberd is on its last legs, a small, faint sound echoes. Was he crying just now?

"I really am an idiot," he chuckles, his swings grow in speed, indulging in more sidesteps, starting to pick up speed.

"What? Answer my query, please."

"I already knew it. That you weren't *her*, that you would **never** be *her* . But I had to hope for it, dammit. I had to be stupid," he tells, to himself perhaps, collapsing onto a minimal whisper.

"Who are you speaking of? Be clear, I do not comprehend what you're saying!" I ask, lowering my stance, meeting a slash before taking a step back.

Once more, we stand in front of the other. Lacerations apparent in our armors, both blades about to give in, and yet our stances do not dull.

Takeru takes in a sharp breath. "I knew you weren't *her*, but I still wanted to believe we could get along. Guess it's on me for being an idiot all this time," he says, dry, slow, almost vacant, absent.

"… Am I correct to assume this person is who bestowed you the blade?"

"Yes."

"And yet, despite what she taught you, you would still refuse my offer?"

"Yes, because you're nothing like *her* ."

"Wh- What has that to do with anything? Anyone in my position would react in the same way!"

"That's the thing, it's not the truth," he chuckles, low. "I was just being an idiot again, trusting in you."

"… Pardon? Are you suggesting… I am not worth your trust?"

"You did treat me like shit during basic, after all."

"I… I already apologized! And I am still extending my aid to you. You are the one refusing!" Why am I shouting? Why is my jaw paralyzed in place? Why am I seething to this extent?

Why won't you simply accept my aid?

"… You know, can I be level with you, *Mitsurugi* ? You're… really similar to the one who gave me the blade," he tells, relaxing into the habitual calm tone I know him for.

"Huh? I am?"

"Yeah. I… Sigh. I guess I've been treating you as I did with her, because I wanted to share with you the same I shared with her."

…

"E-Excuse me, what does that mean?"

"That I gave you benefits I shouldn't have, that I ignored actions I shouldn't have," he says, hardening, fuming. "Heh, Cpt Isumi was right, I chose to blindfold myself. It's clear you don't regret what happened in basic, that everything I've done means jack shit to you."

"All I am asking of you is an apology," I counter, hitting the controls, causing a small odd window to confirm the ejection of the cockpit from the machine, that I have to close in a hurry.

"And assuming I'm whatever the hell the guards told you I am. I'm not worth your trust, so there's no point in us talking anymore," he sighs, hollowed out. "Just ignore me from now on, okay?"

"Wait a moment! If you hold that woman so dearly… Why? I cannot understand you. Even if… you've forgiven my actions all too easily, that is something we can debate, work out somehow. Yet, if you still… cherish that person so much, surely, defusing these doubts would be in your best interest?"

And once more, he grows silent, close, closer, until our blades cross. If he's afraid, concerned, perhaps of whatever lies in his past, if he's no spy, why is he refusing the code?

"Takeru, if you hold her in such esteem, you should know the importance of the code, of a warrior's word."

"Stop. There's no point to it."

"Why?"

"… If that is how you already feel, it's too late."

"I cannot understand what you're getting at. I speak as I do due to my motives to take the sword. I fight to restore peace to this nation, to my people. Surely, she also would hoist these same wishes."

Galloping through open ruins, the sky is the sole witness of the sparks, of the wails of the joints, of the last flares from our jump units. And yet, he remains silent.

"What of you, Takeru? Is this contrarian attitude how you plan to aid others to rebuild the peace in this nation?"

"Wrong scale, honey."

"W-What? What did you just call me?"

"It's not the Empire what I'm trying to save."

"… Pardon?"

"It's something more small, more personal than that."

"And pray tell, what is this something? What could outweigh your own homeland, your duty to the UN as well?"

One final clash breaks both blades in half, forcing us both to retrace our steps, discard the remnant, take out a knife. Amidst the motions, he does not answer. Taking our stances, basking into the reddening numbers, on the fading response from the controls, I gulp and feel a cold shiver run throughout me whole.

And finally, he relents a sigh. "You could say… the blossom is trying to dream of the skies again, to fulfill that last promise I shared before light's out."

"… What kind of promise?" And how could that be an impediment for him to mend his mistake and extend an apology?

"Someone out there is waiting. And I don't plan to let any of them down."

"… May I ask who is this someone?" Someone he left in America? A friend? A… lover?

"It doesn't concern you."

"Oh, yes, it does. This business affects the squad as a whole, Takeru. If you're being truthful then, why refuse? If those memories are a roadblock, rid yourself of them. Whoever that woman was, she is not worth sacrificing your future!"

"Shut it."

"Then, why? Why choose what is no more over what is now in front of you?"

And then, silence blooms.

Aware of my breathing, of the small threads of air filtering through my nose, of the contraction and relaxation of my abdomen, I can only wait.

Wait as the silence extends, anticipation takes hold and strains my eyes, lips, the back of my head shivering.

Until he lets out a strong yet short sigh.

"… Because even if alone I stand in this hill, with loneliness as my mistress," as if crashing upon an iceberg is the shock which envelopes me as his voice turns hoarse, crude and adusted, blazing, "I will never yield to the paralysis of dread."

Blazing as his jump units, causing his Fubuki to blitz towards me, a true blizzard of aggression. A true cyclone against which there is no defense, odd patterns he hadn't yet employed disturb my stance.

"I won't let a world branded in red to come to be again! Because I have a goal, a hand to reach out for!"

As I falter to catch my breath, a shadow is cast up above. Once again, the arc in defiance, the conquest of the skyline as both thrusters exert themselves with what faint fire they yet retain.

"Because I will! Never ever! Forget *you* !"

"W-Wait, Takeru. Regain your poise, I am- Ugh!"

A beeping, I slam the pedals. A shockwave sends my Fubuki spinning towards a hill of rubble, its right hand is now disabled. Yet, the mirage in the radar, all around me does not stop its stride.

"Stars above, watch over me," he fumes, far more searing than his aggro, faster than his jumps, "grant me the strength to press through this freezing night!"

Only able to catch glimpses of the frame, only for it to jump above me. Another beep as I rush forward to avoid the attack, my pylon's signal is lost.

"Takeru, I apologize if my words insulted-"

"You woke up the dragon," he spits out, his shadow cloaking over me in a full blackout, obstructing the sun. "Now deal with it!"

A roll, a tackle, knives that meet, rubble and dust spreads away from us like wildfire. A gallant hop backwards he does upon my pressure, to then return to violence and deliver a kick upon my offense.

"Takeru, regain your senses!"

"I'm fully aware of what's going on, of the ripples I gotta halt."

"What are you even saying? Do you wish to call further attention to yourself?!"

"Heh, being a magnet is all I am good for, anyways."

"Huh? What are- Ugh!"

Red numbers in my only arm available, it doesn't stop me from charging ahead. For my knife to lower upon his Fubuki as a vampire would in thirst, even if it is a crude movement. Inches separate the tip from his visor as his extra hand binds my arm, so I trigger my jump units to tumble him down before he can thrust his own knife into me.

Yet, for some reason, I find my Fubuki is already on the air… As he had done to Ayamine, his heels slip on purpose, his grappling hold over me sends my boost into a building as his Fubuki collapses.

Red is all I see in my Fubuki, standing in a herculean effort. Slowly he also raises, jump units already heating up, it seems.

"Is this the real you, Takeru? Are you… my enemy?"

"Sometimes, words simply run out," he says, still adusted yet slow. Frozen, cracks in the imposing iceberg that stands ahead. "You already decided what I am to your eyes. Now, all that's left is to stem the bleeding."

"I've… I only wish for you to-"

"Even if there is no road to follow, I shall cleave one open with my own hands," he declares, once again charging at me, "just like the moonlight that pierces the clouded skies!"

… W-What? Wait, but those words… those are the words of the poem Tsukuyomi taught me. A poem no spy should know. Why do you know it? No, if he does then it means Takeru isn't-

"Ugh! *Cough!"*

Numbness assails me, claims ownership of my senses for a moment. The sim turns off, my unit was knocked out. Everything slowly ceases to shake, except my hands, except the heartbeats that scratch, and slash, and pike, and rake my insides.

In that moment of hesitation, he stroke a certain hit to my cockpit, I assume. Yet, did I misheard it? Those words, the poem… only a fellow would know such words. I rather not believe something grim happened to one of us to have the intel pried out of them, yet I believe if such were the case Takeru wouldn't be allowed to roam freely, much less near me.

No! Think, myself, think! He uttered no mere words, he employed our poem! A poem the Tsukuyomi Houses teaches with. Something that's only told to the select few who are handpicked to officially learn the Mugen Kidou.

So then… the gesture to have the cousins guard him, how Tsukuyomi chose to seek him first in the mock battle, the good faith she gave him when she caught us arguing about the Minaru Kamui, the admonishment that later befell me…

… By the Heavens, what have I done?

" *Sniff*…" Huh? Something… is the common channel still open? Are those… stifled cries? Is he- "Heh… Sorry Yohime-san, I can't… I just can't anymore," he whispers, barely audible through some more sniffling and short choking.

A beeping halts my words, something zooms into view. "The exercise has finished," the Instructor tells, dry and low, a minute frown hewn into her features. "Cadets, you may disembark," she says, cutting off the connection.

"… Takeru, can you hear me?" I tap the common channel, yet my simulator is completely deactivated. No amount of pressing the button causes a reaction as all the lights slowly start to turn off. Cursed be the Instructor! Now of all times?!

Fumbling about, heart still pounding, mouth gaping to allow me to breath, I cannot undo the bindings fast enough, fingers knotting over themselves at times. Skipping the ladder, almost losing balance, I throw myself out of the unit.

"Takeru!" I rush after him, after the slouched shape that drags itself through the tiles. "Those words… that name…. Where did you heard the poem?"

And he then looks back at me.

An empty mask which lacks any and all emotions.

A line are his lips, eyelids almost turning his sight into a new moon.

"I don't know what you're talking about, *Mitsurugi* ."

"Please… You must know what I speak of. And you can use my name, Takeru."

"… Could you please keep your distance, *Mitsurugi-san* ?" He asks, giving me a slow, delayed bow. "I wouldn't want any… ripples to affect the squad. You're enough to deal with already."

"Ah, well… I admit, I should not have been so insistent. It was my folly, and I apologize," I bow in earnest, constricting both hands and lips. "Please, can you tell me where did-"

"Yes, thank you for understanding," he says in the same frozen tone as he raises, turning around and going his way.

"Wait Takeru, please. I'm trying to-"

"Enough is enough," the Instructor tells as she walks up to us, pinching her nose. "Shirogane is right, this is the end of this argument."

"With all due respect Instructor, this matter is-"

She delivers a vicious strike upon the closest simulator, frowning as she walks up to me, allowing Takeru to leave. "I've let the battle reach its course, not because I am in agreement with what transpired but due to my orders, cadet. But I have been keeping an

ear open. And I want none of this pro-Empire attitude from you, miss .”

"Wh- I… I was only-"

"No excuses!" She threatens, eyes blazing, arms folding. "You may be… may have important ties, but that does not excuse you of punishments, Mitsurugi."

"I never have tried to shirk my duty, ma'am. I was only trying to-"

"Shut it, I don't want to hear it. Respect Shirogane's wish and keep it together." She then comes closer, eyes narrowing. "But if you happen to try and continue to place your own code above the squad, this will be going into your personal records. This is my last warning, Mitsurugi."

"I understand, ma'am. I was only-"

"I said-"

"I only want to apologize. I only… I wanted… I've seen I was mistaken, even if my vision of a warrior differs from Takeru's."

"Then, explain what this 'poem' you were shouting about entails."

"… I cannot. It is tied to my upbringing, ma'am."

"Then, I deem it unnecessary to bring the topic to light. You and Shirogane do not mix, leave it at that."

"However-"

"Was I clear, cadet?!" She once more hits the sim, that glint of barely restrained ire, the cackles of the chains echoing. "If you're still so chipper, I can spar with you in the sim."

"N-No, ma'am. I… shall try to remain composed. However, I do wish to-"

"Not today, Mitsurugi. I won't press about these matters of the IRG… but I will be on the lookout for any further misconduct on your end."

"… It won't impair my duties to the UN, Instructor, ma'am."

"Sigh… Just stop causing such altercations, are we clear?" She ruffles her hair, honest weariness coming to her features as her shoulders and head sag and lower for a second.

As she turns around and we return to the open area, besides the surprised gazes of those watching the battle, there is someone else near my squadmates. Who, for a second, quickly glares my way.

"Is something the matter, Yashiro?" The Instructor asks.

Those odd things atop her head flap, she nods. "The Professor is calling for Takeru-san, if he finished his drills."

"I see. Shirogane, we have maintenance practice in the usual hangar at 1500 hours," she says, looking at him squarely in the eye, sizing his complexion, perhaps.

He salutes, trying to stand straight, the forced mask showing cracks. "Understood."

Without wait, he nods towards the rest, giving them a thumbs up, before starting to walk for the exit. Something grabs onto my shoulder as I try and step forward.

The glare, draconian and imposing, remains fixated on my features. "Mitsurugi, don't," the Instructor orders. "By the by, you're going to do a hundred squats after your laps of the day. Repeat your orders."

Wringing my hands, my feet meet as I stand in attention. "I shall do a hundred squats after my daily laps, ma'am!"

She merely nods then leaves to her post. "Ayamine, Tamase, you're next."

As I walk to the rails, Ayamine is descending. To say she's upset would be a severe underestimation. Just remain silent, don't meet her eyes, do not provoke-

"How's the moral high ground feeling?" She asks when passing me by.

Nibbling at my lips, I skip some steps, never looking back. Tamase hurries past me, not meeting my eyes. Yoroi seems to desire to huddle upon herself, saying nothing. Sakaki simply stares.

"If you wish to say something, feel free."

She merely sighs, shaking her head. Looking away, veiling her sight, saying nothing and hanging a cloak of silence over us.

So I acquiese to her unspoken order, simply leaning closer to the wall, watching the monitors. Even if it has come to this, even if I admit I deserve this atmosphere, it is all temporary.

The warning be damned, I now know what I must do. Worry not, Takeru. Once I confirm with Tsukuyomi this doubt, not only your name will be cleansed of any and all vile rumors but you'll regain the status you deserve.

After all, you truly are a fellow of mine. All I hope is, you can forgive my obstinacy.

Even if I cannot measure up to this Yohime you hold so dearly in your heart.

# Roses and Ashes (II)

*Chapter 8 3 :*

**Roses and Ashes (II)**

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*Some moments later.*

*(In the hallway.)*

**[Takeru]**

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Once I made sure the headband is back in place, I look into the full length mirror nearby. Eyes are still red, can see the veins popping through 'em. But there's no more lag to my hands, head doesn't hurt, no whispers nor echoes remain in the distance. Sigh… Though, maybe I should cut my hair once we're done with this little matter. I look like a villain with this headband on and looking this tired, too. The small little horns it has kind of remind me of the Gandum Enpyon.

"Heh, I just feel rhythm emotion!" I say, striking a pose to my reflection. And, ironically, that is not a joke. All the way to the 'Zero System' once I aid Sumika in her therapy.

Though, if that's the case, I wanna wake up to the beeps.

A sigh after, I go to the door. Leaving to the elevator with slow steps, me and my psydekick depart from the changing room, ignoring the few gazes that linger. Kasumi lays her head on my arm, fingers trying to entwine on mine, as the gentle tingly feel spreads. Now able to lift my head without effort, I smile and pet her head.

"Thanks a lot, Kasumi," I whisper, she smiles back.

"No, it's nothing. Are you truly feeling well?"

"Yeah, no worries."

"… I felt the dragon roaring again, however," she affirms, staring.

"Wait, you could still hear my thoughts?" I had asked Yuuko to shut Kasumi off in case- Oh, fuck. What are you playing at now, *Vice Commander* ?

"Sorry… I didn't meant to, it was like a… wave washing over me, the echo of the roar," bunny ears cascade along her gaze, fingertips enforcing their hold.

"You're fine after that?"

"It was just the echo, I didn't see anything. Um, Takeru-san, do you know why you turned into a dragon within the forest? Is that… how you were in the IRG?"

"No. Back then… I was fire, and just that."

"… Then, who is the dragon?"

"That's… not important right now."

"According to the Professor, dragons are omens of good fortune. And many civilizations seem to revere them as symbols of power and bravery. I do think," she looks away, leaning more, "it fits you well."

"… Thanks, but," there is another symbolism dragons take. And it ain't no good omen or anything. "Anyways, yeah, I had to get serious for a second," to clog the highway despite my rejection, as pointless as it might be I gotta play to my odds.

"I suppose, the questioning was a failure?" She asks, bunny ears and steps slumping.

"There's no failures… Just me being stupid for the umpteenth time," I sigh, she rubs my arm.

"What happened?"

"We argued, Meiya used words that, well, remind me of rough days and I tried to cut things as I felt memories clearing up. How do I look?"

Kasumi puts some space between us, her eyes remain on me. "Shaken, but you're calm now. I feared you were going to faint again, by how pale your aura looked."

"Is it that bad?" My lips dry as she nods, and that cold embrace meets my side again.

"You're still all spiky," she notes, lips shrugged. "Um, the Professor didn't exactly reveal much but, was this truly necessary? Using your… pull so suddenly can backfire."

"It had to be this way, checking Mei- Mitsurugi's feelings was a must."

"But didn't you already know how she reacts in the future?"

"It's not like I know every outcome," I shrug, chuckling. "There's too many possible routes, and I can't really take it all in. Would be cool if, for every problem, a Takeru from another future would come to warn us of what could go wrong." If only I could actually see the future instead of only getting vague hunches and have to hard reset the state to prevent random shit to screw us over. At least, me being an active Nucleus should, theoretically, let Sumika link methods from different timelines… which is the key to getting out of this stalemate.

Kasumi tilts her gaze, blinking fast for a sec. "Huh? But there can't be two you at the same time."

"Oh, yes, they can. I did pass myself Sumika's shoe back home, after all," I smirk, she gapes as the tingly feeling grows, as she sees the memories, one from each side. "Then, we could get one Takeru that comes for the issues we have now, then there's another that comes for the next problem and so on. We'd end up with an army of Takerus, ready to break the universe in half through the sheer stupidity of our puns," I nod to myself, raising a fist.

"That sound unnecessarily complicated," she protests. "Where did you get the idea?"

"You know, Drake Sphere. There's a character there, Tronqs, that comes from the future to help the guys in the past. I'm basically like him, but now without a cool sword." And I can't go Super Shayan.

"Your aura is spiky enough as it is now, Takeru-san," Kasumi keeps complaining, lightly pulling my arm.

"Heh, if you say so."

"But," she says, ears flapping, "that only applies if there's many aspects of the future one does not know. You already, well, know what happens up to Iceberg, so you could technically solve many issues by aiding the Professor with the overall knowledge of how the events transpired, even if they no longer shall occur, simply to be on the lookout for parallels. What does that make you?"

"… Takeru del futuro futuroso."

"I'm being serious," eyes narrow, hold tightens.

"Oh, me too. The futuristic future is real cool and doesn't afraid of anything, though. We got touchscreens, rhino XGs, free chocolate, and the sun is red."

**CHOP!**

"Don't start, please. Sigh… At least you seem to be feeling well enough," she concludes, lips not entirely relaxing.

"Haha… You could say I was mentally prepped up, even if I'd rather things not be this way," I look up, fiddling with my ear, straightening my back, feeling something crack as a small jolt runs through me. "But at least I know now. I just gotta deal with it… somehow."

I know, different world and all that shit. I can't control how people feel, and I'm no one to tell her not to go hard onto the Yamato Damashii when I almost lost it during the invasion. Guess all those pies and presents are a thing of the past. Even with the best possible roll I could have gotten in a reset, I could not get Meiya to stop seeing herself as a tool of the Empire in this world. Different values, different settings, so of course things would be different. But it's too early to simply give up. She might not… resemble my sweet Meiya, but that doesn't mean we gotta be enemies. If I can convince the *XO* to send us to the relief efforts, actually saving the old lady might… either let us start coexisting even if we disagree or it'll be the last nail in the coffin if she's resolved to not take her off the small hamlet. But dammit, I gotta roll that dice. If Meiya remains on this path… regardless of how I handle Yuuko and Yuuhi…

…

" *Pull the trigger, Takeru…"*

Shuddering, I shake my head and inhale sharply. Fighting the scratching, the rake of cold up to my nape, my steps delay themselves as if walking through sinking sand.

"Are you sure you don't want to go to the medical bay right now?" She says as she holds my gaze, clutching both arm and hand tightly as if she were pulling a rope.

"Sigh… It's fine. I think I'm good now," I smile, again petting her head.

She shrugs her lips a bit. "I still think you should-"

Her bunny ears perk up, Kasumi shivers. Immediately after, a steady march reaches my ears. Looking back, a red dress inches closer in long steps as if she were late for a special sale in the super.

"Hey Takeru, whatever is the matter?" Shion hurries to our side, a hand in her chin as she looks straight at me. Lips shrink, gaze narrows. "You… don't look so good."

I wave a hand about, rolling my eyes. "I'm fine, really. I was called to the underground, that's why I left the training," I answer, enduring a smile, bearing the brunt of an inquisitive arrow-stare.

"Oh, I see. Let us escort you, then," she proposes, raising a finger.

"Takeru-san is being called to a special mission," Kasumi says, moving her bunny ears.

"I wasn't talking to you," Shion shoots a glare at her, eyes sharp and carnivorous. Not like in the worst days, but still in needless aggression like when she was little. Only, you know, instead of a silly child this is a full-blown ballista of aggro.

"Hey, don't be like that," I say, waving a hand, losing the smile. "My missions are kind of a big deal, that's all."

As Shion groans and holds my gaze, sparks and shields raised in the crossfire, Mion slowly catches up. Giving a small nod, she plays with her hair. "Is something the matter?"

"Takeru says we can't escort him due to some special duties," Shion complains, not even masking the embers.

"Well, merely accompanying you shouldn't be an issue?" Mion asks, I sigh.

"Please, it's fine. We can take the stairs and hurry to the elevator. Thanks, but you can end the morning watch here."

Her eyes narrow as her fingers trace the ponytail. "Really? Then, may I ask what transpired in the last battle?"

"What are we talking about?"

"Why were you holding your head as you returned to your squadron? Moreover, what compelled you to employ those… tactics against Mitsurugi?" Her tone takes a dive in the Arctic, the hawk in her resurfaced.

"… My head just hurt a bit. Nothing's wrong. And I am doing my best because I need the grades since, you know, my CCSE score was garbage," I point out with a nod, both Pickles seem to not be very enthused by the answer, going by the wiggle of those brows, the embers that still lurk.

"Then, all the more reason to accompany you, isn't it?" Mion suggests, nodding with half a smile.

"Takeru-san said he's going to a special mission. Please leave," Kasumi insists, not dulling her firm opposition even when I grip her hand.

"We are talking with Takeru," Shion spits, playing with her hair as she threw a side glance and a sharp kunai at Kasumi. "So Takeru, let's-"

"Leave us alone please," Kasumi counters, in her own firm way.

"You shut up. Takeru, we are assigned as your-"

"Inconsiderate."

"Kasumi, stop it," I pull her hand, she looks down. Why are you picking a fight with her? What's next, you're gonna hiss like a bunny and bite onto 'em? Her bunny ears flap, she groans as she stares.

As I look back at Shion, her lips are quivering. She takes one step back while holding my gaze, then she shot a glare at Kasumi. Even

as Mion lightly pulls at her sleeve, Shion's face does not unwind the steam nor the embers. She's about to let her menacing side out, probably. And if security sees her being a hazard to Kasumi…

"Come on, now." I place a hand on Kasumi's head as I stand in front of her, covering her from their hawkish glares. "Sorry Shion, Mion, can you just drop it?"

"Huh?! Why? Why are you taking her side?" Shion asks, almost wincing. It feels as if I had thrown a dart at her heart right now.

"I'm not. I just want to go answer my call for a mission. You know I'm under a punishment," I state, leveling a stare at them both.

"But why with her? We can watch over you as you go wherever it is you're required," she again raises a finger and smiles at me, tilting her head to a side.

"Inconsiderate, and forceful too." Kasumi, why?! She squints her eyes at Shion, whose fists are now shaking visibly.

"What was that? You wanna say something else?"

"Screaming won't make you right." She replies, moving her bunny ears. Shion's eyes are lost in a pond of fire, only a light elbowing from Mion chains down the blast.

"Alright, you two. That's enough. 2nd Lts, please take your leave," I tap my brows, frowning just a bit, making them twitch. "Causing an argument now is not what I want, and you've done enough for me today," I affirm, speaking from the pit, glaring in earnest. Until Kasumi pulls my arm, pouting.

"If that is what you wish," Mion relents a nod, despite Shion's frown. "However, considering our position, I'd like to discuss something with Yashiro here," she says, inexpressive and cold. Giving me the false smile of a hyena.

"Are you trying to pick a fight with Kasumi?"

"My, of course not. I do wonder why you came to that conclusion… Did anyone speak ill of us to you?" Mion eyes narrow and blazes at the bunny.

"You did try to harm me when we just met… Leave Kasumi alone. She's my friend."

"I cannot speak for Shion, but I have no hostile intentions towards Yashiro," she states, playing with her hair. You still haven't learned how to veil your anger. And you should know Mion, lying to me is quite the stupid thing to do.

"I see. You wanna stay Kasumi?"

"No, let's go."

We try to move but Mion now stands in my way, still bearing an innocent smile that promises lament and docility. "Please, we merely wish to share some words with her regarding these 'special missions'. There is no way we would do anything inappropriate given our position here, much less to the assistant of the Vice Commander. You can trust in my words, we will do nothing to her."

"Acts are not the only thing that can hurt. Mion, I'll say this clearly, if you're hostile to her I'll take it as a personal insult," I warn, staring down at them both.

"… Why are you being this contrarian? I do not recall doing anything to upset you."

"Shion just tried to pick a fight with her."

"I wasn't doing that," Shion crosses her arms, eyes losing light and warmth by the second. "I was just performing my duty and she got in the way."

"She was telling you I'm late for a special assignment. And you told her off way too harshly."

"Please, cadet Shirogane," Mion said, smiling at me, lightly hitting Shion's side, "I merely wish to share some words with Yashiro, nothing more."

"… Then, go on and ask away. If it's about the mission, neither of us can answer," I nod, Kasumi follows.

"May I ask why you cast such doubt towards me? I thought we agreed to try and get along." Mion then slowly looks at Kasumi, who hides behind my back under the pressure. "Maybe someone is truly speaking ill of us behind our backs?"

"If you're insinuating Kasumi did, you're way off the mark. I merely see the you of that rainy night right now," I say, not changing my posture at all. "If you touch Kasumi, you touch me. Why are you looking at her like that? I mean, how could you ever be upset at her?"

"She was rude to me, unnecessarily hostile. I wonder why?" Shion comments, as sour as she could be. If not for the situation, I'd laugh at how childish she looks.

"You also were rude to her, you know?"

"Is she a fellow to you, Takeru?" She counters, a viper lashing out within her words, her stare.

"She's my friend. Kasumi has always been there for me when stuff got tough here," I return the crossfire, enough to make them falter and douse the pyres.

"I see. But that doesn't excuse her behavior towards me, she made a miss first."

"2nd Lt Tsukuyomi," I glare again, tapping my brows and sighing hard, "it's not about first or second. Kasumi has been helping me since I arrived so she gets easily worried about my health. That's all, right Kasumi?"

"… Yes." She says, peeking from behind me. "I am just looking after him."

"Well, you don't have to," Shion again shoots a glare at her. "We are assigned as his escorts, you see."

"Thanks, but drop that stare," I order, they both hold my gaze for a moment, eyes narrowed.

"Shirogane, is she someone dear to you?" Mion asks, losing light.

"Of course. She's a really good friend. I mean, she puts up with my bullshit everyday with a smile on her face despite all she has to do. That's how good she is. Look at her! How could you be mean to Kasumi? She's just trying to help, is all."

"I see, so that's how you see her…" Mion smiles, but in a crooked way. Like my Mom whenever she came up with a punishment after I failed many tests in a row. "However, I assure you I hold no ill will towards her. I just wish to share a couple words with Yashiro. Do you seriously think-"

"Then talk where I can hear you."

"I would welcome some privacy, if at all possible. Since it regards our briefing for this duty."

"… Kasumi, let's go." I reach out to her, grip her hand, and move past the Pickles. I can't let them fight. Everything would crumble if Kasumi reacts badly towards them and they dared to show their fangs.

"It is saddening to see how little you seem to think of me…" Mion's hand that was on her hair delayed its stroke, her eyes slowly descending onto the figure behind me as we pass her side.

"What's sad is that you showed your fangs again here, Mion. I expected more of you two."

And rushing outta there, we quickly chain a few staircases without slowing down. We say nothing for a while, eventually I have to stop as her steps start to delay. Reaching B5F, letting her catch her breath, we pace quietly to the elevator. A slow arc is drawn on my arm, the tender hold softly pulls and the gale of steps subsides into a breeze as she sighs.

"You okay, Kasumi?"

"Yes," she whispers, eyes remain closed. "Don't worry, I did not scan their minds deeply. I saw no," her grip on me tightens, like her lips, "gruesome memories."

"Quite the negative word. You saw nothing, but what of hearing?" I ask, looking at her.

Steps wane, her bunny ears fall. "They do not seem very pleased to see a," gaze crumbles, sinking beyond reach, "Russian doll overseeing you."

Ears ring, sickness spreading on my mouth. I pet her head, slowly, as if handling an old vase. "You're no 'doll' or 'unit' or 'witch'. You're a human like all the rest, Kasumi."

"The official statement regarding the legitimacy of the life of artificial beings clarifies that-"

I stop, my walking and her words, wrapping an arm over her shoulders, pulling her a bit closer, causing her bunny ears to bump into me. "I don't care what the corporate side of the UN wrote down to appease a bunch of assholes who knows how many decades ago.

You're my friend, and if you say that again about yourself I'm getting angry."

She doesn't pull away, the tingly feeling slowing but never ceasing. "That's how many see me, will see me. It's a fact I cannot avoid. I am not-"

"So what if you're different? You still breathe, think, and feel like a human would. You're nothing of those shitty things people would call you," I frown and sigh. I'll never accept that bullshit, not after Alt IV was taken from Yuuko, not when our life was branded in red, and I won't start now either. "Let's try and keep you away from the Pickles. Did they have any other concerning thoughts?" I ask, letting her go before anyone sees us.

Bunny ears softly flap as her hands readjust their lock, head resting fully onto my arm now as we walk again. "Their auras were as red as their clothing, yet the slow swirling denotes true concern over you. Only, well, there was a mist, a fog covering them both. If it was regret, guilt, or any masked intention I did not try to confirm, the color grew deep like," she shivers, taking a deep breath, "that forest we saw in your mind."

"Sigh. Let's try and avoid contact between you and them. Anyways, I guess it's tuning time?" I ask in a whisper.

"Yes. The Professor is both pleased and upset at the first results we obtained from the tests. What do you have in mind?" She inquires, looking up.

"We gotta establish a base for her to build up from. So we"ll start from the beginning, playing old games that might trigger a jog in her memory."

"Will the consoles work?"

"No, this isn't the one from my home. Picture books of folktales, spinning tops, marbles, stuff like that."

"I see. What about Cat's Cradle?"

"Yeah, that works too. Shogi is out of the question, juggling is a bit risky." It can either fail in the sync, make her remember the Pickles or Yuuhi, or we may end up hitting the cylinder.

"I don't think we'd do something like that," she protests.

"Haha, but, well, we don't really have other games here, do we?"

"Don't you know of anything else we can do?"

"Why not play with cards? A standard deck should be available at the library, I believe."

I nod, smirking. "Oh, that's a good one. Simple is… Huh?" I blink a few times, looking at the tall figure that had, at some point, started walking besides us as Kasumi quivers and huddles behind me, gripping at my fatigues for dear life.

"Hm? What is it, Takeru Shirogane? Done reminiscing about games?"

"Chief Yoroi?! What are you doing here?!" And how do you keep sneaking up on me?! Do I need to polish my sense again? And I don't have Tsuhi to help me with that now, fuck.

He just chuckles at my surprise, waving a hand around. In his usual suit, as always, he tips his hat back as he smiles. "Oh, just taking a walk around the base. It is a beautiful building, after all. Top of the line tech in every corner."

"Well… Yeah, you're right in that. So, why did you sneak up on us?"

"I simply found you two absentmindedly walking and thought to see how you were faring. Hello, Yashiro. It has been a while," giving a smile, he waves. Kasumi shrinks into me further. "Oh? Is she still reticent towards speaking with me?"

"Sigh. You just popped out of nowhere, anyone would freak out," I shrug, rolling my eyes.

"And yet, you seem composed enough, Takeru Shirogane," he says, gaze peering, piercing deep into my soul. Feels as if I were staring straight into a mirror without blinking for too long.

"Been through quite the stuff lately, is all."

"Hmm, so it seems. A few soldiers seemed to desire to follow your trail as you walked. Why has such a dark cloud fell over you, I wonder?" He asks, face tightens as he grasps his chin.

"They see me spinnin', they hatin'." Patrolling they tryin' to catch me walkin' dirty.

"I did not know you favored hip-hop, Takeru Shirogane. An… influence of your time in America?"

"Anything for a pun, Chief." And for the record, be grateful I didn't start singing Without Me as soon as I got back to this world. Kasumi's grip on me tightens, her bunny ears slap away at my back. "Well, we were called to some assignment, so I'll-"

"By the way, might I ask about this… device on your head?" Narrow brows, an unwary tone paired with a hawkish gaze.

"… It's just a headband."

"I see… It resembles some sort of horns, does it not?"

"I guess…"

"I wonder what this means. Takeru Shirogane, are you a guardian angel in disguise; or a demon lurking in the shadows?" He takes a step closer, towering, staring.

Furrowing my brows and plucking my lips, doing an effort to keep my tone neutral, I return the pleasantry. "I'm a UN soldier working for the

same side as you, I believe."

"… Is that so?"

"At least, that's what I think," for now. "Well, aren't you busy? *XO Kouzuki* 's gonna be angry if she finds you snooping around. What are you even here for?" For him to approach me, no, for him to be here… Is he here with news about Sagiri like last loop? Pushing Yuuko for your own goals, forcing intelligence to move out prematurely?

Not on my watch, Chief. You ain't playing me a third time.

"Hoho, I can't tell you that. For I am a man with a mission," he gives me his usual smile, raising both hands and waving them to a side while taking a step back and letting out a hearty chuckle.

"Sigh… Well, I guess that's true. I'll forget we ever saw-"

"Oh, since you insist, I suppose I could tell you."

"… Which is it?" Always marching to his own drum.

"You see, I've been tasked to deliver a certain item to this base…"

"Hmm… I suppose to the *Vice Commander* ?"

"Well, yes. But I suppose you could simply hand it to her."

"Why?"

"You're going to see her at some point, won't you? It makes my work easier."

"Hey, don't slack off, Chief. No one likes a dog that can't do its tricks right, after all," I say, he chuckles.

He's doing his usual act, through and through. Why did he approach me? Is this about an item true or not? Is there… anyone else

nearby? Can't feel anyone's presence… But I also couldn't hear him approaching at all. Kasumi remains hidden, grasping at my fatigues. On her guard.

"You do know what's gonna happen if you start messing around the base?" I ask, tapping my brows.

He then smiles, a bit more softly than usual. "Haha, I suppose it is a risk I cannot take. By the way, here," the Chief passes me a small box.

"What's this?"

"The important item I spoke about."

"Huh?! You're just handing it to me? What is this- Huh?" Touching the package, my fingers dive right in. This feels like… "Chief, this wouldn't be a dodo plushie, would it?"

"Oh?" He smiles widely for some reason, eyes gaining luster. "How did you guess correctly, Takeru Shirogane?"

"Mikoto complained once about the plushie you left her for her birthday, said you always give her these things, how much you love these birds."

And all the goddamned times that also happened in my first loops as well, even if she never told me why that happened during those years. Always with the dodos, really. We had enough of the things to make an extra pillow with 'em all back then. Sigh… Was nice to simply lay and chill onto the dodos after some hijinks by the hill.

He nods, sighing and placing a hand near his neck, relaxing a bit. "Oh, yes. The dodos are fascinating, and not only because they're an extinct mystery to delve in."

"For real?"

"In any case, I suppose we should discuss the real reason I came here," he sobers up, straightening his suit.

… But what about the dodos? I never heard anything of why he loves those birds, now that I think about it.

"Here," he produces letter from his suit and passes it to me, scanning the nearby area with quite the killer stare as he did.

"… You do know that *XO Kouzuki* won't like you using a middle man for the delivery if it's something important, right?"

"Worry not, Takeru Shirogane. This letter isn't for the Professor."

"Huh? Then, who is it for?"

"Read it, and find out. I have business with the XO, so I'll take my leave here," he tips his hat, giving me a smile. "Until later, Takeru Shirogane."

"… Yeah, later."

He goes his way deep into the base, towards the elevator. Doesn't turn around, and shortly after I lose sight of him. I suppose people will deal with him in due time, but just in case.

"Kasumi, can you-"

"I already emailed the Professor about it," she says, waving her PDA at me.

"Thanks, little bun," I pet her head, the bunny ears softly flap. "So, I guess he still has hyper ceramic on him?" She nods, looking down. "Don't worry, his mind is probably one of the last things you wanna scan."

"So, um, what is that about?" She asks, peeking at my hand, at the letter and the box.

"The dodo plushie is… probably a test for me, I guess. Lemme check it for bugs real quick."

… And no, there's nothing on the thing.

"I didn't know you could do that," she says, staring.

"Yuuko taught me some tips when I worked for her in one of my loops." And I got better at it in the Guard. Sure, I ain't no Tsuhi but I can clean up a small plushie no problem. "Wanna keep the little bird?" I offer it, she shakes her head. Guess I'm gonna have to leave it somewhere, maybe in my office.

"Well, but," she pulls at my arm, "what of that letter?"

The envelope is made of a paper softer than anything I've touched before, almost feeling soft despite its sturdiness. White as the moon, it has a small burgundy ribbon on it like those congratulation letters have. Sealed with a wax seal in the same burgundy color, the pattern it has seems… familiar for some reason.

"Wait, a burgundy lotus? Don't tell me-" I gulp, Kasumi gasps and lets go in haste.

As I turn it around, I see another logo. A large purple marking with the image of the handguard of the Minaru Kamui… The Koubuin House's emblem. A stamp with the Imperial Royal Guard's patch is in a corner, looking more like a hand drawn, custom made piece rather than a mass produced stamp. Written in pristine black ink, with such a fine calligraphy that denotes not a single wasted stroke nor hesitation in the action, a name was etched on the envelope.

Recipient: Takeru Shirogane. Followed by it, the directions of the base were written under the name with clear precision, including my current rank.

"Takeru-san?" She pulls my hand, barely grasping it. "This might hurt you. Don't read it."

"Running away is not an option, Kasumi."

"Are you," she looks away, her hold falters on its own, "still considering going back to the IRG?"

I ruffle her hair, the silly bunny looks up. "I ain't going anywhere, Kasumi."

"Really?" I nod, she steps closer. "I see. But I'm not silly, I am worried about-"

"I know. But putting this off is a bad call."

"What about the tuning?"

"I can focus then, unlike you I can't multitask to save my life," I nod, pushing my chest out.

"I do not know if boasting of that is wise, Takeru-san."

"It's the truth, though. I do one thing at a time, very slowly. Don't worry, if we could speak with the actual Sumika before after I came back, I'll keep myself in check."

She still looks into my eyes, unblinking. "Whatever lies in this letter won't make you argue with the Professor again?"

"That depends on what the *Vice Commander* plans to do going forward. I did give her some time to gather her thoughts, but that volcano ain't chilling down. Neither are those who thank it for the spark."

"I know, but still… You're on the Professor's side, right?" Again, barely grasping my sleeve, fingertips quiver as her lips. With the frailty and purity of porcelain, she stares up at me.

"It's the other way around, little bun," I smile, letting a sigh out as I play with her bangs. "That's what I'm trying to answer now."

Enduring her eyes, I gulp and look at the letter, at the emblem. Feeling the cold hands creep back out, as if my feet were sinking in sand, I can't move from the spot. The grip start distorting the edges of the envelope, a small race of ants on my back.

Letting some air out, leaving my mouth open, I slowly turn the thing around.

Some of my fingers blocked the writing, but I can read the surname just fine. Unlike that time when I saw Sagiri's letter and got the reading wrong, I can somehow tell that this time my reading of the kanjis isn't wrong.

Looking at the sender's last name, I can tell I am not mistaken. I can tell that these kanjis read 'Amato'.

…

I wonder how exactly you're making ends meet while dealing with Fujikagi-kun now on your own, Red Lightning. Hehe, sure hope you're not burning everything around you. Although, without the morning coffee, I don't see your mood calming down at all.

---

*Some moments before.*

**[Mion]**

---

Takeru goes his way, sending towards us a murderous glare he only ever employed when truly adusted. Never letting go of the ESPer doll, he leaves without hesitation and in quite the hurry. With that damn witch daring to cling onto his arm, as a parasitic ivy constricts over noble greenery.

I am only allowed a sigh, any reaction can and will be used against us. Turning around, I pace back where we came from.

To think they'll make him doubt us so strongly… As soon as I noticed he seemed dizzy, this Russian witch went to his side wasting not a second. The Instructor shook her head, did not allow us to approach him while she berated Meiya-sama. While I concur she might have made a miss to imprint such ashen dejection to his features, admonishing her in such manner and forbid us to move was a clear mistake on the Instructor's end. I suppose, this shows where the woman truly stands.

In any case, the witch has been ordered to monitor him… Maybe twisting his memories to that fox's convenience?

"So Shion…"

"… What?" She spits, arms tightly crossed as she outpaces my walk.

"Do you think she's affecting him?"

"Yeah, I do. Remember the headband he has? Isn't it oddly similar to that thing she has on her head?"

"Yes, it was. Talking with her won't be easy… But perhaps that won't be necessary."

"It is unnerving, how they flaunt their colors and we can do nothing," she fumes, begins to stomp.

"Peace, we cannot falter. That being said, did you notice the gesture?"

"Yeah…" Her gaze falls to the floor, allowing me to once more walk by her. "To think our Leader would come back defending a foreigner…"

"It is almost a mockery. He does seem to be truly fond of her, and her appearance does align with what Takeru said. However… She's a witch, and she may have him under a foul spell."

"We can't do anything about her, though." Shion says, biting her lips, spewing grave maledictions under her breath.

If she truly is caring for him, I have no objections. However, how did she notice Takeru was in pain when she wasn't looking at him? When she was near the noise of the onlookers? Only us noticed Takeru's slight headache as he exited the sim, and due to the vantage point we observed from. Perhaps the Instructor also did at a glance and that's why she halted Meiya-sama. But the witch wasn't looking at him and yet was the first to react, to hurry to Takeru's side.

Almost as if she could really sense his mind in pain. Almost as if she wanted to block whatever he was remembering then. And she requested of us to leave, without veiling how vexed she was.

"I suppose we've no choice but to remain vigilant," I admit, loosening my arms.

"We do have an option to play," she raises a finger, dead serious upon my stare.

"Do you believe it wise?"

"Now is the most proper moment to contact her."

"Mana-nee is gonna kill us if this backfires, however."

"Then, we can scout the vicinity, to ensure no one takes notice. Or, what?" A slight frown, a step closer. "You rather surrender our brother to a Russian doll?"

"Fine, fine. But if there is any chance we could be seen-"

"We retreat immediately. So, should we be on our way?" She asks, again showing me her teeth.

I relent a sigh and nod, following her stride. Alternating our watch, our approach remains mostly undetected. Mana-nee already gave us a layout of the base, of the blind spots between cameras. Gaining a

vantage point was easy enough, keeping watch for onlookers shall be the test now.

Left with no choice but to idle time, wait for the squats to end, we simply watch from the coldness of the shadows while enduring the modest breeze of the afternoon. Until she finishes, refreshes herself, and starts walking to the base, steps short and slow, gaze down in a pensive gesture.

"Meiya-sama," I call out, gesturing for her to get close.

A twitch, a second of hesitation, she then slowly approaches. "What are you doing here, you two? What of Takeru?" She inquires, arms folding.

"That is what we desired to speak with you about," Shion says, leaving the wall.

Yet she shakes her head. "I don't know if this is wise."

"Huh?" My cousin stalls a reaction, an eye twitches.

"As much as I desire to speak with you, if we're seen-"

"We ensured no such thing could happen," I state, returning her gaze, "most of the crew is having lunch as we speak. No one can see us from this position, rest assured."

"I see. Still," her eyes veer away, faltering, clouding, "what is it you wish to ask? Takeru didn't," lips regress, words stall, "agree to forward an apology. In large- No, due to my obstinate insistence on the matter."

"We didn't expect him to," Shion notes. "All we wish to ask is, why was he in pain after the last training?"

"Pardon?" Reigniting, her glare focuses onto us, causing Shion to falter.

"As it were," I say, giving a low nod, "cadet Shirogane was rather distressed after the battle, holding his head quite tightly when he approached his squadmates."

"What?! Then, what are you even doing here?!" She demands, a sudden landslide of blaze. "Was he taken to the medbay once again?" She asks, the hand which tugs and grips at her tank top revealing the source of the outburst.

"No, there was no need. Sadly, we were forbidden to approach him in the sim room unless it were an emergency."

"And later, that Yashiro," Shion seethes, drilling a burn into the ground, "sent us away in quite the hostility, claiming he was tasked with a special mission," she nods, I shake my head at the kindling in her eyes.

"Is that so. So Yashiro was also rude to you."

"Huh? Meiya-sama, excuse me, but," I stare, the glare of the sun unable to fight off the cold gust which embraces my back, "has Yashiro also been hostile to you?"

She nods in honesty, sighing softly. "Yes, in a few occasions. I don't know why, yet she doesn't seem to like me much."

So the witch does not favor Meiya-sama, huh. Curious, very curious, isn't it?

Shion frowns further, embers to flares. "Have you had an altercation with her, perchance?"

"Perish the thought," she affirms in complete firmness as a diamond, eyes blazing as Yuuhi-sama does at times. "She tends to be rather rude towards me despite my best efforts to remain polite, insisting that I am too stubborn, that I should mind my own business."

"Regarding what?"

"Oh, about Takeru. I had, well, desired his aid some time before. Takeru was busy then, and Yashiro said my insistence was inconsiderate. He did apologize for her bluntness, however no matter when I inquired he always had a special mission and she never seemed to be very welcoming towards me."

"Is this true?"

"But of course. Do you believe I would lie to you?" She asks, shrugging her lips in understandable anger.

I shake my head, giving a hasty bow. "No, I would never. I was merely," idling a hand on my hair, I rest onto the wall, "how to say it? I am at a lack of words to describe this situation."

"I have a word for you, Mion," Shion grins, teeth, no, fangs visible as she hits the concrete. "This is a fucking joke."

"Shion, do not lose your poise," Meiya-sama scolds, we both sigh at Shion's groans.

Still, I find myself agreeing with the vulgarity. So the witch has been around him since he arrived, huh? And also has been against Meiya-sama being near Takeru as well. Very curious, indeed.

"In any case," I cough, restoring my mask, "could you kindly tell us what transpired during your battle with cadet Shirogane?" I bow, Shion follows suit.

"Stop," she asks, "I am nothing yet. Rise, both of you." We so do, finding a hardening stare transfixed onto us, fully focused and never releasing our eyes. "I did plan to request a talk with Tsukuyomi about this, so if you agree to take me to her we can clear the other's doubts as we platicate."

"Eh? Ah, Meiya-sama, bringing you to Sister is-"

"If you're fearful of retaliation, let's agree to make this a request from me. Would you take me to Tsukuyomi?" She asks, holding our gazes.

If she herself deems whatever happened of such importance, it would not be wise to ignore it. Certainly, Mana-nee will understand. And if she doesn't, I shall bear the responsibility. Trusting in a witch is never wise. Shion nods my way and holds my gaze, so I sigh.

"Very well, we shall guide you. Please, do try to follow close by. We'll endeavor to not let anyone see you."

"Thank you kindly, both of you," she smiles, widely and relaxed like the skies are as of now. Vanishing what little clouds obscured her features, almost relieved.

---

**[Meiya]**

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It almost feels as if I were attempting to sabotage the base, sneaking about behind these two. Alternating their watch in front and behind me, we quickly cruise through the hallways. Halting at times, melting into the wall at others, always in silence.

Yet, I do find it odd. If they found motives to seek me, whatever has happened to you, Takeru? Those charges must have taken a severe toll on your body. And while they said he wasn't sent to the medbay… I hope you truly did not exert yourself. Sigh… I'll never be *her*, huh. I wonder, just what kind of woman was this Yohime? To have you captive to this length, to ignite your anger to such extent. Moreover, how did her vision of a warrior differ from mine? To not live or die by the sword… I cannot comprehend, a warrior must never hesitate. To falter upon despair is treason to one's resolve, there is no giving up after committing to a mission or a promise. Revising one's approach is… understandable, yet piercing through should always be the goal.

I cannot understand, what did he grew upset about. Especially when Takeru himself acts with such resolve, unyielding even against the prospect of gaining further attention on himself, of driving himself to near exhaustion. But in due time he'll understand, he is a fellow after all. I wonder… if they know anything.

"By the by," I whisper, gaining their attention. Giving them a short bow, I smile. "Thanks for participating on that mock battle. Even if we did not get the chance to cross strikes, it was a pleasure to share the same battlefield." With all that happened after the bout, no one has approached me personally.

"No, the pleasure was ours," Mion says, returning the gesture.

"The pleasure of getting steamrolled," Shion rolls her eyes as she folds her arms. Mion sends her a glare but chooses to say nothing.

"By the way, how was your encounter with Takeru during the battle?"

"Eh? Ah, well," Mion toys with her hair, looking away, ahead, "it was truly fierce, the cadet's patterns are too erratic to follow."

"And when he isn't diving for your head, he's moving like a mirage," Shion protests, gazing back for a moment, warning with a quick gesture so that we hurry.

"… Didn't you notice anything odd to his patterns?" I ask, staring.

"For example?" Mion asks, remaining composed as a lake.

"… So you do not think anything of his maneuvering?"

"Well, it is most aggressive, that's true," she relents, giving a nod.

… I suppose, better to wait until we're in Tsukuyomi's quarters.

It doesn't take us long before we arrive at the barracks, desolate at this time since most are in the PX. Hurrying to their area, we finally breathe a sigh once we arrive, having avoided any eyes save the

cameras. Although, I assume they must have taken that into account as well?

"Sister, it's us," Mion knocks in a rhythm, gulping.

"Enter," she says from within.

Mion sighs and steps inside. Shortly after, the echo of a slamming palm reaches me, making Shion stand straight, shivering for a second. I fold my arms, waiting in silence.

Eventually, the door slowly parts and a clearly scarred Mion waves us to enter. Shion follows after me, tracing the wall once we're inside. As Mion closes it, I hear the lock being put in place. Both cousins remain standing by the entrance, firm as statues.

So I sigh and face forward, giving a bow. "Good afternoon, Tsukuyomi."

Her laptop still running, she nods my way, features neutral. "Good afternoon, Meiya-sama. Please, do sit down," she gestures towards a spare chair. "What did you need of me?"

"Surely you can guess. I wish to know what happened to Takeru," I affirm, crossing a leg as I sit.

"Ahem… Meiya-sama, I am afraid I cannot comply to your request."

"I assumed so. However, during the training we shared today, Takeru said certain," I look away, enforcing the knot of my arms, "words which make me believe he truly is a fellow of us."

Her brows narrow, yet nothing is said. Scanning my features, Tsukuyomi then relents a nod. "Very well, let's hear what this is about. Mion notified me the cadet was rather exhausted after a sim battle you had against him?"

"Indeed. I admit I am at fault, I pressed Takeru so that he would extend an apology to you."

"Huh? Why would you do such a thing? Were you not notified no claims will fall upon the cadet?" She inquires, leaning forward in truest indignation.

"No, at all. Takeru mentioned how no repercussions had befell him at the moment yet did not leave the possibility null. And, well," I run a hand into my hair, breaking eye contact, "he was very adamant regarding how he could not approach you under no circumstances."

"… What does that mean?" She asks, interlocking her fingers, crossing a leg, aiming her full focus at me.

"Exactly what I said, he does not believe it wise to approach you. Such is why I insisted on perhaps extending a letter, to no avail," I sigh, curling a strand.

"Is that so? Well, do not mull over this matter. While I cannot disclose what transpired, there is no fault in the cadet's shoulders. An apology is unnecessary," she nods, yet she's the one to break eye contact, slightly… nibbling at her bottom lip.

"I understand. I shan't be pressing any further."

"Well, was he faring well?" She asks, resting her hands on her dress. "After returning from the medbay, to be placed on a battle against you must have been toilsome indeed for the cadet."

"Actually, his piloting did not seem any more conservative than his usual." All the contrary, truth be told. "While his showing yesterday was far more impressive, there was a point in our bout where-"

"Excuse me, yesterday?" Tsukuyomi asks, readiness in her posture, as if she were about to deliver a slash.

"Hm? Yes, yesterday. Takeru came to join at the tail end of our night run, taking on the course by his lonesome. And somehow emerging victorious," I note, arms folding again, a gentle shiver as the reminiscence envelops the back of my head.

"Why were we not notified of his departure from the medbay?" Shion asks, rhetorically perhaps, seething.

"Meiya-sama," Mion calls, giving a small bow, "how was Shirogane yesterday?"

"I do not know, we were not allowed to see him, sadly. The Instructor dismissed us before he left the simulator."

"… Is that so," all three of them say, almost in unison, their features distorting.

"Um, so you were not aware he had gone to train late at night?"

Tsukuyomi shakes her head, gradually traversing her hair with a hand, eyes squinted. "No, at all. I wonder, what has caused this turn of events? Meiya-sama, how was this performance of the cadet? You said he obtained victory on his own?"

"Oh, yes. You see, Takeru has some sort of… air jousting maneuver he likes much, and apparently is now trying to polish further," I say, tapping my chin, looking upwards. "During our bout he employed both versions of the maneuver, both the one where he soars high only to dive at high speeds as a hawk upon prey and the other where he forces his TSF to rotate and spin until a cyclone it turns into. I believe they are most reckless, yet I cannot deny their prowess in-Tsukuyomi?"

Gaping, rather, slack-jawed and unblinking, my retainer remains frozen in place. An eyelid twitches, another grave slamming falls upon the wood as she inhales sharply through clenched teeth. "Are you certain of this, Meiya-sama?"

"Yes, I was made into the recipient of such moves so believe me when I say so. My radar could not keep up with his movements, at all. You do seem… distressed. Was one of such moves what caused the accident, I assume?"

"… Forgive me, but I cannot comment on that subject," she says, sheathing her ire as she slowly exhales.

"Is that so, hmm. In any case, don't you notice something odd in Takeru's piloting, Tsukuyomi?"

She slowly raises a brow. "What are we speaking of? I do not follow. Concerned I am towards those… reckless line-piercing maneuvers, yes, but there is nothing odd to aggression," she affirms in contention, her composure not faltering a second time.

"Well, if I must say it so be it. Tsukuyomi, as I said before, I am certain that Takeru is a fellow of us. And not just a fellow Japanese and not a spy, but a member of our fellowship."

"… What? Excuse me, Meiya-sama," she starts, voice still composed unlike her hands, the minute crack in her features, "I know not what has you affirming such a thing, however-"

"Please, let us not waste time. I came here for a reason, and I have not yet had lunch. Tsukuyomi, Takeru employed the poem as we sparred."

Once again, her features extend and silence blooms. Looking behind me, I find both cousins also petrified where they stand.

"Uh… Is something the matter? Why are you all once more dead silent?"

"… Are you certain of this?" She asks, leveling a stare my way, piercing and imposing. I nod, her mouth slightly opens before she looks down, once more hanging a layer of quietness to the room. "… How?" She finally asks, and I tell them of that moment of the fight, their features tightening further as I do. "So he believes we see him as 'some *thing'* he is not… A curious choice of words."

"Well, perhaps he still thinks you hold some resentment over the matter with the blade, and he did mention the issues of his

databases as well during morning," I nod, yet Tsukuyomi does not relax her stance.

"Not some *one*, but some *thing*," she repeats to herself, nodding. "And all the while, he kept employing these aggressive maneuvers?"

"Yes, and certainly you'd agree that they resemble the Mugen Kidou much?" She sighs heavily, finally nodding. "So, I am not demanding an answer or anything of the sort, however, is Takeru truly one of us?"

Throwing herself back onto the chair, making the frontal legs take to the air, she nods. "That is correct, yes."

"… And I suppose, Takeru was chosen to be trained under the Tsukuyomi House at one point? Which is why you've been trying to reach out to him repeatedly?"

"Sigh… This is all I'm willing to confirm on my end. The negotiations for the matter of the databases are still ongoing, and the cadet does not yet seem to recall what was of him fully, so please exert caution around him, Meiya-sama," she tells, forewarns with a glancing glare which assails me.

Yet I nod back, finally unchaining the restrain my breathing had been subjected to and inhaling calmly. He's one of us without a shred of doubt. I can't help to smile as I relax my shoulders onto my chair. He's an ally, he's my fellow. I've truly been blessed by the Heavens, to have you walk alongside me.

"So," Tsukuyomi continues, giving a smile, "can I ask of you to look after him?"

"But of course, leave it to me. I do wish to mend my mistake, and while there is some friction between us, I shan't turn a blind eye to my fellow's plight," I affirm, nodding back, beating a hand upon my heart. "Well, Mion and Shion will also remain close by, I assume?"

"Indeed, they will. However, they do not have the freedom to approach him to their leisure during a training, not without perhaps inciting an argument," she relents, resting onto the desk. "If you can mend this argument that ensued, please do stay on the lookout," I immediately nod, she smiles. "However, it is distressing to hear he reacted in such manner. Equally so for him to cling to the false belief that we desire him harm."

"It could be tied to how he still thinks retribution could fall upon him."

"Yet, we made it abundantly clear we do not wish to push for charges," Shion repines, arms folding, her legs hitting the wall.

"It is what it is," Tsukuyomi states, weaving strands. "At the very least, we know how he is as of now. On that regard, Meiya-sama, do you know of anything that might be placing burdens onto the cadet's shoulders?"

"No, not particularly. He has always been tasked with special missions, after all. Other than his constitution requiring time to stabilize, there isn't…"

… That woman. That Kagami, who he apparently is working with on his special missions.

"Meiya-sama?" Tsukuyomi inquires, interlocking her fingers.

"Ah… No, pay me no mind."

"What is the matter? Is there truly something we should concern ourselves with?"

Looking down, arms fold and compact upon myself as my breathing does. He did request of me not to bring this to light, however, I cannot deny that, if the woman went to awake him so early, she might be… taking advantage of his situation with the punishment.

"Ahem…" she again leans forward, gazing squarely at me, "it does seem that something is troubling you, Meiya-sama."

"… Even so, I believe I shouldn't speak of this."

"He was truly pained today!" Shion shouts suddenly, taking a step forward and not retreating upon Tsukuyomi's imposing glare. "And despite us being assigned as his security, that Instructor forbade us from approaching him only to then have him sent to some special assignment. Please Meiya-sama, if you know of something, anything, please tell us!"

"I also would like to ask you the same," Mion requests, walking to the other's side, the once shining veneer mauled at points. "Even if it's something he mentioned in passing, do not hold it in." They both bow and remain like so in silence, awaiting my words.

It brings a void into my stomach, a searing sensation to my palms. "… Rise, you… you shouldn't act like this." The ripples vanishing, the traces of shadows gone, I so request out of them and they easily return upwards, tension still reigning over their complexions. Tsukuyomi gestures for me to speak, resting her chin onto a hand. "What I am about to tell you is something Takeru himself asked me to keep a secret, and I expect you to also be bound by this. Promise you will not reveal this to anyone else unless necessary," she returns a nod, I cough and clear my throat. "Well… It seems Takeru has been tasked with aiding someone during his missions. I believe that might be taking its toll on him."

"… Is that someone Yashiro?" Mion asks.

"No, although, Yashiro should also work alongside this person if they're tied to his special assignments. I actually saw her for the first time this morning, but her name is Sumika Kagami."

"… Huh?" Tsukuyomi freezes once again, sending the tickle of the night's gust to my nape as her features contort, revealing quite the adusted gesture.

"Sumika… Kagami?" Mion repeats, holding her chin.

"Yes, that is her name. Takeru asked me to not mention her, so I will not say what little he told me about her. If you wish to know, speak of it with him."

"Meiya-sama… Could you describe what this woman looks like?" Shion asks, a small nod despite the tension also claiming her voice, once more seeming ready to begin a duel if so requested out of her.

"Let's see… She was almost as tall as him, she had long, vibrant red hair and a yellow ribbon. She seemed to be very emotionally unstable, however." Assuming she truly had no ulterior motives to place her hands onto him, and that there truly is nothing… odd going on here. Otherwise, well, any unpleasantries are undeserved at the moment.

Despite the silence that falls, my hands and legs move, to idle my thoughts as the cousins approach Tsukuyomi, whispering to one another, shrouding their faces as if traversing smoke. And yet, the largest source of heat in the room lurks within their eyes, kindling against which no wind can triumph.

"Ahem… Tsukuyomi, do you happen to know who this Kagami is?"

She coughs, waving at the cousins to return to their position, trying and failing to regain a neutral facade. "No, it is concerning to hear of a new face being around the cadet, is all."

"… I see." So she cannot tell me, for whatever reason. Pressuring would not be wise. "Anyways, please do not speak of her carelessly. Takeru grew upset when I, well, confronted him about who she was."

"Did he, now," she again rests fully onto the chair, swaying the frontal legs in the air, igniting further blazing. "In any case, thank you kindly for this intel, Meiya-sama."

"No, it is what I should do. After all… It was my miss what had him exhaust himself once again."

"Simply remain composed and stalwart," she advises, nodding my way, restoring a faint smile. "If he sees your honesty, Shirogane will answer to the gesture."

"I so hope. Sigh… Even if I cannot measure up to her, I am still a fellow of him so I shall aid him in whatever I can." If he can find the temperance to yet again forgive my words, even if this time it does not come as easily as before, then there is so much for us to talk about. His views of a warrior, these odd maneuvers, and… how should we proceed going forward. A-Assuming he still desires to share with me whatever it is he had with that woman, that is. Certainly, he's merely talking of being true fellows instead of mere squadmates. Yes, that must-

"Might I ask who are you speaking of when referring to 'her'?" Tsukuyomi asks, raising a brow, still swaying gently the chair in the air.

"Oh, right. I have not yet told you, have I? You see, Takeru mentioned a name after the bout, in whispers and pieces. All we spoke of makes me believe this Yohime is who bestowed upon him the-"

"What did you just-" Tsukuyomi's sudden shout is halted, she yelps as the chair tilts backwards and she falls alongside it.

"Tsukuyomi, are you alright?" I rise to my feet, extending a hand. It has been quite many moons since I've seen her fall on her own in such a manner.

Yet, I twitch and solidify upon her stare, upon the binding clasp her hands place over my shoulder the instant she regains footing. Placing her face mere inches from mine, leaving me no respite from the slaying glare. "Meiya-sama, did I heard that right? Did you just say 'Yohime'?"

"Ah, yes. Takeru mentioned that name, sounding hurt as he did so. I assume, this woman is who bequeathed upon him the Minaru Kamui?"

"There is no mistake? You are certain you've heard that name?!" She presses, fingertips delving onto my shoulders.

"W-What is it, Tsukuyomi? I would not lie to you. It is true he was whispering yet I clearly heard him apologize to this 'Yohime-san' back then," I state, holding my breath and her stare firmly, undaunted upon the incoming pressure.

Her features slowly, gradually relax into truest befuddlement as I've never seen in her before, lips parting and moving yet saying nothing, moving back, resting onto the desk while clutching her forehead. Both cousins are also flabbergasted, Shion is pinching and pulling at her cheek, enough for redness to come forth, whereas Mion is also idling a hand onto her hair.

"Um… I assume you know who this Yohime was?"

"… You are one hundred percent certain that is what you heard, Meiya-sama?"

"Yes, absolutely. Was she who gave him the Minaru Kamui?"

"My apologies, I… I cannot disclose this to you," she hastily bows down.

"Huh? Why can you not? I already know of the blade, and I shan't divulge any sensitive intel to him if that is what you're concerned about."

"You'll have to forgive me, but I cannot-"

"I've come here on my own accord, ignoring a warning from the Instructor for the sake of my fellow. I've broken my orders, giving you intel I should've withdrawn, for Takeru's sake, so that we can aid him

brave through these rumors, so that you know he is no spy. While I won't press further if you truly deem it a secret, I would like you to be honest with me, Tsukuyomi. Who was that Yohime?"

She holds my gaze, folding her arms. "… I suppose, you are already old enough for this topic," she weaves through her hair, placing the chair back to its proper position, both of us sit again.

"So, Takeru seems truly fond of this Yohime. She was who bequeathed him the Minaru Kamui?"

"Their… relation is far closer than that, I'm afraid."

"… Pardon?"

"Please, remain composed. Meiya-sama, what I am about to tell you is, perhaps, enough to grant me a reprimand if you mismanage this intel. You cannot reveal this to anyone, not even under orders. Are we clear?" I gulp, taming the minimal shaking that comes forth, nodding. "Well then," her expression falls, both hands overlay atop her lap, "Yohime Amato was a rather distinguished member of our fellowship, favored by many due to her amicable and composed way of being."

"A High Shinpan, huh," I nod, licking my lips. So I was right, she was truly a high fellow. And yet, despite the reverence Tsukuyomi is giving to her memory, her way of the warrior, the one Takeru follows, differs from ours.

"Indeed. However, Yohime-sama did not meet Shirogane while being a Shinpan."

"Hm? Was she sent as a liaison to the UN?"

"No, they did not meet while in America."

"Huh? However, how did they?"

"You see… Despite some initial friction due to certain concerns over the structure of the fellowship, of the balance of power between all Shinpan Houses, Yohime-sama was bequeathed a most graceful reward for her initial spoils and affable personality…" her hands shake, lips regress. When she looks up, there is no retainer, no Imperial Guard. Only the wounded gaze of the Tsukuyomi I met all those years ago as dampness claims her sight and she sighs shallowly. "She was one chosen by Takahisa Koubuin to be his lady wife."

"… W-What? But… that means…" I gape, out of air, ears ring as she nods back at me.

"It is as you think. Yohime-sama was your mother."

…

What?

My mother?

"She was very much like you," she tells, smiling in earnest, imitating the sun, "kindhearted and good-natured, perhaps to a fault. However, I do admit you are far easier to deal with than her."

"Huh? Was she, um," I grip at my pants, a subtle shaking on my whole body, unable to look up, "as resolute as me?"

"Sigh… No, you do listen to others. There was no dissuading Yohime-sama once she made up her mind, and she was more overwhelming in forwarding her ideas. Still, you do share a striking resemblance to her. Namely, the eyes."

"My eyes?"

"Indeed. That sweetness is hers, no doubt."

"… I see. My mother… Was she also a warrior?"

She shakes her head, sighing. "No, Yohime-sama's greatest weapon were her words, not her proficiency with a blade. Meeting a certain stubborn boy who did all he could to have his way only made her verbal proficiency all the more fearsome, as she had a rival who would not relent due to her station."

"… Takeru, I assume?"

"Yes. Surely you can guess how… persuasive he could be when motivated. It was like watching two typhoons meet, their small arguments and debates," she chuckles, coiling a strand of hair, looking at a side, at nowhere while smiling. "You also possess that ability, even if you've inherited Takahisa-sama's fierce prowess with a sword far more strongly."

"Is that so… So that's who she was," I say, sniffing, wiping a lone tear which was not strong enough to depart on its own. Compacting myself, feeling feathers tickling my sides, arms, and chin, all I can do, to avoid breaking my mask, is close my eyes and let the feeling course through me for as long as it'll last.

Now, this has imparted a new shade of clarity upon his resolve. If he learned under Mother, obvious it is he would remain steadfast in his resolve to the bitter end. Perhaps, she had her own opinions as someone who did not employ blades as her main weapon. To learn her name and who she was, when I had given up on ever knowing if she still yet lived or anything about her identity. This is nothing but a blessing, and all thanks to my fateful meeting with Takeru. And to think you'd value her to such lengths, wishing to… to share that with me as well.

I cannot fault you, Takeru. I would… I would most certainly stain my hands if only for a few minutes to talk, to show them who I've become. I wonder, what would she think of me? Takeru grew most adusted, perhaps she'd shake her head at my obstinacy, at my lacking conversational skill to sail our debate to calmer waters. Mother… so I have your eyes, huh. To think I would be blessed to

such lengths, to be paired with a fellow who you watched over, who learned under you, who you bestowed one of our bla-

…

Wait a moment.

Tsukuyomi has confirmed Mother was who Takeru spoke about, thus it stands to reason she was who presented the blade to him, well, or had ensured her own was delivered to his hands.

Since they held debates often, it stands to reason she would be the one who also taught Takeru about the handguard tradition.

Obviously, she also must have been who authorized him to be trained in the Mugen Kidou.

Also, it is clear how much he cherishes her, with how he wept at the island, his tone as we battled and after it.

And he did say he desired to 'share' something with me, and that I was truly similar to who the blade had belonged to.

So then, that means…

**Takeru was besotted with my Mother?!**

"Meiya-sama, what is the matter?" Tsukuyomi inquires, staring.

"A-Ah, no, nothing. Ahem… Could you tell me what kind… *relationship* Takeru had with my Mother?"

"… I'm afraid I cannot give you the specifics," she gives a small bow.

"Excuse me?" What does that mean? Why- Why would you not be able to?

"What we can tell you, however," Shion says with a gentle smile, pointing a finger up, "is that he truly loved Yohime-sama."

"… Come again?"

"Indeed," Mion nods, also giving a relaxed gesture, "we can confirm that Shirogane was truly fond of her."

"… Is that so."

"In a way," Tsukuyomi begins, looking elsewhere, sighing despite the small smile which does not sink, "one could say Yohime-sama was like a second mother to him at one point."

"… Oh. Oh… I see, of course. Ahahaha… O-Of course that's what it was," I nod, folding my arms, chuckling erratically. "Of course, as if such an age gap would have ever worked."

"What? Meiya-sama, are you-" She frowns, it makes me twitch. "You surely were not thinking what I believe you were?"

"M-My apologies! I jumped to conclusions!" I admit while fumbling my hands in defense, pointlessly trying to defuse the incoming blast of admonishment. "You see Tsukuyomi, Takeru did sound truly fond of who had given him the blade, and he even said he desired to share with me what he had with the previous holder… and considering he knows of the handguard tradition, well, I-"

"… Wait, so, it wasn't an accidental slip?" She asks, leaning forward.

"No, it did not seem so? I believe he knew who he was talking about as he, well, whispered hurtfully. He did play dumb as we exited the sim, however." How rude of you, Takeru. Yet it is obvious he would remain quiet, I am not officially a- Wait a moment. "If he remembers who Mother is… Does that mean he regained his lost memories?" I ask, and their features tense and grow grim, clouding over despite the closed-off nature of the room.

"… You are certain you did not misheard his intent?" She asks once again.

"No, I am certain. And in the event that I did, that does not change that he mentioned her name. Takeru… Takeru remembers something about Mother, however small it may be."

"I see… Sigh. Thank you kindly, Meiya-sama," Tsukuyomi gives a full bow, the cousins follow suit. "You truly have no idea how precious this intel is for us."

"No, it is nothing. I… You've given me an equally precious bit of knowledge in exchange," I smile, sighing, feeling light and about to fly. She returns the gesture, relaxing for a moment. "That being said, Tsukuyomi," I lean closer, holding her gaze, sharpening mine own," I understand the secrecy required, however, could you tell me who Takeru was before losing his memory? I assume you know, all things considered. If Mother is no more, and I assume she perished in the Empire, who was Takeru referring to? Did he obtain the Minaru Kamui here or in America?" Because that, well, changes much in those words, in whatever… relationship he desired to have with me. N-Not that I would refuse a good rivalry as a fellow, of course, but well…

She closes her eyes, heaving a sight, resting an arm onto her desk. "I'm afraid I cannot tell you. If you were to slip up, he may end up having another painful surge of memories. We must be careful about this for his mental health. So don't mention the Guard or Yohime-sama's name to him at all, let Shirogane remember on his own and then he himself shall tell you who he is."

And thus, once more we remain silent, holding each other's gaze. The stoic features, the perfect and imposing complexion of the statue reveal a wince engraved deep as she sighs from the pit upon my unrelenting stare.

"… I suppose I could tell you just a few details," she relents in a whisper, embracing her own stomach. "But under no circumstances you are to tell him of this, are we clear?" She asks, a minimal squint of her eyes, her breath captive. I do not think I've seen her this concerned over anyone except me or Sister.

"Understood. I shall keep this to myself," I give her a nod, clenching my fists in anticipation, bringing my chair slightly closer.

"First, his father was inducted into the Guard when he was little…" She proceeds to tell me of how he lost his mother and how, due to his position in the Guard, his father couldn't go to take care of him. She refused to tell me where his father was stationed, however. "And as it were, as you guessed, he was chosen to be trained under my House's care. Before he lost his memories… Takeru Shirogane was inducted into the Royal Guard."

"Eh?! Takeru is… Takeru is a Royal Guard?!" My mouth remains hanging wide open as I felt a shiver down my spine. He's… already a member of the Guard?!

"In training. Just like you," Tsukuyomi says in a firm tone as she sends a strong gaze at me.

So we're the same? We're both apprentices? You and me, it's as if we were fated to be together. For our paths to have crossed like this, two fellow apprentices in the UN. Sigh… I only hope it is not yet too late to salvage our bond, Takeru.

"So then, do you know when was he given the Minaru Kamui?"

"Sadly, I cannot speak on the matter," she affirms, holding my stare, shrugging it off.

"I see… Well, worry not, Tsukuyomi. I shall do what I can to support Takeru from my position," I nod, firmly, fully returning her gaze.

She smiles, in earnest. "Thank you, please do be patient with him. "So then," Tsukuyomi gazes at me, the hold of her interlocked fingers faltering, "was there anything else Shirogane mentioned that you believe is worth our consideration?"

"Hmm… I believe there isn't- No, wait a moment," I cover my mouth, furrowing my brows.

"What is it?" She asks, gulping and tensing her posture.

"Well, I do not wish to cause you any alarm, but there is one small matter that has been bothering me since a few days ago, actually," I admit, sighing, ruffling my hair in an attempt to rid my head of this numbness. She nods, business face restored, the cousins also listening intently. "You see, during the visit of the Undersecretary's retinue, one of my squadmates mentioned something regarding Takeru, something everyone refused to answer for some odd reason."

"What is this about? Something related to his special missions?" Tsukuyomi inquires, leaning forward, eyes sharpening.

"It very well might be, I assume. As the Undersecretary joked about, one of my comrades said that another was jealous due to being unable to have a taste of Takeru's 'special milk'."

"… Pardon?" She asks, gaping, eyes gradually widening.

"Indeed, so they said. Takeru seemed to know what they were referring to, due to his reaction," I note, groaning as I recall, lightly hitting the floor with my heels. "Then, when I requested him to spare me a cup of his milk, he vehemently refused me."

"Meiya-sama, you did what?" Shion asks, face flushing for some reason.

"What? I am most curious as of what this is about, of course. While I shan't complain about it, the synth menu is lacking in taste. So I wonder how good does Takeru's milk tastes, so I asked some as politely as possible yet he refused time and again."

"M-Meiya-sama, I do not think you should be asking for such things," Mion says, covering her face with a hand, breathing shallow.

"Whyever not? Milk is a spectacular source of vitamins, especially calcium. Having proper dairy elements in one's diet is of paramount

importance, so of course I'd welcome the chance to have a sip of Takeru's milk, if he ever allows me."

"You…" Tsukuyomi slowly stands. Her eyes are twitching, hands shake as if choking a chain, simply staring is enough to make my gaze desire to flee as if a blazing oven she had become. "You young miss won't utter any such vulgarities anymore!"

"Wh- But I'm only-"

"No excuses! Meiya-sama, I forbid you from bringing this up ever again!"

"Why?! Why does everyone want to keep me away from this? Tsukuyomi… you wouldn't be planning to keep this milk all to yourself, would you?" I inquire, casting a side glance, a strike in caution.

She gapes, fingers move erratically like a madman's piano. Face flushing into a red more radical than her attire, I can only shiver at the frown she endows, the overheat which upon my figure towers.

"You shut your mouth!" She scolds, smacking the desk repeatedly. "I don't recall raising you in this way, miss. Since when do you go spouting such unproper words in the open?!"

"Unproper? Wait, were not talking of actual milk?" I raise a brow, tilt my head.

She stalls a reaction, then facepalms. "What- But- In any case! You are forbidden from speaking of this matter again!" She affirms, waving a finger at my face.

"I kept my end of the deal, I've revealed all I could," returning her glare, I hold the silence at bay despite the coldness that embraces my soles. "What is this special milk supposed to be and why does everyone want to keep me out of the loop?"

"Sigh… I suppose, this is my own fault for never having taught you of such topics," she laments, pinching her nose, sighing heavily once more, shoulders sagging like elevations of sand upon high current. Tsukuyomi huddles closer until our shoulders touch, shielding her lips with a hand. "Listen well, Meiya-sama. The, ahem, *milk* you were speaking of is actually…"

…

She leaves my side, sighing. "And as such, you should not mention such vulgarity ever again. Not even as a jest."

So you're telling me…

"Regardless, if anything odd occurs with Shirogane-"

I openly requested Takeru to… to let me have a taste of his…

Lips curl in, thighs meet, hands grip and crush my uniform, foggy echoes surround me.

That embrace, that odd vision in the sim room.

A ruined house with a Gekishin collapsed nearby.

A warm hold on my hand, which then envelopes my shoulders.

Gentle tickling on my ear, the view above the hill as the celestial offerings remain on full display.

" *Come on, say 'Aahn',"* Takeru requests, pointing a fork at me with some food on it. *"What is it, Meiya-kun? If this octopus sausage isn't fitting to your palate…"* he smirks, waving both brows up and down a few times, *"I can offer you another type of 'sausage'."*

W-What? Why would- This… Ugh… Mmh…

*The breeze hits my body, tickling it all as my hair loosely falls. A fingertip, two, three, they draw circles on my nape, another hand*

*pokes at my navel. Looking into his eyes, leaning in, my lips part… and meet his for a moment. Only a moment, as he rolls on the grass to face me, hold my right hand tenderly as if lifting an infant.*

*And under the starry skyline…*

T-Takeru, stop… Why am I thinking of… doing such depraved things in the open of all places… while I'm in Tsukuyomi's presence… My breathing halts, legs mold, melt unto one another, it is as if I were surrounded in lukewarm steam, this ticklish feeling that refuses to surrender its grip on my insides.

*He plants a kiss onto my fingers, eyes lingering on mine, causing a rebellion within my heartbeats. "This is all I am, Meiya. All I can be. I know it might not be enough to appease 1 st Lt Tsukuyomi or whatever ties you have with the IRG but… Would you give me the pleasure of being my wi-"*

**SLUMP!**

**THWACK!**

"M-Meiya-sama?! Meiya-sama, please open your eyes! Can you hear me? What is- S-She's burning! You two, bring me a medpack!"

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*A/N: For further reference on how ESPers are treated within the Reversal timeline, you can go read the sidestory Eclipse Chaser.*

*Now, with this chapter's events we're both on track with the Komoro arc and the issues from before the rewrite. I took some liberties to try and lighten up the mood compared to the usual doom and gloom of the fic, and also to set up the rest of the arc accordingly. I don't know if the last bit works as intended, but I just rolled with it and all be damned. Silly misunderstandings aside, I hope the duality of Meiya's choice and why I'm pressing her so much on her 'resolve' is apparent now. Let's just say that a certain aspect of TDA really stroke a wrong chord in a personal level, due to a character that is absent in it that*

*we know is in the other possible Meiya ending. And if Resonative proves me wrong, glad I made this an AU and the Mad Dog can rail me if I'm wrong about it.*

*Anyways, this was all for now. Thanks for reading. Stay safe.*

*Zuoriel*

# Landmines in the Masquerade

*Chapter 84:*

**Landmines in the Masquerade**

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*December 5 th. Around 11 AM.*

*(Yuuko's Office.)*

**[Yuuko]**

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Sighing with a vengeance, I sit on my chair and he remains standing. A few fingers clasp onto my chin, I spin for a second before facing the immutable expression directly. Chief Yoroi has remained oddly quiet since Pyatkh found him making his way to the office, thanks to Yashiro's warning. In his usual attire, hands in his pockets, he stands only a few steps from the desk. The small smile never changing, the hidden arrow never leaving his eyes.

"… So what is this about? Surely you didn't bring any odd souvenirs for the inspection teams, did you?"

"Oh, don't worry. I left the dodo plushy in Takeru Shirogane's hands. However, if you were wanting to get your own, I could easily-"

"Chief, get to the point. I'm terribly busy today."

"… So the dodos aren't important, huh? I wonder, when was the last time you showed me a smile for my services?" He laments, gesturing as if to wipe a non-existent tear from his desert dry cheek.

So I narrow my eyes, resting both hands on the wood along a warning of an incoming gavel. "If you don't want to be Hayase's

punching bag for the next hour, start talking. I am busy, Chief. You should know why."

"Well, I was told that someone saw a few odd people following a certain group since a few days ago," he mentions undisturbed while tipping his hat downwards, losing the smile, gaining a lingering acid to his words.

"… I see. How does that relate to Alt IV?" I did expect some people to notice, but for him to come personally… Which is it? On which side are you and Her Purpleness on?

"I can understand why they would be curious," he smiles again, waving his hand as if trying to send a breeze to himself. "It seems that there was someone who had become a regular at a sushi shop in the Capital as of late. I do recall telling you of this new establishment, of how their Golden Rolls were culinary works of art."

"Oh, really? What is it with that regular?" I ask while sinking back onto my chair, not lifting my stare.

"You see, he was truly upset that the new business wasn't favored, that the rest preferred to go to the rotating kind of establishments. He often expressed that said practice was against the spirit of sushi, that has to be eaten as it's served," he nods at the end of his slow telling.

I slowly narrow my eyes as I sigh, beginning to spin on my chair. "You don't say. So that regular was upset people weren't following the traditions? Quite the tantrum for a grown man."

"No, he was upset that everyone seemed to think rotating sushi bars were the only alternative left for the business to flourish, all to please the foreigners who saw traditional sushi bars as boring and bare-bones," he couldn't hide the extra pressure of a fingertip onto the hat, acid surfacing again despite the smile never leaving. "I do agree to some extent with the proposition, waiting until the right sushi reaches my seat only to see it taken away by someone else is truly infuriating, won't you agree?"

"If I want something, I go and get it myself. If the rotary equipment has a determined serving place, I'd sit near it to not have to wait. Complaining about the system in such a way is truly childish." Barely answering, I lean on my palm as I send a side glance at him. His brows moved for a second, smile shuffling backwards.

"Well, I rather keep my inner child alive for as long as I can," he chuckles heartily, looking undaunted by my glare. I'm at my wits' end here, so hurry up and get to the damn point. "Also, one could end up eating more than what one plans to in the rotary sushi bars. Temptation is a cruel, bewitching mistress after all."

"… So, what does this has to do with Alt IV?" Stopping spinning, I let go of the chain of my face, now frowning at him and his attempts at making me trip.

He coughs, sobering up. "As I was saying, the old regulars were very upset, I'll have you know. However, after the CCSE, as sudden as a May affair, most of their movements were halted and I haven't heard them complaining as much as they used to."

"… What do you mean?" That's not what my informants have told me. Sagiri was still readying himself and his group, awaiting a spark to light up a blaze.

"So you were not involved in that negotiation?" For a second I was about to retort to his accusation, I manage to clamp my lips and tighten my hands, staring in silence. He immediately raises his hands, regaining that small, insufferable smile. "Please don't shoot the messenger. I'm merely passing the question to you."

Sighing hard, I spin slowly to lift the congestion of aggravations that wish to fly away to his ears. Shaking my head, looking at the red and white mug, I brush the pungency away and lock onto the certain trails I know of.

I have confirmed Sagiri is only a pawn, he lacks the backbone to truly perform a coup only with his loyal men. Their radical group

could, theoretically, swarm the Edo Palace and that's it. As soon as the rest of the IJA starts to move, they're done for. Perhaps, killing the Prime Minister and making themselves be heard is all they're truly after. If so, their naivety is only second to their narrow-sightedness.

Still, tragedy begets opportunity. And certainly, this is a chance few would let go off. Both from within and outside our borders. Only with support from… an outside source could Sagiri get his hands on all the map charts he would need, or the man power to actually take over the Capital and fight off the Royal Guard to get to Her Highness. All relies on her accepting an audience with him, and surely he and his group already have ideas in case she were to leave the Capital.

… And something tells me I'm staring at the main piece of charcoal that's lighting up this fire. Are his words to be trusted, however?

Knowingly going through the coup despite the risks, Sagiri must have been fed up with the status quo of the other world Shirogane went through. So, despite all the differences this world has, how Shirogane confirmed it hoists a stronger nationalist ideal, as well as the possibility of a leak granting him dreams of whatever happened after Alt IV was lost in other worlds, Sagiri as of now 'seems to be quiet'?

"… I was concerned about Sagiri, yes. I do not need any accidents to happen while we're in Sadogashima. I only had him under vigilance, that's all. What's this about halted affairs?"

Chief Yoroi slowly gets closer, leaning forward and producing a small notebook from his suit, with a pencil slotted on the side of it. He quickly scribbles something and passes me the page after folding it up. A finger goes to his lips as I took the paper. Eyes only, huh?

…

Someone put pressure to enhance the agitation that was being instigated to send Sagiri towards a coup. Part of it came from a sector from the UN's Japan Branch, who are not entirely aligned with me, *the same assholes that thought I'd welcome the notion of executing Shirogane for the mess of a CCSE they brought out* . The other… coming from a certain extremist group, one of the core backers of the rushing of Alt V and the raid on the Original Hive. Huh, now this is interesting… So you're already moving out for blood. I chuckle for a moment, since this is unexpected as a simple program eating up all my ram. Not that such a case hasn't presented itself in my time in charge of Alt IV, but the point still stands.

"So he just… got quiet all of a sudden after being fed some intel? He isn't trying to do something on his own?"

"Indeed, what an odd occurrence, wouldn't you agree?"

"Odd? Yes. Unimportant for Alt IV's goals? Also yes."

"Hahaha… What a cruel rose you are, Professor. Certainly, such an oddity deserves more than a passing glance?"

"Not like you aren't the one passing around folders."

"Well, that is true, yet one cannot deny that a small spark is all that's required at times to start a fire."

"… I am going to send support to the relief efforts, personally. Make that clear to Her Highness and her devotees."

A slow raise of a brow, tension in the string, arrow raising. "Oh? Really, now? I was under the impression you were rather short staffed? In any case, Her Highness will be pleased with the news," he tips his hat, giving half a smile. "Still, that's only patchwork. I doubt you'd be… satisfied with such a solution," it turns into a smirk as our stares crash.

"No other accidents will occur, be sure of it Chief."

"Perhaps, what has already occurred will instead fuel this engine to life. Perhaps, it is merely biding its time. Neither of us would welcome anyone disturbing that bar, after all," he chuckles, stopping as I forward a glare.

"… I suppose you're here because you think this has something to do with Shirogane?"

"Oh, what has made you bring up his name here?" He raises a brow, a hand on his chin as he leans forward, smiling like a clown, playing his part to the tune. Whose tune, that's the question.

"Please, anyone could see where this was going. Sagiri was already aware of Ayamine's presence here, and I doubt he either knows or cares about Tamase, Sakaki, or your daughter. And there's no way he knows of Mitsurugi's real identity. So, if your own scouts say he suddenly grew cautious after being given a push, which I assume was something related to the CCSE," I stare, he returns a nod in sobriety, lips shrinking, "then I suppose he saw Shirogane's name, and that has something to do with his newfound over-caution?"

"… You know, as of late I've been unable to surprise people with my reports," he once more laments, bringing his hat to his chest, expression falling to pieces. If I didn't knew him, I'd think he truly was at the verge of tears.

"Are you losing your edge, Chief?"

"Oh, that might be the case. Even Takeru Shirogane saw through my plushy with ease," he smiles, nodding once. Seeming pleased for some odd reason as he returns to normal.

Sigh… Why did he give the plushy to Shirogane? He usually leaves the things here only to make our teams work on them pointlessly because they never have bugs. Perhaps… Trying to spur a memory to surface? Testing if Shirogane is truly himself?

… For which side? *You wouldn't be thinking on harming Shirogane now, would you Chief?* Would Sagiri raise in arms at the threat of Shirogane being alive once more? No, think. Was the intel on the CCSE sent due to what occurred to Ayamine? To try and spur him into defiance to the UN? Or, maybe, those who wish Shirogane to be removed from the squad wanted to put pressure to fit their goals? The Chief seemed slightly distraught at my mention of the CCSE. Meaning, the data was sent. And he was not related to that, much less pleased in the outcome.

"… So, what is your real reason to be here? What does Her Highness require of me now?"

"No, this time Her Highness isn't the one directing my moves," he returns my gaze fully, slowly tipping his hat, quietly coming closer, briefly curving the edge of his lips. "So long as Alt IV is successful, I believe Sagiri could be pacified if everything goes according to plan when Sadogashima is reclaimed. While it is true some in the IJA do not favor the UN, I doubt they would act based solely on that feeling."

"I see… So he had already gotten quieter before 'they' reinforced the pressure?"

"Indeed. I do not discard that someone sent word to spark up the hostilities in light of your announcements during the last meeting, yet I doubt that faction would simply give in so willingly."

"… Which means, one of them was in the retinues that came with the Undersecretary, and probably also present during my announcements as well. I suppose you want a list of the people that came, don't you?"

He smiles and nods, again tapping his hat. "Thanks for making my work easier, Professor. It is good to work with someone who gets to the point quickly."

"Sigh… What do I get out of this favor?" I could investigate on my own, though it makes it easier on me if he wants to lend a hand.

"Well… I can feed false intel of your choosing to certain parties, in case you wished to hide Takeru Shirogane while he remained serving the UN. As well as aid you in keeping an eye on the sushi bar, to not have your men stand out in the streets. Of course," he lowers his hat and tone, jaw tightening ever so slightly, "if you would desire to place your own spark upon the establishment, I suppose I could acquiesce."

"… I guess this works for our mutual benefit. I'll have Pyatkh give you the list before you leave, and I'll contact you when I wish to have you keep your end of the deal," I tell, hand on my chin, as I stare. He nods, placing the hat on his chest as he then makes a small bow.

"Thank you kindly, Professor. However, there is one matter that must be addressed to raise the coming operation's chances of success to a degree many will be comfortable with."

"… And that is?"

"The cases of BETA appearing in the mainland. According to my informants, there were some… victims to these stray appearances after the last mission, thanks to some high ranking officers not sending the right support when it was needed," he gives a short, fleeting sigh, I roll my eyes as I also do. Shirogane won't let me hear the end of this if he finds out. Great. Wait…

I never told him of the BETA attacking isolated settlements, did I? I wonder if he knows anything… He did mention the BETA attacked the base, how they surfaced almost by our defenses' side in the mails he sent me about the Sadogashima mission of his last loop. Yet he has not mentioned anything about this incident. Dammit, I should have asked him about this before. No matter, we're still safe. If Sadogashima goes better and we don't lose Model B this attack will be thwarted with ease and minimal losses.

*I still would like you to be completely open with me, Shirogane. But we'll talk at large tonight, don't worry.*

"You seem… to be pondering something important, Professor." I look at him again, still smiling as his ballista readied itself, tensing his brows before shooting. "For such thorns to raise in threat, what could be troubling our one and only Professor Kouzuki? Do you happen to possess any intel you would be willing to share?"

"… No, I am merely reviewing my moves to ensure Operation 21st succeeds. Moreover, the UN doesn't have authorization to move out in the western side of the Empire and doing so might upset some of the more avid loyalists in the IJA. Furthermore, the crew of Yokosuka should be the one dealing with the scouting."

"Still, perhaps the A-01 could aid in these endeavors?" He tilts his head, the glint of the bolt openly visible in his eyes.

"They're readying themselves for the mission full time. I don't do charity, Chief."

"Well, perhaps, you could send them undercover along the pigeons to the relief-"

"I don't do requests, Chief. You should be grateful I haven't deported Shirogane and accepted to aid the relief efforts, after all the mess of the last few days," I remain composed, my voice level and my expression neutral, a rampart of dry ice.

I don't know what caused him to be suddenly suspicious, but I can't, I won't show him anything. You made me trip multiple times since we met, I'm not going to keep letting you gain intel from me in the same way.

"… Surely you can't risk the BETA suddenly surfacing in Niigata while the Sadogashima operation is on-going?" He suggests, slow.

"I can manage just fine, thank you. I am making plans to counter any and all setbacks that might present themselves." And if Shirogane starts cooperating, then we're all set.

I narrow my eyes, fingers joining as I rest my elbows on the desk. He holds my gaze, bolts and arrows ready to come out yet restrained for now. If he insisted on solely the relief efforts, I could understand. But aiming his shots at the stray BETA… Warning or threat? Still, he does have a point in that I can't overlook this situation.

According to Shirogane's notes of his past experience, the BETA attacked the base after Op 21st coming straight from Gunma, hiding under the ground, and using our tactics to boot, possessing knowledge of how to deactivate an S-11. While we tested that the Reactor hasn't transferred our intel to the BETA yet, the Sadogashima Hive's tunnels can reach the mainland now so we have to take it down as soon as possible before they launch an invasion behind our defenses, even if Shirogane affirmed nothing like that happened in his first loops after Iceberg, despite refusing to elaborate on what actually happened until I give him an answer. And the possibility of them launching an attack as of now, after we're having the 00 Unit connect to the Reactor and after all the tests I did to guarantee that no data was leaked, is a certain threat.

A threat I can use to my advantage. So long as the BETA are breathing down our necks, Sagiri won't be foolish enough to do a coup, I believe. And come next year Alt IV will be showing off results left and right, giving the Empire more recognition and lifting the burden of the tight defense lines from their shoulders. Once the situation for the general population improves, he won't have most of his current backers within the IJA. If Alt IV proves itself superior, America might openly accept it as the best plan and thus Sagiri's lifelines will vanish into thin air.

Of course, I do not believe the other players will remain idling by. It's a matter on what is best in the long term. Gaining the IRG's support would mean much, more so if somehow power is restored to the

Shogunate. Simply saving Her Purpleness should be enough to gain her blessing, what with Shirogane's-

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Right. Shit… Could I somehow convince him to stay despite the coup? I have not had any dreams nor odd feelings creeping into me yet. Despite my pressure, he remained steadfast in the four options he forwarded. Without him… I still can go through the coup, gain the Empire's support. Yoroi here would truly be on my side then. Taking cards to prevent this, to counter the people Shirogane desires to strike down… if linked back to me, it could easily backfire. Not to mention, the ripples we'd have to deal with afterwards.

"… You seem to be pondering the state of things very thoroughly," he notes, sober and lacking any tint to his tone. "I had thought you to already be aware of the terrain's look. Please, those bladed thorns are ruining your complexion, Professor."

"I'm merely weighing my options, Chief. Much rides on the Sadogashima mission."

"And precisely because of that, I believe that it would be in your best interests to solve this issue now, with all due respect," he affirms, clashing his gaze with mine with the habitual inexpressive mask he wears off.

"I think it's quite fair to affirm that moving carelessly could, and will, cause a domino effect. I highly doubt Sagiri is what we are both truly concerned about," I scoff, shaking my head as he starts to chuckle.

"Ahaha, you're truly a sharp, cruel rose. However, it would be a shame if all the efforts you've put into gaining Her Highness' favor were to crumble due to a sudden paradigm shift."

"… Surely you wouldn't be trying to use me for your own agenda, would you Chief?" I accuse, tone slowing down.

"Perish the thought. I merely find the timing of this deceleration odd, and very perplexing."

Ge again smiles, slowly waving a hand as if it were a candle's flame, gazing at the maps on the wall, to what in the east lies.

"If anyone wanted to strike at your project, now would be the most opportune time. Yet, everything seems to be rather… calm, eerily so, compared to how everything looked in the field but moments ago. And if anything could reignite the tension, that is the stray BETA that randomly appear after an attack."

Tipping his hat, hiding his eyes, he leans on the wall as his telling slow downs, drenched in acid.

"The IJA will claim the defense lines were useless, that cramping the population within the shelters was meaningless, that the UN was deceiving them. Maybe then they'll release the reports of the destroyed villages in the radios or through a broadcast, claiming the UN was pressuring them to keep quiet and that Sakaki's cabinet was in league with these efforts."

Quite the elaborate description for what could occur, huh.

"So, you're saying they could rally their troops against us despite the fact that the BETA might still attack during this… petty infighting?" I inquire, causing tension and animosity to well up. The lower lip seemed to be forced to retreat within as he relents a nod. "Well, while the warning is appreciated, there is little we can do against that, can we? If Sagiri do desires, they can and will use the stray BETA as a spark and no report will deter them." After all, if the BETA threat did not stop them during Shirogane's last experience, it certainly won't in this world. "There is one thing you can be sure of, Chief. No rebel will stop Alt IV from starting," I affirm, smirking.

"However, if said unrest made its way to the UN's Security Council-"

"Stop beating around the bush, Chief. What are you truly after? My help in… suppressing these soldiers before they act? You know that we can't take an open political position."

"… I already said I came here on my own, and I do not wish to have you start a fight with the IJA."

So you don't deny that you want the fight to occur, just that you don't want us to be the ones who start it, huh… Seems like Shirogane's notes also apply for this world, Chief Yoroi did leak the plans of Her Highness' escape from the Capital and seemed to be playing as a double agent, to the point that he had to 'vanish' and his daughter was taken in for questioning.

"Then, get to the point before I lose what little remains of my patience." I lean back on my seat, placing a hand on my chin, firing off a glare.

He endures the drizzle, not breaking eye contact. "While I was tasked with delivering a pair of items here, there were another set of reasons for me to take the time to do so now. First, I believe you do need to deal with Sagiri in one way or the other. After the… tensions sparked by the Yukon Incident, I believe we'll both agree that America wishes to stabilize the Far East Frontline."

"Nothing will occur so long as no spark can lift off. And if the stray BETA are revealed, that is something that will affect more than just the Empire." Though, I know a few who would welcome the spreading chaos that would ensue. "Yet, I will not risk the first move. The UN won't involve itself in the Empire's inner matters, even if I were to request an investigation."

He nods, once more smiling. "Precisely. There are some strings you can pull to calm down the regulars of the sushi bar, though."

"For example?"

"Well, I heard they actually dislike natto rolls, very much so. If they were restored to the menu, I'm certain they'd have to do a double take. Not even the snake would dare to reach for the apple, since it dislikes the strong smell of natto."

"… What?"

"Hm? Oh, you don't know? Interesting…"

"Chief, you have two minutes to explain yourself."

He immediately raises both hands in defense, chuckling so erratically, so annoyingly. "I believe you already know what I speak of. But I'll cut to the chase," he straightens his suit, undaunted steel meeting my gaze, "you could send Shirogane to the Capital. His presence alone would be deterrent enough."

"… I am not going to use *my protegee* in such a way. I assume you are aware of his… ties?"

"A trainee of the Tsukuyomi House, mysteriously returning from Death's door as a UN cadet. The horror tale practically writes itself," he once more lets out a chuckle, that stops short as I begin to, very slowly, tap my papers while glaring. "Ahem… You could mend two issues with this action, in my opinion."

So this is what you're truly after. Quite foolish of you, Chief. *Do you think you can try and harm my bodyguard?*

"Interesting proposition. Do you think his name would be enough to strike fear in the valiant Sagiri?" I ask, leaning forward along a smile. "Despite how you warned me to dispose of him before?"

"Well, anyone would be shocked to see a dead man walking again," he deadpans, nodding a few times.

"And that could cause quite the commotion, don't you think? This is a delicate issue, that I shall oversee. Shirogane won't be leaving to the

Capital any time soon. Furthermore, I don't think he would-"

"Oh, I do believe Takeru Shirogane would welcome the notion to visit the Capital," he tells, a faint smile.

"What makes you affirm that?"

"Because I left a letter in Takeru Shirogane's hands."

"… What? From who?"

"You can speak of it with him, if you're so inclined."

Hitting the desk, standing up, my teeth remain closed for a second, keeping the tidal vulgarities at bay. "… And who authorized you to do as you please in my base? *Shirogane is off limits, Chief."* He says nothing, doesn't move, and remains returning my gaze as if a statue he were. "Answer me, who sent the letter?"

"… I am not UN, so I simply took my liberties. Also, Her Highness has already expressed her wishes to have Takeru Shirogane regain his memories. I wonder why you're so riled up about this…"

"Hmph… I am concerned, since he might have another shock as before. I'd be foolish to not be taking his mental health into consideration."

"Quite odd, coming from you," he chuckles, slower than before, "who would have said you'd grant a shield of petals to him."

"Who sent the letter? I am not asking again."

"I suggest you to talk about this with Takeru Shirogane, and proceed as you believe is best after hearing his thoughts."

Rough and dry, inflexible as my equations' numbers. Ruthless and cold, without caring a single bit about my needs or position, only caring about the right result. Heh, people can be just as, if not colder, than my research is to me, after all.

"I will remember this little… mischievous act of yours, Chief," I smile as I sit down, resting onto a still tight fist. "If something is wrong with Shirogane after he reads this little letter… I'll make sure you repay me, and him, for your carelessness."

"I shall accept any punishments or requests you place on me. You were the one who taught me not to hesitate when reaching out for my goals, after all," he then chuckles, I cannot help but to mimic him.

Though, our laughter is dry, restrained in our throats. And our smirks, twisted in their edges, are but a wordless confirmation on our dissidence. Of course, his loyalty lies with Her Purpleness after all. No… To the Shogunate would be more accurate.

"Well, the other reason I am here today is this," he takes out a small data pad from his suit, placing it on my desk. "Here is the confirmation of all troops that will take part in the coming operation, as well as the most recent intel on our sightings of the BETA in the mainland and Sadogashima. The IJA will place most of its military might at your service, and both the Navy and the Army are more than ready to lay down their lives to earn humanity's first victory if you gain the approval. Both the Shogunate and the Diet have forwarded their appeals and answers to your prior announcements, expect a formal document to be coming through the official channels shortly."

"… You could have saved valuable time for us both had you had gotten to the point, you know?"

"Haha, what can I say? I love monologuing," once more smiling for a moment, he places both hands within his pockets as a statue he becomes again. "As for my own reason to be here… I am of the opinion that, considering this odd step back that was taken, you should watch your shadow quite carefully. Many are the people pleased with your developments, but many more are those whose expectations have been dashed."

"So, basically, what I was already doing." However, if they gave up on Sagiri, it might mean their catalyst could have changed to fit the new board we created. "And I suppose that you have certain… interests vested in how this is resolved."

"Ahaha… I cannot best your eyes, it seems." So the notes do apply to this world too. Now it's a matter of whether we are on the same side or not. "If you ever require my services, all you need to do is call. Also, I insist on you sending some help to investigate this matter of the stray BETA. Not only for my own wishes, but for yours as well."

"… I'll keep it in mind. Anything else?"

"Not from me. I suppose Takeru Shirogane will come with the news in due time," he chuckles, until I frown and lean forward. "All I'll say is, solving the issues of his citizenship should be your priority, regardless of how you'd favor to deal with the sparks."

"You say he has enemies that are coming after us?" How odd, they never revealed much about him. What is it with him now? "Out with it, who is it?"

"… It's the opposite, actually," scratching his head, he chuckles, dryly. "I heard your talks with the General and Her Highness weren't exactly smooth sailing?" I sigh, shaking my head as I roll my eyes. "Ahaha… I don't think anyone will insist on him leaving the base as before, so rest assured in that. Her Highness does not oppose him working for the UN."

"Well, that is a good bit of news." Didn't seem like she was on board with that idea, at all, however.

"Yet, there are some that desire to see him, confirm for themselves he truly is alive and that he indeed is who he claims to be. Oh, and do not worry. We are working to keep trouble away from your horizon, Professor. No one wants such a beautiful rose squinting her

eyes so," he affirms, again with that insufferable smile as he gives a small bow.

"Siiigh… Is Her Highness asking for another meeting, then?"

"… No, but not everyone is as patient as Her Highness or the Tsukuyomis, nor do many see you in such a good light as her."

"… Is that so?" The feeling is mutual, then.

If the Guard keeps pressuring us, Shirogane might react negatively. If he favored their aid, then he'd have welcomed the notion, suggested that to me. And yet, he hasn't said anything. Perhaps, because he's still waiting on my answer. In any case, I need to know what was in that letter and who wants to see him. He's… a too valuable asset to be hindered by these fools. Much less now that the 00 Unit is ready to be tuned, even if it overloaded itself again on our first test. I need him… operating at his full capabilities, so I cannot let anything burden Shirogane any more.

"Shirogane is currently required to stay here, focused on the missions. He isn't leaving anywhere, and he won't be meeting anyone from the Guard besides Her Highness or the ones watching over him. Feel free to tell that to whoever sent you to deliver the letter," I smirk, leaning forward, "and don't dare to repeat this, Chief. My patience only lasts so long."

"… I believe I might not want to push further." And you chose right, Chief. "By the way, might I ask about that device he has on his head?"

"… It's there to help him keep his migraines in check, that's all." I stand up, going to make me some coffee, grabbing a small cupcake.

"I see. So, regarding the matter of-"

"I'll send some scouts, if I can spare them and our aid is welcomed. Preparing for Sadogashima is my priority, as should be yours."

"… Indeed. Oh, before leaving, I'll leave you a-"

"Bring out another stuffed bird or a weird rock and I'm calling the Valkyries," I lunge for my communicator with the haste of Yashiro's running speed when faced with carrots.

"Ahaha… I have nothing on me. Please drop the comms, Professor," he requests, voice lowering as does his head, both hands once more up and trying to appease. I do so slowly as I narrow my eyes, he softly sighs, placing a lone finger over the rim of his hat as he looks at nowhere. "Ahem… Simply allow me to give you a bit of advice. She can be very stubborn, and I believe she won't stop insisting until you allow her to visit the base."

"… Who are you talking about?"

"The woman that sent a letter to Takeru Shirogane. Watch out for her, she also has a short temper as you do and it would be a shame if the relations with the Guard worsened all of a sudden."

"… That was a threat," I affirm, giving a chomp to the cupcake.

"No, it wasn't. If he truly is Takeru Shirogane…" his eyes gradually close, massaging his chin he exhales through his nose, "then, you should have nothing to worry about. He should know the truth, it won't do him good to remain in the dark for so long, especially if you desire to have the pigeons graduate and take part in Op 21st."

"That is for me to decide," I glare at him squinting my eyes, "as his current tutor," I add a second later. "Shirogane hasn't said he wants to learn of his past, and so, I see no reason to force the situation when it could backfire."

"Is that so? I wonder, why have you left the rumors unchecked then?"

His eyes look right into mine for a moment, that same coldness, that same harshness, that same arrow aimed right at my throat. I return

the glare, slowly eating the cupcake and silently retaliating towards his wordless accusation.

"… I'll call Pyatkh to escort you out, and to give you the list you were wanting. I expect to hear back from you if you find anything suspicious about anyone."

He strongly places both hands on his suit as he straightens it up, gives a smile, tips his hat with a single finger and bows to me, departing without his traditional wordplay. I call Pyatkh and relay the orders to her as he leaves, sitting down and swallowing what was left of the cupcake as I start to spin.

… So, someone big is coming after Shirogane and the Chief still doubts that he's their Shirogane while also thinking I'm keeping him from the truth. I assume, someone was not very pleased with Her Purpleness' answer to let him stay here. Sigh… Nothing I can do, save for preparing for whoever it is that wants to poke their nose where they shouldn't, *to try and take him off my side* . And more loyalists to boot, great.

I assume, must be someone tied to his old squadron in the Guard. Someone from the Koubuin fellowship, that probably took part in Lucifer. Quickly flaring my PC to life, flashing past pointless reports and pop ups, I begin my search. Option one is the other Tsukuyomi, the one that came to deliver spare parts to the Blood squad. However, she has been serving Ikaruga since a few years before the invasion. Chances are, she's not on Shirogane's side. The females from the Kisaragi that could have met Shirogane are all dead, the ones from the Guren family are stuck in offices. They do not strike me as the type that would challenge me, going by what my crew says of the meetings. So that leaves-

"… The leader of the Strike Force," I say as the profile comes up, inhaling sharply and tasting iron.

Raiho Amato, leader of the Chain Squadron. I believe, she was in charge of some food plant project the UN wanted a piece of during

the invasion. She stalwartly refused any cooperation, and to her credit the deals she has secured do seem to be on their way to fruition. I don't… have a particularly pleasant view of the woman, however. If I recall correctly, she was one of the strongest opposing voices to my directives during the invasion, to take the defense lines further back, to have the IRG work alongside the UN and IJA.

… And if my sources don't lie, she was behind the fall of-

…

"No… You gotta be kidding me."

Quickly typing, smashing the keys in a flurry, the result of the search voids me of air. There is a blank in her squadron's formation. I'm sure Shirogane is this missing member of the Chains. But then, that means… he was involved in the fall of Mogami?

… Chief Yoroi warned me of possible enemies, of how his presence could work as a deterrent. After all… that squadron was said to show neither justice nor mercy to the wicked. If Sagiri is the smokescreen, and the Chief chose to be frontal about it then, what lies in between the lines? Wait, the snake and the apple. Are you telling me-

"… Is EDEN trying to worm their way back into the Empire? Damn it all," I hit the keyboard, exiting the window, causing something unrelated to come to the front. I already have enough with the softer side of the cult, this is-

Could this be a mirror, a parallel to the events of another world? If I could gain even some small memory, regardless of how small, I could try and adapt the landscape. And yet, I find myself slumping onto my seat.

"No matter how much I try, I've no idea who could have written that dumb poem. Siiigh… I haven't noticed anything odd, my absorption of radiation hasn't changed either."

That being said, where is Shirogane? Why didn't he contact me about this letter? Let's see… my inbox doesn't have anything from him or Yashiro. He… wouldn't be thinking on meeting this woman, would he? No, what was he doing until now? Considering this threat… Why have you not come to me already?!

No, that doesn't matter. I inhale deeply, feeling the smell of the coffee before I drink it as I slowly sit down. I'll send him on a special mission if things look bad. I cannot lose such an important… resource, without him I can't tune the 00 Unit. The Guard can't be so idiotic to do something against me now when the mission is so close, even if Her Purpleness gets all riled up about how I'm handling 'her stepbrother'. Once the waters are calm, I'm certain they'll welcome a proposal to ensure no further outside interference can strike back at the project.

However, Shirogane did say something interesting about regarding their relation… A difference between 'Yuuhi' and 'Her Highness'. Perhaps, that is the reason why they're insisting so much. I can only wait until he comes and tells me of what the letter said. Still, I need to give him an answer soon… and if EDEN is in the picture, then I should try and bring stability sooner rather than later. To allow an intervention would be suicide, even if the US begins to support my project. Not to mention, I can only parley so much with what few Alt IV supporters, or Alt V decriers to be exact, I still have in the US.

Finishing my coffee and eating another cupcake, I spin in my chair, spinning and spinning, closing my eyes and fully resting my neck onto the cushioning.

"… You sure do like leaving me in wait as of late, Shirogane."

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*Same Day. Around the same time.*

*(Office. Camp Ichigaya, Tokyo.)*

**[Naoya]**

Straightening the papers, I sort today's report before stashing it within a folder. Sigh… It is so disgusting, how they shift the blame onto the delivery services when we never receive enough supplies. Oh, but the 'favored' bases get their shipments in time. And of course the high political class has all their necessities covered. Is it so hard to give just a tiny more support to our people?

"Worst of all is, if the Capital Defense Regiment is in such state, what is left for the rest?"

What of our fellows in Kyushu? Of those holding the line near the possible attack lines coming from Sadogashima?

I walk to the window, basking in the incoming sunlight, in the busy streets of Tokyo. From here, it's almost as if there were no war. People are still working, walking to their everyday jobs, holding the line in our capital. Be it those who tend to the food centers, the shelters, the schools, the toll is beginning to show. Is there truly no other way… than to risk their lives in rebellion?

… What good is a blade that so simply surrenders to violence? Am I lacking resolve, perhaps? To merely live on in this monotonous dread would be equal to death, and yet… Can I so easily surrender their future, risk it all in hellfire and smoke? I will most certainly perish, yet those I leave behind… Will the melting snow serve to breathe new life onto our soil? Will it mingle and mix with the spilled blood into an amorphous corruption instead? Regardless, if this emergency evacuation we've heard about does come to pass, the shelters won't be able to hold out. To leave the people in meager excuses for tents, out at the elements' mercy…

"… Is there truly so little empathy left in your soul, Prime Minister?"

At the very least, I should reserve my judgment until Her Highness has spoken. We have a duty to ensure her conference proceeds smoothly, and cleansing my mind of clouds should be my-

"Captain," I hear her voice alongside a knock on my door.

"Enter," The figure of my second-in-command, 1st Lt Sayoko Komaki, takes some steps into my office, giving me a salute and standing in attention. "At ease. What is the matter?"

Not altering her firm posture, she takes a few steps forward. "I have come with two reports for you, sir. First, our contact in America has brought some papers for you," she holds up two dark gray envelopes in offering, which I take and start breezing through. "And second, our informants have confirmed that the UN will be lending their troops for the relief efforts."

"What? Are they… planning to forcefully remove our fellows from their rightful land?"

She shakes her head, immutable despite the small pursing of her lips. "We do not have confirmation on their intent. However, our sources seem to indicate that they're willing to send a few TSFs to the mission."

"I see… I can only hope some meager decency remains in those halls. Do we know from where the aid comes?"

"No, my apologies, sir," Sayoko bows down, tightly veiling her sight. "We were unable to receive a conclusive answer."

I pat her shoulder, giving a smile. "Such oppression in not deserved, you hold no blame, 2nd Lt Komaki," I affirm, she straightens once more and nods. "However, that does not equal we can relax just yet. Even if they're lending us a hand, it's the method which makes the madness. Our scouts are still vigilant, I assume?"

"Of course, sir. In that regard, I wish to inform you of something that caught my attention."

"What is it?"

"There were some people snooping around the perimeter of the base, as well as the sushi bar our fellows frequent while on leave," she notes, further tension to her already serious expression, arms bolted to her sides. "It is not a rare sight for some of the civvies that still choose to live nearby to come near the base, but these two individuals remained staring at the building, and from different places too as they moved around. I believe someone sent them to monitor our moves."

"Do you think our real intentions were leaked?"

"No, I doubt anyone in this base would betray you, sir. However, it is clear someone is wary of us," she looks down, tapping her glasses, "perhaps, due to the slowness of our movements of late."

Sighing, I face the window, meeting the dejection of the reflection. "… I cannot deny that," after all, we are merely pieces on the board. If it's not us, it will be another. "I trust in your instincts Komaki, so have some of ours perform a few surveillance patrols around the terrain every now and then. Don't do it all the time, we must not let them know we're suspicious of anyone."

"Yes, sir!"

"Also, did we already receive any news of the next budget?"

"Yes, it does seem like the Prime Minister will once more cut part of the Restoration Project, to use the money to rearm the western front," she informs, trying to remain composed, failing to tame her brows and lips.

"Heh, using some of their own money is out of the equation."

It's always the same. No matter the face, all of them are corrupt to the core. Just like how Shukaku-san was betrayed by politicians, those same corrupts are thriving on our suffering, leeching off our resources. But if I don't time my moves… the BETA will eradicate us. If another large herd comes our way while we fight, that which we

desire to safeguard will fall. And that, that will be nothing but the toll of the final bell. Is this all I can accomplish?

"… *When it is time for actions and not words, you should force the clouds to part with your own damn hands. If you ain't got the balls to do what's necessary, kindly fuck off the battlefield and go back to the reports, 1st Lt Sagiri."*

The adusted voice returns, the pressure of the blaze. With war as its cloak, thriving amidst the carnage, that echo still resides within my ears. A frown is hewn into my features once more, carved deep into my soul.

"Sir, with all due respect," Sayoko calls, a hesitant and slow step forward, her eyes unable to rise and meet mine, "isn't this the most appropriate time to launch our offensive? The BETA's last attack in Niigata proved the frailty of our defenses, and now this evacuation only confirms our suspicions. We could easily-"

"And risk having another Shura's Dance?!" A shout left me, fueled by cinders of days past. Her lips clamp shut, she hastily dives into a deep bow in apology. "Raise Komaki, I didn't meant to let my woes to affect my voice." Sighing, I take off my glasses, rub my eyes for a moment. "I understand your feelings, but we must never underestimate the BETA. And if we start our plan now, the people won't take our side. It will seem as if we were kicking the government when they're weak, we'll be giving them a chance to victimize themselves, to seek support from the UN and the US. And I think I know what's in these folders…"

If that name from the new recruit was no mistake… Did you make a deal with the Devil? Or perhaps, your sins were so grave you were even denied the eternity of nothingness?

Shaking my head, I pace to my seat. "We might be playing as their pawns, but that doesn't mean we will follow their moves to the letter. Patience is key, Komaki. We must execute the valor that is discretion, until the time is right."

"Yes, forgive my rudeness, Captain," and again, Sayoko bows in apology.

"Please… It is alright. You may leave."

"Isn't there anything else you require of me? I could aid you sort these new reports, if you so wish," she proposes in a hushed tone, locking her gaze with mine.

"Sigh… Sit down, let's take a look at these documents together. Two heads think better than one." I nod and walk up to the other end of the room, preparing some coffee for the both of us.

As we drank, we discussed the data Sauber had sent us. It's clear he is not entirely false in his words, as what he tells aligns with our own intel. Even if this insistence is also born out of interest, I don't believe his words about desiring to offer honest aid. We are, truly, nothing but pieces on a board, but even so there is some merit to being a pawn. At the least, we can endeavor to athwart their plotting. It's all a matter of whether Her Highness will welcome the chance to free herself we shall offer.

As me and Komaki plan possible routes to surround the new Capital, brainstorming possible scenarios and double checking our allies' positions on a map, a page on the second folder cautches my attention.

Or, to be more precise, halts my heartbeat for a moment. I felt my throat twist on itself as the shock jolted my insides. A request for a report on someone Sauber didn't have any data on, couldn't find anything about.

"Captain? What is the matter?"

I quickly type the name into the databases and a profile shows up. Once more, my breathing halts as I stare, not believing what pops up on the screen. I take my glasses off, rub my eyes and look at the screen again. The writing does not change.

So you're truly back from the grave… Now of all times, this cannot be a coincidence. Why must you reappear at this moment, Black Fire?

"Captain, whatever is the problem?" Komaki's shoulders grew smaller as she gazes at me, seeming to be holding her breath. She rarely shows her inner feelings, so I take a deep breath to calm myself down and shake my head.

"I simply saw… someone I hadn't seen in a long time." I say, ripping the page apart, closing the site in my PC. "I'll handle the second folder on my own, 2nd Lt Komaki. It would be suspicious if you were to stay too long in my presence from the eyes of the few unaware ones here."

"… Yes, Captain," she immediately stands and salutes me, not inquiring about my sudden decision, and leaves after bowing by the door. Sigh… What would I do without her, really.

But, then again, what is the meaning of this? Why is a dead man walking? And why you, of all people?

"Takeru Shirogane… You truly are a revenant, I suppose," I cannot help but to chuckle at the state of affairs.

Quickly reopening his profile, only minimal intel remains in the report. Alaska, huh. Was he truly overseas or is this all lies? The beast that destroyed Mogami Base in a single night, the Black Fire that which surges after the Red Lightning. Shirogane, Chain Three, despite being of common descent was perhaps the most dreadful member of the Strike Force.

Does this mean… the UN is against us? I doubt I could get any insight on him without drawing eyes onto me, and I cannot do that. I already risk myself by sending those letters to Kei… Wait, that's it! According to this data, he's stationed at Yokohama. As a cadet, for some unexplainable reason. Well, he always favored the shadows,

that much is true. I could at the least warn Kei of him, try and keep her safe. But does this mean the UN is cooperating with Shirogane?

Wait… A sudden approval to send aid to the relief efforts, despite the rather lack of cooperation between the UN and our forces of late. Is this your doing? Did he gave up on struggling from the inside? Or, on the contrary, is he operating in the UN for his own gains? Predicting his moves is a futile effort, that much is true.

"Sigh… This threat completely changes the landscape. The smallest push, the faintest spark… if he's showing himself openly again, it can only mean one thing," I shudder, frozen slugs spilling through my back, dripping all over me. The icy pain of the cold shower I endured during the invasion's worst days, the desire to curl up assails me.

Back before the invasion was fully repelled, I was tasked many 'favors' to cover Kei's trails. And of those, the ones I loath the most are the ones regarding you, Shirogane. Those first months of '99, having to 'cover' your missions…

… The instinct to puke comes up again when remembering how his squad even attacked some of my comrades, saying they were traitors involved in backroom deals. I knew those people better than them, there was no way anything of the sort happened! The Lt Col of Mogami Base was a very respected man, framing him with charges of selling and producing illegal drugs was nothing but the lowest a warrior could do. And according to some, there were some more awful charges pressed onto him.

I do agree with some of his targets, but to execute our fellows without trial… to use the cruelty of war for his own ends…

" *Don't make me waste my time. It's clear as day, these bastards were involved in illegal acts that amount to treason towards our nation."*

Always the same answer. 'Treason to the Empire', the perfect excuse no one could argue against without bringing about a brand upon

oneself. And when pressed for clarification-

" *I have no reason to tell you the specifics, soldier. I'd suggest you to open your eyes and take a clear look at who stands by your side, but you have to wear glasses to even see…"*

Gulping what was left of my coffee, I again stand and open the window, feel the breeze rustle and wash over me as I light a cigarette. Simply standing, I look at the sky, at the clouds which threaten with covering it all again.

I concede some people were not worth my trust. But for someone so young, so ruthless, to be given such power… Why? A casualty of the war that only furthers the chain of pain, that's what he was. Even if his searing wrath cleansed a path forward, there is much regret left in the ashes.

And yet, standing here, watching at the city, at what we managed to protect, I realize that, perhaps, you were just like me, trying to brave the despair. If results are absolute, I suppose the future generations are to decide if our struggles were worth it or not. And yet, is there someone who can truly judge right from wrong within the desperation of carnage?

"And when our guard was down, we both did see eye to eye. Suffering only begets suffering, it is a venom that corrupts the mind, erodes the soul. More so in these times, where even the smallest elevation another may enjoy gives plentiful reasons for spite to fester like a disease."

A disease there is no cure for, a bewitching whisper which one cannot ignore at times. The desire to strike back, to lash out. Every time we hold a meeting, this meager office is barely able to hold all that mire within its four walls. It overflows, it sinks its fangs through the flesh, straight at the heart. Discontent which morphs to anger, anger which evolves to hatred. Had I not been taught under Shukaku-san I, too, would have fallen to such a cesspit. A cesspit you employed as a fuel source at times, Black Fire.

"And yet, looking at our current dilemmas… Perhaps, it simply has to be this way. I've carved my own path, you followed your wrath, and yet we met the same dead ends," letting out a puff of smoke then closing the window, I drag my feet back to the report, the request for intel Sauber forwarded. "If this is the landscape you fought against, maybe… we are far more similar than I thought."

To ensure yesterday never becomes tomorrow. That is what he always said whenever I pressed for answers.

Under that hope, perhaps I could eternally rest under the bloodstained snow. Would marching for my ideals despite the risks find some meaning? On which side would you stand if I raise a banner to war? Or is bloodshed all you desire to bring about?

**Ring! Ring!**

Hm? I wasn't expecting a call at this hour…

"Hello, Captain Sagiri speaking."

"Good afternoon, Captain. Might I borrow some of your time?" A small voice resonates from the other side of the line, I straighten up instinctively.

"Of course, 1st Lt Kobayashi. What is the matter?"

"We of the Royal Guard stationed here in Hibiya have been ordered to move out to assist the western front for the time being. Thus, there will be some shuffling of patrols near the Palace during the press conference. A report should be arriving to Ichigaya to update you on the IRG's positions. Considering how short staffed we already are, I decided to inform you ahead of time, so that you can hasten the commands."

"I see. Thanks for the intel, 1st Lt. Best of luck in your coming endeavors."

"Yes, likewise."

"If I may, what has caused this last minute arrangement? It is odd to hear such an important matter relayed in such haste, mere hours before the conference."

"Apologies, Captain. As you perhaps already know, the UN's aid has given us some… leeway to deal with certain pressing matters, is all," she says, composed and stable. "By the way, Captain," she asks, lowering her tone ever so slightly, "a bird told me someone rather suspicious presented itself at your base's gate at dawn break. Do you know anything about it?" Is she… suspecting me? I suppose the Royal Guard does want to avoid any kind of infighting after all. Also, damn you, Sauber. Be more careful next time.

"No, I was not aware of such happenings. I will ask around, just to make sure nothing is wrong in the base. Thanks for the tip, 1st Lt Kobayashi."

"It is nothing. It will be much appreciated if you can find out what was that about. Now then, until another time, Captain," She cut the call, without changing her sharp yet kind sounding tone.

If the Guard were watching over me… Does that mean you want to neutralize me, Shirogane? If he is the one behind this- No, he's in the UN as of now. Furtheemore, he knows no moderation. If I were in his sights, there would be no words left to speak. Yet, this sudden movement from the Chains is extremely suspicious. Not to mention, there has been some other oddities after the Defense of Niigata.

I might need to call Saito for intel and hope that mysterious caller contacts me again. For the time being, patience is my ally. I cannot show weakness, I must ensure my fellows remain composed in front of the adversity. Faltering isn't an option, not with the threat of the Black Fire on the horizon and the Red Lightning on the loose.

… And whatever lies buried in Kitanomaru as well.

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*A/N: Answering MonkeTitan's question, while Alt III is top secret, remember that the Pickles were part of the Swordbreakers, which are like the Valkyries of the Imperial Guard. Besides that, even if her status as an ESPer is not know, this world is more discriminatory than canon and Kasumi is Russian. So while not everyone treats her badly, prejudice is still there.*

*Also, no, Keru does not need a haircut. Long hair Takeru looks better.*

*Anyways, this was more of a transition chap not much action here. See you next time, thanks for reading. Stay safe.*

*Zuoriel*

# Link of Desire

*Chapter 85:*

**Link of Desire**

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*December 5th. Some minutes before noon.*

*(Yuuko's Office.)*

**[Yuuko]**

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Aiming my full focus upon him, to the point where Yashiro can no longer remain staring, a hand serves as soft landing for my chin while I stare. And yet, he forwards the silent treatment again as he drinks his coffee.

"You refuse to tell me of the letter?" He nods, a leg crossing over the other, an arm loosely extends over the sofa. "Do you realize what this antagonism tells me about you, Shirogane?"

A brow corks, he then smiles back. "Do you realize what kind of mess you're getting into, *Vice Commander* ? Knowing intel you shouldn't have access to can easily backfire."

"Thanks for the reminder, but I deem this an emergency. Speak, now."

"No, I don't think I will," he then sobers up, resting the cup on a thigh as he returns my gaze, fully, "unless you're ready to give me an answer."

"The contents of the letter may play a vital role in our plans, Shirogane."

"Your plans, you mean. We have not yet agreed to remain working together after I tune Sumika, and I'd like you to cease these attempts at pressuring me, *Vice Commander* ."

"… Is that so," spinning, kicking away at the floor until I can feel the back of my head regretting the impulse, I interlock my fingers and shoot gazes at him when he enters my vision. "Did you also have something with this Amato while you served in the Guard?"

"… She almost killed me, you know."

"What?"

Slowly sipping his coffee, he remains quiet. Bereft of answers, I can only stare yet find no cracks. Perhaps, because any further cracks would have it all collapse. Yashiro's ears lower, a few fingers barely grasping at his sleeve. And then, she fires a glare at me. If she were a real bunny, she'd be hissing.

"… Alright, enough of this. Are you in any danger, Shirogane?"

"Nope," he says, leaving the mug on the small table, shrugging, "not while I remain here. And I ain't leaving the base if we can't reach an agreement, so telling you of something that will matter little if your decision is set is a waste of time. Try as she might, *Captain Amato* cannot do anything to get in the way of the tuning, so it's not worth your notice."

"… And what of afterwards? If we need to stabilize you and regain your citizenship-"

"Should I take that as an answer, then?" He delivers another eclipsing stare, tone quiet yet harsh.

Little more han once again focus fully on him, pressing a knuckle onto a cheek to denote my displeasure. "I'm merely seeing if you're thinking this through, remember that the IRG doesn't have a good

view of me. If I commit to your ideas, I cannot have you in any danger going forward. So, what was in the letter?"

"I don't deal in hypotheticals, *Vice Commander.* This has nothing to do with Alt IV, so can we get to the tuning already? I won't let any memories affect Sumika, if that's what you're concerned about," he affirms, arms folding and giving a firm nod, never breaking eye contact, breathing stable as his features also remain.

"… Shirogane, surely you cannot let a meager detail get out of control again, can you?" I ask, leaning forward. "Even if we pacify Sagiri, there is a possibility your identity could be used to strike back at me, that a few loyalists would try and free the Shogun's stepbrother from my grasp. After all, you're, legally speaking, closer to Her Highness than even Mitsurugi."

"Except I'm no longer that," he slowly shakes his head, joining both hands, slouching a bit.

"… Hmm. So why are you refusing, then? What are you keeping from me, Shirogane?"

Like a sudden wave gaining altitude, the counter effect of the surfacing of whatever lies below, beyond sight. The smallest frown, now present nonetheless. "You should know already, *Vice Commander.* Curiosity is what killed the cat."

"Are you threatening me, Shirogane?"

"Are *you* threatening me, *XO Kouzuki ?*"

"You two, stop it!"

**CHOP!**

He pouts a bit, groaning back at Yashiro, whose bunny ears continue to flap as she shoots little glares at both of us. "You're supposed to be on my side, young Gadawan."

"A young what?" I cork a brow, failing to recall hearing of said word before.

Yashiro's gaze gains intensity, as does the hand which still grips at his sleeve. "I am your friend, but please stop antagonizing the Professor."

"Not my fault she can't take a no for an answer. I do give her time to sort out her thoughts, but she immediately pressures me for every last bit of intel, even on things she knows she cannot learn at the time," he shrugs, shaking his head in a dramatic and exaggerated gesture.

Coiling a fist, hammering at the desk, I glare. "Shirogane, stop messing around! You already know what risks would I face if someone with your ties to the nobility ever becomes a target. Do I have to force the answers out of you, perhaps?"

His lips purse, slowly he leans towards Yashiro. "See, Kasumi? Told you she was Zith."

"Takeru-san, don't start, please. We're all on the same side," she scolds, pulling at his arm.

"What's a Zith?"

"I guess that means now there's… three of us?" He says, losing force as he raises a brow, ignoring my query.

"Sigh… Do you have to try and make the joke?" She asks, flapping her ears.

"No, wait, we're the Zith Triumvirate now," he affirms, regaining the usual cheer, raising a small fist while nodding to himself.

"I'm saying, what is a Zith?!"

"We are nothing of the sort," Yashiro protests, pouting.

"I mean, to be fair, from the perspective of the Empire, I'm sure we're probably the bad guys of the story, though. But don't worry Dersh Bnnuy, Mom and Dad got this covered," he states, pushing his chest out, eating another flurry of chops to the shoulder while starting to chuckle.

"… Dersh what? Okay, Shirogane, can you start explaining what are you on about?" Here I am, revising all the old docs I can to see if there's anything conclusive to use as a lead to confirm my suspicions. And there he is, joking around like a clown.

Blocking the chopping, he nods back at me. Endowing a small smirk. "Fuhuhu, well, if you insist. Allow me to present to you the first ruler of the United Federation of Mankind, our overlord and savior, Dersh Bnnuy!" He announces with a dramatic bow, patting Yashiro's head.

"Takeru-san, stop it with the puns," and she immediately protests again. "I'm nothing like that old mean man who ruled the Zith."

"Hey, for now," he raises a finger, another smirk. And receives another chop.

"Sigh… Is this all just a joke, Shirogane? Because I might be considering bringing some syringes if you don't stop now."

"See, Kasumi? That's the Dark Flow at work," he points at me, nodding at her groans. Before going back to business, lazily smiling my way. "But anyways, I was just talking of Galaxy Wars to lighten the mood a bit."

"And what is this 'Galaxy Wars'?" I ask as I spin, rubbing my forehead.

"… Wait, we don't have Galaxy Wars in this timeline?" He asks, features widening in honest surprise.

"No, I don't think so? Unless you count the BETA war, that is."

"… This world sucks."

"So, you were saying about these wars…"

"Oh, they're a series of movies. And comics, and games, and other junk. It features lots of starships and battles, the iconic lasersabres, and it was really popular back home."

"Laser… sabres?"

"Swords made out of lasers, that is."

"What!? You could make… Was that all fiction?"

"Of course they were, duh," he rolls his eyes, shrugging. "Though, not all of it was magic science. Learning about the Doom Moon was actually what made me like jets and stuff when I was little. Though, it kinda sucks knowing it could never be real," he nods slowly, putting both arms behind his head as he relaxes onto the sofa.

"And what is this Doom Moon?"

"A planet-sized XG, kind of. With a laser beam and all. As I said, seeing that is what made me wanna be an engineer, even though my grades were awful."

Inhaling slowly, feeling my own waves going tidal, a frown I forward. "… Shirogane, why have you not mentioned any of this until now?"

"I mean…" he looks away, ruffling his hair, "the tech shown in Galaxy Wars comes from a futuristic future. I doubt even you could make heads or tails about such advanced things, and we have other stuff to deal with. More important stuff, like tuning the 00 Unit to get a head start compared to last loop."

Halting the spin with a heel, aiming squarely at his eyes, tensing my lips for a second, I rest both arms onto the desk, causing a pencil to fly away to the floor. "Excuse me? I am more than capable of sizing up and working on any 'futuristic' tech from your world. Do remember

we have far more advanced spacecraft here, going by the notes you brought from your world."

"Huh, really? Then, what about the Rapier?" He asks, resting onto the sofa while playing with his hair, while smirking.

"… What?"

"Yeah. You told me the meeting for the negotiations went alright, but you didn't say a thing about it, you only spoke about the XGs. What's up? Chickening out again?" He raises a brow, defiant challenge, not altering the teeth-revealing smirk as I glare.

"What are- What do you mean by 'again'?" Staring, I tap and press a paper, pulling at my own strings.

He chuckles while idling time on his long strands. "Well… Last loop you didn't have the time to work on it, so you gave up on fine tuning the Rapier. I think it was some sort of special TSF made to work with the XG?" He asks, hand on his chin, returning my gaze, not faltering.

"Yes, it… Yes, it was. Why haven't you mentioned it thus far?"

"Because I know nothing about it, of course," he smiles, shrugging, not altering his posture at all, still looking into my eyes. "Never saw it do anything but collect dust. We did have a small talk like this, when you showed me Model D for the first time. Something about the ion thrusters not being like you thought, kind of a pain to deal with."

"Wait, you- Since when do you know of ion technology?!" I slam the desk, hands quivering against my restrain.

And he dares, he dares to chuckle again. To still smile my way, resting onto a hand, posture relaxed onto the sofa as if floating on a pool. "Since back home. It was actually one of the stuff I looked as a way to forward my thesis back in college."

"Huh, really now?"

"Yeah, for real. Not gonna lie, I wanted to make one of those giant ships from the movies, maybe fly to Mars and explore the stars. Turns out Ion thrusters are not actually very strong, though. Good at efficiency, but back home they had their limitations and weren't very fast. Mostly used for satellites that remain on orbit, I think."

"I see…" No lag in his words, no shade in his eyes, only raising a brow as I remain silent and staring. So he's telling the truth, huh. Something I couldn't do in another world, something which could protect the XG… "Do you believe we should push to get one in our hands?"

"Depends. If you think you've got the time, sure, go for it. Not that I care, if you're dead set on going through the coup."

"Sigh… What is it now? Something in the letter riled you up, *Captain* ?"

"It's 'cadet', *Vice Commander* ."

"It's 'Sensei', Shirogane."

"I'd prefer it to be 'Yuuko', though."

"Oh, giving up on the 'honey' already?"

"… Not like you remember anything about the poem, anyways. Sigh…" And like a balloon poked by a needle, he deflates for a second. Taking a short breath, folding his arms, he straightens up, back to the neutral facade. "But, back to the point, no, I ain't telling you about the letter. Has nothing to do with Alt IV or our pact, of that you can be sure."

"So you won't speak?"

"Until you give me your final answer and commit to it, I think it's better for both of us to, you know, keep our cards close to our chest.

Better for you to not entangle yourself with me more than you need, if you only need me for the tuning."

"… So you are not answering, huh," I narrow my eyes, bumping a hand on my chin while spinning.

"Neither are you," he rolls his eyes, some hair on a finger.

"Please, stop fighting…" Yashiro pleads, trying to stare, lips quiver as she looks down. "We're all allies, right?"

"Until *XO Kouzuki* answers my suggestion, it can't be helped, Kasumi," he says, petting her head.

"Mmgh… Is this pouty act fueled by the result of the questioning on Mitsurugi?" I stand, going to make myself more coffee.

He sighs, relenting a nod. "Kind of, yeah. And no, it did not work out."

"Hmm. As expected. Don't worry, I already told Marimo to stay on her guard. Mitsurugi won't be an issue to you."

"If only that solved the problems."

"You cannot control other's feelings, Shirogane. If she won't see as you do, there is only so much you can try to do," I remind as my cup fills up, he simply shrugs.

"I know… And I won't falter, don't worry."

"Any ideas to try and make peace with her?" I ask, inhaling into the fresh scent, bringing the cup to my lips.

"Yeah, there is one card left to play," he affirms, despite the desolate tint to his eyes, the visibility I gain on his knuckles.

"I see. In any case, there are other matters we need to talk about, so let's deal with the 00 Unit first," I say, pacing towards the door.

They follow behind, Shirogane scratching his head as he comes closer. "Anything I should know before we start the tuning?"

"Nothing we did could get a reaction out of the 00 Unit that was not pure rage or docile obedience, and it did not answer why it left the cylinder room to seek you. From a computational standpoint, it's working as expected. But if I only needed a quantum computer…"

"Same as before, huh," he comments, sighing.

"Well, I hope your tuning session yields results, however small."

We exit the office, turning towards the cylinder room. If my theory of two-way communication stands true then, perhaps we don't even need to send the 00 Unit to Sadogashima to gain intel on the Hives. Shirogane did report that the Reactors are another BETA strain, so once I confirm no leaking happens, once its capabilities are stabilized, perhaps we could have the 00 Unit scan our Reactor, gain the mapping of the Sadogashima hive, maybe more.

Then, our last resort would be far safer than otherwise. The 00 Unit can fully focus on the particle cannon without resorting to scanning the Sadogashima hive, without putting further burdens onto the system.

We enter the room, the two of them slowly go up to the pod, watching over it as I approach the monitors and start the gradual cease of Sleep Mode.

… If it does react as I believe, then I will require Shirogane to stay until then. That equals preparing a motive for the pigeons to graduate against the piling pressure that pushes against the notion. Perhaps he could help me, but that would mean accepting his terms.

… *Not that I had any plans to allow him to leave. Shirogane is staying, I'm certain.* He's only hesitant due to what's at stake for his world, for the ripples that may follow. Once the 00 Unit is properly tuned, things will go back to normal. *I'll ensure no ripples can screw*

*up his home world, nor our efforts here.* It's in my best interests after all… to repay his aid, to have him stay *by me* .

Looking back at Shirogane, stepping towards him, I cough. "So, are you ready to begin?"

Silently nodding, he holds my gaze.

---

*Some moments later…*

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"So, which one do you think will stop spinning first?" He asks, looking at the three spinning tops he somehow found available in the library.

The 00 Unit's lips twitch, gazing at the three wooden triangles. "Uhh… Left one."

Sigh… Still talking in a monotone, huh. Only some brief changes to the patterns recorded earlier.

"Alright, let's see how this goes," he softly says, brushing the hair and the ribbon, before the three twirl and give impulse to the toys.

As they spun around on the ground, I took a glance at Shirogane. He nods back, so I return my attention to the monitors. The fluctuating graphs, the spikes, the smallest, erratic reactions on its face… So this is working, somehow. Luckily, it seems to like spinning tops for some reason.

There is only a minimal disquiet to the patterns in the screen, a composed appearance instead of seeking bloody murder far more savage than Shirogane's piloting.

The toys slowly start to lose speed, and in the end the left one was the last to remain spinning.

"Wow, you guessed right again, Sumika. Here, some more candies," he cheers, placing more of the things in its hand.

However, the 00 Unit limits itself to simply holding on tightly. The still waters of its expression betray no emotion, blank as a sheet of pure, immaculate snow.

And yet, the stability is more than enough. Its patterns denote emotion, buried deep within, lost in a trench. But it is there, there is acknowledgment towards Shirogane's actions and queries. His gaze hesitates towards me, he allows a sigh as I smile and nod back. Gesturing for him and Yashiro to stand, his motions stop and a grip sends him back to the floor.

"Don't leave," the 00 Unit pleads, grasping at his arm, maintaining the neutral facade.

"Sumika, we played a lot today, right? I have to go back to my own training," he whispers with a smile, petting its head.

"No," the gripping increases in strength, his lips purse for a moment.

"Come on, now. I'll come back tomorrow and we'll play again. I'm not going anywhere."

"No!" It then constricts upon him, with far more impulse, enough to cause a wince out of Shirogane.

"Sumika, calm down," he pleads amidst a groan, embracing it with his free arm, patting the back of its head. "Nothing's wrong, no one here will harm you."

Yashiro hesitantly steps closer, as if walking against the wind. "Takeru-san, shouldn't we turn her off?"

"No, she has to get better," he looks my way, unblinking. I slowly nod, watching the erratic numbers, the exertion closer to red.

"But she might hurt you, and I don't think this is good for her, either. Professor, should we really let this go on?"

"We do need the data of a stress test," I simply say, not meeting her gaze. And frankly, there is little comfort we can offer for the horrors Kagami endured. Time is all we can give the 00 Unit.

Shirogane did report that the 00 Unit was also reacting in this manner during his last experience. We have little choice but to stand and watch it endure the flashbacks until it can control the searing revengeance it inherited from Kagami. To that end, the readings are necessary. After all, if there is a need to assault Kashgar before its Reactor grows to the next Phase, the 00 Unit has to reach a proper level of aptitude. Fast at that. And while Shirogane's idea of playing games is trouncing my earlier trainings, if the progress is insufficient…

… Do I have to send him back to his world? What will Shirogane do… if I force him to ruin another Kagami? He's going to cross me if it comes to that.

"It's alright, Sumika-san," Yashiro says softly, lowering to the ground. "We're safe here, there is nothing to-"

**SMACK!**

**THUD!**

"Go away!" The 00 Unit shouts, eyelids constricting, trying to melt into Shirogane's hold as it stares at Yashiro, who lays frozen on the floor, holding a reddening cheek, eyes and lips extended in paralysis.

"Sumika, calm down! Kasumi isn't your enemy, she's-"

"No! Go away!" Another manic scream, another frantic expression, yet this time-

The readings are different, this isn't a berserk overload. The toxins released by the synth skin, the wavelengths emulated… Fear. Another emotion.

It took him only a single session to bring out another emotion in it already?!

"Ugh! Please calm down, Sumika. Nothing's wrong, we're all on your side here," he wails, groaning. Looking back at him, his glare holds my gaze, unblinking. Gesturing for me to turn the 00 Unit off.

Inhaling softly for a moment, gazing at the shrinking shape that starts to loudly wail, to beg for Shirogane to not leave, to not be hurt, I relent a nod. Inputting the commands takes a second, the 00 Units begins to quiver, its speech turning jumbled, down to a mumble in mere moments. A sleeping Whitesnow it turns into, limp on Shirogane's hold.

Without sharing words, we connect it back into the pod. Once I made sure the ESP protocol is in working order, I start up the ODL purification. Looking back, Shirogane is rubbing Yashiro's swollen cheek as she apologizes for some reason.

"Shirogane, Yashiro, to the office," I order, leading the way.

I take one last look at the pod, seeing the undisturbed sleeping face, as if resting beneath an ice cage for eons at a time. Both of them sigh and leave the 00 Unit's side, so I exit the room with them tracing my steps back to the office.

Shirogane and Yashiro both sit side by side as before in the usual sofa, she in complete petrification, he still gently rubbing the reddening cheek. I quickly prep up and hand him the red and white mug with coffee to him and the full black one with cocoa to Yashiro. Both of them drink in silence, so I take the opportunity to sit down myself and start looking at the recordings. After some minutes with only my key clicks resonating in the office, Shirogane clears his throat.

"So how did it go?"

"What do you think of that last outburst?" I ask, looking into his eyes.

"She was either seeing another traumatic memory or she was really afraid of me leaving," he affirms, then looks back at Yashiro. "Do we have anything for her cheek?"

"Don't worry, we can tend to that later," I wave away, he groans a bit. "How is the progress compared to the prior one you tuned?"

"A bit better, I guess," he shrugs, taking another sip. "The outbursts were way stronger last loop, probably because she saw me die in front of her. But the overloads still happened, it took me a while to actually hold a conversation with her."

"… I see. So there is not yet conclusive proof of progress on the stabilization of her psyche."

"Yeah, that is true. I'm not going to-"

"I wasn't going to suggest anything. Drop your guard," I cut him off, slowly spinning in the chair. He sighs, resting his full weight onto the sofa again. "Shirogane, did I ever tell you what you were doing right last loop?"

He raises a brow, eyes squint. "Regarding the 00 Unit? No, you only told me she never showed emotions when I wasn't around, that I just needed to be close to trigger a change. Her attitude did shift drastically, she started behaving like a kid just a few days after you put me in charge of tuning her."

"Hmm… You told me Yashiro shared memories with her too, right?"

"Yeah, that Sumika once said she remembered sharing breakfast with my squad, but the one who did that was Kasumi. Do you think Kasumi can't link the memories of her little self I saw for some

reason?" He asks, Yashiro's ears flop down, stalling the rise of the cup to her lips.

"No, that's not it. The easing of memories from another Kagami might have aided with the assimilation."

Inhaling sharply, his eyes shut down as harsh as hail. "… Yes, that's what happened. I am not doing that again." He then swallows all the remaining coffee in one go, throwing himself harshly onto the sofa.

"No matter what? I'm sure you know it, we need the 00 Unit in working condition as soon as possible. Even if another Kagami suffers again, that world will get fixed in the end. For our shared goals, stabilizing the 00 Unit is-"

"One more word and I break off our pact."

A frown rises on its own, we glare at the other. He meets my eyes without any hesitation, arms resting comfortably on the sofa, lips tightly sealed. Yashiro once more steals glances at us, slowly finishing her drink.

A small moment of silence extends in the office.

And yet, not even a slight crack surfaces in the mask. Not even a mere joke to lighten the mood, not the lightest relaxation of the blazing glare.

So I shake my head, spinning again. "Sigh… Fine, I won't ask you to go back there. Do you have a plan to make this go better then?"

"Yeah, actually. We just gotta do the reverse of what we were doing before," he affirms, smiling again.

"The… reverse?"

"Remember what we were doing with the recovery sessions? Can't Kasumi work as a bridge between my memories of this world's

Sumika and the 00 Unit?" He asks, patting Yashiro's shoulder, making her gaze slowly return to reality.

"So instead of holding back the memories, you want to bring them out and link them to its current psyche? Hmm… I suppose, there is some merit to the approach." However, an adverse reaction could occur if, for example, Kagami's mother appears and the reminiscence turns into a catalyst. Even the faintest detail could devolve into an overheat, and Yashiro's psyche could suffer due to the recoil. "… Let me test it first. I can't have either of you getting injured, after all. Do you want to try this later tonight?" I ask, gazing squarely at him.

"I guess? Not like I've got much to do, other than oversee the tuning," he says, returning a nod. "So, how did the session go in the end? Did we get anything out of it?"

I shrug, sighing, resting my head onto the cushioning as the spin slows down. "It went fine, I guess. Your idea of playing games did affect her more strongly than my testings, I'll give you that. I got some new readings and data to compile for later."

"Um, Professor," Yashiro asks, peeking. "how much of an improvement did we obtain?"

"Well…" I ruffle my hair, taking a moment to readjust my position on the chair, the numbers and possible wording to employ. "What the 00 Unit is struggling with right now is the processing of Kagami's memories. Every time it tries to do so, the instruction the 00 Unit demands are too much for the constrains of the system and that causes an overheat. This time it was again drawing too many resources, but it handled the stress better than the test we did at early morning. After all, we could make the shift to Safe Mode without any sudden shutdowns required."

Shirogane coughs, leaning forward. "Basically, what she sees in the memories is so strong that she can't distinguish it from reality. That sends her whole system on a loop of anger or fear. Then, she can't

keep up with both what she feels for the memory because she relieves it as if it were an intense flashback, alongside how her body has to react in a proper way to he memory. Was that somehow right?"

Smiling his way, I nod and breathe a sigh. "Exactly, that is it. You get a hundred, Shirogane."

"A hundred what?"

"I dunno, I'll decide later. Anyways, that is the main issue. The 00 Unit tries to assimilate the memories as something of its own, that forces it to emulate the pain and trauma. Its current status clashes with the perceived status as the flashback occurs, the programs' priorities get mixed up, it starts using more energy than it should as it thrashes about while the security programs try to execute the right order to work in. The system falls into chaos as the instructions don't align, so the 00 Unit shuts off as the errors overload the system."

I conclude, spin for a moment, before facing them both once more, endowing a mask, a glare.

"However, if the current approach doesn't work out in a few days…" the spinning stops, my fingers entwine as I lean onto the desk, focusing onto his eyes. "I want you to think thoroughly what you should do to ensure the 00 Unit is properly tuned before the Sadogashima Operation. On that hinges our pact, Shirogane."

"… I'm well aware, *Vice Commander."*

I narrow my brows, crossing one leg over the other, meeting the silent hail as I tighten my gut.

"I surely hope so," I say with a shrug, again going back into the seat's cushion. "Well, now that's out of the way, how have you been feeling? Did the talk with Mitsurugi give you any memories?"

He looks down, idling a hand on his ear. "Yeah, parts of stuff I rather not see. She used words from… a dead end, so I think she's suffering from a negative leak. Anything coming up in the radiation scans?" He asks, looking up, lips cascading down, eyes ever so slightly squinted as if surrounded in smoke.

"Let me check. The training happened at around- Oh…"

"I'll take that as a yes?" He asks, barely audible. I nod, he heaves a sigh.

"Don't get too beat up about this. There is only so much you can do against a fanatic."

A minute frown, he then shakes his head. "Meiya could be different, you know? She may not be… like the one I remember fondly, but that doesn't mean we gotta be enemies."

"I take it this means you do not wish to antagonize the IRG?" I ask, resting both arms onto the desk again.

He gives me a side glance. "That doesn't help in the slightest and you know it."

"And in the off-chance your fears about the leaked parallels becomes truth? What do you propose we do then, assuming my answer is affirmative?"

For a moment, he again stares at me.

Arms slowly fold, silence extends.

And then, he again gives a small smirk.

"I'll fly like a cannon ball."

"… What?"

"Exactly what it means. If it comes to blows, there's nothing to fear. They won't take me down."

"And you're so confident in that because…"

"Because," he frowns, inhaling sharply as he looks down, hellfire dripping from the glare, "I already pulled the trigger once. I can sure as hell do it again."

"Takeru-san, you're no coward," Yashiro states, rubbing his arm.

"Thanks, little bun," he smiles faintly, patting her head again, causing the bunny ears to flap a bit. "Still," he shakes his head, returning my gaze, "if you do want to keep me around, I can guarantee you victory in the field if you help me with the setup. So long as you don't send me against fighter jets or an XG and I'm in a working machine, I can probably beat anyone in a fight."

"Anyone?"

"Yeah, anyone. I didn't survive the Babylon Disaster for nothing," he reminds, a glitched twitch on one of his eyes.

"I see… You still won't mention anything about the letter?"

"Will you give me your answer now?" He stares at me, and nowhere else.

"… There are some matters I'd like to check before," I say, spinning away.

"Of course… Of course…"

"Takeru-san, please," Yashiro again pats his arm, trying to smile back at him, "the Professor is merely being cautious. You're no burden or anything."

He sighs, leaning back onto the sofa, both hands behind his head, seeming to be sinking further away from reach. And so, he says

nothing, closing his eyes.

"This isn't a game," she protests, for some reason, flapping her ears. "There is more at stake than cold numbers."

… What is she answering to? And why is she so upset?

"Sigh… Thanks, Kasumi. But it is what it is."

"I don't agree."

"Excuse me, you two," they look at me, seemingly unaware of the motive of my inquisitive stare, "what exactly are you talking about?"

"Huh?" Shirogane raises a brow, scratching his head. "I said, it's completely understandable for you to prioritize other stuff, after all… I am aware I don't have a good RoI for Alt IV, that on this board I'm more of a pain than anything else," he shrugs, chuckling dryly at the ground.

"That is not true," she protests again, ears flapping a few times.

"Is that so… But you didn't say that, at all." He again raises a brow, she tilts her head. "Yashiro, can you still hear Shirogane's thoughts?"

"Eh? Ah, yes… Sorry."

"Wait, you didn't lock her away?" Sudden blazes back to life, he glares strongly enough to scatter ashes about. "Now that I think about it, she did hear an echo of my thoughts as she came to the sim room. *Vice Commander*, kindly block Kasumi from scanning my mind. Now."

"I already did, though," I retaliate, the frown and the Fimbulvetr back at him.

"… What? Then, why is she still hearing my thoughts?"

"Yashiro, can you?" She huddles upon herself, relenting a nod. It only brings the stillness of the great winter into me. "But I… But I'm sure I blocked Shirogane from your-" I quickly bring my laptop to life, smacking away at the keys, bringing up the control logs. And yes, the safety measures are in full effect. "There are no errors coming up, there should be no way in which she can scan your mind…"

"But she did hear my thoughts just now," he points out, still glaring.

"Shirogane, think of something."

"Of what?"

"Anything at all. Yashiro, you try and see if anything comes to your senses."

He holds my gaze for a moment, a grave expression hewn onto his face, but a pull from Yashiro relaxes his features. A sigh after, Shirogane holds his chin and purses his lips, looking upwards. A moment of silence passes, until both bunny ears perk up as if hearing thunder. Yashiro proceeds to release suppression fire upon his shoulder, Shirogane laughing for some reason without even trying to appease the chops.

"… So I assume she did manage to scan your mind?"

"Ahaha… Y-Yeah, she did," he says, coughing as he wipes a small tear from his eye.

"You're horrible, Takeru-san," she pouts, bunny ears flapping. "Why do you have to imagine that again?"

"Hey, you need to eat them to start growing, my young Gadawan."

"Shirogane, what did you show her? Nothing… inappropriate, I assume?" I threaten, narrowing my eyes.

He merely smirks back. "I thought of Kasumi frolicking about in a field of carrots, devouring them all in large chomps."

…

"Pfft! Ahahaha!"

"P-Professor! Do not laugh, please."

"N-No, I mean… *Cough*… Just thinking of you actually doing that- Ahem… Anyways," straightening my lab coat, I look back at the still chuckling Shirogane and the still chopping Yashiro, "this is quite odd. The bunny ears are working as they should, this shouldn't be-"

Wait, a link that cannot be broken… Being able to see and hear his thoughts in real time…

"Yashiro, do you feel any pushback from his mind?"

She groans for a moment, looks at him, then shakes her head. "No, I can clearly hear him, even if only a whisper. Sorry, I am not trying to-
"

"It's okay, little bun," he comforts, petting her head. "So, can you do something about this?" He asks, leaving his hand atop her hair.

"Shirogane, how are you feeling as of now? Any pain, any disquiet, discomfort?"

"No, not really? The tingly feeling's still there, just, like… There, and that's all," he says, furrowing his brows. Not lifting the hand which on the hair rests, Yashiro not seeming to mind as she leans closer.

Why are they engaging in a psychic link all of a sudden? Why with so little recoil? Is this a side effect of the mind dive? What could-

…

Oh… Interesting, very interesting.

"I don't like that smile," Shirogane says, giving me a side glance.

" *Shush, you.* Anyways, Yashiro, can you end the psychic link?"

"Eh? But I'm not… Well…" she looks down, gripping her dress, putting some space between herself and Shirogane. "Mmgh… I… can't," her shoulders slump, she throws herself back upon his arm. "I can't zone his mind out. Sorry…"

He pats her head, softly parting her bangs. "Hey, it's fine. Don't pressure yourself. So *Vice Commander-"*

"Sensei."

" *Vice Commander,"* he insists, looking back at me, monotonous as the silent ruins, the beeps of machinery, "is there anything we can do?"

"Hmm… You can't push her out yourself?"

"I would if I could, it's just, you know, the feel is there. Not bothering or anything," he says, scratching the back of his head, compacting his shoulders a bit.

So he isn't suffering any recoil either? Could this be… a synchrony? If so then, there's much work to do. I cannot allow Yashiro to end up as she was when returning from the mind dive, and I rather not have Shirogane believe I'm pushing Yashiro against her will. But if my hunch is true and this isn't some temporary link… I should go and rewatch the readings from the Mindseeker, see what I can glean.

"Well, for now you remain on your guard, Shirogane. Don't think of anything that might harm Yashiro," he nods, immediately. "Also, Yashiro, try and not remain attached to him all the time."

She twitches, bunny ears flap. "I am not."

"Oh, really?" I smirk, she straightens herself.

It is odd, Yashiro hasn't been particularly receptive of most people. Not even I've managed to have her display such closeness. While

the mind dive did leave a great toll on her shoulders, if there is no recoil as of now and he welcomes her aid then, this is nothing but more news. *All I need to do is ensure you both remain in good health, so that this link does not become a burden instead. I suppose, another motive to have Shirogane remain by me. Not that I ever doubted he would aid Yashiro, but now I simply cannot…* let such an enticing asset out of *my grasp.*

"I repeat, I do not like that smile," Shirogane says, arms folding, another side glance cast.

" *Shush.* You remain on your guard and take good care of Yashiro, you hear me? Now then, time is of essence so I have one report for you, Shirogane."

"Hm? What's up?"

"Tomorrow, a retinue from Daikuuji Corp will pay a visit to the base. You'll accompany me to present your weapons to them, with some luck they'll be interested in them."

"Wait… Daiku… Daikuuji Corp?! Are you for real?!"

"… So you know of them already, huh. *And you didn't tell me a thing about that, why exactly?"*

"Oh, come on. I know them from my world, they were, like, the second largest business group in Japan," he says, nodding a few times, small sparks coming out of his eyes. "Are they still the same big shots here?"

"Well, more or less. They're the largest commoner-led business in the Empire. All the others have had ties to the nobility, but Daikuuji Corp has stood on its own since the, ahem, restructuring the IRG did a few decades ago."

"The mess with the New Zaibatsu stuff and the like?" He asks, raising a brow, a scowl.

"Yes, precisely. Sadly for them, they were left out of the TSF deal for the Shiranui due to being, well, referred to as 'lukewarm' fellows. While they still have a good standing, they're losing ground by the minute as things are now."

"So you'll use that to your advantage and get an easy agreement," he nods a few times, relaxing a bit.

"Something like that, yes."

Of course, that is not the entire truth. Daikuuji Corp is one of my initial supporters, I wouldn't be standing here if they hadn't backed my proposition to the IRI when I was just a teenager. Now I have much to offer back to them, but the most important thing… the treasure he left in my care…

No, do not focus on that. There is much to be done, and grieving accomplishes nothing.

"So, you be on your way to the office and get as much done as you can before your afternoon training. Once you're done, go back to Hangar 90 and keep at it until Yashiro goes to pick you up."

"Understood."

"Yashiro, you go back to the 00 Unit and start compiling the data produced before. And try and not scan Shirogane's mind."

"Yes," she nods, standing up. Looking back, she waves at him as she goes to the door, saying her goodbyes.

His hand remains in the air for a second before it slumps back into the sofa, Shirogane then sighs.

"Shirogane, I won't press on the letter, but do not let the result of the questioning to Mitsurugi-"

"I'm not," he shoots out, hitting his knees softly. "I know, no time to waste. Don't worry, I'm fine. But…" his lips then pluck as he starts

gazing around. A tight, narrowed gaze meets mine as he grumbles for a second.

"… Is something the matter, Shirogane?"

"Yeah, that I see no tray or anything around."

"Wh- No. We are not doing this again."

"Sigh… Look, our pact aside, you really need to rest well," he says, lips shrink, his gaze lingers on me, in silence, calm and sober as a lake. "I bet you didn't sleep at all yesterday, too. There's still quite some time before my training begins. I can tackle the office again, if you need the rest."

"… Hmm. I assume, you're not planning on forcing me to my room, will you?"

"If you don't want me around…" he slowly stands, dejectedly shrugging, chuckling to himself, "I'll just take my leave here."

…

"I want a report on Sadogashima."

"What?"

"A report on Sadogashima, on the outcome of Iceberg to compare to our current situation. You can deliver that, Shirogane?"

"Hmm… I guess I can do that, yes," he nods, smiling.

"What of a report on the discussion you had with Mitsurugi?"

"I already told you the most important things about it," he affirms, holding my gaze.

"Surely it's in your best interests to halt the ripples? I need to know her reactions to analyze the readings of G-Radiation."

"Is that your answer, then?"

"Sigh… You should be aware of how the board looks, Shirogane," I let out a small sting, gazing at him.

Yet, his gaze crumbles. "Did the Chief tell you anything odd?"

"… Perhaps. But if you don't make an appeal, I don't know if I can properly see your side. You promise aid, but refuse to elaborate and give conclusive evidence on what and how you plan to halt the issues which will come, coup or not. So," I smirk, leaning on a hand, "will you give me details to base my answer on, Shirogane?"

His complexion dulls, slowly he inhales, as slowly as the twitch in his right eye. "I already told you my position yesterday. But if you want proof…" he again smirks, letting me see his teeth, "we can easily bind the moves of the IRG, even if it doesn't come to blows."

"How, exactly, do you propose we do that? They don't particularly hold us in good esteem, you see." And I highly doubt they'd let the opportunity pass them by.

"But the ones who want to light up a spark don't have the freedom they wish," he affirms, a gradual cloud shrouding his complexion. "After all, they made many mistakes… many compromises during the invasion."

"What are we talking about?"

"I'm saying that, if you'd like, I can give you a hint towards what really happened in Mogami Base and why the Swordbreakers were as feared as they were," he says, low, stepping closer and resting onto the desk. "You really didn't think Yuuhi let us roam around freely for no reason, did you?"

"… What of handing me intel that would place me in a compromising position?"

"Oh, that's not what we're talking about here," he remains smiling, undaunted. "But if there are parallels incoming even beyond the coup, if distress will fall on us to deter Alt IV from attaining victory, I think this won't be the first and only attempt to destabilize the Empire."

"Hmm… You do know we cannot take a political position. Are you suggesting me to blackmail certain key figures, then?"

"Yeah, I mean, we don't have to cross strikes if we can help it," he notes, despite the sigh that follows. "There are some that probably won't listen… but we can try and, uh, negotiate with the rest. Even if you've no intention to actually committing to the threats, having dirt on the HC or the Regents has to be worth something for you, right *XO Kouzuki?"*

"Sensei," I counter, tapping the desk. "And might I ask what athwarted you from achieving these goals while you were in the IRG?"

He rolls his eyes. "Her Highness. She won't do anything that might impair the peace of today, not in a million years. And my own hastiness back then."

"Hmm. Then, if she refused, why should I agree, Black Fire?"

A minute frown, whirlwinds on his pants the clawing spawns. "Because, one, we can't let the Empire lash out in defiance. Any more prideful bullshit and the rest of the world might truly be done with Japan. I guess that's why you were keeping the peace until I arrived."

Holding his gaze, I twirl a hair. "Perhaps."

"And two," he relaxes onto the sofa, blazing at the ceiling, "I'm no longer fire."

"Shirogane, you should know how the guards will-"

"That's not what I'm talking about. As of now, I am the dragon," he chuckles, rubbing one of his wrists.

"The dragon, huh. The one from the mind dive," I stare, until he deigns a nod. "And why is that benefitial to me?"

"Because this dragon don't need any Heavens," he declares, gazing straight at me, banners to war. "Do you plan to seek Heaven's aid?"

"Never."

"So, I guess our endgame is still in alignment? Because if it is," he smiles, confidence like the ever-rising sun, "let me remind you I'd like you to remain strong after Kashgar. So I can't have you burning everything to make Ouka a success."

"Huh… So if I support your little mischievous act, *I assume you swear to remain here?"* I ask, he nods immediately, not releasing my gaze. "Yet, the issues with," I spin, nibbling at my lips, "those extremist are something that we might prevent. What else can you present as proof now?" I stare, smirking.

Yet, while tightly folding his arms, he groans and looks up. "Well, I can lend a hand in dealing with IRG or the nobles. There's also the odd reports you've told me in other lives, which I already told you about before."

"And you won't force a fight against the ones you dislike?"

He frowns, tone searing. "I retaliated like an accursed fiend because they made a miss, to deny me the balm that is peace. I assumed we agreed on that regard?" He stares, I look away and nod.

"I see… Shirogane, if I can be honest with you, there is something I've been wanting to ask," he nods as he tries to cool down, gesturing me to continue. "We will both agree in that, so long as Her Highness remains unhurt, the coup won't yield us a negative result," he again nods, complexion undisturbed. "So, if bringing stability to

the board that is the Empire is our goal, why not ally ourselves with the IRG? I can see your… strong emotions towards Ikaruga due to the man's addiction to heroics at the cost of verticalism coming to the Guard, but certainly, we benefit more with a united Empire, don't we?"

"Yeah, we do. Assuming Yuuhi isn't taken out of the board."

"… Excuse me?"

"I told you before, didn't I?" He frowns, bending over the desk, our gazes meeting at the same height. "I died in the original coup. Care to guess against what the rebels rose?"

"The Diet, I assume?"

"Correct. But there was an American intervention in those worlds, remember?" He smirks, one eye starting to twitch non-stop. "There was no way the rebels could have gotten away with their coup, right? There'd be no reason for the US to support something like that in that future, right?"

"… You didn't pull the trigger back then."

He chuckles, both arms falling to the desk as he shakes his head. "No… I couldn't. And that cost me my life."

Standing up, I pat his shoulder, stronger with each repetition. "It won't come to that in this world, even if she refused your words."

"… Even if that's the case," he raises back, the waves towering, his sight almost going odd-eyed, "would you care to guess why I joined the IRG in another world, if I vehemently opposed them in the other roads available?"

"… So that is the spark that comes from within, huh." It makes sense… too much, to be honest. Her Purpleness pacifism is in stark contrast with Ikaruga's glorification of the Imperial traditions, of the

addiction he has over the spotlight. However, "You wouldn't be letting your… *feelings* for Her Highness cloud your judgment?"

He again stares, then chuckles. "No, because I know what will happen. Maybe not who, but I do know what. And there's no peace to be found in tyranny. Stability and power? Yeah, if what you're after is that, like what I showed you of our meeting in Sendai," he grimaces, far too strongly, "then supporting them is your best bet," he spits, pungent acid coating his every word, drenching the scowl.

"… So her life is in danger. Is that why you're against regaining your citizenship for now, to not give her further burdens?"

"Sigh… More or less. I'd like to believe we could make a truce but-"

"It is quite fair to affirm you and him are in collision course, yes."

"Well, there goes that option," he shrugs, closing an eye, restoring his usual calmness to his features. "So, this is where I stand. I really can't tell you anything else, not before you commit to an answer," he nods, holding my gaze.

"… And if I do accept, you'll stay in this world? Fighting under the UN?"

"Yeah."

"And there won't be any more secrets between us?" I ask, edging closer, poking his collarbone with a single finger.

"I dunno, will there be?"He asks, staring, not moving away.

"I… wouldn't mind being honest, *if you give me your full acquiescence* and continue to produce results with the 00 Unit . I do expect you to follow my orders, as well, " I state, holding his stare, his chin with the tip of my finger.

"And I expect you," he places his own finger on my neck, narrowing his eyes, "to hear my warnings, instead of doing things behind my

back. If we are to be equals, then I also expect your full compliance."

"You will have it, *so long as you pledge yours to me.* "

"You do like being always on top, don't you honey," he rolls his eyes, slowly.

"Oh, it's just what comes with the position," I smirk, leaning a bit closer, treading a fingertip slowly up and down his neck. *"What is it? If you'd like, I can bottom for you if you triumph in Sadogashima."*

Pursed lips, choked words, eyes that flee. "Don't try and trip with me with that, *Vice Commander.* I know younger guys ain't fitting to your palate."

I chuckle, lightly nibbling at my lip. "Well, pour me enough drinks and anything could happen, you know? *I'm almost tempted to ask you to 'take care' of me if I do overdo it with the alcohol,"* even if only to see if it'll let me inherit any memories, and maybe grant him some stable ground to regain his usual cheer.

Yet, his eyes widen. Breathing stuck as I was in my research, lips slightly parting to let out intellegible syllabes.

"Wh… Oh, no, we are not having this conversation," he quickly pulls away, rushing like a deer seeing a predator. Flushing red, blazing red, his hands idle themselves as they straighten his uniform, features contorting a bit. How… *How adorable, to grow so embarrassed.*

"What is it?" I approach from behind, slowly binding his arms with mine, he freezes for a moment yet doesn't refuse the hold. "Is the mighty Viking coming undone under some simple teasing? Fuhuhu…" Leaning closer, whispering to his ear, *"My, how cute of you, Takeru."*

"Don't tempt me."

"Huh?"

A hand reaches mine, fingers slowly sliding in between, gently squeezing. His back relaxes, resting against me, onto me. Looking back, our eyes meet, heads almost bumping, strands mixing. There is no longer a blush, only an ashen, downcast gaze left in him.

"Don't tempt me, Yuuko. I'm only human."

Gradually, he undoes the little lock, shakes his head and heaves a sigh. Turning around, a small frown, another tidal wave.

"And if you're just playing here… Believe me, you'll regret it."

"Sorry… Still, I do want you to stay here. Despite the issues that might come."

"… Is that your answer?"

"Sigh…" ruffling my hair, I sit on my desk. Meeting the frontal gaze, the ice which now covers him whole, I simply return the pleasantry. "If I want you to regain your citizenship, will you comply?" He nods. "If I want you to aid me in building a sustainable relation with Her Highness?" Again, an immediate nod. "If I… desire you to tell me about that poem?"

"That's off limits."

"Isn't it something important enough to allow me to see memories of other timelines?"

"If you can't recall it on your own, there's no point. Same reason for why you didn't straight up tell me I was this world's Shirogane after the CCSE, right?" He asks, smiling.

I can only groan and look away. "Heh, is that so?"

"If it's the results you want, I can tell you once we progress enough with Alt IV," *Takeru* affirms, standing straightly, in attention.

"… Good enough, I suppose. Still," I walk up to him, never lifting my gaze from his, again poking his neck with a finger, " *get used to the idea of staying in this world, dragon."*

"Keep your word and I will, *Vice Commander."*

"For the last time, it's Sensei. Or, if you want it so badly, you may call be by name," I tease with a smirk.

He steps back, shaking his head, looking down, collapsing down. "Anyways, get your thoughts in order and give me a clear answer, soon if you can. Without teasing involved," he adds, pursing his lips while messing with his hair. "So, you wanna rest or should I leave?"

"Hmm… You will write those reports I asked of you?" He nods, I smile. "Then, I suppose I could use the rest." Groaning as I stretch my arms upwards, I hear something crack. My lips part, a yawn roars out. "I… really do need some shuteye right now. Don't do anything stupid while I'm asleep, got it?"

"Yeah, yeah," he gives me a sideglance, arms folding. "You want lunch later?"

I rub an eye, swallowing another wild yawn. "Hm? Oh, yes, call for it. Wake me up before you leave for the training."

"Roger. Sweet dreams, Yuuko," he smirks, waving back.

"Yeah, whatever. I leave the office to you then, *Takeru.* "

"… Huh?"

"Hm?" I look back, he's gaping for some reason, blinking slowing to a halt, remaining quiet. "What?"

"How did you just… call me?"

"What is it? That's your name, isn't it?"

"I mean, yeah, but-"

"Anyways, I did overdo it today, so I accept your graceful offer," I turn around, rolling both shoulders up and down. "Don't exert yourself like last time, understood?" He nods, slowly, features tight for some reason. "Well, I am expecting a decent set of reports from you, *Takeru.* Do not disappoint me."

"… I won't," he salutes, gaining a small, yet honest, smile.

"Good. *See you later,* then," waving him off, I yawn without restrain. Again stretching my arms and arching my back, I slump back to my room.

… For now, I won't overload myself. I'll just note down what I think is important from what *Takeru* told me, and then I'll sleep. After all, he seems to be telling the truth. If harm can come to Her Highness… that completely changes the scenery.

But still, if he no longer wants to endow the mantle of the Black Fire, what is this 'dragon' to him? Now that I think about it, Shirogane hadn't mentioned anything regarding the cult yet. A memory gained from his experiences in this world? Or, perhaps, there are still secrets to unearth?

Well, for now, let's not focus on that lest I won't be able to fall asleep. At least we got good results in the tuning. Another thing to thank him for, I suppose.

# Jester's Trickery

" *You swore never to look back*

*and yet, somehow, it's painful not to*

*This wasteland cracked by incessant drought is, truly, a perfect reflection of your soul*

*Beyond those eyes that blaze, all I see is abundant courage*

*and a conflicting sadness swirling in*

*Unseen by everyone, alone you're washed away in the tears you shed*

*a current strong enough to cause an oceanic collapse*

*Even those who you're supposed to love will vanish from your mind, if you choose to endow the Great Red Dragon's mask*

*You carry grievous scars engraved deeply even within your dreams,*

*thus you hide them with the mask as you rush through the timeline*

*Hey, this is what divine retribution feels like, right?*

*Hey, this endless conflict is a masquerade*

*Hey, this is what celestial tears look like, right?*

*Hey, this tactical face-off is a masquerade*

*… Right?"*

Masquerade, by Kosaka Yumiko. From Tekkaman Blade.

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*Chapter 86:*

**Jester's Trickery**

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*December 5th. Some minutes past 2 PM.*

*(In the grounds of the Edo Palace.)*

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Hurried whispers traverse the tiles as journalists take notes, make calls, ready themselves to collect phrases off the record. The Capital Defense Regiment raises its arms in salutation, receiving a gentle smile from the Shogun as she descends from the small stage prepared for the occasion, a similar gesture is taken by the detachment of Imperial Guards from the palace stationed around her perimeter. A few flashes capture her silhouette as she approaches the leaders of the IJA's retinue, who kneel and bow in deference, a shiver enveloping them upon words of thankfulness from Her Highness. It soothes the parched heart of the Captain, assuages the displeasure the Guards had at being stationed to watch over her alongside the IJA.

The scarce natural light showering upon her features gives her already angelical smile further boons, as she walks by and both rows of Guards and IJA men raise and salute, forming a corridor of honor for her to return into the building. With only a simple wave of a hand she has all those present return bows and salutations, exaltation blooming into those watching the live footage, hands clasping around dry lips for those who heard her speech via the radio. As the first gust of dawn, cleansing the skyline of dark tints, burying the stars and refreshing the shine which upon the land delivers blessings.

And yet, the flashes only serve the unnerve, to unearth what little spikes are raking at her composure at the moment. Gulping, licking the inner side of her lips, she turns and returns to the innermost section of the palace grounds in slow yet long steps. The stalwart

rampart that is Maya guarding her steps, shielding her Regent from any further inquiries, eventually the noise and chatter subside and leave silence as her sole escort.

Slow are the steps, slower the exhalation she releases. To pieces, the smile. To ashes, the eyes. No matter how much she tries to run, the welcoming tint is now gone. Lost to the undercurrents which she cannot tame, on those eyes she longs to see once again.

"According to our sources," Maya says, edging closer while trying to catch up, "your words had a positive effect in both the media and the soldiers. A few of our fellows already reported the balm your speech was to those in the shelters."

"… Is that so?" She answers, short and cold, never looking back.

"The other members of the Guard were in agreement with the necessity to enforce the evacuation, I believe there won't be any discussions arising to impede the command for the IJA to sortie."

"Is that so?"

"… Your Highness," she lowers to a whisper, towards her ear, "please do not hoist such apprehension. Certainly, news about him will be coming shortly."

"… Sigh. Forgive my lacking veneer, Maya. It is all… simply frustrating," she admits, a minute crossing of her brows. *"All these years, and all I can hope for is to parley with time. When I should be acting as a guiding light, all I can afford is to leave the heavy lifting to another, simply suggest the course and not act to ensure it is taken. Sigh… "*

"Please, Your Highness," Maya comforts, tapping her glasses, "you deflected most questions in grace, and I do not believe either side was left in disagreement. No doubt do I hoist that your performance was not lacking in any way," she affirms, and receives the same drowned answer again. Folding a sigh, knowing dissuading the

Shogun would be as foolish as to compel her to cook, she simply shakes her head and desists.

Maya continues with her report on what she observed, yet as their walk continues they pass by a mirror. When gazing upon it, Yuuhi finds an empty glass returning her stare. Despite the gentle sunlight which invades through the glass and curtains, none of the warmth reaches her. It is, after all, nothing but a performance, an act. While understandable it is to soften reality's cruelty for their already battered population, to find no receptor for her truest words only furthers the ill mood she has been in as of late, the tension with which both lips press onto one another.

In the warfare of wordings that is the stage of politics, alliances could come and go in a heartbeat. And while in the local level, in the vicinity of Tokyo all those present had an agreement in certain key matters, such was not the same once you zoom out from the map.

"Excuse me, Your Highness," a voice calls, slow and tired. Tapping his glasses as he slowly approaches, Kurechika Sakaki bows down and remains in position, "Would you have the time to share some words?"

Inhaling sharply, bolting the edges of her lips upwards, she turns around and relents a small nod, endowing in docility and imitating the sun's gentle light. "Why, of course. Whatever is the matter, Kurechika-dono?"

Raising back, gesturing to his retinue to remain a few feet away, he looks back at her as he once more idles a hand on his glasses. "Regarding the arrangement for the evacuation, I have an inquiry to make. Why did you request for UN aid without consulting with our advisors?"

"Would there be a problem with my decision?" Blazes rise back despite the smile never vanishing, the gentle tilt of her head.

He clears his throat, slightly sticking his chest outwards in a, quite futile, attempt to ascertain his position. "Your Highness, while your concern is noted, please do not ignore the channels we've built between our offices. It is quite detrimental to my men to be left negotiating for a deal they knew little about."

"A report was forwarded to the Diet after the last meeting of the Regency Council," Maya states, glaring in venom. "Whatever caused a break in the chain of reports, I know not. Yet we did notify the course of action the Shogunate had arrived to, Prime Minister," she says, slowly bowing, if only for the Shogun's sake.

"Still," the man's eyes squint, words slow, taking his sweet time to ponder and brew them, "please do not try and act on your own anymore, Your Highness. I can comprehend the negotiations for the Type-00C were made as a proposal from your fellowship, yet the Diet needs to debate on whether we desire to accept the UN's aid as of now," he notes, tapping his glasses, breaking eye contact.

"… Would you possess a method which could allow our forces to proceed with the evacuation as soon as possible?" She presses, eyes regressing downwards.

"It is my duty to oversee that matter," he affirms, eyes holding the stare. "If you so desired, a call to the advisors was all that you required to do. Yes, it might have taken a few more days to debate the matter, yet it is only the way things have to be handled."

"… Then, may I inquire on the other propositions I forwarded? Because I've yet to hear an answer from your fellows, Kurechika-dono," Yuuhi requests, raising her chin, the acid despite never losing that small, gentle smile. "I know many are the tasks which upon your shoulders rest, yet, certainly, a meager answer wouldn't take more than a few weeks, you'd agree."

"Huh? Ah, well…" he slowly turns to face the window, coughing. "There are some concerns about the plans you've presented that we do not have the manpower to make a reality." Another slow bow,

voice as dry as his complexion, sealing the Shogun's words in a bottle, throwing it towards a twister.

"Is that so?" And closing her eyes, heaving a sigh, lips then press together for a moment.

"Yes, that is the case. Currently, we do not possess the-"

"However, I believe that, for example, Mitsuhishi's R&D has already received plentiful boons from us," she notes, fingers entwining, about to tear apart the frail veil of restrain which holds the facade, the blazes at bay. "Wouldn't it be in our best interests to employ the surplus to, finally, finish the adaption of the Kanamachi Waterworks?" She states with a rapid nod. After all, it never had quite sunk, the motives behind that delay.

Yet, even now, as she gently compacts both lips and stares firmly in blazes at the Prime Minister, the Shogun also knows that the towering funds to make the Takemikazuchi a reality had to come from somewhere. And as harsh as it is to admit, to let matters rest, to focus on avenues that produce further earnings is what a nation in shambles like the Empire should do. Such was the conviction she held onto, to await the rebound and be able to fulfill the task without risk.

And yet, even a mere gesture is denied to the population. Despite the rising tensions, despite the already grim horizon which upon the Empire falls.

Kurechika coughs, idling a hand on his tie. "Your Highness, as you know, we have contracts to answer to, quotas to fulfill. It is not yet time," he bows down, brows almost crossing, almost breaking the mask. "Furthermore, our industries are what drives this nation forward. Without the budget assigned to them, the already dire situation with spare parts for our armies would only worsen. Once we can compact the defense lines, we'll hold another meeting to discuss this matter," he affirms, relenting a small smile.

Yet a subtle narrowing overtakes those purple eyes, a step forward she takes. "Certainly, we cannot simply let time pass us by. When the remaining of the population is brought to the shelters, everything that comes with that would soon follow. What of using the available infrastructure for new locations to house the people?"

"Ahem… Your Highness, each district has its own stance on the buildings left in decent shape," he states, holding her gaze, tapping her glasses before turning to the window once more. "The distribution centers are already plentiful to keep the situation under control."

Yuuhi simply inhales sharply, shoulders raise as her hands fold behind her back. "Is that so. I suppose, then, my words are not required for the moment. We shall discuss these matters… when the time is right," she nods, slowly turning away.

"Excuse me, Your Highness," Kurechika presses, now clearly shrugging his lips. "Could you kindly revise your decision to have the UN intervene in the evacuation efforts?" He bows in haste, a cold shudder enveloping him at Maya's glare.

Yuuhi waves a hand, defusing the heat and having her retainer take a step back. "Why would you desire so? Our men are in need of aid after the last defense operation from the herd that surfaced in Niigata. I believe it is our duty to ensure the evacuation can proceed smoothly."

"Yet, the risk of altercations in the field is too large to ignore, Your Highness," he says, wiping his forehead, coughing again. "Not only with our own soldiers, but think of how the population will react to seeing UN crew asking them to leave their," his lips purse, fingers shuffle around, "rightful land. It would be a disaster if those sent had to complete the evacuation by force, as their own code forbids them from abandoning civilians under danger. If the volcano were to erupt-"

"Then, an immediate approval would solve that issue," Yuuhi counters, choking a strand of hair, letting it go, not softening her expression. "The sooner the UN receives an answer, the sooner the operation can be coordinated and executed. I understand the possibility of reticence festering in the people, yet isn't because of that why you've requested me to speak today?"

"Well… while I can see your point," he grimaces for a moment, a small shape holding a Chop-kun doll flashing through his mind, hands which tighten upon his pockets' innards, "to leave that duty to UN soldiers would be-"

A small step, a cough coming from behind breaks the link between both stares and both loosen their posture. Yuuhi turns and finds Tsuhi standing in attention, bowing down as they make eye contact. Maya flinches, once more failing to notice the presence until the last moment, yet as Tsuhi does not look her way, the retainer knows the intrusion is fueled by honest concern.

Without letting a single ripple disturb her composure, the shinobi garbed in gray slowly starts. "Yuuhi-sama, I have a report for your ears," she says as slowly as usual, staring as she raises back. As the Shogun relents a nod, holding her breath, the shinobi grows closer, she so whispers. "Mana-sama has called, with quite the urgent report."

"How urgent are we speaking of? I'm in the middle of an important discussion, you see."

"… More important than learning of what Takeru remembered?" She asks, giving a small smile.

"… Kurechika-dono, something has come to my attention and I must tend to this immediately," she states, looking back, relenting a nod. "Please excuse my hasty departure, but I must return to my chamber."

The man swallows a sigh, once more tapping his glasses and straightening his posture. "Oh, I see. However, regarding the-"

"I shall be calling your office so that we can debate at large. Until then," she spares a smile before turning on her heels and moving to the elevator, outpacing both Maya and Tsuhi who must first give the expected courtesy to the Prime Minister before departing after the hasty steps.

"Your Highness, please remain composed," Maya so requests, sighing at the lack of deceleration. "2nd Lt Yasomaga, whatever is the matter? Did something disturb the departure of the Chains?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," Tsuhi notes, twirling a curl in her hair, gaining a gaze from Yuuhi as Maya's arms fold and compact. "It seems Fujikagi-kun did not wish to say his 'See you later', so Raiho-sama had quite the trouble in pacifying him. Worry not, however, as they are already on the road," she says with a faint smile, which the Shogun imitates for a second, a second of calmness.

Maya simply sighs, shaking her head slowly. "I see… Then, what other matter has caused you to interrupt the discussion?"

"… I cannot say, not here," she lowers her eyelids, facing forward, not reacting upon a frontal stare.

Maya groans momentarily, looking away from the impregnable shadow who refuses to return her gaze. As the three make it to the elevator and await its descent, nothing is said. Once inside the narrowness, Yuuhi relents quite the heavy sigh, shoulders sagging, posture beginning to melt.

"I assume Mana has forwarded a report?" Maya inquires, resting onto the wall.

Tsuhi nods, electing to remain silent, not meeting the retainer's gaze. Maya gulps, sudden heaviness in her gut. Yuuhi coughs, a searing glare demanding silence, which is answered by two immediate nods.

Little it takes for them to reach the audience chamber, despite Maya's request to have the Shogun slow down once again.

"Please, Your Highness. Such disquiet in your features will certainly cause concern in the attendants," she repines once inside the chamber, sighing when she gains no answer. Coughing, she turns to her right, finds nothing, and with a shrug of her lips glances at her left, where Tsuhi stands, raising a brow. "2nd Lt Yasomaga, this is… about Takeru, isn't it?"

She nods subtly, as slowly as if having just awoken. "Indeed. It seems he has recalled who Yohime-sama was," she simply says, as if commenting on the weather.

The words send a jolt into the other two's bodies, the paralysis causing Yuuhi's feet to meet the wood and almost stumble face first onto it. A minute wobbling until balance returns to her posture, a blaze of a gaze then blasts towards the humble shadow.

"Excuse me?! You said… Did you just said he remembered Mother?!"

"So I said, yes," she repeats, brows lowering, lips ever so slightly pursing.

"Wait a moment," Maya asks, features contorting yet finding no words for a second, lost as a penguin in a desert, "does that mean Takeru has finally recalled everything?"

"I do not know," she answers, slow. "Mana-sama has reported that Takeru was granted leave from the medbay yesterday, without them knowing of it for some unexplainable reason. According to their words, he is now training as if," he looks away, idling a hand on her hair again, "he were preparing for a sortie, like we were when stationed here."

"… Tsuhi, whatever do you speak of?" Yuuhi asks, feeling a slight needle on the back of her head, fingers coiling in. "Is he once again

being tasked to resume his piloting training?"

"In a simulator, it seems," she nods, arms folding onto her back.

Hands wring, throat as well and blocks incoming air. A small poke of pain on the sides of her head, Yuuhi's eyes close, as tightly as a vault. "But I requested… The XO said she would ensure he would remain in good health."

"Ahem," tapping her glasses, she stares at the petite shinobi, "were Mion and Shion able to interact with him?"

"Yes, it seems he does not have any issues with them following as his guardians. However," she notes, lips pursing, "they informed that the small ESPer which works as an assistant to the XO has displayed an odd closeness with him."

"… Pardon?" Yuuhi inquires, a brow twitches. Maya sighs and shakes her head at the poor choice of words.

Meanwhile, Tsuhi simply nods back, immutable as a frozen lake except for the minute shrug in her lips as she raises her voice ever so slightly. "I said, they reported that the ESPer has been looking after Takeru, it seems. The cousins do not seem to favor the assistant being around him, despite Takeru openly referring to it as a 'friend'."

"I see…" she says, sighing as she finally sits down, fingers interlocking as her hands gently fall onto her lap. "So how did… how did they learn Takeru recalled who Mother was?"

Clearing her throat, she takes a step forward and kneels before the Regent. "You see, it would seem Meiya-sama has made a… folly in her interactions with my Leader," she says, somber, features growing tight. "Her obstinacy in demanding answers from him drove Takeru to fighting her without restrain, causing him to grow pained after the fact. Not only that, but it seems her attitude has caused friction to brew in the cadet squadron as well."

"… What a foul turn of events," Yuuhi laments, rubbing her forehead, looking down. For as she envied her sister's resolve, the Shogun can only feel a void at the thought of what imposing the dogma of the Imperial Guard onto the soldier could cause. "Did he react negatively towards Meiya?"

Tsuhi shakes her head hastily. "It seems he desired to coexist with her, until she, believing him to be a spy, countered in hostility. After that, it seems he was driven to performing equal to, well," she purses her lips again, shoulders compacting, "whenever he began spinning. Then after their training was over, amidst wails heard before the common channel was closed, it would seem he uttered Yohime-sama's name."

"Huh? After the battle? Not due to Meiya's resemblance to her?" Yuuhi asks, leaning forward.

Both hers and Maya's features begin to widen upon Tsuhi's full report of how he himself mentioned the resemblance Meiya had to who handed him the blade, his desire to share said bond with Meiya as he had insisted when a child he still was, yet in equal measure they contort when learning he denied the query, that the cousins were unable to follow him to his next assignment, his stoic rejected towards both of them in favor of young Yashiro.

Yuuhi nods, treading her hair, looking at the balcony. "So it is all thanks to Meiya breaking her orders to notify Mana that we learned of this… Sigh. Maya, go and contact Mana posthaste. It seems XO Kouzuki owes us a report on Takeru's condition," she orders, raising her chin, her voice.

And causes a flinch from her retainer, who immediately shakes her head as she steps forward. "Your Highness, please reconsider," Maya requests, brushing her bangs, adjusting her posture to not receive the brunt of the sunlight, of the light's blaze of a gaze. "Do not act on emotion, it will only open wounds for others to strike back at us. Perhaps, Kouzuki does not yet know of his ties to Yohime-

sama, and simply learning that name would be enough for her to retrace the trail."

Her eyes narrow yet there is no blink, her smile raises as dawn yet the composure remains frozen. "Whatever are you saying, Maya? All I wish to do is extend some advice to the Vice Commander so that she can press for the relief efforts to be authorized shortly, due to the reticence Kurechika-dono's crew seem to hold towards the notion of welcoming Yokohama's involvement."

"H-However-"

"Certainly, we both agree that it is imperative for the order to sortie to be forwarded to the respective offices posthaste?"

"Yes, milady, of course. However, clashing against Kouzuki will-"

"I am not planning to do nothing of the sort," she affirms, hands enveloping each other a bit more, fuming a slight ember out. "Tsuhi, do the cousins believe Takeru is, well, stable enough to hold a conversation with?" Yuuhi inquires, forcing Maya to pinch her nose and sigh heavily.

The shinobi returns a quick nod, her features do not relax. "Yes, although they did not try to breach the subject of his profiles. Also, Meiya-sama said, it seems, that Takeru believes he cannot approach Mana-sama at the moment."

"It's understandable," Maya nods, tilting her chin downwards. "After such an accident, anyone would try and steer clear of the Imperial Guard. More so if suffering through painful memories, or the dread of further punishments. Yet, I still believe composure and patience are your allies, Your Highness," she affirms, bowing down.

"While I do not wish to pile further pressure upon the board, this… truly does merit an inquiry. Maya, contact Mana and relay my request for a talk with the XO. Now," she commands, staring as her retainer stalled a motion.

Maya relents a sigh as she nods and stands, taking a second to salute before immediately departing. Once outside, however, her steps wane momentarily, gaze losing itself to the clouds above, thinking about the soldier, on what he could have recalled, extending a prayer as she taps her glasses.

Yuuhi idles some seconds looking at the skies, at the threads of light which fall upon the room. "Tsuhi, did the cousins report how he was after this training he shared with Meiya?"

"It seems he was tired but unhurt," she notes, softly. "However, as I said before, he stalwartly defended the ESPer as he used to retort when we worked under the Swordbreakers."

"Is… that so."

"Although, the cousins did mention he requested them to not be hostile towards the assistant, and also kept an amicable posture towards them during their talks at morning. In due time, I believe he might reach out on his own to the Tsukuyomi," Tsuhi concludes, in an attempt to appease the combustion which within the Shogun erupts.

At the very least, the smoke veils the fire as she shakes her head. "I hope so, too. So," clearing her throat, her inner clouds and raising a smile, she fiddles with her hair, "what else did Meiya mention? Is her training proceed well?"

Tsuhi corks a brow, lips plucking. "Yes, it seems her efforts are still yielding good results, and that she does not wish to enhance the rift in the squadron. However, Mana-sama mentioned that there was something troubling her, lamenting how she hadn't taught Meiya-sama of whatever this was before. She hastily changed the topic when I inquired about it."

"Huh, is that so? I can only hope Meiya remains stoic in the face of adversity, and whatever is troubling her at the moment." *And that Kouzuki does not take her offer back upon Kurechika-dono's concerns.*

Looking back at the skies, pacing towards the balcony, her gaze loses itself in the azure expansion. In days past, in those visits he used to pay her, in those first days when he had just moved into the fellowship. Holding, gripping, choking the railing as she slowly exhales, wondering what it is that the soldier remembered, how he felt about the words they shared during the call. Knowing it's better not to hope, yet finding her rising heartbeats disagreeing with the notion.

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*Some moments later.*

*(Yokohama Base, Mana's room.)*

**[Mana]**

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"Look, I do agree with you," Maya repines from the other side of the line, heaving a sigh, "yet Her Highness was clear in her wishes and I doubt could be dissuaded from this decision. Could you arrange a call with the XO?"

"Sigh… I'll see what I can do," I answer, a finger gently rubbing the outer side of an eye. "I did assume a quick reaction would arise but, for Yuuhi-sama to once more endow aggression as her method of choice…" It is not odd, no, it always has been what followed when he could ever have been in any danger, yet for her to still favor this approach at this point in time. I sigh and slowly throw myself onto my chair, careful not to fall again.

"By the by, Mana," Maya asks, lowering her tone, retreating to the ice cage, "did Takeru truly recall who Yohime-sama was?"

"We don't know yet. Meiya-sama affirmed she heard the name clearly, and if so, his confusion would be understandable," I admit, a faint numbness on the back of my head. There's also the gesture the cousins reported, however whether that was unconscious or

deliberate would be hard to confirm. "I assume Her Highness would desire to platicate with him once again?"

"Sigh… Yes, certainly. While I do not believe it wise, her orders are clear. There is also the matter I told you about, to at least maintain appearances with the fox and see whether she honors her word," she says, a venomous tincture brewing. "Now that Raiho-sama has departed, it is perhaps the most auspicious time for Her Highness and Kouzuki to platicate again."

"… I assume she did not retract her words?" Maya groans, I sigh and place my full palm onto my face, resting onto the chair, lifting the legs off the floor.

"I shall concede that the points she raised were valid," she starts, slow and frozen. "However, to still put into question the resolve of the Shogun, it is nothing but treason."

"… Yet, if not for that, perhaps Yuuhi-sama wouldn't be acting with as much haste as she is. If she already had extended an offer to aid him, and he has recalled anything at all, there is no point in focusing in such petty details."

"Sigh… I suppose," she relents, leaving silence hanging for a moment. I know those two never got along well, more after the invasion, yet I want to believe both you and Raiho share the same goal, as I do too. A small cough, a contained snowfall follows. "In any case, please do not dally in requesting this call. If you can try and garner anything to at least placate the blaze, it would be much appreciated," she tells, weary, with the decaying impulse of one final, dried leave forever departing from a branch.

"Understood. I shall be trying to attain an answer soon enough. If the cousins find anything else, I shall be relaying that alongside my report later at night," I affirm, resting the chair back on the floor, straightening myself and smoothing my dress.

"Copy that. Godspeed, Mana," she says, lowering her tone, her guard, slumping within the cage before cutting the connection.

Resting the comms onto the wood, slowly letting my arms come into a soft knot, I simply stare at the desk as I move my neck to the sides, hearing something crack. Not only the cousins' full report, regarding the ESPer's closeness towards Takeru and his own adusted reaction, but Meiya-sama's account on his words paints a harsh visage looming behind the horizon. Takeru always sings during battle, yet the tone indicates the motive, the wording his goals. He was truly upset, from the bottom of his heart, if the savagery of his shouts was not exaggerated by Meiya-sama. If he recalled something and he does not desire to approach us, is he confusing the memories? Not believing them? Or, perhaps, could Kouzuki have a hand in this?

Going by his reactions during the fight and his reluctance to approach me, could he believe we restrained him after Kageyuki-san's death? It is odd Kouzuki hasn't tried to inquire on the matter, too, if he disclosed anything to her. Rubbing my forehead, another sigh leaves me as I look up.

I suppose, waiting is all that can be done now. Meiya-sama and both cousins should gain anything from their interactions with him, and hopefully that will be enough to assuage Her Highness' ill mood. If Takeru has remained silent, Kouzuki must be bidding her time to breach the subject and not risk him suffering from any recoil. And if not I do not pity her, for the retribution Yuuhi-sama shall unleash is an end I do not wish upon even my enemies.

Opening a drawer, I take out the UN communicator I was given, slowly tapping at the buttons, searching the ID of the proper channel. Taking in a sharp breath, crossing a leg and pinching my chin, I input the command and bring the device to my ear.

I'll have to mind my words carefully, lest she'll treat this as further pressure, intimidation. I assume, she should be aware of what happened in the training and perhaps will deem us a hazard,

perhaps even remove the cousins from his side due to their reaction against the ESPer.

The automatic receiver answers from the other side, asking for me to input the Code for the office I desire to be connected to. Quickly following with the XO's quarters, the machine takes a moment before accepting the connection, the tune echoing once again. I know the fox has expressly requested I only call her directly in case of emergency, yet these matters with the negotiations for the relief efforts should suffice. If she hangs once I try and delve into the other subject, that is a plentiful answer in and of itself.

Still, it is imperative to alert her of the block to the negotiations. So long as Kouzuki keeps her end of the deal, time is all Takeru needs, and perhaps a showing of fellowship. He did… request empathy out of me during the mock battle. Considering what he had to do, the role he had to play… Sigh. Again tilting back on the chair, I ruffle and twirl my hair. I should have been more careful, should have actually listened to his words. If only the XO could allow another talk with him… I doubt we will be able to share some words any time soon, Takeru. I only hope you are faring-

"Vice Commander's office. What may I do for you?"

"… Huh?" That voice… Did I hear that wrong?

"Could you hear me well?" He asks, coughing, a small jolt running from my nape to my heels. "You're speaking with XO Kouzuki's office. What business may I help you with?"

This is voice… This is-

A small creaking sound, my vision bends, the chair tips backwards and I slam against the floor. "Oof… Ugh…" Twice in the same day, to make matters worse.

"Um, excuse me? Is everything alright?" He asks, softly, the voice not changing at all.

I roll and rest my palm on the floor, slowly lifting myself, coughing softly. "Cadet Shirogane, is that you?"

"Ah… Yes, that is the case," he says, slightly slowing down his tone. "What can I help you with, 1st Lt Tsukuyomi?"

"Why- Why are you picking up this line? Where is the Vice Commander?" I ask, pulling the chair back up, brows crossing as I slowly sit.

" *XO Kouzuki* is AFK at the moment."

"What? Oh, you mean absent, right?" If my memory isn't failing me, that is.

"Yeah…" he stalls the words, seeming to groan a bit, just a bit. "So, as per my punishment, I am now tasked with receiving calls and redirecting them to the proper offices, or leave notes in case anyone requires to speak directly with the *XO*," he tells, simply and flatly, before coughing again. "What may I help you with?"

"Ahem… First, would you be in good health at the moment?"

"Yes, thanks for asking."

"I see… Cadet, allow me to apologize over what transpired in the mock battle. I did not intend my words to-"

"It's fine, don't bother," he says, lightly, a small glimmer gliding over the horizon, through the line. "On the contrary, it was my fault that things spiraled out of control. There is no blame on you, ma'am."

"Is that so?" I nod, licking my lips, compacting upon myself for a second as I ponder what to say. "It is good to know. Were you told of what was already arranged on the matter?"

"… No, not yet," he tells, slow, delayed and leaving a moment of silence hanging. "Am I correct in assuming no further inquiries will be forwarded?"

"Only if and when you welcome them, cadet. We only desire to aid you with the databases, nothing more. By the by… About our discussion during the battle-"

"Please, let's not. Our views don't match, we'll never see eye to eye," he deflects, affirming the absoluteness of his answer. "I understand that we come from different worlds, 1st Lt. After all…" he short, hollow sigh, a second of silence, "those of the Imperial Guard do believe Heaven can only be reached through Pandemonium."

"Wh- Excuse me, what?" I hit the wood, pursing my lips in a futile attempt to halt my words. "Cadet, that is not the case. Such a mantra is not what the IRG practices."

"Oh, for real?" He asks, slow, dismissive. "You did disagree with me back there, even if I do admit I got too heated about my, well, *naive and ignorant ideals* ."

"We were merely arguing semantics," I counter, again pinching my nose, leaning into the desk as the venom of those last words constricts over my throat. "No warrior would desire death to be the sole metric upon which a life's worth is judged, I was merely saying there is no need to so harshly judge the actions of those who came before you since… it could take you down a path of wrath, rejecting their efforts. I… may not know what tribulations have you endured, yet I do not think our views to be opposites."

"… I see. So, why have you called the office? Would you like to leave a note for the *XO* ?" He replies, monotonous yet still sounding welcoming, flowing easily as a calm river.

"Ahem… I heard the cousins had some trouble before with the assistant of the Professor?"

"Is that why you've called the office?"

"One of the matters it is, yes. Allow me to apologize in their stead, they are… not very welcoming towards foreigners," I relent, resting

onto the wood.

"Oh, yes, I already know that. Very well, in fact," he tells, almost in jest, probably rolling his eyes. "Don't worry, I don't plan to let them argue with Kasumi. So long as we can coexist, it's all good. Just tell them to not think of approaching Kasumi as they did earlier, security will be forced to intervene," he warns, a slow thunder, the same shaving tone he employed when a shadow he was.

"Of course, I understand," I answer quickly, idling a finger atop a pencil, making it roll. "If I may, why were we not notified of your return to the training course yesterday night? The cousins should have escorted you to the sim room and back, according to our agreement."

He chuckles shortly, light and melting the ice from his voice. "It's cool, I insisted to go train to get back in the groove. The *XO* simply didn't want to pressure you in the middle of the night, is all."

"Is that so…" The cheer and usual relaxed tone tells he isn't hiding anything, yet I doubt XO Kouzuki would risk this to be misunderstood.

"I also didn't know they were assigned to follow me when I went to train, so the blame lays on me, really," he adds a second later.

"Eh? Did the XO not notify you?"

"Not until I was ready to return to my cell, no."

Hmm… How curious. I had assumed the woman was being truthful when she said Takeru would remain in good hands, yet here we are apparently. Gripping the pencil, pressing my lips, I sheathe my words and choose to slowly exhale instead.

"I see. So, you've been tasked to do office work for the XO personally?"

"Not like I could be elsewhere without risks or forcing the 2nd Lts to stay close. Really, I'm doing less than you'd expect," he chuckles again, the sound of some ruffling papers coming up. "Well, did you require anything else?"

"I had an inquiry for the XO herself, when may I call back?"

"Hmm… After 1500 hours she should be back here in person. Is there anything you'd like to relay to the *Vice Commander* ?" He asks in a corporate tone once again, it makes my teeth sink onto my lips, flick the pencil to the other end of the desk.

"No, it is an important matter, so simply tell her I shall be calling back."

"Understood. Anything else, 1st Lt Tsukuyomi?"

"Would you be in a hurry?" I ask, swaying in the chair again, frowning a bit at the hastiness with which he desires to end our talk.

"Not really, I just need to finish sorting some papers. Did you want to leave another message?" He says, still keeping that fake business tone.

"I would… be wishing to ask you for some minutes to platicate. Would that be agreeable?"

A moment of silence extends, enough to force a gulp out of me.

The flop of a heavy stack of papers in the distance comes up, before the whirring of a chair reaches my ears

"What exactly would you be wishing to ask of me, 1st Lt, ma'am?" He asks, back to the shaving wording, the forced formality.

"I assume cadet Mitsurugi held some… mistaken views towards you? Do not mistake them as her true feelings, we do no wish to antagonize you, cadet."

"I see."

"… And, if you ever need to depart to the medbay, do inform the cousins. We cannot be too careful as things stand nor do we desire to impair your training regime."

"I see."

… Takeru, please. "Ahem… So, if there is ever anything you'd desire to talk about with us, do not hesitate to reach out. I was told you… believe it is dangerous to approach me, yet that is not the case. I hoist no animosity towards you, cadet Shirogane," I state, giving a small palm to the desk.

"I see. Thanks for the gesture, ma'am," he utters, faint as a cloud, undisturbed like pure snow, cold.

"No, it is nothing… I only hope you truly do not hoist any mistaken views of us, and I reiterate my apology towards you."

"Really, don't," he tells, another small glimmer through the blizzard. "It ain't your fault, I lost my cool first."

"It was still my miss, as the officer I am. Thus, well, is there anything you'd wish to request out of me? If you were wishing for our aid, my ears are open," I ask, holding my breath, clutching the comms closer.

"… I assume Her Highness asked you to inquire about me regaining my citizenship?"

"Eh? Ah, well, yes… I was told you… platicated with her for some moments," I admit, slow gestures as I swipe my hair off my forehead. "Would you wish to accept our aid to restore your databases?"

"… That won't be necessary, but thanks for the offer," he says, downcast.

"Pardon? What do you mean, it isn't necessary?"

"Opportunities don't arrive freely, 1st Lt," he tells, slow as I hear him start to spin in a chair. "Talent on its own cannot break through the clouds, so making the most out of the chances you get is important, I think."

"… Huh?" But those words… I told him that many moons ago. If you recall that then, "Why refuse our aid? Isn't this a prime opportunity for you? You could… become a fellow once again, after all."

"Aren't you seeing me as something I'm not, ma'am?"

"Something, instead of someone. Could you enlighten me on the meaning of said words?"

"Heh… Well, you're helping out due to," he stops, words and the spin, as pungency permeates his voice, "who you believe I could be. But that's not who I am now. So, could we please try and coexist as things stand now?"

"… I believe Her Highness herself had made it clear, that you are a fellow of ours. Whether you choose to regain your identity or not, at the very least your citizenship has to be returned to you."

"… Maybe later. Let's not force any issues, please, ma'am," he asks, dull, low, vanishing in image of the afterglow surrendering to dusk.

"What are we speaking of? The Shogun herself has confirmed-"

"1st Lt, ma'am, certainly you can see what issues will arise if someone like me were to be shielded by Her Highness?" He asks in assertion, once more endowing the sting of a blizzard. "This is no time to be spawning rifts, 1st Lt. Someone of my station has nothing to offer in return of the favor that it is to be granted the goodwill of the Shogun."

"That… might be so, yes," hands curl in before flicking the pencil again, before resting a brow upon my fingers, "however, you are the son of a vassal. It would be a most regrettable shame if-"

"What would be a shame is Her Highness suffering through undeserved setbacks due to the aid she has extended towards me, a mere peasant," he affirms, once again without hesitation or delay, absolute as the dusk of a new moon night. "Even if wild horses wouldn't drag her away as of now," he says, with a light chuckle, "if these issues were noticed, many would be the troubles going her way. It is far easier to mend the databases and simply let me be, to avoid any ties to be brought to you."

"… What are you saying? You don't even know-"

"Now, 1st Lt Tsukuyomi," he says, coughing, frosting, "if my memories of my talk with Her Highness are not mistaken, she had forwarded the idea that someone from the fellowship had been hired by my late Father to take care of me while he was on duty."

The formal telling, the molded wording brings tension to my stomach, recalling the whisper, the steps of the shadow that once followed, judged from afar. So I cough, place my free hand on the base of my neck. "That might be the case, I assume. If so, do you not desire to-"

"Do you not think it is extremely selfish of me, to try and entangle those people with my current woes?" He asks, once again low, the snow melting away. "There is little a baseborn like me can offer in offering for these favors, much less if being linked to me brings judgment and trouble to your fellowship. I'm sure that such a gesture towards a commoner won't be taken well by the more… intense members of the IRG, just as Mitsurugi reacted against me."

"But that is not-"

"You should know, better than me, that there are many threads tied into the knot you're trying to untie, how it all weights on the Shogun's shoulder. And how time is of essence and she cannot spare the horses. To either face the error in the databases exposed or for her mingling with a commoner to be discovered, someone as violent as me, who is in UN, would be nothing short of fair for Her Highness, wouldn't you agree?"

Nibbling at my bottom lip upon the ice blade hewn into the voice, contraction coming to my neck and shoulders, I simply sigh, heavy. "While that is true, and your concern over Her Highness is welcomed, you are deserving of a reward. Do you not desire to search for the ties that you once had?"

"If wishes were horses, beggars would ride. And Her Highness shouldn't be forced to beat a dead horse, it's better for me to remain as I am now."

"… Do you not think abandoning you to fate would be far more cruel, far worse on the Shogun's image?"

"It if it prevents rifts from spawning, yes," he tells, simply, coldly, as if merely announcing an obvious answer. "Please remember that, even in the most favorable case, you are still wanting Her Highness the Shogun to favor a baseborn UN soldier that killed your fellow Japanese."

"You should be aware the CCSE is not a fair metric upon which to judge you!" I hit the wood, sending the pencil to the floor, feeling my lips fold in, air barely seeping through my throat.

He simply sighs. "And you should know how the intel would be taken, and how it will be used to pressure her. She has done enough for me, as you have too, by not forcing a brand upon me for possessing a Minaru Kamui illegally. Thanks, really, but," he takes a second, sighing softly, I then hear the chain spinning once more, "I think you'd agree that it is for the greater good to not rock the boat. Nothing good will come out from letting such shadows linger near the light, I'm sure you'd agree, 1st Lt."

"… What?" Did he just… Is he holding a grudge? No, wait, he shouldn't- Did he remember?! "Cadet, what are we speaking about? Certainly, simply restoring your rightful citizenship can not be the source of such concern."

"Well… No, but it's true that I don't want more problems to happen because of me. Both Her Highness and the *Vice Commander* have much to deal with, there is no need to pile on further pressure," he says, back to a rather normal tone.

"Her Highness had already expressed her wish for you to regain your identity, right? Could the XO be… behind this rejection you're displaying?"

"She is not pleased, to be honest. How would you feel if a mere cadet was giving you such trouble when you have more pressing matters at hand? Sure, I don't really know what's going on in the base, but the Vice Commander was on edge lately so I assume something serious is happening, or going to," he tells, heaving a sigh.

I see, if the announcement is to be believed then, the project is about to bestow results. To be faced with Her Highness' ire while she rather be finishing the preparations on her end must have been excruciatingly arduous, yet the words she gave indicated she desired Takeru to remain under her. Was she merely admonishing him?

"So," he coughs, "all I'm trying to do is make myself useful, making the most of what little time I have left." Huh? What does that- "While I thank your deference, there's no need for you to bother with the likes of me, 1st Lt Tsukuyomi, ma'am."

"Excuse me, what did you mean before?"

"If you'd permit me," he continues, unaffected, again low and sharp, "I believe you should be more concerned over the ripples my identity could have if and when the *XO* inevitably asks me to regain my Japanese citizenship. How the threads that will fall once this knot is untied could cause a premature sunset."

Eyes widen as do my lips, yet I do not take in air. "… Wait, are you-"

"Thus, please do fulfill your duty, 1st Lt Tsukuyomi. Stop looking out for someone who is no more, and do ensure nothing weakens Her Highness or troubles the *XO* . I'd hate myself if either of them were to be placed in jeopardy due to my presence, so kindly cease your inquiries. And, if and when no bad apples can get in the way… maybe then we can continue this conversation, 1st Lt, ma'am."

"I see… If such is your wish, I shall respect it. Would there be anything you'd like to request or express? If only as a gesture of goodwill."

"… Well, some pudding would be real nice right now."

"Pudding, huh… Do you favor such desserts, cadet?"

"Yeah, I liked homemade pudding much. Still, nothing I can do under the punishment. Well, I've got some papers to tackle so if there's nothing else, I'll be hanging up."

"If I may, was this concern of yours towards Her Highness… sparked by the conference?"

"Conference?" He asks, finally breaking the relaxed tone, back to the unsheathed blade.

"Yes, you see, Her Highness held a conference moments ago, where she expressed her feelings on the current situation of the Empire. Were you not allowed to listen to it?" I ask, low, hand in my face.

"… Sadly, as you can see, I was left in an office to handle paperwork. It sucks, but I suppose I'll hear something in the hallways," he repines a bit, spinning in the chair once more.

So you were left unable to hear the announcement, huh. Interesting and curious, indeed. "Would these tasks not be taking their toll on you, cadet? You did seem rather exhausted after the training, according to the cousins," leaning on the desk, pinching my chin, I focus.

On the small sigh, the sudden halt of the spin. "Yeah, just a bit," and the weary and decaying tone he now makes. "It is what it is, though. Tell the 2nd Lts not to worry, I can take this."

"Were you not given any aid? I had assumed the assistant would also join in such tasks?"

"No, as of now I am on my own. I am sure you know, but Kasumi isn't the *XO's* assistant just for show. Anyways, was there anything else?"

Treading my hair, I cough and try to clear the dryness of my lips, straightening my posture on the chair. "I did have one final query. If you were in need of aid, perhaps, couldn't you request the one known as Kagami to support you? I believed you worked alongside-"

"Excuse me, what was that?" He cuts, searing, blazing as when the shadow of black fire he was.

"… What is the matter?" I compact, the same cold shiver running down my nape as whenever he used to stand behind me during those days.

"Where did you hear… No, why did Meiya tell you about her? You wouldn't have forced her to speak, would you 1st Lt, ma'am?" He asks, demands, short and precise as a simple volley, yet still burning a small injury upon my throat.

"… Ahem. If you must know, Meiya-sama was concerned over the words you spoke during your sparring. She merely thought it wise to notify us that, well, her views of you were mistaken. I then informed her you were not under suspicions, and that the cousins were following you under protection and not otherwise."

"And why did she speak about Kagami?" He presses, not dulling the impulse of the arrow, the glare of the dragster chasing me down.

"Please, do not hoist such apprehension, cadet. Meiya-sama was merely concerned over your special assignments taking a toll on your constitution," I say, relenting a sigh, narrowing brows, lips and legs. "Is this Kagami not aiding you as of now?"

"1st Lt, as I asked of *Mitsurugi*, you should not delve into this matter. Ever. I asked her to keep this a secret for a reason, dammit," he states, still blazing.

"… Why, it seems that everything around you is a secret. You're like a box full of mysteries."

"This is hardly a matter to jest about, 1st Lt Tsukuyomi," he warns, I can sense the scorching of his composure peeling away. "I will have to ask of you to kindly not divulge a word to anyone else about her."

"May I ask the motives behind such… adusted impulse residing in your words?"

"Because Kagami's situation is very delicate, she is as important as Kasumi. If anything is disclosed about her, and if the *XO* finds it was because of me, you can bet she's gonna lose her marbles. Please, I know I cannot ask much of you, but take my standing into account if you will, 1st Lt."

"There is no need for such words, I do not wish to worsen your situation, cadet. And, you are a *fellow* of ours. If that is your wish, I shall respect it," I sigh, nodding, my free arm embracing my upset stomach. "Still, it is quite curious. Why would you be placed near such key individuals, if your situation is so delicate?"

"Well, they both helped me when I just arrived," he tells, back to normal, under the waves. "I've been assigned to lend them a hand when I can since the *XO* saw I hold no prejudices towards Kasumi, is all. Please, do not disclose anything about them… let's not force a, ahem, solar storm to come our way."

"I see… Very well, then. I shall acquiesce to your petition. And do not place blames on Meiya-sama, all she desired was to mend the rift her attitude seems to have spawned in your comrades," I ask, shoulders sagging.

Takeru scoffs, sounding angry. "… She had given me her word, and it didn't take a day for her to break it. I expected more of her, to be honest," he fumes momentarily, groaning. "Anyways, please, let's not force an argument about Kagami. It would be better to keep certain things from reaching the light," he affirms, coughing a bit. Was the wording deliberate? I am receiving mixed signals in your tone, Takeru.

"I understand, cadet. And worry not, I shan't pressure the XO unnecessarily, either. Well then, this shall be all. Farewell."

"That's wrong, 1st Lt Tsukuyomi," he immediately counters, almost chuckling.

"How so?"

"It's 'See you later', not 'Farewell'. I assume we shall be seeing each other and, even if things won't ever be as pleasant as they once were, I do hope we can remain in good terms," he says softly, slowly, as if extending a hand to the stars when he was little.

"I see… Indeed, I too desire to that to be the case. Do you… believe you'll be able to one day regain your citizenship, then?" I ask, leaning forward, joining my knees, pressing my lips.

He lightly chuckles, spinning slowly in the chair. "If the situation can be salvaged, and *XO Kouzuki* sees no threats in the horizon, then I may accept your proposal to visit the Capital. Maybe you could suggest me some establishments to try some pudding once I do?"

"… It'll be my pleasure then, to recommend you the best homemade pudding of the Empire," I say with a smile again, leaning back onto

the chair, swaying a bit, enjoying the soothing tone as if floating in the sea.

"It's a date, then! That'll be much appreciated, 1st Lt," he answers, calm and bright.

"Well, I shan't disturb your work any longer. I hope the day when you can… regain what you've lost can come soon. See you later, cadet Shirogane."

"… See you later, Mana-nee."

"Wh- A-Ahh!" Again, the chair tips, I meet the ground.

Groaning as I roll and caress the place of impact, the comms lay on the floor. Returning only the empty tune now that the connection has been dropped. And yet, I cannot lift myself from the floor, remaining in a crawling position. Hiccups on my breathing, distortion caused by dampness on my sight as my nails bend upon pressure onto the tiles.

Coughing, supporting myself on the desk and picking up the pencil, I quickly restore the chair to its proper position. Readying a page, twirling the pencil, I start to pour all the words, all that at first I thought were coincidences but were actually deliberate. Not giving my lips any respite, still breathing with an open mouth. Because not only he remembers, not only Takeru truly recalls us…

"… But you believe Yuuhi-sama to be in danger, and have kept quiet about your situation thus far. If he also believes Kouzuki could be impaired by his identity, if he still supports the workload given to him…"

Bad apples.

That is what he said.

That was the calling card, the warning the snake of the garden gave. The sign he said would be followed by those he tried to erase from this Empire of ours.

Feeling a void in my stomach, my scribbles gain speed despite the roughness of my strokes. If he truly was conscious of it all, and spoke in consequence… then I must decipher what 1st Lt Shirogane was trying to request out of me, not only for the coming call I need to make towards the XO but also…

"… Oh, by the Holy Emperor," I slump onto my desk, both hands tugging at my hair. "Takeru, why must you always leave the harshest reports to Yuuhi-sama in my hands?! What am I even supposed to tell her now if you want her to not grow adusted?! Sigh… Still… Hehe… It is a blessing, to hear you composed again. It truly… will be my pleasure, to once more make pudding for you and the cousins. So," coughing, rubbing my face with both hands, throwing my hair back and inhaling sharply, again I wield the pen, "I must note everything to the utmost detail, as detailed as the report for Her Highness must become."

# Pulling and Being Pulled

*A/N: The introductory scene for this chapter would be the prologue to the sidestory 'Before Light's Out'.*

*I was on the fence about whether to place this here to give some clarity, since it probably will take some time for me to finish and start posting any side content. While the prologue will be expanded in its proper story, I hope the added context helps a bit.*

*While I don't think it will appease those who are dissatisfied with the direction the story took and I admit that my portrayal of Yuuko is sub-optimal, being generous, I feel like this has to be placed here for the moment. Once I get to posting Before Light's Out, I'll remove the prologue from this chapter and link to that sidestory instead. That means this chapter doesn't do much for the plot at large. I know the pacing went to play Faraway Dawn, and there's nothing more to say than sorry to those who find reading this a chore, I guess.*

*Also, this chapter contains passages that hint at substance abuse. I don't think it's that bad, there's no violence or anything, only mentioned in passing, but just in case. There's also clear discrimination and some sexist slurs, so proceed with caution. And no, I do not support the strong worded attitudes depicted in the story.*

*As always, thanks for reading and sorry for the drag. Stay safe.*

*Zuoriel*

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*Chapter 87:*

**Pulling and Being Pulled**

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*December, 2001. Unlimited Timeline.*

*(Yokohama Base. Yuuko's office.)*

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Slightly to the left, she spins in her seat. Eyes closed, basking in the silence. As if a thin thread was tied to her neck, holding her breathing hostage, the scientist cannot truly relax. Not that she was wishing to, not that she looked for such comfort.

Barely opening her eyes, reddening eyes, scanning her office… the office that would no longer be hers in but a few hours, echoes and stitches replayed in her mind. All the towers of papers, all those nights of work, all those equations fixed and erased and fixed who knows how many times over…

"… All for nothing," she whispers, looking at an empty hand before it raises to claw at air, to hold nothing within its palm. Void as her stomach, the gesture collapses in apathy as she continues to spin in slow motion, slumped into the seat.

Unable to muster any anger at all, carefully resting her hands on the desk, one good breath she takes before standing up. Grabbing a few folders and placing them on an open suitcase, grabbing both mugs she always used, dragging her feet, feeling as if walking upon scorching sands, the scientist allows herself a last look at the office by the door before flicking the switch off.

From behind the mask, within the shell, a minute quiver tries to emerge on her lips. Thoughts of what could have been, of where she had gone wrong swirl, boil in her mind, overloading it, rough strokes of pain in the back of her head. The quietness that comes after utter defeat, the unbearable silence, the unblinking pondering… and the echoes, the echoes of the wound that remains open made the sight a torture, you'd understand. Inhaling sharply, the hair on her nape standing on edge, she shakes her head. And thus, she turns off the lights, leaving the place.

Small, short steps towards the elevator, towards the exit. Whatever tincture is brewing within, whatever lies buried in the cyclopean

depths of her guilt makes Yuuko release an extensive and slow sigh, body slouching forward, downward. I believe it is quite fair to affirm part of her is glad to be leaving. To be able to leave the whispers behind, to not be forced to remain static in this place filled to the brim with regrets.

Inhaling is painful, as if all of her teeth were piked by cavities and she had just attempted to drink warm coffee. Feeling contraction, as if her ribs were actually pressing themselves closer and closer to her lungs with each exhalation, to crush whatever faint beats that yet remain in her heart, to choke them as a noose would now that the floor is crumbling all around her.

Running a hand over her eyes, trying to hammer the mask into her face, to rivet the nails of composure upon her features, it did little to aid her breathing, her steps, or the nauseating hammer on the back of her head. So she slows down, pressing her palm over her eyes, groaning, feeling her features dry, her eyes burning. Shaking, oh, so subtly.

"… Sensei, are you alright?" An unexpected voice asks, low, making her flinch.

Looking up through the fingers clinging to her face, she sees the one who was not supposed to be, who now was grimacing as if he had just been stabbed right in the gut. The proof her theory had been right all along, the proof she herself had failed to bring it to fruition, that was what he meant for her at the moment.

It hurts, looking at the cadet, at his worried grimace.

It aches, thinking on what could have been should she have met him months earlier.

It burns, pondering what she could have been achieved if only she had a bit more time.

And finally, it ravishes her insides, recalling what she forced upon him in her pain. How she felt after waking up drenched in sweat and other sticky fluids, barely able to move her limbs due to the hangover, unable to fully close her legs due to the soreness, and unable to stop the shaking as she started remembering what she had done as the lingering vanilla scent he had left imprinted in the sheets made nest within her nose.

So she shakes her head, sighing hard. "You shouldn't be here, Shirogane. Upper brass doesn't know of your security pass being different, remember?" Yuuko wearily reminds, ruffling her messy, entangled, unwashed hair. At the least, there was one person she did not need to pretend around. A small, tiny comfort on this ruinous day for her soul.

The cadet frowns, taking a step closer. "Whatever. So… A-Are you leaving for real?"

"… Yes. Alt V command decided my aid is of paramount importance. And… well, that's all you need to know." Looking down, away from his worry, she bites her lips. Frustrated, not at the situation but at her weakness. To have released such cruel truths upon the boy, when he was only trying to support her as she drowned her despair in alcohol, unable to look at reality in the face.

"That's just… Come on, there has to be something…" Wincing, hands shaking, he denies, he rebels, he rejects. So he seeks her eyes, slicing the air with a sharp gesture. "This base was super important, right? Why can't you stay here and-"

"Shirogane," she steps closer to him, a hand slowly, hesitantly reaching upwards. A second of stalling, instead of going for his face the scientist grabs the cadet's shoulder. "It's alright, this is how things work. Just… do what you can, and forget what we spoke of that night."

Grimacing, the cadet shakes his head, never leaving her eyes. "But Alternative V doesn't exactly guarantee our survival, right? I mean…

I don't…"

"You do what you can, you now know what… will come. You have time to act, to think things through." *As I should have done when Yokohama fell,* she admonishes within, the grip on his shoulder tightening. "Time's cruel, but it can also be forgiving. Healing at some points, even. But-"

"That all depends on what we make of it," still frowning, he finishes.

Surprised for a second, the scientist nods, releasing his shoulder. "Indeed. And none of this is your responsibility, so do not mull over it so hard. Get commissioned, learn to fight, and maybe… things will change for your future, Shirogane."

"… And what about you?" Leaning closer, he inquires.

So the scientist holds his gaze in silence for a moment. "… I'm leaving on my own volition, this is a burden I have to shoulder as the head of the prior project. But you… you have nothing to do with this." *And I won't allow them to lay their hands on you, Yashiro, or anyone else,* she swears to herself, knowing what would be of the cadet should his existence as a dead man were noticed by HC. "So go back to the barracks after I leave, don't mention how I called you to meet me, don't stand out. And don't ever come back to this floor." Uttering not another word, she hurriedly walks past the cadet, eyes bolted forward.

Yet, after she got to the elevator, she hears his steps chasing after her. "Is there anything I can do to help you, Sensei?" He asks, out of air and aware of his heartbeats despite not enduring any physical exertion.

Folding a sigh, she tries to muster, to forge some steel, some of the imposing tone she employed at times. "… Can you operate a PC like I do to help my research?"

"Well, no…"

"Can you help in the calculus I need to make?" Looking back at him, she sees the cadet clawing at his palms, sharpening his teeth against one another. "Do you know anything about engineering? Of how to manufacture machinery? Electronics?" She waits, yet his gritting and shaking only invigorate. It hurts, it sends a myriad of arrows into her throat. "… You can't, you've no skills to aid me, Shirogane. So don't worry, there's no point in lamenting the failure of another," *I'm just reaping what I sowed,* so the scientist keeps admonishing herself, shaking her head, unrelenting in the blames she places upon her person. "And moreover, you already… helped me enough, that day." Allowing a moment of honesty as the doors open, she then heaves another sigh.

Unable to truly express how much the cadet's company, his honest words of praise and encouragement had done to keep the scientist from hurting herself that night, how he broke her fall into a seemingly endless cesspit of despair.

He says nothing, she steps into the elevator. The scientist remains looking to the walls, not turning around.

"Is there really… nothing I can do for you?" He asks, low, cracking.

Her hand grips the briefcase as intensely as her teeth hail upon her bottom lip, a self-imposed reminder not to give in. Yet, as if choking on smoke, as if swallowing needles, tearing her throat and filtering blood into her lungs, her chest tightens. So, lips twisting, Yuuko looks back.

"… Shirogane?"

"Yes?" Immediately looking up and alert, he gazes into the reddening eyes.

"Yashiro," she asks, something crushing her heartbeats into stillness for a second.

Takeru then nods, saluting her firmly, understanding the request. And right before the door to the elevator closes, the scientist can discern the faint drops welling on the corner of his eyes, the minute shaking on the hand that remains bolted by his head in one last showing of respect and support. The small twitch of his throat, of his lips, the same defeated expression she engraved in him while blurting cruel truths upon him that night.

The elevator whirs to life, beginning its ascend. Slowly allowing her back to crash against the wall, Yuuko remains looking down, unmoving. Mouth a bit open, fingers and arms limp, what currents of thoughts had flown in the scientist were now frozen, molded into a square, an unmoving, unchanging state.

"At least I might be able to device a warning by working on the ML-Engine for the G-Bombs, I guess," she reassures out loud while embracing herself, trying to compress her figure, not truly believing her own words.

Donning the mask, molding her inner feelings deep within, she steps out of the elevator. Ready to leave Yokohama Base, back to the IRI's facilities in Sendai.

As it were, those of the Fifth Project did not trust in her, at all. They desired full access to the spoils of Yokohama, the Reactor, and having her near would be detrimental despite the prospect of cooperation. Thus, locking her service behind the eventual pass for herself, granting her family a seat in the migrant fleet the more she produced results was the condition, the main one, the UN imposed onto the scientist. To that end, to avoid any rebellious ideas from taking hold in her mind, the IJA was discarded due to the eventual reshuffle of the Valkyries and their Instructor into the Fuji Corps, into the Wardog Battalion. So, in a show of cooperation, in a bid to gain stability, the US allowed Yuuko to be handled by the IRG as she was before she took charge of Alt IV in Yokohama. Sharing some spoils would, for the moment, placate the nobility and perhaps prevent their desire to spark an incident in the face of a, quite forceful and one-sided, reinstatement of the US-Japan Security Treaty.

It all would happen in but a few hours, and by then Yuuko would once more be forced to wear the black dress of the IRG as she was when forwarding her thesis at age sixteen. Back to square one, only with no prospect of support, knowing no rope would be coming to soften her fall.

Guided by the MPs as the wind howls around them, no one returns her gaze, no one even dares to look her way. Smiling wryly, she chuckles at the sight.

No interruptions are found on the way out, and only a small retinue of the prior crew of the base is standing in wait near the carrier on the runway. CO Radhabinod, 2nd Lt Pyatkh, a few of her engineers and fellow researchers, and all of the Valkyries besides Sgt Jinguuji grow stiff and salute her, gaze locked upwards, away from hers.

Again, the nails pierce her jaw, the skin below her ears as she merely passes them by, enduring the strain. All of them remain stoic, the formality required in their postures and gazes never breaks. Yet, the cracks are evident in their eyes, the cold seeping through them, the light squeezed out as they stood in petrification. Not even her best friend has the valor to break protocol, despite the quake in her knees and hands. Not even a whisper does she extends to the scientist, whose heart and shoulders sink a tiny bit more. She was not expecting it, but perhaps she had wondered whether anyone would extend a simple parting word.

" *So only Shirogane, huh. The one that shouldn't exist, the one I've been with for the less time…"* she muses, giving a faint, warped smile.

And with just a nod, and a few pleasantries from the new authorities, Yuuko slowly steps forward into the carrier. The shadows falling upon her sight, as if something had spread wings to envelop her whole, or as if she was again drunk like she was on Christmas. Walking on automatic, slumping onto a seat as the doors to her VIP room close, she still looks upwards in a daze before simply collapsing face first into the cushioning bed.

"At least those two will be safe…"

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Sinking, sinking, just a little bit more every day.

Buildings falling inwards into a trench, to the bottom of the sea, obstructing all light.

"-and as such, the overuse of the engine could-" her voice drone on, trying to lift her gaze, only finding unfocused eyes, faces lacking any and all emotion or expression in the vast conference room, all over the seats present.

"But where is the proof?" A man asks, frowning at the papers she had crafted so thoroughly.

Slowly inhaling, swallowing the brine, she nods and points to the right papers. "As you can see in the graphs obtained during my stay in Yokohama-"

"That was only an unpolished model of the G-Bomb," a woman dismisses while tapping her glasses, brushing her short dark hair. "I sincerely doubt such a large scale reaction could occur by simultaneous detonations."

Chin lowering in, unable to meet their eyes, a stutter in her lips prevents the words from flying as they normally would. "The readings of the second detonation show a twenty three percent increase in its expected radius, the scans done in Ground Zero shortly after the mission and throughout last year do indicate that-"

Her voice continues seeking, the gazes simply cast lazily over the papers. As her diagrams on the possible distortion of gravity appears on the large screen behind her, a sudden shout makes her quiver for a moment, a researcher from Boening storms from his seat to curse aggravations. While the scientist speaks the truth and nothing but the truth, her results, the veracity of them, only serves to add fuel to the fire.

"There is no proof!" The man shouts, eyes red as he points at Yuuko. "All the testings done thus far have confirmed the safety of the G-Bomb. Your claims are nothing but baseless slander!"

"Then, why have our readings on Ground Zero been rejected thus far? I am not decrying your own research, I'm only showing the results obtained during my stay in Yokohama and the conclusions I've drawn from them," she presses, taking a step forward and giving a wide stare at the room at large.

The man seethes, waving down at her while his features contort as if smelling bodily decay. "Again, the G-Bombs used in the Yokohama Hive were prototypes. All the testings done since then have granted conclusive results over the safety of the engine and its null collateral damage."

"As far as I'm aware, you're only testing one engine at a time," she says, sighing, straightening her dark dress. "That is why I am requesting you to test multiple in unison, due to the anomaly that our readings captured during Lucifer and my preliminary calculus over the ML-Engine."

The man scoffs as he sits down, his weight causing wailing in the seat. "Heh, are you aware of the cost attached to such intensive testing, with how precious our reserves of G-Elements are? To jeopardize the production schedule over a single reading? Guess we should rework the entire delivery system because one truck was delayed yesterday."

"… Perhaps, if you actually analyzed the readings, you'd arrive at the same result. Unless, of course, there is something you're not disclosing about the lasting effects of the G-Radiation," she spit out, wanting to rid herself of the cold lump in her throat, of the vines constricting her limbs.

"Professor, I believe falling to insults is only an admission of your lack of arguments," a man with crimson hair tells, grinning. "I do find it quite farfetched, your angle of attack. While simultaneous

detonations in the nearby area are a fair concern you've proven, to claim such an effect could extend to other locations in Babylon is nothing but fear mongering," he concludes with a nod, a vain and smug smirk.

"Indeed," the woman from before quickly chains in, glaring at Yuuko, "there is simply no way the effect of a G-Bomb will leave the place where it's detonated. It has been proved the radiation only affects the radius and its adjacent area, and nothing else. Frankly, to you say the gravity's distortion could grow despite the sheer distance between hives is nothing but madness."

Nods and whispers soon follow, gazes narrowing, postures facing away from her all over the expansive room, brows that fall and cross, sighs in tandem with eyes rolling. Her hands begin to shake despite the pleasant lukewarmness of the room, chin almost hitting her neck as the tide of not-so-subtle whispers reach her ears.

" *What a hysteric bitch. Can't believe she's still rambling about this, I thought she had learned her lesson."*

" *She's delusional, what the hell. Expansive world-wide gravitational anomalies? The G-Bombs barely even affect the nearby area around their detonation. Why was such a psycho put in charge of the prior project?"*

" *Did you see that rack? Probably sold a night to some important seats in the Empire to skip the ladder."*

" *I heard she was a minor when she was admitted in the project, actually."*

" *What did you expect of the japs? They do have a taste for unripe fruit, if you know what I mean."*

" *Ew, gross. Still, how immature, really. I expected more from the famous Professor Kouzuki, not this bitchy tantrum."*

" *Why doesn't she bring her super quantum thing to explain the radiation issue? Oh, right. It was a fucking waste of money."*

" *I bet there was some laundering involved there, and in how over the top Yokohama was built. How much do you think she got paid?"*

" *I'm more frustrated with how she insists on opposing the project if she doesn't get her way. She's just being cunt to flip us off at this point."*

" *I'd like to disagree, but it is women like her which give the rest of us a bad reputation. I wonder how many times she bent over to get this meeting approved."*

"T-The distortion issue-" she chokes, knees bolted, pain slicing her legs. "There is a detailed effect that lingers in the air, an impediment to the equipment used to record the readings. And said same effect left our vessels unable to properly communicate with the troop during the minutes that followed the bombing," she states, hurrying to showcase the proper documents.

Right she is, as the side effect she has proven to exist is what will send the HSST fleet of Babylon to their doom, forever ruining the Earth with magnetic interference. Despite the nails which pierce her flesh, the quiver of her wrist as if it were snowing, she tries and conveys it all as simply as possible, so that it digests easily and without a hint of malice or ill will from her end. Yet the apathy, the frowns, the smirks which her gaze receives only makes hers collapse as once more harsh taps hit the presented papers, more whispers put her integrity under the microscope, and others openly belittle her while using her research as a coaster for their drinks of choice.

Sink and sink. Below the waves, further beyond the sea, light becoming ever distant. Her lungs ache, now unable to properly search those gazes, heaviness claiming her back and innards, bolting her in place.

Cutting off in the middle of the explanation, the members of the Security Council stand up in hurry and call off the meeting. The rest of the retinue from different avenues of the UN also stand as if their seats were flaming, shooting glares at the scientist, throwing the papers she had worked for nights on end without rest to the floor, stepping on them, some with evident pungency and deriving a thrill from the vacant gaze Yuuko endows to prevent anger to surface. Like mannequins, expressionless in a blur they pass her by. Some order about ceasing on the futility reaches her ears for a moment, she barely musters a nod in acknowledgment out of formality.

Slowly, she bends down and starts picking up the pages, one by one. The ones that were crumpled into a ball, the ones thrown to the floor in dismissal, the ones stepped on purposely. Tenderly grasping each with only her fingertips, as if they were each a small shard of glass, a recently unearthed relic. It takes her a moment to gather them, until only one remains. Yet as a hand reaches out for it, a well-lustered shoe steps on the paper.

The page breaks in half as she pulls, a small shiver runs through her veins, freezing her in place. There is no anger, no fire surging from the empty stomach, from the dried lips. Only a sigh, a frown as she looks up.

"… Listen, Kouzuki," the man with crimson hair whispers, still daring to smirk down at the scientist, "there is little to be done about this. Even if you decry Alt V, their decision is already set. They'll only think you're lashing against your prior rivals."

"Lift your shoe from my research," she says, glaring, low.

He sighs, throwing his hair backwards. "Please, listen to reason. You're wasting your talent, you should see how fruitless your work thus far has been. Why not honestly support the project, join our team?"

"Lift your shoe, Eberbach," she threatens, allowing her teeth to be seen, a primal reaction, a last meager vestige of impulse.

"Me and my men lobbied to grant you this meeting, out of our mutual distaste for Alt V, and yet you've dashed our efforts with your attitude. Is this how you will treat your *allies*, Professor?" He asks, smirking, pressing his shoe further into the paper as if stomping on a small spider.

Jaw clenches, she looks down. Slowly exhaling, a small, minute nod follows. "Please, let me pick up my research."

"See? It isn't that hard to not be a bitch, Kouzuki," he states, still daring to smirk.

The shoe leaves the page which she immediately picks up and places on her stack. Hugging the research papers for dear life to her chest, the scientist stands in a hurry and tries to return to her desk, yet the man blocks her way.

Patting her shoulder, leaning closer, he whispers. "They'll never listen to you. It was the same with me when I suggested the French frontline to be reinforced, you cannot change anything from the outside."

She turns away, grimacing. "… Thanks, but I will manage on my own. I only need to present conclusive proof, once my work on the ML-Engine bears fruit-"

"They won't let you near one, if you remain in opposition," he affirms, chuckling as he again traces her shoulder and backside with his fingertips. "Your prior research met a dead end, but this doesn't need to be *your* end. Are you sure you don't want our aid? Prominence might have little support as of now, yes, but together maybe we-"

Stuffing her research into a briefcase in a rush, some edges of the papers sticking out, she edges away, knowing lashing out would only cause further issues, only allowing herself to bite her lips. "My research was not mistaken, of that you can be certain." *Otherwise, where the hell did Shirogane come from? Where did those images Yashiro showed me came from? Where did that Game Guy machine*

*came from? I am not mistaken, I only didn't manage to circumvent the limitations of the current hardware.*

"I see… I do concede you are one of a kind, Professor. If you wish to see the fruits of your research be taken seriously, some compromises are unavoidable." Gaining a smirk upon the petrification which follows as he once more trails her shoulder and arm, the man nods at the her, undaunted as he seeks direct eye contact. "I'm sure you don't desire to surrender to becoming the Whore of Babylon. Certainly, your efforts deserve better than this sorrowful ending. My phone is always open for you, I'll be anxiously awaiting your call, Kouzuki," he says with light cheer, daring to slap at her bottom while chuckling.

Shaking as her hands coil, she remains still while glaring at the man, who winks and waves back before departing. As the door once more closes, as the shaking resumes and overtakes her being, she tries to order, to arrange her papers once more. To put everything in its proper place, to honor the research she had started, she had inherited so many moons ago. However, it doesn't take long for the detachment of the Imperial Guard to enter the room.

A slim man garbed in burgundy smirks, giving a bow. "It is time for our departure, Professor."

"I am arranging my papers, Cpt Makabe," she states, not looking at him, chin still pointed down, shoulders sagging.

"My apologies, but we must be going shortly since there is another meeting to come in this room. Due to the extended duration of your speech, we are already tardy as it is. If you dally too much, I'm afraid I'll have to report this to-"

"Stop, I- I'll be ready in a moment. Just give me a minute."

He smiles, bowing. "Just a minute, then. By the by, since I assume your presentation was met with rejection," he stops as she glares, trying to rise her chin, to stand straight, a lone tree braving a

typhoon, "perhaps, could I suggest you to seek my Regent's support? With us as your patrons, your words could gain a new weight for the UN."

"I cannot entangle anyone in-"

"If you produce no results, certainly, consequences will follow, for both the Empire and your own goals," he states, never losing the insufferable smirk. "We are in agreement towards our views of the Fifth Project, why not collaborate in our efforts? I believe we have treated you well in Sendai."

She hurriedly stuffs her papers, choking on blazing charcoal as she knows they're out of order, as she sees them bend and twist within the briefcase before she slams it close. "This is not the time nor the place…" clawing at the grip of her case, at the laptop she had brought, she rushes away, gaze locked on the floor.

And yet, her steps wane eventually. Collapsing to a mere stroll, stalked by the Imperial Guards. Knowing there is nowhere to run, joining her wrists as if wearing handcuffs, gaze lost and vacant as she slumps her way back to the carrier, back to Sendai, back to the prison, to the silence.

Once she regains consciousness, it becomes hard for her to know how much time had passed. Unable to gain approval to go outside, she simply paces to the lab, eating in it while standing, delivering a daily report, returning to her quarters and slumping into her bed without getting under the sheets, removing her heels or changing her clothes.

Over and over again, time and time again. Enduring the monotony of the closed-off space, the queries, the demands for results. Emptying a small bottle of all its pills, failing to prevent a whirlwind in her stomach from spouting breakfast out of her system. Wobbling to a desk, to dirty her nostrils in white, shivering with each inhalation. Losing her perception of time, reports and failed tests pile on the lab. Growing to despise the chime of a phone that only signaled awful

news, growing intimate with the angular plastic seat of the place, falling unconscious on it, the abundant papers acting as a cushion for Yuuko as she slips to the floor in her sleep.

Night by night, a life by the knife, with it on her throat. The reprimands echoing in her ears make her shoulders forget how to raise, scoliosis setting in as the slump in dejection becomes a staple of her daily routine.

" *When was the last time someone noticed I ain't eating breakfast?"* She thought once as the emptiness in her gut almost sent her to meet the cables of the lab.

Days or weeks? Months already? When was the last time she could leave her prison? Time had lost its meaning, only mattering when she was called to report something in person. Like a dog ordered to do tricks for the amusement of its owner. That same small smile, the gaze that looks down at the restrained being which believes it's free is what meets her gaze, time and again. Realizing she has to work for that praise, for the headpat in approval only serves to rend her spirits further, relenting on some negotiations and petitions if only to see some meager improvement. Unknown to her, the reports she forwarded were actually craved by many as much as fresh water in the desert, held as carefully as a newborn child. It is, perhaps, her own refusal to request aid and the adusted mood which she endows whenever she leaves which isolates her further. It's what makes the excuses of the IRG all the more believable, how 'the Professor does not wish to be disturbed by petty matters not pertaining to her research'. And so long as results continue to appear, and if they can come without forcing an altercation between Yuuko and the researchers from Alt V, the top seats of the UN are more than pacified.

Unlike the dissolving heartbeats in her chest, the arms that rubs her own arms and neck over and over again at times while awaiting the computers to finish the compile.

" *When was the last time I talked of anything besides work? When have I done anything other than work?"*

Reprimanded when speaking out, dismissed, rejected, forever living in a new moon. Nyx could have very well have cast an eternal night over the scientist, for the routine never breaks. Never, not a single time. Never, not once, did she try to reach out. After all, there were more pressing matters to attend. After all, she could not let her life's work meet its final curtain in such shape

" *Am I not actually mistaken here? I mean, why are my readings not lining up? Am I doing something wrong?"*

The babel towers of papers grow and grow, yet she now slumps in her seat, not wanting to move.

" *After all, I failed and now am meeting the expected result, is all."*

Completely loose as she spins, looking up at nowhere, the petition for her to work on the railgun rests on her desk.

" *Why did I think I was right all along? Even if you could sense causality… no one can change its nature."*

The desire for support lingers as she gulps heavily, wheezing for a second. Knowing it would be a mistake to trust in the IRG as of now, in who desires to be her patron, yet it is that or surrendering to fully cooperating with Alt V. Still, to cling to obstinacy would be a mistake, she thinks.

" *Am I sure I didn't imagine Shirogane being there? A dead man walking… as if something like that could happen. Maybe I really am going insane at this rate."*

Shoulders sag, with slow movements she grasps a pen with which to place her agreement. Merely extending her arm causes pain to sear at the bottom of her nape, forces her to actually stand. Staring at the paper with half-open lips, resting the tip of the pen onto the line with

demands binding, she gives out a long, low sigh, hunching even more.

A knocking disturbs her, flinching and trying to straighten herself. "Who is it?" She asks, almost rasping.

A guard in black enters and salutes. "Professor, ma'am, you have a visitor."

"… A visitor?" She tilts her head, not recalling any appointments. "From where?"

"UN, ma'am."

She frowns, seeing the crimson hair and the smirk in her mind for a moment. "Send him away, I am in no mood to receive him."

"Um, ma'am, the soldier in question has been very adamant in this request. I am loath to admit he shall return at a latter date even if I refuse him once again," the inductee laments, giving a bow in respect.

"A soldier?" Yuuko asks, brows furrowing, blinking fast for a moment.

"Yes, ma'am. He has accompanied the retinues from the UN that have come to receive your reports for a few months, and has requested a meeting with you on every occasion claiming he comes to deliver intel from Yokohama to you," the inductee returns up, straightening himself into petrification, not making eye contact, afraid of disturbing the scientist.

She raises a brow as her lips purse, the description not inciting any face in particular. No one from the Valkyries or her close circle could it be, nor was it that insufferable man since he no longer was a soldier and, with his influence, could attain a meeting with ease instead of having to wait. Interest piqued, she leans forward, her chin onto a hand. "What's the name and grace of this soldier?" She asks, staring.

The guard stiffens, relenting a small nod while gulping. "He identified himself as 1st Lt Shirogane, ma'am. Stationed in Yokohama Base, 4th Armored Battalion, OIC of the Lupine Squadron," he notes, shivering a bit upon her silence. Yuuko merely hums, blinking a few times, wondering if she was dreaming or if he actually existed. Coughing, the man gives a minute bow to the scientist. "The security personnel at the foyer are, well, vexed with his reiterated insistence, and those from the UN's retinue do not seem to keen on reprimanding the man. Please, could you not receive him, if only this time?" He again asks, remaining in position, pressing his arms onto his dress upon the silence.

"1st Lt… Shirogane…" Yuuko says, repeating the words under her breath, a hand raising through her cheek to grasp at some hair. Lips purse, legs meet, eyes close. Inhaling slowly, slower she stands. "Fine, I suppose…"

Allowing herself to be guided towards the place of the meeting, a room divided by glass with a small speaker in the middle of it and two chairs on each side. Fitting for a prison such as this damned establishment, I dare say. In equal disgust was he frowning as he strides into the room, ignoring the ill comments from a guard in gray.

"-and if you were to attempt anything to-"

"Dammit, I get it!" He snaps, arms folding, glaring, making the woman take a sudden step back. "You think I'll try to impair the UN's standing here of all places, surrounded by Imperial Guards?"

"I am merely reminding you-"

"Yeah, shove the screams. Any further hostility will be detailed in my report to Yokohama HQ as aggression towards UN personnel," he threatens, in earnest. "I do not recall to have broken protocol so, if you'd be so kind," he smirks while giving half a bow, with a hand swipe exuding drama, "please relent on the pressure, miss. I would hate to give my superiors an unfavorable report. After all, instead of letting us grunts handle these reports, perhaps some higher ranking

officers will decide to involve themselves," he says, half in threat, half serious. The small kindling in his eyes, unblinking, is enough of a deterrent to the inflexible demands of the woman. The foolish guard gulps and leaves with another warning, he heaves a sigh and shakes his head.

The searing fire dies down as he looks to his left, meeting the pale, crumbling complexion of the scientist, her sunken cheeks as spirals of shifting sand, the red eyes aiming down as if in apology, a dead serious and almost absent expression. Eyes like fish, still as a pillar, compacting onto herself as if to trim dear space in a hard drive. For a moment, neither says a thing. She stares at him, scolding herself for believing the soldier to have been nothing but a fever dream, noting the sharper angle of his jaw, the usual relax smile absent, and the extension of his unkempt hair that is about to reach his shoulders. He cannot look, the erosion in her features bringing stillness to his thoughts, the downcast posture contrasting with the one he recalls. Except for one particular night which fills him with regret and aching, reprimanding himself for having taken advantage of her weakness.

"… How are you, Sensei?" He asks as he sits, tightly entwining his fingers to dispel his negative thoughts.

"I'm not your teacher, 1st Lt Shirogane," she says, barely, low, without meeting his eyes. "Congratulations on the promotion, I suppose," she raises a wry smile, compacting her shoulders in a shrug. The expression leaves her, her breath is caught in an attempt to escape her throat at his tense frown. Believing to see disappointment, she once more looks down, silent.

"How are you faring?" He asks, leaning closer, lips tight. "You don't look good at all, Sensei."

"I am well, I am well," she states, nodding slowly, not looking up as she idles time on a strand of hair. "I am rather busy so… What would you be needing out of me, 1st Lt?"

Biting his lips for a moment at the docility of the answer, he coughs and clears his throat. "Yokohama HQ is asking for a detailed report on your findings of late, personally from your hands. Some intel was delivered to you a month ago, I think?"

"I see… So you too, now," she whispers, softly joining her hands.

"Huh? What did-"

"You sure climbed the ladder fast, Shirogane," she nods, smiling weakly, chuckling at the apparent success he had found. "I do have the reports at the ready, if you would be so kind to wait a moment," she tells, nodding, almost bowing, tension freezing her complexion. "I shall have an attendant bring them to you, however they are all printed in paper at the moment. Would that be agreeable or would you prefer a digital format for the intel?"

"Yes, sure, in paper is fine… Still, that's not the only reason I'm here," he says, stealing gazes, never finding her eyes, sighing.

"What would you need of me, then?"

"I came here with a proposal from the UN," he affirms, leaning forward while clenching his hands, sighing as he seeks her sight. "Sensei, would you consider returning to Yokohama?"

"… Why? I am… I already have dealt with those discussions," she states, lifting her eyes, facing him with renewed plating. For she knew this conversation was being recorded, that retribution would fall upon her sisters or her only friend should she go against the current. "The leads of the Fifth Project have rejected my findings thus far, and I still would desire time to work on my own. If that is what you're after, I will have to decline the offer."

A frown meets her, it sends shivers down her spine. The same adusted glare, the unblinking fixation of that night, of that Christmas of defeat lingers in the soldier's eyes as he force palms the nearby wood. "Please, be serious. There are concerns about how well you

can work in this lab as opposed to back at the base. And a few people told me… you seem to be having a hard time. Looking at you now, you're made a mess."

"I am… lacking time, Shirogane. It's my responsibility to finish what I started," she affirms, before breaking eye contact. "I've no intention to alter the conditions of my duties. Tell that to whoever is using you."

"I came here on my own volition," he affirms, smiling.

"Are you sure you're not being used as a pawn?" She asks, shrugging, venomous, trying to scare him away.

But instead of the usual fidgety attitude she knew in the cadet, the soldier remains smiling. "I am only following your advice, Sensei. I'm making the most out of my time, before it runs out."

"… Is that so. How does being a delivery man help your career? Paying back a favor for the promotion?" She spits out, arms folding, looking away from the shine. Yet, she finds herself staring as he starts to chuckle. At first due to anger, feeling betrayal, the same echoes that trampled her research.

But finding a small, kind smile, a nod as she stares, the old upbeat posture of defiance she knew in him. "I am still on your side, remember? I don't believe I'm completely useless now. I'll have you know the entire base hates my guts," he states with a puff of his chest.

"Why? You… wouldn't still be swimming against the current?"

"Oh, no. I just spin."

"What?"

"I spin, in the TSFs. Haven't lost a single fight yet, so pretty much every squad wants to strike us down," he admits while scratching his

head, giving a wry smile. "The new authorities have more or less turned my squad into the grueling trial for fresh cadets. My scores and tactics gained me some recognition, is all."

"I see… Good for you, I suppose," she says, facing away.

"And since I also tend to Kasumi, people have found me useful for contacting you."

"Huh? You… Why?"

"What? You think I'd leave Kasumi alone?" He asks, crossing brows and arms, hurt to some degree by the gaze of befuddlement. "I do concede that I am only a useful pawn, but even a pawn can become something great if it makes it to the other end of the board. Still, my peste- I mean, suggestions have made some high ups see some value in cooperating with you to prevent any intel from being withheld."

"What? What are you talking about?" She asks, leaving her lips parted, slightly slouching to a side.

"Well, that it seems your reports are not sent as is," he notes with a nod. "I caught a glimpse once when I reported to O'Connor-"

"Who?"

"Oh, the new CO. Anyways, he asked me if I knew anything about your research and junk and I noticed then your doodles were not present in the reports our men got," he affirms, giving the evil eye to the guards that stood nearby in watchfulness as their features tightened.

And yet, what makes him flinch is not them but the caustic frown, the slam into the nearby wood the scientist makes. "What do you mean by that? Doodles?"

"You know, those odd symbols you write with."

"Wh- They are not doodles! They're symbols of my-"

"Yeah, cool. Anyways, they're not in the papers," he states, giving a nod. "Did you remove 'em or is something rotten here?"

Crossing her arms, facing away once more, she slowly takes in air. "I… will have to revise my papers, I've been very busy as of late," she says, hoping he'd desist, to avoid the recording to bring him trouble. "And anyways, I do not recall ever letting you in on such topics, Shirogane. Who would have thought you'd be so loose-lipped?"

"… I only talked out of concern, because it's not like you to omit such details," he retorts in sobriety, holding her stare, wincing a bit. "Also, you should know I… can easily draw *parallels* in your rambles, even if they sound like they come from *another world*," he says with a smirk, pleased with the wording he practiced to deliver the message.

Yuuko gapes for a second, suddenly desiring the glass to not be present to lunge at his neck and demand answers. The impediment, however, is enough for her to sigh and look away, ponder on the repercussions. With a heavy stomach, she shakes her head. "In any case, your report has been received. I shall tend to my reports more carefully, notify that to the UN. Now, if there's nothing else-"

"Sensei, you haven't answered yet," he complains, pursing his lips a bit. Taking in air, features tightening as his fingers entwine, he looks straight ahead into her eyes. "The UN would like you to return to under their banner, to prevent these issues from repeating themselves. Believe me, they weren't pleased with the repeated negatives I got to meet with you, and," he steals a glare towards the ones watching for a second, "they won't the next report. If you give the agreement, negotiations with the IRG will proceed shortly. I think maybe in a month or so you could-"

"… I will not bend over," she states, clutching, gripping at her thighs, bending her dress, looking down in blazes. "I'll lead my own research, with the paths available to me. Breaking the status quo will

only cause further ripples." *And I will not bow down and surrender my work to go and slave away at the bombs, not before delivering a proper warning of what will follow Babylon to whoever listens.*

"I was under the impression they want you to lead the R&D back at the base," he says, slow, nodding. "That's why I'm here, to see if you'd welcome the notion. And… by the way, are you eating well?"

"That's none of your business…"

"… Please, Sensei. You're looking-"

"I'm not your teacher, you were only a pawn in my project. Nothing more," she says, frozen in place. *"Stop it, don't become a target, you idiot. You'll get hurt if you get closer."*

"Still, I think that you can't do your best in these conditions," he firmly says, not flinching or looking away, gaze squarely on her features as his lips cascade. "And I am on your side, Sensei."

For a second, she stares. Legs press together as she looks down, she shakes her head. "You shouldn't, there's nothing to be gained."

"At least, I can be a bridge between you and Yokohama for anything you might want to convey. Also, you don't look good at all. How the hell are the Guards treating you here?" He repines, glaring at the men standing behind her, who despite their training find themselves looking away from the ravenous bite of his eyes.

"That's none of your business," she dismisses, shaking her head, turning away from him.

"For real? Come on, Sensei. Look at me, let me explain what the papers-"

"I shall receive the documents and reading them in my free time," she says, supporting herself on the chair as she stands up, looking

away. "However, I won't be revising my decision. I… have only one way available to me."

"H-Hey, wait up! I haven't even-"

"Shush. I have work to do, 1st Lt. The reports you're after will be arriving to your hands shortly, so please do wait a moment. Now, if you'd excuse me," she nods, nibbling at the edge of her lips as he calls out when she departs, when she runs away.

Jogging back to the silence of the lab, hugging her sides, she shakes her head while taking short breaths. Rummaging through the papers, a shiver runs down her back as she sees that, in fact, her symbols were present in the pages. Handing the correct folders to the attendant along a glacial glare, so that the soldier can depart as quickly as possible, she starts up the calculus and everything else, sending herself into work. The threat of not delivering present in her mind, of being reduced to an assistant, a mere clerk standing on the side answering requests like an automaton. The threat of having Shirogane sent once again to this place, to garner more attention onto himself. The threat of knowing her reports were being tampered, that she was far more trapped than she believed to be.

The same guard from before enters her lab, leaving the briefcase the soldier had brought, ascertaining the folder had safely reached his hands before departing in quite the hurry like a kitty from a source of water. With heavy steps and a heavier stomach she places her hands on it, lifting it towards the desk, opening it in slow motion. Seeing what inside rests sends a dart into her heart.

A messy drawing, unpolished as it could be. Rectangular shapes to the limbs, twisted circles as the eyes, the colors not remaining under their expected lines. Two figures were in the page, a woman with purple hair and a long lab coat wielding a clunky mug from which steam apparently comes out and a smaller girl garbed in black with two bunny ears carrying a stack of papers almost as tall as herself. Etched in the bottom of the page, a single line so reads: *"Please stay safe, Professor. Until we meet again, best of luck. Yashiro."*

Soon after, small stains fall upon the page. Only two or three, only that as the scientist's vision blurs, as hiccups devour her shallow breaths, pressing her teeth upon one another enough for it to begin to hurt. The disturbance did not stop as she sees another letter and a small sealed cup. Opening it and finding coffee as she likes it most, instinct takes over and she drinks. The iced coffee replenishes her spirits, the sensation forcing her back to stand straight on its own. As she sits down, she opens the next letter. A small paragraph was all it was, words of encouragement from Kyozuka-san, hoping for Yuuko to remain in good health. Hands shake as she reads, having to stop a times to pinch her nose and breath in sharply.

Finishing her coffee, rubbing her eyes to clear the fogginess which befalls her, she slowly picks up the next report. A detailed proposition to transfer back to Yokohama, to appeal to Alt V command for cooperation due to the rather lackluster results of the current crew stationed in the base. A proposition that was forwarded by Prime Minister Sakaki, before a rather convenient accident forced his departure from the seat. While traversing the text, the scientist once more slumps, seeing only demands, the same demands and results others desire out of her. Until a small update comes up, the rather precarious state of affairs between the IRG and IJA with the UN-US bases regarding the arrangement of the defense lines, a request for Yuuko's opinion on the matter, perhaps for her to intervene in favor of the peacekeeping efforts in the meetings coming from Undersecretary Tamase. It hollows her insides, she shakes her head and throws the papers towards her desk.

Twisting her lips, an odd tincture brews and swirls in her stomach. The difference with the landscape she knew is shocking to the point of almost giving her vertigo. Even with the schedule for the departure of the selected few towards the migrant fleet, it is quite fair to affirm the tensions were rising at an abnormal rate. What took her breath the most was the presence of the RLF, a few attacks and threats made to certain key ministries. And the clerical chorus that would soon follow.

It made her question her sense of time, question how could she even react on her own outside of the lab. The Empire's board has changed much, and she was unaware of it all. Almost dizzy, she stares at the ceiling. Wondering if it wouldn't be easier to just remain here, working and focusing on what she does best instead of again swim in opposition under unknown waters. Perhaps, appeasing the retribution that desired to fall upon the Empire would be the best course of action, what yields the best results in the bigger picture.

As she stands and rubs her legs, sighing and preparing to resume her work, she finds a small box left in the suitcase. Raising a brow at it, Yuuko cannot tell what it could be. It is too small to be food, a data pad would not be left in such a case either. Contact with it makes part of it sink and give out a clicking noise, sending a shiver down her spine. Removing the cloth, a small gray machine meets her eyes, a trinket that should not exist. Sensing something soft meet her fingers, she turns the Game Guy around. A folded note is attached with tape to its backside, which she gently removes and unfolds, beginning to read what in it is written.

" *Don't forget to take breaks or you'll get sucked in, Sensei. I left the cartridges in the small pocket of the cover, I hope you find it useful even if only to idle some time every now and then.*

*And if I didn't get to speak with you, know that me and Kasumi are still on your side! So please do take care of yourself if you're really having a hard time.*

*If you need anything, don't hesitate to send me a letter and I'll go deliver a package to you in person. The same if you want intel or how the base looks now if your reports are really getting tampered with. I have some good rep now that the squad got a record going in the mock battles, so I can ask about and give you some tidbits of intel if you think the UN can screw you over, too.*

*And don't worry, Kasumi is safe with me even if her drawings ain't getting any better. Can you believe she still refuses to eat her*

*carrots? She has now taken a liking to chopping my shoulder whenever I try to feed her some, the ungrateful bunny.*

*Major Marimo-chan also sends you her regards along her battalion. She asked me to tell you that no soldier marches to seek death, that even if you're called names only those who survive and keep pressing on can change the future.*

*Time can be cruel, but also forgiving. The difference lies in what you do with it. So let's try to make the most out of what we have left, Sensei. Your fight is not over yet, even if we can't stop Alt V there has to be something we can do for the better. And while I can't help at all with your research, I think I'm not entirely useless as I am now. Even if you were right and we're headed to a disaster, I'll do my part properly and brave through it all. I'll despair after I'm dead, doing my share from wherever it is I can help.*

*So please, don't hesitate to contact me if you need anything at all. Even if it's only to send you more of Kyozuka-san's coffee, let me repay all you did for me.*

*See you later.*

*Shirogane"*

Simply gripping the Game Guy, she sighs and, for the first time in who knows how long, she begins to chuckle. "You're truly… such an idiot…"

Grabbing the cup, she tries to drink again, only a few droplets reach her tongue even as she shakes it. Slumping again onto the seat, her grasp on the cup falters and makes it fall and roll away, her chin lowers and rests on her shoulders.

"I wonder if he'll really come here if I write him a letter…" she ponders, simply spinning in her chair, licking her lips to savor the taste, slowly pushing the buttons of the turned-off console.

*December 5th, 2001. Reversal Timeline.*

*(Yuuko's room.)*

**[Yuuko]**

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From one shoulder to the other, a gentle shaking rustles me. A moment of quietness follows, then yet again something moves my shoulder, a faint voice calls. Squirming under the sheets, hugging the pillow with an arm, my eyelids refuse to open shop.

" *Vice Commander*… *XO Kouzuki*, it's time to wake up," *Takeru* calls, again shaking my shoulder in slow circles, almost like a massage. "I have to go train so I can't stay here much longer… Hey, are you hearing?"

"Mmh… Yeah…"

"Oh, cool. Your coffee and the lunch are over there," he says, lowering his voice, retracting his hand. "I left a note with the calls you received on your desk. I'll be goi-"

I extend a hand, fumbling in the air for a moment before I catch his sleeve, digging into it. "Wait…"

"What is it? Is there anything you want a report on?" He asks, looking at me in calmness as I move my head, a single eye catching him raising a brow at my silence.

"Did you arrange the papers?"

"Yes, just as I did last time."

"The reports?" I ask, yawning softly.

"They're also ready for you, do you want me to bring them here?"

"Mmh," I nod, slumping back into the pillow. He sighs as I slowly let go of his sleeve before turning around.

As I wait for him, I extend a hand to grab small bites of the lunch he ordered. Stretching my legs causes a small pain to raise in the middle of my back, I can't fully circle my neck. Ugh… What a pain… This is what I get for sitting all dusk in front of a monitor. And just when I need to review the compiled analysis of the 00 Unit.

"Here they are," he says as he enters, leaving a few stacks of papers in the small table further in. "Give me a call if you need clarification, I'll be in Hangar 90 after the training is done," *Takeru* nods, waving as he moves to the door.

"Wait," I call out, gesturing for him to come closer. Again pursing his lips a tiny bit and raising a brow, he walks up to the end of the bed, and there he remains. So I point to my wardrobe, coughing a bit. "There's a pair of jade wheels there, take them out."

"… You are not thinking of requesting me to give you a massage, are you *Vice Commander* ?" He asks, giving me a side glance.

"Yuuko."

"What?"

"My name is- *Yaaawn…* Yuuko. Stop it with the rank already," I rub my eyes, again pointing to the wardrobe afterwards. "Come on, stop standing there. My back hurts and I need to get rid of the soreness," again resting my chin on the pillow, grabbing small bites of food, I steal glances at him.

"Wait, are you-"

"It's an order, you're under a punishment. So- *Yaawn.* So stop standing there."

At first, *Takeru* simply remains watching with quite the tension in his posture. As I simply return his stare, smile back, he sighs and shakes his head, rolling his eyes as he walks to the wardrobe. Procuring the wheels without much issue, he hands me the coffee as I point to it.

"Someone sure is comfy there," he comments, raising a brow.

" *Gulp*… I did need the rest, and don't feel like rushing is a good idea as of now," I admit, resting the cup on the nearby wood. "So? Come on, get on with it," I tilt my head backwards, removing the sheets from my upper back.

Sighing yet again, *Takeru* slowly starts, from outwards to the center, from the top of the shoulders to my nape, up and down my neck, around the base, following my spine.

"Mmh… Harder…"

"H-Huh?"

"Do it harder, just a bit," he sighs, I feel his breath on my arm as the impulse picks up, now enough to move me, a tender jolt coursing through my muscles. "So, umh… Did anything of importance happen?"

"1st Lt Tsukuyomi called, she apologized for the altercation the cousins had with Kasumi," he says, dry, as he focus on my neck for a moment.

"I see… Anything else?"

"She said she had something important to speak with you, so she'll be calling back. She refused to divulge what it was, though."

"Mmh… Good. What else?"

As he reports what few calls arrived, his hands drive the wheels over me, crushing the soreness residing under the skin. *Takeru* does

express his concern over the amount of coffee in the expresso machine, and I can only roll my eyes at his usual complains about how much I drink while taking bites off the lunch. When he ask about his plans for the 00 Unit, I tell him the few folktales available are already in the cylinder room for whenever he desires to use them.

"Got it. Do you want another go at the tuning tonight?" He asks, kneading my shoulders a bit harder, tighter.

"Yes, we should- Mmh… try two sessions each day to gauge its reactions," I nod, sighing with my nose, rubbing my ankles together.

"Roger… Well, I guess this was enough?" He lifts his hands, giving a nod.

I stretch and feel no tension in my muscles, nothing cracking. "Yeah… It's like day and night, *for real* . Who would have said you'd be so useful?" I smirk at him, again reaching out for a bite of food.

"Sigh… You really do like to drive me hard, honey."

"Only because you can deliver," I say, chuckling at the minimal shock, the lips that cannot seal. "Well, anything else?"

"… No, there's nothing else to report. Should I be on my way?"

"Hm? Oh, yes. Let's not give Marimo any more trouble. You be careful around the hallways, *Takeru.* I'll call you if I need anything," I nod back with a smile, grabbing the coffee and taking a sip.

Mmh… This burning sensation is the best. The smell, the aching already has my breathing restarting in full force, ready to march out and untangle the next puzzle. Shame I never asked *Takeru* about how he aided that other me before, I really can get used to receiving coffee every time I wake up.

Looking back up, he was again shocked, standing still and contracting upon himself.

"Is something the matter, *Takeru* ?"

"Ah, no… Not really, but-"

"Out with it, what happened?"

"… Why are you calling me by name?" He asks, facing me frontally, features tight, arms folding.

"Huh? Why, you ask? It's your name."

"I mean, yeah, but-"

"Come on, now. Enough with the formalities, okay? Unless, you're retracting your habitual way of being for some reason?" I ask, sitting up and brushing the sheets off me.

Eyes widen upon my stare, he truly remains petrified. Void of breath for a second, before he coughs and straightens further, turning away. "No, it ain't that… Just wondered why you started calling me like that all of a sudden."

"I dunno, why have you been calling me as Vice Commander?" I stare, he cannot return my eyes. Lips pursing, posture faltering as if walking on the shore, receiving a wave to the face and turning away at the saline impact. " *Takeru*, what is the matter? You wouldn't still hold some… doubts towards me?"

"No, it's not that," he affirms, nodding once, despite how his sight remains veiled. "I simply would like you to stop teasing me, especially when we're speaking of important matters. I am not going to trip, *Vice Co-"*

"Yuuko."

"… Okay, fine, you win but stop with the teasing. I mean, I don't mind some, but Sumika could scan us and-"

"The 00 Unit cannot scan my mind, and while you are not in its vicinity it also cannot scan yours," I affirm, grabbing the cup and finishing the coffee in one gulp. Mmh… Damn it *Takeru*, you brew it almost as good as I would.

"I see… Makes sense, with the guards being near me and the rumors as well," he nods, scratching his head. Yet as I nod with a smile, he quickly turns away, as if recoiling from a source of heat. "Well, I have to be going or I'll be late for the training. Later," he turns around as if hearing the 991 alarm, blasting away from the room as if he had engaged one of his crazy acrobatics.

What is it with him now? Well, Marimo might become concerned if he is late. Right, those two guards could also be a nuisance for him if they start asking questions. Still, what was with his expression? The way in which his lips turned and tossed, the disquiet in his arms… You wouldn't be hiding something from me now, *Takeru* ?

"Sigh… Anyways, I should be going, too. Yashiro should be done with her tasks as well, and I have a call awaiting me, it seems."

So I rest the cup again on the wood, a hand caressing my neck as I circle it around. Both of my hands join and stretch up, letting a shiver run from my toes to my nape, one final yawn to leave my lips. There truly is no tension left in my back, no knots or contraction in it. Sigh… You know, I might have joked about it before, but I think I'm gonna have him bring me coffee every morning. Not like he can refuse, since he's under a punishment to justify the order. And he can come here earlier, to tend to the 00 Unit too. A perfect result, isn't it. Wiping the last motes of blurriness from my sight, I approach my wardrobe.

And my steps halt cold in place as I reach it.

My own eyes widen and extend as my lips, as my own reflection returns the confusion and shock *Takeru* endowed in moments before.

In the full length mirror that resides in one of the doors of the wardrobe my reflection stands before me, with absolutely no modesty covering her figure.

"… Hmm, I see," I smirk, tapping my lips as I open the wardrobe, taking out a fresh uniform from it. "So that's why he was in a rush, huh."

Sitting on the bed to begin from the bottom, slowly I get changed. Still, he was not ogling like a teenager or a creep. Not intimidated either, but not trying to steal 'subtle' glances. Standing up, I raise both arms and put the undershirt in place, slowly pushing my head outwards. Grabbing the upper part, buttoning it all, once that's in place I grab the skirt, push the heels from below the bed. In only an extra minute, my reflection returns the usual visage as I put on my lab coat, brush my bangs.

"… Still, he tried so hard to remain standing in attention, never letting his composure falter." I place a hand on the glass, finding a smile curving as I lean closer to it. "And yet, those lips and hands remained so disturbed, to the point that he fled. In embarrassment, maybe?"

I can't help but to chuckle. Turning around, I grab the tray with the lunch and bring it to the small table. Sitting there, starting to glance at the reports while finishing the meal, my lips cannot relax. A few fingertips trace my neck, down to my back. Recalling the pressure, the small hesitation he showed me. Even the small surprise at the simple show of appreciation that is to call him by name. And still, to think you'd try so hard not to stare, to manage to keep your poise yet still would find your own subconscious fighting against you. That troubled expression as you tightly closed your eyes with pursed lips… despite all that is in the board, all that can come our way, you still do have many amusing surprises waiting for me to uncover.

Slowly licking my lips as I take the final piece of food into my mouth, I chuckle softly, leaning back, trailing the edge of my neck. "My, my…

How cute of you, *Takeru.* Fuhuhu… If you were so adorable in front of it, perhaps the 00 Unit would be tuned far more easily."

… Still, I think I prefer that side of yours to be something only I get to see. It's good to know… that same bright gaze you had when we met is still there for me, even now, after all that has happened.

A sound reaches my ears, the ringing of the phone. Well, looks like I have to go keep my end of the deal. I do wonder what she wants, though. I certainly hope Her Purpleness isn't thinking on insisting any more to have *Takeru* visit the Capital. Not when the 00 Unit's tuning is on the line, and the reactions we got before show he is on the right track.

"… And I rather not have him resorting to the third option due to your meddling, guards. I should try and inquire about their intentions… to see whether we choose the first or the second one, though."

…

… I do wonder what is up with that poem, and why can't I recall anything about it. Did I have a dream today? Um… I can't tell, the heaviness left me now so I don't really remember. Grasping the receiver, I give the okay to accept the incoming call. Guess I should try and cause a link on my own to start remembering something of those worlds sooner rather than later, if the reports I asked of him do not spur any echoes in me.

Assuming he won't again grow all red upon the notion, that is. Hehehe…

# Jester's Quiz

*Chapter 88:*

**Jester's Quiz**

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*December 5th. A few minutes before 3 PM.*

*(Hangar.)*

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All stood still, ears sharpened and listening. From the available speakers in the expansive room parts of the speech from Her Highness the Shogun are repeated, intensely commented on by the debating journalists. Even the smallest clanking ceases upon the silky voice, all foreigners ceasing their movements in a show of respect to their comrades who stand in attention when hearing the pleasant flow the speech.

Sights that untie the knots choking chests, features that tense upon the words and turn away, two sides of the same coin, two sides of the same argument. Both born out of equal concern, yet fundamentally different.

"A request for another evacuation… I dunno how to feel about this," Ayamine says as her arms slowly cross, sight downcast. Rubbing her arms slowly, she tries to dispel the narrowing of humid walls that choke her, the overflowed and thick air of the slums again kidnapping her sense of smell.

"It's a commendable request," Jinguuji begins, tapping her shoulder, breaking Ayamine's ill reminiscence. "Sometimes, there is little to do besides weathering the storm. I understand how you could feel about this Ayamine, but there is only so much we can do to aid those who remain living beyond the defense lines," she sighs, dropping the

mask as she nods. *" And considering the last result of the BETA incursion in Niigata, the eruption is but the perfect excuse to order the evacuation. It's not a work anyone wants to tackle, but it is a necessary evil even if the slums are already in a compromising position."*

The cadet returns the gesture, sighing briefly and resuming her aid to prepare the lesson under the calm company of the silky voice, the debating journalists and mechanics that express the same concerns anyone with knowledge of the precarious situation of the shelters would do. Deafening her ears, Ayamine simply entrusts herself to the work. Tending to each crate, to ensure enough tools were in each, she reports that the last one lacks a wrench, causing the Instructor to heave a sigh. The small matter leaves their minds as a low rumble reaches the hangar, a Gekishin unit being docked in.

All the other present begin to whisper, small gestures, glances at the still damaged machine. The Gekishin the soldier used during his bout against the guards, with part of its plating still showing the marking of violence endowed in said mock battle.

"… I suppose this is also part of his punishment, huh," Jinguuji comments, a hand slowly swimming through her hair.

"Instructor, ma'am, will Shirogane be tasked with servicing this unit?" Ayamine asks, standing upright.

"I assume so, since there is little reason to send this unit here otherwise," she relents a nod, a shrug.

"Ma'am, requesting permission to operate in pairs during the training," she asks, an unblinking stare upon Jinguuji.

"Motives for the request?"

"Shirogane mentioned before he is not confident in his maintenance skills. I believe it would be more fruitful to pair him with someone who could aid this lacking aspect he has. The same applies for

Tamase. Since in the frontlines a squad must collaborate with their mechanics at times, I believe this would be a good opportunity for us to operate as a real squad would," she tells, complexion unfaltering, unblinking as she stares.

The Instructor sighs again as a hand rests on her forehead, rubbing it softly as Ayamine remains silently staring. Her answer stays captive within the throat as footsteps inch closer in quick succession. Turning around, the remaining four girls of the squadron stand in a line and salute, notifying their arrival to the training. Ayamine goes to join the line, still staring at Jinguuji, unblinkingly so.

Pacing in front of them and coughing into a hand, the Instructor nods and folds her arms. "Alright, all of you. As you know, today is maintenance day. If you reviewed your textbooks as you should, this training should not be too difficult. You will have two hours to try and repair small sections of the joints and cockpits of your TSFs, and do a system check to ensure your task was completed successfully," she slowly tells, as slow as her pacing back and forth in front of them, giving them all a side glance. "While I don't expect a perfect performance on your first hands-on maintenance, I am looking forward to the results you'll produce. If there are any doubts, either me or the crew nearby can aid you. Do remember to pay attention to what you see, what your movements cause in the TSFs," she states, chin upwards, drilling her gaze into each and every one of them for a second. "This training isn't solely about how to mend the TSFs but to also let you see how your choice of maneuvers impairs the machine."

"Yes, ma'am!"

"Now, unlike usually… we shall approach this training in pairs. Sakaki with Yoroi, Mitsurugi with Tamase, and Ayamine with Shirogane," she notes, halting her walk to observe them well.

Minute glances towards Mitsurugi, whose lips purse ever so slightly. And the smallest, briefest hint of a smile in Ayamine's face, the

faintest relaxation in Tamase's breathing as Mitsurugi returns a subtle nod her way.

"I expect a report for tomorrow's morning lecture, about the difference you found in each TSF's maintenance," she concludes with a firm nod, which they all answer in unison as habitually. "Good. Now then," her voice drifts off, her gaze cast towards the hallway, lips pressing a bit.

As if beckoned by her stare, the soldier walks into the hangar, once again messing with his hair as both cousins follow close by, unrelenting in their small queries, the small, shallow breaths they take upon the rather somber and neutral facade dad chooses to employ on them. Both guards salute the Instructor, taking their vigilance to a spot where they'll remain undetected.

"Apologies for the tardiness, Instructor!" He says, standing stiff, hands at the seams. "My prior assignment had some… difficulties in letting me go," he folds a sigh, a minute lowering of both brows.

"I see. In any case, we shall be taking on this training as pairs, you're with Ayamine," she reports, holding his gaze, gauging his reaction.

The freshness of his gestures, despite the slowness, grants her some respite and Jinguuji returns a nod, allowing the cadets to be lectured by the mechanics one last time before starting on their duties.

It does not elude her, however, the downcast gaze the soldier throws at his unit as he approaches it after the preliminary lecture. For a moment, the Instructor tilts her head, rubs her eyes, as a few cerulean fireflies spark away as he gently rests a hand upon the cockpit of the Gekishin. Sighing at what she assumes is the stress and tiredness seeping in, she leaves the cadets in charge of the mechanics, going to the closest vending machine to get some much needed caffeine into her system.

Meanwhile, as the clanking and whirring of machinery resumes, as hands grip onto cold steel and follow pointers, the cadets all look to one another, taking a step forward. For a moment, only the silence and rustling of iron can be heard. Despite being tasked with the simplest parts of the Fubukis, minutes pass as they look at the parts, at the inner recordings of their lectures before hands respond to the command, before even starting. And even when they do begin, their breathing remains isolated, their movements as delicate as if handling porcelain.

"… Damn, you really destroyed this thing, Special-kun," Ayamine comments, giving a solemn nod to the Gekishin.

"Well, it's what happens when you crash land," he chuckles erratically, looking down.

She pats his shoulder, giving a small smile. "Look well, this part here needs lots of care," she notes, pointing to the gears that open or close the cockpit.

As they tend to his Gekishin, a relaxed and easy flow in between them, Mitsurugi and both cousins cannot help but to stare a bit for moments at a time. Obvious it is that Ayamine is placing herself in between the samurai's line of sight and him, throwing back glances every now and then, a sharp and blazing gaze towards Mitsurugi, who looks away to avoid a confrontation. For a time, their training proceeds smoothly despite some setbacks in the complexity they yet cannot tend to on their own, Tamase deflating and almost flying away like a wounded balloon, Sakaki massaging her temple and wanting to melt into the floor upon inciting a detailed rambling from Yoroi about the modular nature of the Fubuki.

"… Don't we need a wrench to replace this thing here?" He asks, slowly caressing his head on instinct, recalling the tomahawk technique his prior comrades learned back then.

"Yeah, you're right," Ayamine nods, rubbing some soot off her nose.

"Looks like our crate doesn't have one, huh…" he comments as he rummages through the supply crate assigned to them, lips pursing as he blinks slowly, again shielding his head with a hand.

"Ah, here," Mitsurugi hastily steps forward, procuring a wrench and extending it in offering, "you can use ours." Yet, the relaxed gesture grows tense as his eyes refuse to meet hers, as his posture compacts onto itself, retreating back into the stillness of a cave. "… Takeru? What is-"

"Ayamine, here," Sakaki calls out, throwing a wrench in a slow tomahawk, Ayamine catching in in midair like a goalkeeper sealing a corner kick. "Once you're done there, hand it over."

"Of course, ma'am," she gives an exaggerated salute and a smile, causing Yoroi and the soldier to chuckle at Sakaki's grumbles.

And yet, Mitsurugi's lips purse, the once calm hold turning into a tight vicegrip over the refused wrench as he slowly walks away back to the Gekishin. Contraction in her throat, eyelids that grow closer, squinted. "Takeru, I was-"

"Can you not?" He asks, almost pleads, in a low whisper. "Please keep your distance, *Mitsurugi-san* ."

"But I was only-"

Ayamine glares, Sakaki stares, and he walks away with a sigh. So Mitsurugi simply folds her words, hand limply falling, walking back to the petrified Tamase. Still glancing at him throughout the training, softly nibbling at her bottom lip, at the smile and relaxed gestures he gives to Ayamine, the small jokes he shares with Yoroi to Sakaki's complains. Even at the tools he extends to Tamase as the girl fidgeted about as her mind blanked on how to proceed.

And she can only heave a sigh, feeling the cold gust of dusk envelop her whole at how his gaze avoids hers. At the frail slump in his

shoulders, the stiff posture he gains after their eyes cross, the aversion overflowing.

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*Almost two hours later.*

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"Well, I'll be damned," Jinguuji slowly claps, smirking and nodding. "I didn't think you'd actually finish before time is up. Good work, squad."

"Thank, ma'am!" All reply in unison, again standing in a line.

"While I understand the setbacks you faced, the end result is, once again, better than previous cadet squadrons achieved in their first go at the maintenance. Don't rest on your laurels and redouble your reading on the basics, build firm foundations and ensure you can be entrusted with repair duty when extra hands are needed," she states, raising her voice a bit, the scythe out of her as her expression tightens.

"Ma'am, yes, ma'am!" The six reply again, a few more stiffly then before.

"In any case, good job. I am looking forward to your reports on the maintenance duty for tomorrow's morning lecture. This shall be all for today, however. Dismissed!"

"Salute!" Sakaki orders and the cadets exchange the gesture with her teacher, who nods with a smirk, honest in its contentment, before slowly strolling to the hallway. Once Jinguuji is out of sight, she sighs as she taps her glasses. "Oh, thank the Emperor. For a moment I was sure we were not going to make it…"

"Come on, Chizuru-san," Yoroi pats her shoulder, returning a thumbs up, "we were making good time. And anyways, all we had to do was follow the pointers detailed in the report about the benefits of the modular design for-"

"It's because of your ramblings we almost didn't finish," she admonishes, shrugging. "Yoroi, I really thank you for the pointers, but please don't go on so many tangents. Leave that for class, okay?"

"… Well, if you insist," she nods, joining her hands, lips shrugging slightly. "Anyways, what of you guys? You also finished the repairs, was it too hard?"

"There's so many gears…" Tamase says, slumping down, melting into a slime. "And there's so many cables, and some parts are almost the same… and the explosive set in the blade pylons didn't want to fit in… Awawawa."

"Worry not, Tamase. I believe we made a decent enough job on the surface repairs we were tasked with. No one shall fault us for a pair of mistakes," Mitsurugi reassures, smiling at the small dam cracking due to overflowing concern.

"What of you, Ayamine?" Sakaki asks to the silent duo, tapping her glasses.

"Stuff went fine, save for the Geki's cockpit. The hatch was in need of lots of oil, and probably will need a serious repair," the soldier says, scratching his head, looking down.

"It was made a mess, really," Ayamine affirms, tapping his arm. "Even the simple matter of getting the system of the control unit to do the check for errors took us quite some time, same for making sure everything worked as intended. Still, thanks to it being a bit more simple, it didn't take us much to see what we had to do," she smiles, nodding.

"Yeah, the Gekishin's simplistic way of operating does help with the maintenance, even when you thrash them," he nods, recalling the scolding his mechanics gave him in his loops due to the abuse he subjected his unit to.

"I see," she taps her glasses, coughing softly. "Squad, what do you say of meeting in the library before our night sim run to review the material and prepare the reports?" The other four nod, dad scratches his head and looks away. "Are you available, Shirogane-kun?"

"Uh, well, I don't think so. I actually gotta return to the underground right away, and I don't know if I'll get permission to join in the night training," he sighs, shoulders sagging a bit.

"Well, nothing we can do… Anyways, let's be going to the barracks. You can come with us until the elevator, right Shirogane-kun?" He nods, she smiles, and so all six of them make their way into the hallway.

At first, they merely extend their shoulders and arms, relaxing their tension, idly platicating about the training, a gaze of azure seeking the one of light brow and being ignored at large, a few lingering whispers follow their steps until a cordial pair of guards places their attention upon the fools.

"Still…" Yoroi says, hands behind her head as she looks up, "do you guys really think a volcano is gonna erupt?"

"It wouldn't be odd," Sakaki notes with a slow, dejected gesture, the finger barely finishing the circles. "Volcanic activity has been on the rise, and, well, I can comprehend the concerns fueling the request."

"… I still think it's a bad call," the raven says, arms tying into a firm sailor knot. "The slums are full already, and I don't think this benefits anyone," she repines, knowing full well that complains will fall upon the government for the worsening situation in the shelters, yet also being aware that leaving the people in the loneliness of the wilderness is not an option for they as soldiers. *"If the army has to do what it can for the people it protects, what would be the correct choice? To allow them to live and die in their homes or to safeguard their future and the heritage of their villages?"*

"I, too, think the same as Ayamine," Mitsurugi affirms, a slight frown setting in, light vanishing from her features as the incoming dusk. "I do not believe it wise, to place further burdens upon our people. And also, the IJA is already lacking hands at the moment. While I comprehend the concerns Her Highness must hoist… I have my doubts regarding this request."

"Meiya-san, what are you saying? You want to abandon those people?" Yoroi glares at Mitsurugi, the slicing of wilderness all over her body, the soreness of limbs and back, the silence of the dark when forced to camp in the open during the evacuation.

Losing words at the unexpected counter, Mitsurugi's frowns gains impulse as her arms fold. "No, I did not meant to say that."

"Then, why did you say that? The soldiers have to protect the people, right?"

"The army has to do what is in the people's best interests. I highly doubt this motion truly benefits anyone," she states, knowing, dreading the pressure which upon her sister falls, understanding the pain of being taken away from the place one favors the most. For a moment, the last meeting with Raiden flashes in her eyes, and in an attempt to remain composed she clamps her lips and looks away.

Taking the gesture as dismissal, shaking subtly as her stomach tightens, Yoroi hugs herself while looking away. "What if the volcano erupts? Would you leave them there, knowing they're in danger?"

"I mean… It's their land. If it is their desire to perish there… It's their life, isn't it?" Mitsurugi slowly says, still looking away, lips regressing, fingers delving into the curves of her forearm, preying upon the muscles that tense up.

"It's the army's duty to do what it can for its people," Ayamine says, a poison sting as she glares at Mitsurugi, ignoring the pull Tamase enforces on her sleeve. "While I agree the shelters are note exactly

a nice place to be in, if there is an eruption it is the duty of any soldier to protect the civilians."

"I am not decrying that," she counters, sighing hard but short, shaking her head. "I'm merely saying that, if it is their desire to remain there, why force an altercation? Why take them forcefully from their homes?"

"… Her Highness wants everyone to be safe," Ayamine takes a step closer to the purple blaze, shrugging Tamase's hold off her arm. "Protecting the civilians' lives is something only the army can be entrusted to do."

"… Living and being kept alive are not the same thing," Mitsurugi scoffs, turning away, speeding up, trying to end the argument. "And in the current stage of the Empire, I highly doubt Her Highness desires for such barbarity to befall our people."

"What are you trying to say, Mitsurugi?" Sakaki asks, lips narrowing as do her eyes, throat constricting ever so slowly. "Who are you blaming for this 'barbaric orders', then?"

"I am not blaming anyone, cease placing words in my mouth," she counters, folding her arms again.

"C-Come on, we all agree that we're worried about the eruption, right?" Tamase wails, placing herself in between the squad leader and the 2IC, waving both arms in the air as if she were drowning. "Sometimes, imperfect methods have to be used to prevent something worse from happening, right? I-I mean, if a volcano does erupt, there's no way the army won't have to do an emergency sortie, right, right?"

A gentle hand pats the small shoulder, diffusing the spiky tension in Tamase. Smiling her way, Takeru nods. "Yeah, Tama's right. It's better to prevent than to lament, and turning a blind eye to the people's woes is not wise," he affirms, his sight remaining in the

other three's for a second, until his firm gaze makes them all relent a nod.

"Yeah, I agree," Yoroi says, doubting in meeting the other's gazes as she hugs an elbow and the wall as her pace slows down a bit. "Reacting to the problem would be worse in the people's eyes, after all."

"… Misjudging the threat to forward the evacuation is equally, if not worse than that," Mitsurugi affirms, nibbling at her lips, trying to tame the slices and gashes which pour over her at the thought of her sister remaining alone in the podium again, on the concern she noticed in Yuuhi's complexion.

"I do agree with that… but that doesn't mean we shouldn't try and save them from an eruption," Ayamine says, giving the azure samurai the evil eye.

"Casting doubts on the authorities under biases is also not wise, Mitsurugi," Sakaki points out, lips shrugging at how she knows that, perhaps, her comrade is speaking the truth about the deals her father must meet to ensure the threads that hold peace together remain undisturbed.

"Ahem!" He folds his arms, a brow twitching. "Look guys, sometimes shit is gonna hit the fan, like it or not," he starts slowly, sighing, looking up as acid claws up to his lips. "While acting on the ideals each of us holds dear ain't a problem, it is when it starts interfering with our duty. And even if we can and should speak out if we notice something is wrong in the field, doing it with so much venom is gonna backfire."

"I doubt any Japanese fellow would be able to remain composed in front of such an affront to our rightful land," Mitsurugi says, sighing, slumping a bit. "Simply thinking on forcing villagers to depart from their homes… is honestly enough to make me lose my appetite."

"… Same here," Ayamine nods, shoulders eroding in the same dejection as she fiddles with her hair. "If there is an eruption, I do agree with the orders. But even then, if the soldiers have to remove the people by force…" a small frown appears, swirls and cuts within her stomach.

"I don't think anyone would welcome such orders, even if they might be necessary," Sakaki relents a sigh and a nod.

"Still," he says, inhaling slowly as a hand rubs his forehead, slowing down to descend the stairs, "whether the orders are correct or not, I do agree that respecting the people's wishes isn't a hard ask. It's better than forcing them and causing a mess. After all, no matter how badly you'd want to help… there is simply no saving those who cannot help themselves. If death is what they desire, simply keeping them alive serves no purpose," eyes blazing, the signs left engraved in old rocks by the path serve only to thicken his breathing, his lips pressing themselves to forget a certain moment spent in absolute and intimate dark. So he shakes his head, ruffling his hair hard as if clearing a desk off books and old notes. "But so long as someone out there is asking for help, even if it is to keep a tiny peace of memory alive, the army should try to lend a hand."

"… Even against the negative to evacuate? Why withhold some empathy to their desires?" Mitsurugi asks, arms unfolding, loosely falling as she stares down at the steps, stomping the rest of the way down the stairs.

He sighs and looks away as he reaches the hallway, walking past Mitsurugi. "Everyone needs a hand at times, even if you're set in going down with your convictions. If the villagers die, their customs, their legacy dies with them. In these times, if we don't offer them a hand then we become all the more darker for it. Even if you're right and they have to be kept alive for some years, people have to survive for the day when the war ends."

"But… the people are not requesting any aid, are they? To be a rampart for the powerless, that is what the army should strive to do,"

she affirms with a nod, Ayamine and Tamase relenting a nod in mild agreement, Yoroi hugging the wall and remaining silent, Sakaki sighing as she rubs her head. And yet, the soldier remains quiet, not looking back. *"Why, Takeru? You also desired to aid the people, did you not? You also were taught under our code, under Mother of all people? The soldiers sent will have to remove the people, forced to act against their fellows…* "Surely, there has to be another way to solve such an issue?" She asks, almost rhetorically, as she sighs and tightens her hands.

The other four sigh in equal dejection, some MP passing by imitate the gesture, grim contortion to their features. Silence extends as they descend another set of stairs, the railing choked with undeserved strength.

The soldier sighs, rubbing the underside of an ear. "… Sometimes, there is not. The volcano doesn't care about ideals or oaths. And not extending a hand in front of such a disaster to safeguard a moral code will only make us darker for it."

"… However, a warrior should strive to-"

"A protector should strive to see past the immediate board. Can you think for a second on the issues that come with a government abandoning its people under some idealistic code?" He lashes back, glaring. "What of the precedent this will leave? What of the repercussions this could cause? Just because the people desire something doesn't make them right. A parent has to reprimand its children when they act out of line, and like it or not, people are in danger our there, in need of rescue from an eruption. When it's time for action and not words, our ideals ain't enough to save lives, *Mitsurugi-san* . And bending to the desires of the people will get you nowhere."

"Wh- But, surely, some empathy towards them can be spared? Removing them by force is not wise," she insists, holding his gaze.

"We can listen, we can explain ourselves, but ultimately we gotta protect their lives. Otherwise, with them die the memories of their villages, a piece of history forever lost," he sighs, grimacing as cold arrows pierce his flesh, as an aquatic tornado fills his view for a second. "We help without betrayal to our ideals when we can, and we bite the bullet if it comes down to it."

"… It would be hard to find a middle ground in such a situation, after all," Sakaki says, caressing an arm, looking down.

"I mean, if there is an eruption," Yoroi starts, looks up, clamps her lips as she messes with her tags and looks down again, "the soldiers might even have to place themselves in danger to get to the people."

"And the BETA might attack anytime, too," Tamase mentions, hands joining as if in prayer, compacting her already lithe shape further.

Ayamine places both hands behind her head, closing her eyes tightly, clicking her lips. "This whole business looks like a time bomb, huh. Damned if you do, damned if you don't."

"Sigh… I suppose, all we can afford is to hope the relief efforts proceed without issue," Mitsurugi nods, a hand tracing her ponytail to the end, the other hugging her side. And yet, those eyes seek his figure, taking a few steps forward to meet his stride before a final stair to the barracks. "Still, Takeru, do you not believe Her Highness would favor extending some kindness to our fellows in such dire times?"

"… That depends on what you mean by kindness," he says, low, as his hand slides down the railing, strong steps down.

"What do you mean?"

"What is the kindest thing to do? To let them do as they think it's best or to guide them to what will actually keep them alive? What does a leader have to do on such occasions, *Mitsurugi-san?* "

"Well, there are vast examples of those who came before us, of the values we must uphold and the methods to employ. Following the wisdom imparted to-"

He scoffs, shaking his head. "That's wrong."

A brow of hers twitch, arms begin to fold. "Could you elaborate?" She presses, tone frosting over, causing Sakaki to sigh and shake her head and the other three to grow tense.

The soldier shrugs as he finishes his descent, messing with his hair, meeting the azure gaze and feeling emptiness permeate his innards at it. "Yesterday will never be tomorrow. So repeating the same methods over and over again ain't exactly a good call. If you were a leader… you would have to be a guiding light for the rest, a light that illuminates the untamed path towards the future, right?" He asks, holding his breath, gulping hard as a march of cold ants races in his back.

Yet, the wording causes said same sensation to envelop Mitsurugi. A brow again twitches, lips fold in. "I… do not believe that to be true. A leader must endeavor to be worthy of its position for it is the first servant of the people. That is why we act with others in mind first, isn't it?" She asks, seeking his gaze, a nod in approval.

Yet he sighs, looking away, crumbling away. "Guess we really don't see eye to eye, huh…" And with slow steps, he goes towards a different hallway, towards the elevator. "I gotta go this way. See you tomorrow, guys. And… please don't beat yourselves up about this whole affair, okay?" He asks, receiving a few nods. Raising a hand, he waves back as he departs.

A slow grip restrains Mitsurugi's arms, Sakaki shakes her head as the azure gaze blazes back. "Don't, give him some space."

"I only desire to-"

"Please, Mitsurugi. Shirogane-kun tried to keep things civil, so don't go causing another argument. I'll notify the Instructor if you do," she warns, again drawing circles.

"I was not attempting to do anything of the sort. I merely…" she looks to the hallway, to the silhouette that leaves, to the two shadows that his steps trace. "I want to apologize from my previous words, since I did not have the chance. I do admit… I've been acting out of line, but I merely wish to bridge this rift that's spawned in between me and Takeru," she affirms with a strong nod, unfaltering and clear gaze imposing as the skyline.

"And what if he doesn't want to?" Ayamine says, rolling her eyes.

"What was that?"

"Special-kun tried to keep things calm but you keep insisting," she says, glaring a bit as she toys with her tags, pulling them a bit. "Look, I agree with wanting to help the people, but give him some space. You already almost knocked him out during the training earlier, and he hasn't tried to provoke you at all."

"Wh- I did not aim to-"

"Please, don't fight!" Tamase asks, again placing herself in between them. "It was just an accident, right? Right?"

"I… It was my miss, I admit it," Mitsurugi relents, sighing, turning away. "However, I only… wish to platicate with Takeru, nothing more." *About his views, the words he said… about Mother, if he would allow the question… if he truly remembers her. And if not, then granting clarity to his teachings is my duty. Even if we seem to still be debating semantics.*

"… Can't you give him some space?" Sakaki asks, tilting her head a bit. "If you're really sorry, start by thinking about him. You heard the whispers, right? Let's not force any arguments. That also goes for you, Ayamine."

"… Got it. Sorry," she gives a small nod, scratching her head.

Mitsurugi waves as she sighs. "It is fine, I deserve the pungency with how I've been acting. Was he fine during the maintenance?" She asks as they begin to walk once more.

"Yeah, Special-kun didn't seem too tired. Still looks pale, but I think he's fine. He didn't make any puns, though," she notes, holding and kneading her chin.

"Well, you did say the Gekishin was in rough shape," Yoroi says, again edging closer now that the tide was calm. "Maybe he was feeling bad, seeing the state of his TSF?"

"Yeah, if I was nervous seeing the damage mine has, Shirogane-san must have been so concerned about his," Tamase affirms, again shrinking further, rubbing her palms together.

"In any case, let's remain focused," Sakaki orders as they make it to the barracks. Standing to face all of them, a finger raises once more. "I haven't heard if the Instructor or Takamura will be in charge of the night run today, but in any case, we have much time to make up for. I expect nothing but your best in there," she affirms, holding their gazes until they nod. "Well, would you like to go to the PX earlier or to go to the library?"

"I would welcome some free time," Mitsurugi says, rolling her shoulders.

"Same here," Ayamine nods, circling her shoulder as she cracks her knuckles. Yoroi shrugs, Tamase is quick to agree once again.

"Sigh… Okay, see you all in the sim room later," she says, waving as she turns around, heading to her room.

The rest all do so too, except the samurai whose steps are slower, her gaze still crumbled on the floor. Still lingering on the aversion, the reticence he displayed, the collapse to darkest depth that came to

his features and posture upon her final answer. Throwing herself into the bed, covering her face with both hands, she groans as she turns and tussles.

"Why? If you were trained by Mother, if you're one of us, a Guard in training as myself… Why are your answers so different, Takeru?"

Hugging herself, crossing and entangling her legs, another hailing falls upon her lips.

"… And why do you refuse to call me by name now? Sigh… I know Tsukuyomi ordered me to remain quiet…" turning on her side, biting a nail, her eyes tightly veil themselves, "but I still desire to mend our relation… Surely, some moments to extend an apology to him are not a hard ask. Cleansing the shadows which follow him is a priority, after all."

But, again, she turns around.

Again she bites her nail, cracking it, bending it.

Legs cross and twist, brows lower and crash like orbital divers.

"… That is, if he even desires my apology… Siiigh… I should have apologized as we came here…"

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*Some minutes before.*

*(In a hallway.)*

**[Shion]**

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The cadets remain arguing something or the other, Meiya-sama remains quite upset about the result of the discussion and the impediment of following after us. In perfect steps, Takeru marches in front of us. Never looking back, never stopping nor decelerating.

First he almost doesn't make it in time for the training, now he has to stay under another special mission all day long. And that's saying nothing on how much tension he bathed in whenever Meiya-sama tried to approach him.

I can't help but to groan, Mion shakes her head as I try and step closer. So I keep groaning, arms folding. It's completely normal for him to want to put some distance with her, but to not even accept a wrench or some tools? Come on, Takeru. You're better than that.

It's so distressing, too. He refused to tell us the reason behind his delay, and despite our attempts at small talk he remained mostly silent on the way to the hangar. Mana-nee isn't responding the comms, so who knows where she is. The trio isn't nearby watching over Meiya-sama, probably because we already had to be here. Luckily, she didn't hurt herself as she fainted and managed to keep her composure after the fact, despite the clear insistence to have Takeru agree to her words. I do comprehend her distress, however. When interacting with the rest, that small smile, the gentle gestures are still there, even if slower. Yet whenever Meiya-sama tries to approach him, his features grow dull, tense and averse. Truly, as he was on our worst days, when we… lashed out in our darkest hour thanks to those damned meds.

"Mion, you think he's sad?" I whisper, leaning closer.

"Hm? You think so?" She says, raising a brow as we peek at his back, at his stride that does not decelerate.

"See? He's not waiting at all, Takeru always busies himself when he's worried, right?"

"Perhaps. Still, let's not bring anything up," she states, holding my gaze as she retreats back behind the wall. "Meiya-sama already said she'd endeavor to regain his trust on her own, so let us not interfere. Our position might impair her efforts, until we can confirm what it is he remembered."

"Sigh… Is waiting all we can really do?" I ask, still peeking. "We could try asking him about his hobbies, what games he favors…"

"Shion, come on," she sighs, elbowing me softly. "Can you please remain composed?"

"Hmph, I don't know how you can be so collected. Ice must flow in those veins of yours."

"What? Sigh…" she pinches her nose, wrinkles surfacing in her face. "Look, if you do anything, I'll report it to Mana-nee."

"Better to make haste than to let opportunity pass us by."

"Haste makes waste, patience is our ally."

"Says you."

"Mmgh… Don't you dare to start anything, Shion."

"Or what?"

"What are you two arguing about now?"

"Huh?!" Flinching away from the clash of stares, I find Takeru giving us a side glance, a brow raised. "We… We were merely debating… some questions we'd like to ask you," I say, coughing, standing upright again.

"Shion, let us not impose on the cadet," Mion warns, folding her arms.

"It's cool, really," he waves down, shrugging. "I also did want to talk with you two about some stuff," he says, arms folding as he rests onto the wall, his full attention falling on us, hail to the gardens.

"Ahem," Mion straightens up, giving him a bow which I quickly follow. "First, we'd like to apologize for our behavior earlier towards Yashiro. It was unsightly and inappropriate."

Yet, as we raise back, Takeru is pressing a brow with a finger, lips pursed. "I think you've got something wrong. Kasumi is the one you should be apologizing to."

"… Is that so?" I ask.

He nods. "Yeah, since you two were real nasty to her. Make sure to not repeat this ever again, okay?"

"… You like her a lot, don't you," can't help but to squint my eyes, drip some poison.

He nods again, holding my gaze as he looks down. "Yeah, she's a friend. And I'd like to ask you two to never be like that again to her, security will have to intervene otherwise."

"Still, she reacted aggressively first," I say, arms folding. "No issues would have happened if she had behaved properly."

"Sigh… Look, I know you might have your… reasons to not trust in Kasumi much. But if you're willing to give me a second chance, despite all I did thus far, why not give Kasumi a chance?"

"The assistant proved she does not wish to cooperate with us, despite us being merely worried over your complexion," I state, holding his gaze, the concern he shows to that damn doll. "If she does not provoke us, we shall not retort."

"Look, even if she does-"

"We understand, and will not react as we did before twice," Mion says, giving a minute nod, elbowing me. "Sadly, we cannot approach Yashiro to our leisure. Which is why we're relaying our apology through you, please do let her know we are sorry for our actions yesterday," she says in a business tone, with a small smile on her face.

He sighs, ruffling his hair. "Good to hear. Well, I'll tell Kasumi you said sorry."

Folding my arms, staring, I can't help but to ask. "By the by Takeru, why do you still have that headband on?"

"I'm too lazy to go get it cut, is all," he shrugs, avoiding my gaze, retreating, avoiding me. "So I just wear this thing instead."

"But it doesn't look like a normal headband," I insist, a hand on my waist as I lean closer, staring at the odd thing. "Why does it have those horns?"

"Because the Enpyon looks metal as fuck, obviously."

"… What?"

He chuckles, rolling his eyes. "Your guess is as good as mine. I have no clue what the current fashion trends are."

"So, you ordered it from somewhere?" Mion asks, idling a hand on her hair, curling it behind an ear. "Might I ask from which store?"

Lips shrugging, he looks away while scratching his head. "I just went to our storehouse in the underground and asked for a headband. No idea where it's from. So, think it looks good on me?" He winks, a hand on his chin as he grins back.

"I do think… you look fine," Mion relents, slightly looking away.

"Well, it's not like you look bad…" I groan, still staring at the odd thing. "But you'd be better without it, in my opinion."

"Well, can't please everybody." He shrugs. "Anyways, please don't be mean to Kasumi, for real. Let's keep things peaceful, okay?"

"But of course," Mion nods immediately, returning a smile. "Was there anything else you wished to discuss with us, perchance?"

"No, not really…"

"Ahem…" Mion sends me a glare, I remain looking at him, "How are you feeling at the moment? Considering how you were after the morning training, you still do look rather pale."

"Eh, I'm fine. Don't worry," he nods, sounding clear, firm.

"Hmm… So, ahem, you seemed a bit… reticent to speak with Mitsurugi during the maintenance."

"Shion," Mion warns, again glaring.

"What? I'm merely concerned if there is… anything we could do to bridge their postures. Would you favor our aid, Takeru?" I ask, smiling and raising a finger, taking a step closer.

"… And what's the price?" He asks, low, giving me a narrow gaze.

"Nothing. We only desire to mend our prior failings, and bridging whatever rift is now present between you and Mitsurugi is only natural," I nod a few times, holding his gaze. "Certainly, you do wish to remain in good terms with her?"

"Sigh… I do, but our views are… perhaps too different to reconcile," he says, barely forcing it out, hunching over.

"… May I ask what did you argue about during the training?" Mion asks, giving a minute bow, standing stiff.

He shrugs, looking away. "I just… told her the person what gave me the blade was similar to her, in their ways of carrying themselves but with a different outlook in life, is all. She didn't take kindly to my opinion, so I think keeping quiet is the best I can do as of now," he straightens up, leaving the wall, giving us both a calm, slow nod. "So don't worry, I don't hate her or anything."

"Still…" I purse my lips, curling a strand of hair, "if this… person you speak of is so similar, why not try and speak things through with

Meiya-sama?"

Slow, his blinking.

Unblinking, his upward gaze.

Faint, the tightening of his expression.

Downcast, both lips and eyes.

"… Sometimes, words simply run out. I know they were raised in different worlds… but I do hope me and *Mitsurugi* can make peace. Just that debating will serve no purpose as of now, I doubt I could dissuade her in an argument with her stubbornness," he shrugs and sighs again, brows crossing in complain.

"Well, you do have a point," I nod, agreeing on his concern. "Still, if you ever… desire to reach out, know that we do sincerely wish to aid you, Takeru."

"… Thanks," and there, the usual, old smile. Bright and warm like direct sunlight, paired with a direct gaze which locks upon us and nowhere else… He's there, right here, in front of me… "Anyways, I really need to hurry to the elevator or I'm gonna be late, so if you've nothing else to ask, I'll be on my way," he says, leaving the wall and walking again.

Following after him in silence for some moments, keeping cold glares and ill whispers at bay, the shallow distance is unbearable. He's right there, as he always was… If he recalls Yohime-sama, does he also remember us? Is he confused? His gestures do not denote anger, he's simply a bit dejected. And if so-

"Shion, don't," Mion whispers, grabbing my arm. "Any more pressure may be counterproductive."

"We don't know that. I do have an idea to ask him about without risking anything," I glare back, she corks an eyebrow. "And if it

backfires, you can lay the blame on me, alright?" Never breaking the bridge between our souls, she relents a small nod, relaxing her shoulders when she lets me go. "Ahem, Takeru?"

"What?"

"Did you get the chance to listen to the speech Her Highness gave earlier?" I ask, staring.

Blinking slow, he veers away. "No, didn't have a radio nearby."

"So you were not allowed to listen?" Mion notes, choking the end of her ponytail.

"I had work to do, didn't think to ask for a radio, is all," he shrugs, shaking his head.

"But still, you did hear something in the hangar, right?" I press, walking closer, stepping on his shadow. "I assume, your debate with your squadmates was about what she spoke about?"

"Sigh… Kind of, yeah. I do…" fury surfaces with the violence of a whale, he again taps his brows, "agree in Mitsurugi's real concerns, about using Her Highness to deliver the request of another. I know we are stuck between a rock and a hard place, but I expected more from the Empire."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

Slowing down as he reaches the elevator and pushes the button, he gives the wall a small kick, sighing hard from his nose with the fury of a bull seeing red, or Yuuhi-sama seeing horses. "It's not like I don't understand the burdens that lay on the Shogun's shoulders. It is simply…" inhaling through clenched teeth, slowly shaking his head he again kicks the wall, "concerning to hear a mere figurehead instead of a proper ruler in her voice."

A shiver runs down my spine, ears burning at the adusted tone, the displeasure flooding his lips. That same blazing stare which my leader endowed whenever Yuuhi-sama would refuse his proposals. Looking to my side finds Mion staring at me in equal befuddlement, just that her lips cannot close, her chin desires to sink into her neck, standing still, stiff. Silent.

"Um…" Licking my lips, unable to dispel the acidity, the burning on my throat, I step closer. "Do you not favor Her Highness' actions, perchance? Or, are you merely displeased with the situation she's facing at the moment?"

Barely looking back, a single eye holds my stare, rivets my feet in place, cause my lungs to forget to breathe. Lost in the soft kindling, I can only wait.

"… I simply expected more of her, to act on her words instead of merely doing a request. If Her Highness believes it imperative to tighten the defense lines, then she can order the evacuation immediately or support the notion forwarded by the other powers. Leaving things to those that remain away, when they clearly have had no desire to seek asylum in the shelters, is asking for things to go wrong."

"In that we agree," I nod, releasing a long exhalation from my nose. "However, there is some… friction she is enduring at the moment, you'd understand. Perhaps… a stronger, imposing ruler would be what you'd favor? If the Shogun were… feared and respected then-"

"Is that how you wanna do things, huh?"

"Eh?"

Glaring back, blazing back, coming closer, mere inches separating our eyes. "Is that how you rather do things? To forget empathy and rule by decrees? To… crush the fangs of anyone who opposes you?"

"W-Wait, I did not-"

"Violence breeds violence, and should only be used as the last resource," he affirms, restoring my personal space, tapping his brows again. "If that is all you can think of to aid your Lady Shogun, then you'll never become a proper member of the Guard."

"… Excuse me, what?" Mion asks, gaping.

He beats a fist into his chest, raising his chin, the blaze. "A blade that doesn't know when to sheathe itself is nothing but a tool to kill. And an Imperial Guard is, first and foremost, a protector of the people. A rampart to safeguard the peace of the future, to ensure it remains smiling." He sighs, hiding his hands on his pockets yet not releasing us from the draconian stare, the unblinking and stoic stare of our Leader. "If you falter to aggression, you're no better than a mere knife. Sometimes, the threat of violence is more effective than violence itself. Standing in protection is what you should focus on, in my opinion. Unless, of course," he frowns, looking away, "you rather try to reach Heaven through Pandemonium."

"Wh- There is no way in which we'd support such a notion!" Unable to rein myself in, I step closer, stares clashing.

"For real?" He asks, in that same irreverence, that same burning gaze.

"Of course. We… We do not hoist such values, even if we would wish Her Highness to stand proud."

"Shion, do not be so coarse," I'm pulled back, Mion gives him a minute bow. "Do forgive her outburst, cadet Shirogane. In any case, I assume you also are opposed to… such adusted showings of power?"

"Yeah, more or less," he states, frowning a bit. "You're both Imperial Guards, Shinpans at that. Supporting your rulers to avoid needless conflict is something you should know well, and sometimes ascertaining a clear position is what is required to quell the disquiet in the air."

"… Are you displeased with the Shogun's decision?" Mion asks, low, gaze and chin descending.

He sighs and shakes his head. "I merely would wish Her Highness to stand resolute, whatever her plan is. There are lives at risk, and her words can easily solve the issue. Even if at times one must not hesitate to bloody both hands, even if there are differing views in play, I believe her standing her ground would be welcomed by many, and would actually help the Diet more than they believe."

"I… Ahem… I do agree with your words, cadet," Mion says, giving a nod, compacting both shoulders. "However, sometimes, there is little option but to stand proud in one's convictions. And if Her Highness chooses to do so as of now, well…"

"Consequences will follow, as you perhaps know already our Empire is in quite the dire situation," I sigh, letting my sight crash down. "Her Highness only desires to safeguard the peace we enjoy today, frail as it is. Moderation in one's wording is, sadly, the most fitting weapon she can wield at the moment," giving a nod, I hesitate, lick my lips, steal a gaze.

And find his eyes still squarely on mine. "Yeah, I know. Doesn't mean she can't try with what little cards she has to edge the board to her favor. If actions have to be taken, they have to be swift a silent, aiming to stem the bleeding instead of leaving it to chance."

"Still, please do not be so harsh on the Shogun. There is much which rests on her shoulders, and the pressure she exerts upon herself is grand indeed. I can understand you not knowing of it… but she truly has been doing an utmost effort with whatever tools she has at her disposal," I ask, sighing along Mion. Ever since you've been away, convincing Yuuhi-sama to sleep properly has been nigh impossible, much less to placate her ill mood on the odd moons in which it rose back. I cannot blame her to show cracks in her veneer, more considering how their talk seems to have gone.

And yet, he sighs and relaxes every so slightly. As he fiddles with his hair, a small swirl of air causes lips and eyes to squint in concern. "While I concede her situation is hard to juggle and that her words do carry another weight, those same words are her greatest tool. If she allows her mood to cloud her judgment things will only turn south. As much as I get her frustration with how things seem to be going by what I've heard since I arrived to the Empire, this ain't the time to go spewing blue fire."

"Yes, I do… What?" Did he just-

A chime rings, the elevator opens. From within it, Takeru stands upright, in attention as he salutes us both. With a glare that could slay, an open combustion roaring away.

"I'm certain we'll agree in that there are more pressing matters to tend to, before the bad apples spoil the rest of the tree. So I think, from my humble position, that perhaps Her Highness should choose one path and stick to it, be it the docile peacekeeping efforts or the adusted blue fire of displeasure. I'm sure a resolute speech would have done more for everyone, a truthful one which she believes in. Otherwise, her poor standing… could call snakes to the tree."

"Wait, what are you-"

"Anyways, thanks for keeping an eye open so far, you two. 2nd Lts, I sincerely hope we can keep getting along. And I'd appreciate it if you could ensure the blue fire chills down, before the black one has to go and burn some snakes again," he smirks widely, letting me see his teeth, as his eyes begin to cross, as he cackles slowly. "Remind her that she has to be in the dark, so that she can shine brighter. I'll leave this request in your more than capable hands, cousins."

The door to the elevator then closes, the whirring follows shortly after, the display showing the descent. For a moment, I simply stare there in silence. Watching the numbers slowly go up, feeling the small threads of air seep into my nose. Glancing down, at the minute

shake of my fingers as I exhale and feel a my stomach contracting upon the lack of air.

"… Mion, did he just gave us an order?"

She blinks fast, again fiddling with her hair. "I… don't know. But those words… I did not misheard them, right?"

"No, it was the same as during, well, *cough*, the times when we were working together, yes."

"Wait, so- Wait a moment," eyes and lips widen, we both look at the elevator, back to each other, lost in silence for a while. "… Did he remember?"

"Did he?"

"You did hear the same as I, right?"

"Yeah, and he did look as adusted as back then, too."

"Indeed he did. So… Wait, if he remembers, why did he remain quiet?" She pouts, eyes closing as her hands shake.

"Perhaps, he's being overcautious? Even the wording of the order…" I look at the elevator, rubbing my arms together. "We didn't misheard that, right?"

"No, we did not. He… Sigh… Oh, thank the Heavens…"

"Yeah, thank the- H-Hey! Don't fall on me!" Supporting her with a hand, Mion groans a bit, tugging at my dress.

"S-Sorry, I merely… I mean, we really did not misheard it, right?"

"No, I think not. Still…" Why those words? Why not smile, call us Pickles? Why… remain quiet and distant? Why must you be the Leader and not Takeru? "… Let's go look for Mana-nee, we need to report this."

"Eh? Ah, yes, of course," she nods back and regains her footing, we quickly turn around and start to almost jog back to the barracks.

There is no mistake, that was deliberate. Those words, the expression… But then, if he remembers… Why keep quiet? Why antagonize Meiya-sama? I don't care about the Leader of the Swordbreakers, he can stay dead for all I care. But that kind gleam in your features, the sound of your chuckles… I want my clumsy little brother back, I… know it won't ever be the same. I know it. But at least we can remain close, be there when we need each other. If he already recalled everything then, why would Takeru choose to play dumb when-

…

Slowing down, I tap Mion's shoulder. She raises a brow, decelerating a few feet in front of me. "Say Mion, don't you find this odd?"

"Huh? You mean, him asking us that out of the blue? Well, yes, it is rather concerning he hasn't tried to approach us, but perhaps Kouzuki has him under vigilance and-"

"No, not that. Well, that is a concern too, but it's not what I'm talking about here." Sighing, rubbing my forehead, I lick my lips, restoring dampness to my mouth as I meet her gaze. "This last talk… he gave us an order, right?" She nods, hugging both arms together, looking down, a tender flower under a downpour. "Yet our leader wouldn't be so, well, subtle about this, right?"

"Indeed… If he deemed the issue worthy of an order, considering the circumstances, then I don't think Takeru would have postponed the talk. Perhaps, he would have told us something earlier when we had some time alone."

"And yet, he waited until the last moment. If all of this was deliberate, why?"

"Hmm… If he, well, was truly aware of everything… He chose to gave us a warning about Yuuhi-sama, above everything. To prevent… the Black Fire from resurging." Inhaling sharply, enduring the pit that spawns in my stomach, I return the grim gaze Mion also endows. "Do you believe Kouzuki is what he's warning us about?"

"Hardly. There would be no warning if that was the issue. Still, let us not act conspicuously for the fox may not be aware he regained his memories. And if our leader desires Yuuhi-sama to remain calm, then it means he knows his presence can be used to her detriment?"

I nod, folding my arms. "If Yuuhi-sama is upset, he must be aware the tribulations about his return are ruining her mood. And learning of his memories will only incite her to reclaim him… and if we tell her Takeru wants her to stay put…"

"She's gonna lose her marbles," Mion sighs, slouching alongside me. "In any case, whatever it is his goal, it's clear Takeru is aware of the burdens Yuuhi-sama is facing… and I suppose, the possible ripples of disturbances hitting the Capital," she finishes with a solemn nod.

Slowly walking once more, the back of my head hurts. Looking down, I simply follow Mion's lead. "If he requested of us to remain composed… Does it mean there are enemies nearby?"

"Either that, or that we cannot alert anyone of our cards," she says, low.

"… Anyways, let's hurry to Mana-nee. If our Leader of all people is asking us to be calm…" I shiver, exhaling pure snow. Mion chuckles weakly, smiling in equal dejection and happiness.

Because he is back, he's right there, at arm's reach.

But he is back, aware of the risk, the danger.

And he is back, back to that furious gaze, that adusted contortion, distortion of his bright features.

Even if it was calmer, more subtle than before. Even if he may have used it only to deliver a message.

… You stupid idiot. You could have hugged us or something when away from the cameras, called us as always, smiled as before. You're such a jerk, always leaving us in wait, never arriving in time. You're cruel… After all this time, after being so close…

… Next time I see you, I'm gonna hug you so hard your eyes are gonna pop. And this time, this time I ain't letting you go on your own anywhere. This time… we'll rid you of those nightmares, of whatever is making you believe you must remain adusted, Takeru.

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*A/N: Not gonna lie, the last batch of comments has made me a bit concerned, and also a bit upset.*

*I know the story is dragging on, and to be honest I do understand the complains about shipping and all. For a while since I started this rewrite, when I freaked out and deleted the older chapters 59 to 64 and then wiped D&R, this story has been a mess to deal with. Part of me does agree with some of the more strong worded comments, that maybe this would be better split up into its separate stories. It was a thought I had, and still toy with, to make the whole 'Native Takeru AU' from scratch with TDB and work up from there and keep the other aspects about the Unlimited timelines and Takeru's daughter to Before Light's Out and the story it builds up to, something I call the 4U-0W Saga.*

*All these details and different mindsets of characters are honestly a bit overwhelming and hard to keep track of, and I may have been way more ambitious than I should have. Trying to make everything make sense has been hard, and while I thought the Mind Dive arc would help a bit it is a bummer to see the small foreshadowing added to kind of hint at Yuuko's change didn't work out, but she is the character I write the worst out of the original cast.*

*So, point being, lay it on me and be brutally honest. Are the last slew of chapters just not working at all? The characterization, reactions, and interactions, I mean. I know the pacing is dead, despite my attempts at getting it back up. I've been second guessing myself since chapter 69, since I had to sit down and commit to writing the last scene of chapter 77, and while stubbornness, sunken cost fallacy, and feeling bad about dropping this fic are kind of driving me forward to ignore the complains, I do concede that it may be for the better to have this split and turn into separate canon-divergent stories even if that makes it all 'not read like muv-luv' as a commenter pointed out.*

*And yes, I am salty as fuck about this. But it's all more practice to learn to juggle the details better, even if some will never be pleased with what and how I write. I know that both Yuuhi and Yuuko should have no need for someone like Takeru in a romantic sense if we base them on canon, but even if it comes out OOC that is the direction I wanna write.*

*Anyways, yeah, I won't be going on a 'hissy fit' again nor deleting stuff or anything. I'm honestly just frustrated, while this fic did start out without an outline or a clear goal beyond 'find a way to let the girls be happy even if the war goes on' I did try to put some signposts and stuff back then about where I wanted to go, and I did try to hint at where the story would go in the current chapters since the rewrite, thanks to some harsh but helpful words I got on the OG chapter 31 from both a guest and Dash9. Namely, the whole relation with Yuuhi being actually a thing and the involvement of Takeru's daughter from Unlimited are twists I tried to foreshadow, even if in canon those timelines are erased. It was all to hint at the conflict from the cover and the issues Takeru faces and the forgets about post-CCSE, that the people here are not like the ones he loved before. And having him deal with that is what kind of fuels his attitude in the last chapters, or what I hoped to hint at anyways.*

*So while I know I'm not entitled to any comments, I'd like your honesty on how this has been thus far, beyond the pacing issues*

*which… I don't know if I can solve, writing long is the only way I know to write. Also, learning new details from old Age games isn't helping. Seeing one of your 'original' ideas be already present in a canon CG is quite the shock, more so when it actually makes a small joke I put in just for the lols suddenly fit in better with the plot at large. I love and hate this franchise so much, but God, I should not have requested those CGs. As someone who loves little details, trying to keep up with the parallels in between games is exhausting. Mad respect to the localization team.*

*Sorry for the long ramble. As always, thanks for reading. Stay safe.*

*Zuoriel*

# Cracks in the Masquerade

*Chapter 89:*

**Cracks in the Masquerade**

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*December 5th, 07:25 PM.*

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**[Meiya]**

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"That was not my fault." Ayamine says, lowering her brows.

"Yes, it was. I asked you to not advance so much," I insist with a sigh. "How can I cover your advance should you choose to insist on not communicating your patterns?"

"I told you to move one breath faster, to not remove your feet from the pedal," she counters, taking a spoonful to her lips.

I look down to my own plate, letting the synth scent of the broth fill me, the chatter in the PX claim my ears. Try as I might, I do not believe this rift will be mended easily thus it is in the squad's interest for me to desist on this front. So I resume my dinner, ignoring the small gazes Yoroi steals at me.

"Sigh… Look Ayamine, if we are to work as an element you have to stay near my position," Sakaki repines, tapping her glasses. "You already know I can't move as fast as you do."

"I'm trying to actually beat our enemies. Hiding all the time won't do us good," she retorts as her nose tightens slightly, before going back to her dinner.

"Loath I am to admit my agreement, Sakaki. While I welcome the idea to shuffle our positions, it is clear you're not yet ready to take the role of a vanguard," I offer, trying to defuse the situation.

"Mitsurugi, that's not the issue here," she tenses her lips, closing her eyes as circles are drawn once again. "Regardless of my position, Ayamine's tendency to advance carelessly could compromise a mission. She won't always have someone like you or Shirogane to accompany her. Furthermore, our performance in the morning training proves we need adaptability. This new method in the night trainings is my idea to allow us to reach said aptitude faster," she states with a slow nod, slowly cutting a slice of pork and giving it small bites as she looks back.

"I merely do not see the merits of such an approach. Why place us in positions where we will not work at our full capacity?" I fold my arms, as I cannot fathom what she's trying to achieve. Besides keeping myself and Ayamine away from the same element, that is. I admit my folly, and I have kept quiet during the run to not burden my comrades any further yet if Sakaki decides to implement this routine as our nightly course then, I have my doubts whether this will truly be beneficial at all.

"Did you ask yourself how good your covering fire was, Mitsurugi?" Sakaki says as she leans back and slides another piece of pork into her lips.

"What? You know I am not a good a sniper as Tamase. Obvious it was my performance in the position you placed me in would be subpar."

"What is it? You're adept at criticizing me and Shirogane-kun, why can't you say that you failed in your task openly?" She asks, raising a brow, a cup to her lips.

"Mmgh… It is true that I did not fulfill my role today, but that is because you placed me in a position I am not comfortable with." What is wrong with her? I had thought Sakaki did not wish to

invigorate the tensions I foolhardily created… It seems I was mistaken.

"A-All of us had some trouble in the training since we tried out new positions, is all," Tamase braves, barely lifting both voice, gaze and posture, as hesitant as the hand that brings a small dose of rice to her lips.

"Yes, that is true. And how would you rate my performance as a vanguard, Mitsurugi?" Sakaki then asks, yet again beginning to make circles in the air as she rests her glass on the table. So… I cannot read her intent as of now, I believed her to be still upset towards my person.

"Atrociously terribad," Ayamine answers with a smirk while I was trying to find the right words to avoid further embers.

I can practically feel my breath turning cold at the sight of Sakaki scowling at the one sitting to my left. Her lips seem to contort, swallowing a retort and the venom of a snake that still slithers in her gaze. Tamase, who is sitting to her right, sighs heavily when she sees our leader calm down. I merely shook my head.

"Ayamine… What exactly do you mean?" Sakaki says, eyes still narrowed.

"Ask Special-kun, I just think the word sounds funny. And you were awful, worst partner I've ever fought with."

"… Precisely. And that's why we'll continue to use this formation from now on. This was my idea to aid us surpass our temporary setback, even if I agree with the points Shirogane-kun raised earlier today." she declares while tapping her glasses, then returns to emptying her plate.

If she admits her own shortcoming, why continue down this path? It is unlike her, when Sakaki voices her own failings she usually back downs from her plans, even if that only happened rarely. I fold my

arms, deliberating within myself for a moment at how to approach her.

"… Sakaki, forgive me for insisting, but I do not see what good this will do. If you also have seen none of us benefited from this training, I think it best that we return to our usual formation."

"No, that will only make everything worse. We need adaptability if we ever wish to catch up to the training. Please remember that you, me, and Shirogane-kun need the score to reach graduation," she answers, despite her voice being calm it's apparent in how her chin and eyes contract that she is troubled, angered perhaps, at our results so far. "At this rate, we will take many months to get up to skill if we remain stuck in this level of the course. So we need to begin by polishing our individual abilities before anything. After all, he is right. This lacking display will not be enough once we become commissioned."

"Hard disagree," Ayamine counters in her usual emotion lacking tone. "We would benefit more from letting everyone do what they do best for now."

"I agree with Ayamine. I am to be a vanguard, considering my aptitude, so while I can only agree in further polishing our skills I see no reason for you to place me as a Blast Guard." One of Sakaki's brows twitches, she then sighs shortly. "I believe every one of us has a role we excel at. I am of the opinion that we should return to what was working best for us, with you in the middle as our leader. And… I shan't spawn any further debates. My veneer won't bend twice, you have my word," I nod her way, never blinking, never breaking eye contact.

"Sigh… I just told you, we can't keep going like this," Sakaki says, practically sighing the words out as she lowers her arms to the table. What has afflicted her to such lengths? Could she be dejected with herself at the issues we suffered through since the mock battle?

"Chizuru-san, no one is blaming you for this slump we are now in. You do not need to shoulder it all on your own," Yoroi requests, wincing slightly, idling the cup she was drinking from.

"Sadly, the leader has to take responsibility for it's team. So, it's up to me to find a new way to take us out of this lock."

"You're only digging the hole."

"Ayamine, must you?" I stare, she shrugs, so I sigh and see Sakaki's gaze lost in her soup, not even wishing to retort.

Ayamine also seems to notice it, growing a bit stiff. If Sakaki is again holding the words in, retreating within herself… this will end up in the same way our prior trainings before Takeru arrived. I… What can I do to help without undermining Sakaki's role as our leader? I do think she is mistaken, but if I keep pushing that fact… her confidence might crumble. She is taking this harder than the rest after all. And I have not been in my best behavior to point fingers to anyone at the moment, much less since they are trying to not exclude me as well.

"Um…" Tamase's interjection is barely more than a whisper, she switches her gaze from us to her plate in indecision for a moment. "Maybe we could… leave the swapped positions for when we clear all the standard courses? If we keep falling back on the trainings, the Instructor will continue to increase the sim run's difficulty, right? We do need to make up the days we lost, and you three also need the grades, so we should do our best in the one area each of us excels at, in my opinion."

"So much that," Ayamine nods as she points a finger to Tamase. "We need one good result. We can't keep screwing up for so long."

"… And that's why I'm telling you all, we should first get used to shuffling around the battlefield." Sakaki tightens a fist, dispelling anger's roots from the soil of her words. "The Instructor won't give us the luxury of two identical battles or a detailed skirmish plan once we shift back to mock battles, going by how today went. Care to guess

what's going to happen if we start to drag our feet again?" She inquires, tapping her glasses, seeking our gazes. We all lowered our eyes, remembering the earlier training.

I can only sigh and bring some water to my lips to cleanse the dryness, the harshness which didn't leave me after the training. I had thought I could fight toe to toe against Takeru, but as it turns out he had been holding back. Even leaving my uncouth behavior aside, I was no match for him once he began to employ those erratic, eccentric patterns. A novice I still am, yet I believed myself more capable after trading blows with Tsukuyomi. All I truly desire as of now, besides mending my relation with you, is growing strong enough… to stand by your side, Takeru. To understand what it is you see, what drives you forward, and how it is our teachings developed into such savage maneuvers under your hands.

Which is why I agreed to try Sakaki's suggestion for this nightly training, as a way to clear away these clogging chains on my hands, these doubts that threaten to take hold of me once again in my frustrations. I cannot believe he still isn't available, even if to only extend an apology. It also serves as proof I do not wish to hamper the squadron's unity any longer, and I did try earnestly to support both her and Ayamine from the position I was assigned to.

"Sakaki, I truly agree on your wish," I say, nodding. She seems to relax her gaze and lips. "I do know we need much training to reach a level of aptitude which will please the Instructor. Yet, I believe Tamase speaks the truth. We, as a team and individuals, need to gain our first victory. We need to see positive results, since… well, our first mock battle was not particularly positive for us."

"Sigh… I know that already. But we won't see different results if we stick to the same trainings forever," her brows narrow, she quickly grabs the last slice of pork and mixes it with one small mound of rice, bringing it all to her lips.

"We won't prove ourselves if we keep failing, though," Ayamine retorts as she leaned back on her seat, finishing her drink.

"Ayamine-san, please don't say that," Tamase scolds, her tone rising from that whisper despite the downcast posture not faltering. "We all are in this together. So… maybe we could keep trying for a few days?"

"Tamase, we do not have the luxury of time," I sigh as she looks down immediately, as if that was all it took to have her silenced. "Surely you also weren't comfortable as a Rush Guard?"

"Well… I guess."

"It's as if Miki-san was missing a wing as she flied. Speaking of, I think this tale of a bird is-" Yoroi commented, despite having being silent most of the time.

"Yoroi, this is not the time for your ramblings." I cut her off, before she worsens the mood.

"Eh? But I was just-"

"Please, read the mood. You shouldn't speak up now."

"… Why not? I can't talk now?"

My mouth was left agape as Yoroi returned my gaze intensely. I looked at her, Yoroi was to my right so it was clear to me. Her brows furrowed and lips pursed, she reminds me of those lynxes I saw in books. It is rare to see her… No, scratch that, I have never seen her hold her ground to speak up.

Despite a slight shaking in her shoulders, she returns my gaze firmly. "I think all of you are misunderstanding Chizuru-san here. Meiya-san, Kei-san, you tend to move forward without considering that we might not reach your side to cover you."

"That is… As the vanguard it is our duty to-"

"Do you think those excuses will convince the Instructor?" She narrows her brows, my words clog my throat for a moment.

"… I am not making excuses. It is our role to take the frontlines."

"Yes, that's true. But you can't simply rush away and put yourselves in danger. Didn't you learn anything from what Takeru has always told us? You know, cancel and back-dash?"

Ah… She does have a point. Takeru would also have reminded me of that… if I hadn't been so obstinate towards my fellow. Yet, he would have covered us… No, I cannot think in this way. I cannot solely rely on him. Even more after what Mion and Shion told me, what Tsukuyomi disclosed as well. Despite how late it is, it seems he hasn't yet been released from his special mission as I was not allowed to visit his cell. Moreover, I cannot allow myself to become co-dependent on him, I desire… to be a pillar of support, to mend my mistakes. Sigh… I suppose, being more agreeable to the squad as a whole would also work in my favor to rebuild the trust I eroded.

"So you're saying this method will bring boons to all of us somehow?"

She smiles, giving a small nod. "Yeah. You saw how Chizuru-san was acting when trying to be a vanguard, right? So now you know how frustrating it is as a Blast Guard to have the vanguard rush ahead without a care."

"Wait, are you saying… I cannot believe I did not see it." It all makes sense now.

Sakaki is trying to have us see our own shortcomings by placing us in other positions. Me and Ayamine tend to move too far ahead, it is true. So, if we are placed in the read and are forced to keep up with the vanguard while having to cover their advance, we will learn how detrimental it is to the team as a whole for the frontliners to never take a pause to retreat, even if from our position it seems as if we were making the right call.

The same applies for Tamase. She tends to get down easily and is not odd for her to downplay her contributions. So by displacing her in

the formation and having someone else be the sniper, we can show Tamase how truly vital her marksmanship is for us, perhaps more by placing her in the frontlines. So that is what this was about… Polishing our vision individually, both to sharpen our habits from the training course and to allow us to take different roles on the fly if the situation so demands, to then allow us to bring better results for the team as a whole.

"I see… I was so focused on my own role that I failed to see the bigger picture."

"Hm? What do you mean?"

I explain to Ayamine what I just realized, allowing Sakaki to sigh and recover a faint smile, relaxation coming as she finishes her drink.

"That's exactly what I was trying to do. But telling you beforehand would have been counterproductive, so I chose to keep that to myself, to let you figure it out on your own through the trainings," she nods, again making circles in the air.

This time, however, she seems to catch herself and stops said finger, furrowing her brows at that for some reason. Why would she be bothered by the gesture?

"… You could have told us, though," Ayamine glares at Sakaki in mild acidity, leaning into the table.

"It wouldn't have done much. I think it's better to let us reach our own answers through experience," Sakaki shrugs, expression remains loose and undisturbed as the night sky.

"I agree with Sakaki in this. Now that this has been cleared up, I suppose we could continue this method for a few days."

"Kei-san, maybe you should be the Blast Guard tomorrow," Yoroi smiles and chuckles at her, making Tamase giggle at Ayamine's flinch and purse of her lips.

"… God no. Anything but that, my sniping sucks."

"Use the chance to improve. You never know what might happen in the field, after all," I nod in agreement with Sakaki's words, Ayamine groans as she leaves her mouth slightly open.

"I know we all have sore spots but… let's try a bit harder tomorrow to make up for the time we got stumped!" Yoroi says, a smile on her face. "Well, I'm gonna hit the library now, do any of you wanna come?"

"Oh, I was wanting to go there too," Tamase then finish what little was in her plate, causing her cheeks to balloon beyond limits, causing her to hastily seek her glass to aid the gulping process.

Sakaki sighs as she pats her back, which allows Tamase to return to normal. "Be more careful, there's no need to rush. I'll pass on the reading though," she says, tapping her glasses, a hand running around her neck, "I need a good night's rest today."

"I think I'll join in the reading, if we're gonna keep shuffling positions in the night runs," Ayamine nods, making eye contact with Sakaki for a second.

"Meiya-san, um," Yoroi's hands rustle together, her eyes veer away as her elbows rustle closer to her person, "would you be liking to join us in the library?"

My throat constricts for but a moment, a small shiver runs down my spine. Barely managing to restrain a frown from raising to my face, I merely shake my head, look away.

… I know it is futile to repine on the matter, but it is truly uncomfortable to hear you being formal all of a sudden. I suppose, it is my just dessert for my attitude of late. Sigh…

"No, I'm going for my usual run and then I'll sleep early as well."

"Oh, I see. Well, see you guys tomorrow then!" Yoroi smiles at us as she grabs her tray, nodding as she departs to the counter.

Tamase also says her good nights to us as she follows behind. Sakaki covers her mouth, hiding the yawn that she allows to escape. After rubbing her eyes, she also stands and grabs her tray and, followed by Ayamine, also went to return her tray. I gave a nod to them as they left, choosing to take my time to finish my meal and not disturb the obvious motives behind the synchronized departure.

Savoring the food on my tongue, slowly breathing in, I ponder what Mion and Shion told me, what my trainings are producing, and what comes from tomorrow. Should I give him some space today, leave my apology for tomorrow? On the contrary, is a mere apology worth anything at this point? I should endeavor to show him clear support first instead of simple words. The same extends to the rest of the squad, that have tried to remain composed and welcoming during our training and dinner despite my prior words and actions.

Still… I wonder, how are you faring as of now? Burdened with more assignments, lacking any free time at all, unable to take a breather, to come outside if you so desired. Despite our arguments over semantics of late, the fight earlier today… Was that how you dispatched of the chasers? Not an ounce of hesitation, overflowing hostility. When we spar, usually there is tension to his features but the brazen spirit has never denoted wrath as his voice portrayed earlier today.

… Perhaps, the gaps in his memories are causing him pain? Tsukuyomi warned me not to mention anything, but I suppose that, if he was close to Mother, to see our Empire fall, to return and learn of our grim situation is not doing Takeru any favors. And here I am, adding further pressure to his shoulders.

I drink some juice to clean my palate, then grab a tissue and wipe my lips. Letting a small amount of air out, it feels as if a shower had washed away what weighted down on my shoulders. All things considered, it is good to see we can now discuss openly without

reaching a dead point. I had feared Sakaki and Ayamine would begin arguing, but it is reliving to see that is a problem of the past, even if they still bicker from time to time. I do have to give Sakaki her due credit, I never would have thought of such a training. In any case, now it is my obligation to mend my relation with Takeru, so that we can all once more progress as a team.

After all, above everything else, I do have an oath to fulfill… For if that park still remains standing among the ruins, then I must also endeavor to bring my ideals into practice. I am blessed to no longer being caged, to have a fellow guard-in-training near me. I can only hope you can spare me another chance, Takeru.

"Oh, I didn't think you would be here."

"Hm? Oh, 1st Lt. Takamura. Good evening." I salute her and she returns the gesture as she sits down in front of me, leaving her tray onto the table. "Were you occupied until now? The night training ended quite a while ago."

"No, nothing of the sort. It's just that, since my current task is close to completion, I need to review a few reports before retiring for the day, is all," she compacts her shoulders, sighing shortly as she slowly begins to eat.

"I see…" That, too, is a duty we must prepare to tackle in due time.

"By the by, did something happen today? It was rather odd you all would choose to alter your formation for today's run," she asks, staring.

"Oh, it is nothing. Sakaki merely believed it was for the better to allow us to see the battlefield from another position, to give us all more awareness once we return to our intended placements."

"Hmm… Quite an astute plan, I say. It is good to see you're truly making the most of your time as cadets," she smiles, nodding as she pierces two slices of pork atop one another, slowly munching them.

"Thank you, ma'am."

"It's nothing, really. It is nice to see you're all this determined in your trainings, is all. At first I feared to be perhaps too harsh on you all, however I am impressed by your results," she nods, again slicing the synth pork in tiny pieces.

"… Ma'am, may I ask why are you using a fork?"

"Hm?" She tilts her head, still munching. Eyes widen momentarily, she drinks slowly for a moment to then clear her throat. "Oh, force of habit, I suppose. I was stationed in Yukon Base beforehand, so it has been a reflex to ask for forks and knives to eat my meals."

"I see…" So she, too, was stationed at Yukon, huh. Is that the reason why she has been watching over Takeru's training from time to time and he aids her- Wait, that's right! If she's here, then he should be already free for the night. "1st. Lieutenant, if it isn't much bother, could you tell me how Takeru has been faring as of late?" I would not like to intrude on what little free time he has, after all.

"Shirogane?" Her expression darkens ever so slightly, eyes falling to the plate, lips compressing for a second. "I haven't had the chance to see the cadet since a few days back, due to my duties not requiring his presence at the moment."

"Is that so?"

"If I may… Has he been giving you any trouble?"

"Eh? No, on the contrary, I have… been rather tactless towards him lately."

"I see…" She resumes her eating, we share a moment of silence as the scent of her synth food reaches me, as the noise in the PX dies down. "I assume, he has remained composed thus far?"

"Yes, of course. Please, do not think badly of him. Takeru wasn't-"

"Worry not, I do not entirely believe the rumors I've heard," she waves a hand, shaking her hear. Still, not entirely, huh. "I am merely concerned over what he could do, I did see a few soldiers trying to incite a fight with him. Perhaps the same will happen now, and the same could extend to you and the others," she sighs, then looks straight into my own gaze. "Do not let the pressure impair your poise, is all I'll say."

"Yes, ma'am." Sadly… those are words I required earlier today.

I fold my arms, I feel my teeth pressuring my lips from within. I take a sharp breath as I cross one leg over the other. All he has done for me, and yet I once again lashed out as we platicated on the way to the barracks. When I should have expressed my apologies to him. And yet, now that Takamura has confirmed she has not been requiring Takeru's aid, that equals he might still be in the midst of his special missions at the moment. Sigh… Such a blunder on my part…

Still, all in due time. No need to fret over small errors. Me and Takeru will once again share a good relation after I properly make amends. Then, maybe… maybe I could ask him something about Mother… or would that be a secret we cannot disclose? Mmgh… There are so many oddities I'd like to clear regarding your identity, Takeru. For us to become true fellows, to hoist no secrets between us as the partners of the fellowship we are. And…

" *It's a beautiful name, is all. I just think it suits you well."*

Mmgh… I admit, it is truly frustrating to hear him refuse to use my name for some reason. I do deserve the reticence, yet the reluctance he displays is truly a concern. Takeru didn't show such aversion to my person before the CCSE or during it, so I must have crossed a line. To think it was only a few days ago we were jesting during the Undersecretary's visit, all of us sitting in this same table without the air thickening at all.

… Even if they refused to elaborate on that dirty joke, for some reason. Sigh… How shameful of me, to not have realized what

Ayamine's gesture was about, to lose my composure in such way in front of Tsukuyomi. I admit, such vulgarity was unexpected and I am thankful Takeru and Sakaki defused that situation as swiftly as they did. I may lack experience with such jargon, but uttering such vulgar words is nothing but a stain on my person.

… Even more to have imagined it in such detail upon the revelation. I did not think myself such a salacious person, to fall prey to my basest instincts at such simple words. First that odd dream of a mansion during the CCSE, then my daydream in the simulator, and now this. I am grateful to have learned meditation, to keep my hormones at bay. Who knows what manner of shameful behavior I would have displayed in front of him without the proper time to regain my poise? Truly, this is nothing but a stain on my person, to view him with such eyes, to think him in that way.

… As if Takeru would ever try and feed me in such manner, or p-pet my head while doing so, o-or toy with my navel as he licks a stray grain of rice off the side of my lips… m-much less to embrace me and say such words… Or to k-k-kiss me as he did in that dream of the mansion… even less to sully our training grounds, to have us act as beasts. I-I mean, we did seem, well, compatible at one point, I admit. Now that I know he is truly a fellow, that all he said was truthful, I shall relent that… I admire many traits of his, even if our views seem to not be perfectly aligned. *And, truth be told, he has been most kind towards my person ever since we met.* However, me admiring his skills does not- I don't truly think Takeru…

*Would he? Would he truly favor me to such lengths?* If he desired to share such a relation with me, the same closeness he had with whoever handed him the Minaru Kamui, which I believe was Mother, does that mean Takeru… w *ould truly one day… embrace me in that same manner and offer a ring to me?* Can I… salvage our relation and… aim to earn his respect once more? *Were you… all this time… seeing me with those eyes …* while I stomped all over your goodwill? *Would he wrap me in such kindness, try and share a picnic with me, be content with sharing his time with me?* He had always… smiled

much whenever we sparred, before I became undeservedly harsh towards him. *He did say he found my name beautiful, even allowed me to call him by his.*

Perhaps, he noticed the similarities in our style during our bouts? And thus, he has… *favored me* since then? Takeru has… always looked hurt whenever I grow harsh, averse towards him. Be it when we trained with those small simulators, when we started to put space between us and him, during the CCSE, and these days in our training have been the same… until I crossed a line, until I uttered grave words today. Then, all the more reason for me to ensure this mistake does not make nest. To show Takeru that I am regretting my words, that I am willing to lift this stain and regain his trust. And, if he would still desire it, that I would… w-wouldn't be opposed to-

"Mitsurugi?"

"Y-Yes?!"

"Huh? What's the matter?" Takamura asks as her brows cross, slightly tilting her head.

"No, I was… deeply lost in thought. What it is, 1st Lt?"

"I was merely wishing to ask how are you all faring. You all didn't seem as tense during this evening training, so I suppose you've managed to attain some progress?" She smiles softly, delaying the ascent of the cup to her lips.

"… Well, while we are at an impasse as of now, I believe we are making decent progress."

I spend a moment indulging Takamura's questions, accompanying her on her dinner, while receiving her advice for my squadmates and sharing opinions with her as I also finish my meal.

"… I do think that you should focus on giving Tamase an idea on how important she has been for all of you."

"Yes, I agree. She does need to gain confidence, after all."

And yet… it feels just like back then. While she is trying to not be so obvious in her respect due to her rank, it feels like all those caretakers that were assigned to me back in Sendai. I know Amato meant well, and he was right in that I needed trustworthy people looking over me, yet I would have preferred to remain with Tsukuyomi.

I know it was due to my standing as a political piece, but what wouldn't I have given to be allowed to fight back then. I am sure Takamura also was made to fight despite being younger than me, and yet there I was. And now, she is also speaking with that same respect, just like Tsukuyomi was when we met again. Like everyone else, except Takeru. And Yashiro, even if she dislikes me for some reason.

"I have been faring well," I nod, folding my arms. "Perhaps not to a degree I would be pleased with, but I cannot complain." Not after what my actions have caused to the squad as a whole.

"I see. If you ever need advice, I am always ready to listen. Even Shirogane has consulted with me at times, despite how far ahead you say he seems to be," she again smiles, giving me a small nod.

I return the gesture with a faint bow, she does seem to be far more relaxed than Tsukuyomi is, perhaps because she isn't completely aware of who I am. In any case, I do agree with Takamura's words. Simply following the training courses blindly will do us no good, indeed. Learning from the past, from all that has been harvested thus far and then applying it to our current missions is key for our growth. I do wonder why Takeru refused my words, however. I suppose, he has seen battle already whereas I haven't. And Tsukuyomi was quite flabbergasted at learning he might recall who Mother was… so there is a chance he has recalled unpleasant memories from the invasion, before whatever accident took his memories befell him.

Even if Tsukuyomi warned me to not disclose anything, I do wish to mend my relation with him. As fellows, of course. So… perhaps asking Takamura her opinion on the matter, on how she saw the incident and these semantic disagreements me and Takeru are having could grant me a hint to better approach the situation.

"… 1st Lt, if I may ask, you said you were stationed in Yukon before returning to the Empire, right?"

"Eh? Ah… Yes, I was. Why do you ask?" her expression gains sobriety, her shoulders slowly lower as does the fork that was aiming for her mouth. "Did you wish to ask anything about my time there?"

"Yes, if you would be so kind?" I ask, lowering my head, she sighs and nods. "Ahem… Could you perhaps tell me… how the Incident played out from your eyes?"

The sudden appearance of the BETA, having to fight against other humans, then seeing the broadcast where the Americans' foul plan was revealed and moments later executed… And yet, she's still here. Standing proud and working for the Empire from her humble position. I know certain intel will be withheld, but I desire to hear the contrast her words have with his, even if I only gain an immediate refusal.

"Of course, if it is painful you do not need to indulge me," I add with a hasty bow, lips pressing together, as I do not wish my appearance to force her hand.

"… It's alright. I suppose it could be useful, somehow, to your growth. We should speak of it somewhere else, however. Would you like to hear it now or, perhaps, tomorrow?"

"If I am not imposing, I would like to hear it today."

"Well, let me finish my dinner and we'll be on our way."

"No, please do not rush. It is fine," I say, grabbing my own glass to slowly finish my water. She seemed to wish to object, but merely nods to my words. Sigh… "If I may ask, you weren't injured during the fight, were you?"

"Oh, no. I was lucky, one could say," her eyes curve away, her tone dulls and slows down.

I see… Perhaps, she was sent to her TSF immediately while Takeru had to fight head on with the terrorists? No, I am sure he was also lucky to only suffer those scars. If he had been hit on the head or shot at, he could have been killed. Truly, I am blessed to have been given the chance to meet him.

Takamura finishes her dinner rather quickly, despite me insisting that she could take her time while we could discuss other matters. A few odd murmurs tail our steps as we advance to the track field, lingering stares that are repelled by Takamura's own adusted glare over her shoulder. Once we reach the door, a cold gust envelops us as it opens, a shiver from my armpits to the tail end of my toenails. Nobody is here at this hour, so there is no risk of anyone eavesdropping in our conversation. Only us and the clear skyline, the rather humid air of this calm night of December.

Takamura walks over the lines of the track, looking up. I can hear her taking a breath, I do so as well while looking at the stars and the moon, the faint light that upon us falls. That being said…

"It truly is getting colder," I rub my arms a few times over, still feeling the coldness seep through what little openings my uniform gives it. I let the air go and, for now, I cannot see my breath. I know it is a matter of days however.

"Indeed. In Yukon it was somewhere around this temperature all the time. I did miss my Royal Guard uniform back then…" she slowly says, placing her hands on her elbows, embracing tight as she slightly sways, eyes remaining on the sky as her lips slightly purse and twist inwards.

"Is it protective against the cold?"

"Oh, yes. Since it's made of a fine material, I barely felt cold during winter. It is slightly uncomfortable to wear during summer, but I vastly prefer it to the UN's dress."

"I see… So, 1st Lieutenant, I know it is a confidential matter, however-"

"Worry not, I won't divulge anything you shouldn't know. So, what in particular would you like to hear?"

"Where to begin? Oh, I suppose you could start with how the whole attack started. It must have been hard repelling the terrorists if they used both guns and blunt weapons."

"Blunt weapons?" Takamura arches one of her brows, blinking in quick succession yet remaining silent as the wind propels her hair off her shoulder. "Who told you of that?"

"Hm? Takeru told me about his participation in the Incident once."

"Huh? But… The terrorists in Yukon only used machineguns."

"… Eh? That can't be. Takeru told me of that himself, of how he had to fight back during the Incident."

"However, that cannot be true," Takamura affirms, her voice firm and clear as tonight's sky, her eyes looking straight at me. "I was also in the ground when the attack began and they didn't resort to blunt weaponry. That wasn't even mentioned in the briefing, they all stole weapons from a nearby outpost and brought them to Yukon by abusing their jobs in a delivery company. I cannot discard the chance of them making due with objects at hand in the heat of the moment, but I assume you watched the broadcast. The incident was caused by the RLF, and believe me when I said they were more than prepared for their foul plan."

"Is that so? Was Takeru trying to cover the truth, in case I ever mentioned anything?"

"Sigh… It was foolish to divulge such a thing, to be honest," she caresses her hair, her face still stern and tense, the hold over her strands twisting. "Might I ask why you inquired about the matter with him?"

"Well, I once saw his scars, so I grew curious as the rest of us did. Takeru told me he got hit by metal bats and other objects while he tried to protect the people. That's why his back is full of scars, and, well, there's another large marking covering the entirety of a side of his chest." I purse my lips, swallowing harshly and feeling my throat burn, my stomach heavy. The aftertaste is filthy, for me to divulge these matters without consulting him. However, I am certain that Takeru will understand. Takamura was also in Yukon like him, after all.

"… What?" Takamura's eyes remain widened as her posture freezes, and not due to the breeze that still surrounds us. "That's… That's not possible. I cannot deny that, at one point, ammo might have run out, but still, to employ bats and the like? Considering they had taken over parts of the base, I doubt such objects would be nearby."

"Huh? I am not lying, 1st Lieutenant. I saw said scars myself."

"No, however, as I said before, such blunt objects couldn't have been used by the terrorists. If Shirogane was attacked, he would have been shot at or paralyzed with a taser. And in the case he had been struck with a baton repeatedly, considering the progression of the attack… Well, I can understand the small markings you mention in his back, but the large scar in his chest does not add up…"

"… Then, how do you explain his words?" I fold my arms, raising a brow at her.

"I do not know about that, perhaps he simply exercised caution at the time. However, those scars are not from the Yukon Incident at

the least, of that you can be certain. More so considering… No, it's nothing."

"Is there something… classified about the matter, ma'am?"

"Not classified per se, perhaps you've already heard of… the motives why cadets were targeted during the incident?"

"Hmm… No, I do not know. I do recall hearing the training schools in Yukon were also attacked, but the news were, well… more focused on the lasting damage." And we were all tending to the scars of failing our first CCSE, so we did not particularly spend much time in the PX together or listening to the news.

"I see…" she sighs, embracing her sides strongly. One of her eyes twitches as she looks up to the moon, as she presses a hand into her cheek. "The schools were targeted due to the RLF seeing the young pilots as traitors who looked away from their fellow refugees, so they were targeted as a diversion to separate the forces of the UN. That is why, I believe he might have told you a half truth."

"I… I see…"

… Then, how was he inflicted with such grievous scars? Why was he forced to lie? I thought you… had been serious… No, he was! Those expressions did not betray truthfulness, thus, what does this mean? Takeru is being forced to not reveal the source of those scars, he said it was a military secret that day. However, he didn't seem to be lying back when he told me of how was he inflicted those scars, nor at the CCSE, that night after those soldiers ambushed us.

"1st Lt, is it truly impossible that Takeru could have sustained such scars in the Incident?"

"Yes, I am certain of this. I don't know if we should pry into his life, but I can confirm such scars as the ones you describe would not come from the incident. If Shirogane had found himself at the mercy of the terrorists for long enough to leave so large a gash on chest, he

would have been, well, killed by that point," she affirms with a nod and a heavy sigh, erosion coming to both features and posture, finally relenting a shiver to the dancing breeze around us. "The only thing I can think of is…" she grasps her chin, closes her eyes, and hums softly, "no, nothing."

To see her deflect the matter in such hurry, something she cannot disclose is what she was pondering at the moment. The only way to gain injuries to leave such scars… The BETA would have killed him, the terrorists could have clearly struck his head instead of his chest if he was left at their mercy. I haven't been inside a tank but I doubt they sway like a TSF does, so he couldn't have…. A moment, a TSF?

I gulp, my brows tensing downwards as the coldness pikes at my nape, as my breathing becomes a hostage to the pressure in my stomach. Was he… made to pilot? Perhaps, without a suit? Or, maybe, did he do so without permission? In the anger of losing whoever that woman was… in that same adusted impulse he showed in our bout this morning…

"Well, I believe we shouldn't pursue this matter," Takamura asserts, sending a hand to her hair which dances in the air, basking in the moonlight. "Whatever reason he had for covering it up, we shouldn't pry into it."

"However, it is odd. Why would he lie regarding them? Even more, linking them to the attack…" Why is my chest hurting? Because he lied to me? Of course, but that's not all. Why was he hurt in such a way? Why did he… Well, I was horrible with him back then, and have continued to act poorly around Takeru to this very day. Perhaps, I wasn't worth his trust, perhaps he simply tried to appease me and Sakaki with a half truth during the CCSE to prevent silence from festering doubt in our hearts. Yet, this is strange. What is the need to hide the origin of such scars?

"I agree it is odd, but I am sure he must have his reasons. Surely you have had a talk with him regarding his experiences. It is clear

Shirogane is burdened by what lies in his past," she whispers as she looks down, holding one of her elbows, walking about the track field.

"… Well, that is true."

"Let's not dredge up this matter. It would only make him hurt more, considering all that the cadet is shouldering at the moment. Well, in any case, would you like to hear of my experiences during that day?"

"Oh, yes. Please do, 1st Lieutenant."

"Ahem… Takamura will suffice, Mitsurugi."

"Truly?"

"Yes, please do not be so stiff. Well then, I'll try to avoid the confidential details as I go, would that be alright?"

"Of course. Thanks again for indulging me," I give her a small bow, she waves and says I shouldn't worry.

For now, I'll let this rest. However, I suppose I should tell Shion and Mion about them. For all I know, they might be a clue to his past. That's right… Perhaps Takeru doesn't even know from where they come from, considering he woke up without any memories. Of course, saying he knows not how was he inflicted such injuries would sound quite suspicious. Then, with all the more reason, I should ask Tsukuyomi to look into this. In that way, I could help him to finally lift one of the mysteries that are veiling his past.

And in any case, I wish to tell him that he… can confide in me, that I do regret my actions and words… and that I would be more elated than any expression I could use to regain his trust, to… perhaps, maybe, be worthy of sharing that closeness, the fellowship he had with who bestowed upon him the Minaru Kamui. I am certain… Mother would approve, that she would desire me to aid Takeru. And I… and I will act as to not dishonor my lineage any longer. After all, I do know how it feels to lose those who you held dearest in your

heart. I at least still have Tsukuyomi, and I suppose I can visit the park now that I know it is still standing… but what of him?

However, small steps. For now, I'll focus on learning all I can from Takamura's experiences. And I also must remain composed, to not let my guilt rush my hand, to not fall to… those odd visions again.

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*A/N: Thank you all for the responses! Really, they helped a lot.*

*For now, I'll keep at it in smaller doses like this one, limiting myself to one, maybe two points of view per chapter. Flashbacks and the like will go to their separate stories, unless they're required and short, so I hope the small thoughts in italics can work as hints towards the conflict in emotions. As for the stuff that will be cut off, it will be eventually coming even if most things are small, world-building stories or background details on certain characters. I do feel like fleshing out the past bits, it works out better for me in that way even if it can cause issues like those in chapters 69 and 87.*

*Regarding the claims of plagiarism, Provenance was an inspiration to give me the itch to see how a possible story with Takeru being paired with Yuuhi, the real one, would work. So I guess some similarities were bound to happen. As for this Luv and Hate story, I am afraid to say I am unable to read it. I can't imagine its main character, Captain Steele, as anything other than Estelle from Trails in the Sky because my brain is very dumb and it ruins the story as I can't stop hearing 'WE'RE GOOD TO GO!" whenever the captain is supposed to be talking. I've heard much praise for the story in some Discord servers, but from what I gather the way in which it handles Yuuko's daughter is nothing like what I have planned for my white bnnuy.*

*And since we're on topic, I know the last bits of Yuuko's possessive strike towards Keru come off as odd. For now, I'll keep on trying my best to make it less jarring with as little flashbacks as necessary. In time, I'll finish the final rewrite and Takeru's interactions with Yuuko will hopefully hint at this better, even without needing to read BLO. I*

*admit it will come across as OOC, Yuuko would never let her feelings get in the way of her work in canon and I know that.*

*There might be a few more slow chapters like this one but after the current arc ends, all that's left is gas. Once the volcano erupts, there won't be as many slow breaks, I hope, even if no hard mecha action is in every chapter. If my estimations on my current drafts are correct, I'm more or less done with 75% of the story of this saga once the Komoro arc ends. Updates might slow down while I try and write Yuuko in a better way, but I do plan to stick to my idea of finishing this saga in this year or shortly after.*

*Anyways, this has been a large enough wall of text. Thanks for reading, and again thanks for the honesty. Keep staying safe.*

*Zuoriel*

# Jester's Dagger

*Chapter 90:*

**Jester's Dagger**

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*On a stormy night of January, 1999.*

*(In the hallways of Hibiya Camp.)*

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Where in another world an ample expansion laid bare to the elements, a fortification now stands in the night. A reinforcement, a sign of might to those who surround and squirm about the two palaces of Tokyo. The newly designed edification shines under the light of erratic thunders and the constant curtain of heavy rain, perhaps contrasting against the olden atmosphere of the palace grounds, the frail gardens which endure the bombardment of hail Mother Nature delivers in the eye of this storm. Through the coldness of this winter downpour the place remains indifferent, however. In grand part due to the adusted slam of a pair of eyes which sent sticky sweat down to blemish most polished uniforms, an odd tincture swirling within the stomachs of what few crossed her path at the moment.

And yet, little do her contorted features against the small smile that remains chuckling as if frolicking over a field of flowers. With a single finger he tips his hat, still forwarding the amicable gesture. "Please, Amato-sama. This humble worker does not deserve such tension from your delectable features."

"If you remain jesting, these folders shan't be departing to my office, Yoroi," she warns without lifting her eyes from his for a second, expression and posture frozen in an upward tilt, almost as if endowing a light veil of hoarfrost.

The incoming hail from the Red Lightning does not thaw the facade which remains smiling, not even a random thunders can elicit a flinch from the agent. "Hahaha, always such a cruel mistress. However," the finger which on his hat rested now limply falls to his chin, which also falls to hide eyes that regress as if facing the aggressive rain, "my warning is no jest. The supply lines are in jeopardy as it is, and I'm merely…" again, the smiles raises, "passing the tip to your ears."

"Hmph… Quite forthcoming with demands, aren't you?" She asserts, the voice imitating the rapid descent of raindrops onto the windows, the waterfalls marked upon the glass. Eyes blazing, aiming to pierce the storm as a lighthouse would, she takes a step forward while crushing, choking the small plush toy the agent had insisted she took. "What has you casting such defamation onto my person, I wonder?"

"It is no insult, I'm afraid," he relents a sigh, the small cold cloud leaving his mouth clogs against a window, fogging the shape of the castle in the distance. "The delivery of supplies has not been received, not the ones you sent. The shelters near the northern defenses are making do with low ranked synth food, and the tension is as harsh as this storm that has been raging for quite a while." Looking back, another smiles raises as he again fiddles with his hat. "Certainly you would see what I mean, being shoved within the buildings with little to do but to endure the rain or to withstand it in tents is hastening the downfall of the citizens' mood."

"… And yet, you conveniently are not aware of the method in which the cargo was supposedly diverted from its intended destination," she comments, a narrowed and venomous glare flowing towards Yoroi.

"Well, is there anything you'd be wishing to share? Perhaps, with the right tip I could-"

A thunder blasts in the sky, loud enough for the shiver to propel veins to spike towards the skin, spines to ring away like a xylophone. Yet the motive behind the flinch of the agent is not the lightning up

above nor the one in front. It was instead the faint rustle, the minute step that behind him echoes along the orchestra of nature, the shuffling of a shadowy silhouette in the nearby window. And the raking in his nape, the instinct which forebodes danger, that had always kept Yoroi safe thus far in his rather dicey line of work.

With a noticeable gulp, he rearranges his suit, clears his throat, dispels the cloak of cold that had enveloped him like a twister. "If you'd allow, there is little reason for you to doubt my sources. There are certain sectors that will only grow more displeased if the situation is left unchecked, and the liberties the IRG has taken are only invigorating such concerns."

"Duly noted," she answers, facing away, lips still cascading down, posture as gallant as the samurai statue near the outpost that defies the rain. "Yet you are coming to the wrong location if you aim to solve those issues. If you're recommending me to clash with the Saionji and Ikaruga fellowships, allow me to inform you that such a course of action is not in my plans."

"Hahaha, perish the thought," he says, raising both hands as the shoulders compact. "On the contrary, my suggestion aims for the opposite. Do not forget," he again tips his hat, lips shrinking as he gazes out the window, to the shrouded lightning of the castle, "we are walking a treacherous tightrope, and the minimal unbalance will cause a domino effect. Sharing words is all I can do, so I hope my services prove useful to you, Amato-sama."

Both gazes cross, both lightless expansions scanning and piercing under the soft company of raindrops. Not even a faint thread broke through the crack of both gates, so swirling in dark the souls remain, unconnected. A mere nod, a singular prayer, obscured by the storm which rages on since a year already. I believe it is quite fair to affirm that despite the lack of words, true ones, both clearly understood in which tile each stands.

"I shall review the intel, and act in consequence. Against whoever it was that dared to divert the supplies of mine House from the

people," she affirms, raising both voice and posture, a slicing stare which could perhaps even cut a brief respite into the raging clouds as she bounces the small dodo plushy the Chief had brought along the folders.

So Yoroi relents a small smile, a faint nod. "That will be much appreciated, I assure you. Well then, while I'd love to remain in your gracious presence, I have places to be. Until next time," tipping his hat, he slowly turns away and departs with careful, methodical steps.

As if he were dodging large pools of water, walking against the storming winds. Once he reaches the midway point of the hallway and begins descending the stairs, he heaves a sigh and throws a brief glance upwards from the corner, the rim of his hat. No shadow falls upon the stairs, except from the markings of water on the windows. The shiver on his nape does not decelerate nor do the heartbeats in his neck, so a smile and another nod are extended at the emptiness. Yoroi then resumes and finishes his trip back to the ground floor, the distance between each step gradually enlarging with every repetition of the movement. Fleeing from the judgment of the silence.

Back at the hallway, a slight frown stares at the derpy-eyed dodo as it bounces up into the air, back into the gloved hand. A slight curve in the lips, she shakes her head and gazes outside for a second, basking into the rain, shoulders sagging as she grows closer to observe better, a sigh leaving as she sees the hail not halt its descent. Fingers that rustle the opposite arm, driving away the freezing air that would otherwise sink through even the undershirt, nostrils that wiggle as the smell of humidity trounces the glass, lightning that convulses up above flashing erratically. So Amato shakes her head, rubs her temple while slowly stepping towards the opposite end of the hallway, back to her personal quarters in the edification.

The lateness of the visit, the night shift that was in place meant her steps are only accompanied by the rain and thunders. So with no hurry whatsoever she takes a turn, still bouncing the little dodo as

she eyes the folders, the lack of an emblem or a stamp causes a ripple in her brows. Briefly placing two fingers onto the seal, the squirming noise of faint glue giving away as she opens the folder almost losing to the rain, she brushes the edge of the envelope the peek at what within it lies. The gray and blue marking that on the first page lies can only signal one origin for the reports, a certain gaze of violet flashes through Amato's mind as her complexion tightens, as her steps stop cold, as another thunder roars.

So tilting her gaze to the side without angling her head, raising the folder ever so slightly, she stares for a moment at the one garbed in black that silently stands behind. "What are your thoughts on these papers?"

"At least one half of their content is truthful," he replies with a short nod. "I managed to get Makabe to admit certain things and relent on the pressure a while ago, so Chief Yoroi was not lying about the supplies."

A slight frown sets in momentarily, she heaves a sigh. "Is that so. Yet he should not have known we'd attempt to gain such confirmation," she resumes her walk, now with another set of footsteps trailing hers. "Do you believe his intentions to be aligned with ours, Takeru?"

"Neither the Chief nor the fox indulge in charities, Raiho-san," he comments, low, colder than the rain.

"Sigh… I suppose you are correct," she relents a nod, a hand swimming through the feathery spikes of her lily hair as she gazes to the windows one last time before taking an inner hallway. "Still, perhaps the Chief can still be useful for us even if there are certain disagreements in our visions."

"… Doubt," he counters, shaking his head, brows lowering upon the hints of embers. "I find it very curious that he'd forward this intel now of all times, after the meeting with Makabe was held no less, when we had the trail since a few weeks ago. It's such a clear tripwire it makes me mad he'd even attempt the misdirection, for real," he

grumbles, arms folding. "I think he should still be in the building. Can I go sucker punch him?"

"But of course not."

"… Shoot him?"

"Even less."

"Force feed him Her Highness' cooking?" The folder softly meets his forehead along a groan, he sighs and shrugs.

So Amato shakes her head as she halts her steps and looks back at him, hands on her waist. "Being Her Highness' personal intelligence division does not equal we are allowed to commit war crimes, Takeru."

"Then, should we really let him go without a slight reprimand?" He pushes, taking a step forward, mere centimeters between their gazes.

So she softens hers, shrugging her lips. "We'll take some countermeasures to make it so the Chief doesn't have such easy access to the castle, if he is indeed attempting to misdirect us. Sheathe your blaze, it is better served elsewhere," she states, giving repeated, slow slaps to one of his shoulders with the folder.

"I see… Sorry," he relents, nodding, thus they once more walk side by side. "So, what do we do with the *Shogun's* aberrant attempts at cooking?"

"Wait, you weren't jesting?" She asks, eyes widen as he shakes his head, the poor dodo is once more distorted, it's already derpy eyes popping further beyond its fake fur. "Why did you even allow her to-"

"Releasing stress is good for the mind, and cooking is indeed a relaxing activity that aids said goal. Burning things, too, works to that end even if they're expensive pots, ingredients, and utensils. Your

complexion does look rather drained as of late, so maybe you should give that a try, Raiho-san," he says with a small smile, chuckling.

"… The burning or the cooking?"

"Yes." Again, the folder blocks his sight in a light slap as Amato groans. "Ouch," he deadpans, closing his eyes.

"Siiigh… Why, exactly, did you not stop the Shogun?"

"One, to remind her of her limits," he remarks, somber, looking down, eyes squinting, "to remind her of how useless she is, of her mortality. That she is not only the prim and proper Shogun enforced onto her shoulders," Takeru sighs, short and shallow, as Amato's steps wane and her features contort. "Two, to let her see the difference in the available food we have when compared to her practices back home. If herself, the Shogun, is now using what once were regular ingredients even I could gain access to, then that should serve to let her imagination fill in the gaps as to how severe the food situation is for the recruits and the peasants."

"… All to deliver the importance of the missing supplies during the meeting, huh," she notes, lightly holding her chin. "Decent enough method, Takeru. Did she make any comments on the matter?"

"She asked if the rest of the castle was receiving the same quality while we were alone in the elevator, and by her compact posture and gestures I think *Yuuhi* got the message."

"And your answer was?"

"That comparing her meals to those of anyone below the fudais was the same as equaling duck ragu to canned dog food, a comparison as excessive as employing a shotgun to kill a cockroach."

"… Sometimes I am left bereft of words at the examples you forward," she admits through the unpleasant twist on her lips, even if he spoke the truth and nothing but.

Looking away, pace and tone unchanging, he simply remains walking. "And finally, because she really needed something to block her mind even if only for some minutes."

"I see… How did the meeting proceed?" She inquires, he details the events that transpired some moments ago in the castle.

Their walking slows upon his words, acidic and caustic, and the pressure which once again assails the little bird. With a slow brush of her hair she idles time as he opens the door to her quarters, in slower steps they walk past the living room, so as to not awaken the little one which clings to a blue cloth, and once reaching her studio Amato swiftly enters and flicks the switch, allows cold light to bathe the small room. A few shelves of gallant, polished wood return the glare of the light in pride, the thick books and folders that within their rows stand seem to leave no air in between each other. The slow search makes Amato raise a brow, resign herself to rest the delivered folder to on her desk. Not even the aroma of lilies which the office retains within its four cream white walls can douse the tense lines of displeasure remain engraved in her features as she sits down, and no amount of massaging her temple can tame those traces of embers. The gaze towards a shimmering dark blue vase with flower offerings which once belonged to her own House's magnificent gardens, the lingering of her sight on Kodachi which in a small altar rests does not dispel the clouds either.

Until a pair of hands meet her nape, the thumbs folding the skin, a jolt coursing down her back, sounds stuck in her throat as both eyes part wide. "Mmh… Takeru, stop. I do not require- Ah… Kgh…"

"Come on, now," he whispers, the four fingers scouting the curve towards her chin, the thumb softly circling the lower end of her ear, the cleanly cut end of her hair with the slowness of a calm tide enveloping the shore. "Exhale, loosen your shoulders. It's too late an hour for you to be this tense, Raiho-san."

"I know, however there is- Mmh…" Sight veils itself, arms rest and sink into the desk, a sigh reaches them. "Your report is-"

"We can platicate as I tend to your stiffness, it does you no good to either remain working this late or to go to sleep as is."

"However, I do not-"

"You cannot take care of others, if you do not take care of yourself first, Raiho-san. I believe we both learned to rely on each other when the going gets tough?"

"That is true… However, this is no way for me to receive such a vital report."

"Neither is it while your muscles are strained after a whole day of office work," he affirms, lowering his face, allowing her to feel his breathing on her scalp, the edge of her ear. "You won't welcome even a meager massage? You certainly won't begin to imitate *Her Highness* in her rejection towards proper rest, are you now?"

"… Sigh. Just on my neck, understood?"

"As you wish," he smiles and chuckles, her lips fold inwards.

The first movements are slow, as if carefully passing a thread into a needle. After some moments, the steady pace, the sewing and entwining of motions spreads from the base to the sides, eliciting another drowned groan, a back that fully rests on the seat, a calm tendency to the breathing.

Seeing she was beginning to relax, he leans ever so slightly, keeping his tone low, slow. "If I had to bet," he begins, his palms resting onto her shoulders, the scent of faint lilies reaching his nose from the equally colored hair, "the fox is seeking to edge us to seek the supplies, but not for the obvious motives one would assume."

"Hm? How do you mean?" She inquires, looking up, extending both legs as the fingers tug at the seams of tension, untying it in slow motion.

"One would assume the UN is either warning us of this issue due to being unable to do jack shit about Ikaruga's stance and its ripples in our ranks or because of their concern over the defense lines." His eyes almost close, his fingers stopping when meeting the neck of her undershirt while his thumbs press circles on the sides, yet it is not his breathing what is held hostage of tension. "But if that were the case, Yoroi would have done everything he could to deliver this folder to us before the meeting with Makabe considering he keeps playing dumb about our arrangement. I think he was scouting for intel, as always. Damn dog…"

"Takeru, please do not lose your poise," she repines, taking in a good breath and relaxing, sinking into the seat, his hands. "I do agree, and it is frustrating to be left with no choice but to continue the parade. The question is, why and who is tugging at his strings? Another Regent, perhaps?"

"I doubt it's anyone from our ranks," he ascertains, "I don't see the point of trying to bait us with this intel, knowing *Her Highness* would forbid the correct course of action," he notes, giving a strong kneading as his lips shrug, fuming in understandable dejection at the answer he no longer awaits from who was once his sister. "And if they wanted to sow discord in our fellowship, well…"

"Say no more, that four-eyed traitor does not deserve to reside in your lips," she fumes, frowning for a moment. Upon the diving of a few fingers to the base of the strings, her neck, her features slowly contort in the opposing side, the pendulum swinging in counter-force. "Mmh… Not so hard…"

"Got it, sorry."

"Phew… No, it is fine. Then, the Diet- No, they do not possess the structure, the support to dare antagonize the Shogunate in the current climate."

"I think Sakaki is on our side, to be honest," he says with a slow sigh from his nose, to try and douse the embers.

She groans in silence. "Is that so…" relenting only that, and a half tilt with her neck, demanding treatment and quickly receiving the slow caress which makes her eyelids almost close, lips remaining parted as she sighs in contentedness. The soldiers caretaking is nothing but precise and welcomed, you'd understand. "The UN it is, then."

"The fox, to be precise," he affirms, low and adusted, his own complexion clouding over, and she gives a strong nod in full agreement. Four fingers slowly threading through her nape and up, the blur between the neck and the back of the head as she arches down further into the desk. "I surmise *XO Kouzuki* is aware of the whereabouts of both the supplies, the motives behind the lack of intel, and… I dare say, Kannagi's whereabouts."

The name causes contraction, stillness in Amato, who then takes in a sharp breath. "A test, isn't it? She's gauging which faction of the IRG to collaborate with?"

"I doubt it. Even the concessions are part of her outlined scenario, I bet. The fox is toying with her agreement, with the defense lines and all just to exhaust time. Once neither side can reach a solution on their own, her terms will sound all the more enticing… It's all just a setup for the future she believes is correct, all other opinions be damned," he repines, his hands stopping, breathing as well.

"With the threat of another intervention on the horizon? Is she aiming to have the UN default to another imposition of the Treaty?!"

"… Raiho-san, please do relax. You're growing all tense again," he complains, giving her neck a slight pinch as he kneads and folds and circles. "Don't you always tell *me* not to snap so easily?"

"Mmgh… Sigh. I cannot help it. The Americans abandoned us, allowed the BETA to ravish our land and people all to have an easy to invade hive to raid. To parade themselves as the saviors of the nation, to crush what little pride still remains in our people and- Ah! T-Takeru, don't- Mmh…"

"I won't repeat myself, 1st Lt Amato. You either chill down or I carry you back to the bedroom."

"Wh- Y-You will do no such thing!" His hands stop, a finger lifts her chin into his narrowed and silent stare. Lips purse as her shoulders compact, a shiver running down her spine. Slow inhaling courses through her nose, filling her stomach. "… I shall try not to grow adusted, if it will alleviate your concerns."

"Thanks," slightly lowering, for a moment his lips find her forehead, and causing paralysis to bind her whole being. "So, as I was saying," from the outside towards the chin, down and extending to the shoulders, and back up again, the motion continues as he ignores the eyes that blaze due to the lingering touch he planted a second ago, "I think the fox desires a raid to occur, but not on either proposition. The UN would rather impose another Treaty, perhaps even… seek another alternative."

"Whereas our people would see anything but support as treason," she finishes the trail, closing her eyes, enjoying the pull of the tide which envelopes her nape.

"And yet, without the aid of the US army, we would be allowing both hives to grow to Phase Three, or more if our scouts' intel on the Yokohama Hive is confirmed."

"Then, we simply must surrender to that fox's whims?"

"Raiho-san, you must chill."

"Mmgh… I admit an assault on Yokohama with only Imperial and COSEAN troops is madness, yet I shan't relent on my rejection towards the Americans meddling in our land any further. Her project is hanging from a thread, yet she dares to cut her ties with the Shogunate, to desire to reside in the UN's complex instead when they rather surrender the Empire as they did with Korea. Just what in the Heavens could that woman be thinking?" She fumes as both eyes blaze, as arms and legs cross, composure shining for its

absence. Nothing but smoke and sparks, combustion is left within her towards the scientist, despite how she knows nothing but rumors.

It is all, sadly, a reflection of the scientist's own actions. Of the echoes Shura's Dance left imprinted on her soul, on the cracks that came afterwards upon a certain flat-line.

"… From within the forest, you cannot always see the stars," and yet, he quietly whispers.

"Hm?"

His hands stop, rest on her shoulders, barely grasping.

"It'd be easy to assume every rustling sound, every little shifting shadow around is a predator."

Toying with the tip of the spiky feathers, he looks up and nibbles at his lips.

"The smallest fire can be used as a guide, but it is also a sign that reveals one's position. And who knows what lurks behind the veil, awaiting the first mistake."

"… Do you think as she does, then?" She asks, low, straightening her posture, shaking his hands off her person.

"No, because a swift resolution would be better," he admits, softly resting his fingertips against her nape. When she doesn't move away, when she releases a strong exhalation, he resumes the massage. "I think *Her Highness* and *XO Kouzuki* are very similar, only that one favors intrigue while the other would rather be frontal as a battering ram should she be able to. Neither of them can afford to make a mistake, but they also cannot waste time to deal with those who stalk our steps." Smirking, he again lowers his posture, to whisper to Amato's ear. "And that's where we come into play, right?"

"… What of their STF?"

"Under constant surveillance and suffering appalling losses. I think."

"Do we play into her hand, then?" She asks, looking back.

He smiles, chuckling. "There's no need to feed the mistake. Let's remain vigilant for some more days, let's see if my hunch is correct again."

"Sigh… You say that, yet every time you ascertain something it is usually what ends up happening. You and your odd hunches," she complains, lifting a hand, poking his nose, putting some distance so that she doesn't have to feel the slow feathers that tickle at her, his breath on her ear. "Ahem… Does the whisper tell you to remain in stillness for the moment?"

"Yeah, it's time to observe now. While I believe we both agree with the fox's desire to prevent any… insurgent attitudes from ruining what frail bridges of support we have with the UN, there is no need to make a grand show of our moves. Let's make her seek us once again, and then we can have a talk at large."

"Do you believe that the fox would bend the knee and show herself? That we can trust in her word after the fall?" She asks, arms folding tightly, eyes lightly blazing in ignorant animosity towards the scientist.

So the soldier relents a sigh, sewing slow erosion to the firmness, causing Amato to swallow a soft groan again as her eyelids flutter upon the caretaking. "… No. But I doubt she has any actual support, behind her own exploits and the disturbances within the UN giving both her and us the time to avoid an imposition of the Treaty."

"Then, why not use our new liberties to gain intel on her, to ascertain an agreement?"

"We need to also keep her safe, right?" He affirms, truthful and correct, which causes her to groan and look away. "I believe… she wouldn't try and make business out of this tragedy, that we can leave hints and signs for her to see we share an end goal."

"Is that so?" She asks, low, venomous as her light frown. "What if she doesn't?"

"… If the UN Farces do prove to be all the same rotten apples, then we're gonna have… to make the fox collide against an Iceberg."

Smiling at the calmness, at the lack of dark blazes in his words and movements, she nods his way. "Very well, I can agree to that. So you believe her to be someone we can negotiate with? After Shura's Dance?" She presses on her concern, holding his gaze.

Which does not combusts even if his fingers stop, hands resting upon her skin. "If we manage to arrange a meeting, I believe we could reach a mutually beneficial agreement. After all, if she did not desire to collaborate with the Empire any longer, she would have sold the Fourth Project to the US and fully turned her back onto our woes, supported the notion of the Treaty returning in full force. And as… irritating as the situation is, if we snap first we lose," he admits with a heavy sigh.

"… I suppose," Amato relents, once again straightening her posture yet not fleeing his touch this time. "There is the chance that Yoroi will leak her intentions somewhere else, however. Or, on the contrary, that he could be altering the message she entrusted him to deliver."

"That's why, better to observe and stand at the ready. To see if she truly is… who we believe her to be."

"Point taken," she nods, tilting her head to a side. "Mmh… It also serves to placate Her Highness, and to continue this play of cooperation with the UN for the moment. In time we shall see how the fox plays her cards, if the supposed goodwill Yoroi spoke about actually resides within that woman."

"Still, she did send the message. I rather believe there is more to that than a mere misdirection. So before she places herself or the Project in any danger, or she chooses the wrong allies, we should return the intrigue and make her want to seek us again, for real this time," he notes, finishing the massage and leaving her side, resting his weight and back onto a bookshelf.

"… And if she doesn't?"

"Then… all the more reason to hasten our search of Kannagi. That threat is bound to make the UN relent on their idiotic pressure."

"And if they don't?"

"… Then I hope their STF is proficient at CQC."

"Is there truly no way in which you'll support a diplomatic end to this conundrum, Takeru?"

"Not with the little time we have left… Things will spiral out of control if we don't act now. Everything could fall apart at the smallest spark, after all."

And while Amato relents on his points and worries, thanks him for the massage, and begins to admonish him for once again daring to suggest that he'd carry her off to bed, despite the expanding red below both eyes and shuffling in her lips, she looks away while tracing her neck, the remnants of heat as she bounces the little dodo.

Yet he is not listening, feeling heaviness in his stomach. *"Otherwise, she won't even consider the possibility of speaking with us in person. Using her research to try and facilitate a meeting will backfire if middle men have to deliver the message, it will put her on edge if it's forwarded by the Valkyries. And having that intel leaked would spell doom for her standing in the UN to boot, if we take the risk. Even then, the defensiveness of her posture shows pursuing that line will only make her more paranoid. Instead of openly requesting our*

*support, you're still playing at two coasts. To not force Yuuhi and the Prime Minister to join in your petition for international forces, to keep the UN interested and the US at bay, to prevent the warmongers from ruining everything. Again shouldering everything on your own, exhausting all your lines of play, standing alone and isolated…"*

Breathing hiccups, new charcoal onto the bonfire, blazes that begin to revel.

" *Becoming a target… thanks to whatever you think is your fault, thanks to whatever it is that you're convinced will play out. Thanks to that reticence, to remain playing on two sides, wasting so much time, such a prime board… all for whatever balance you wanna strike. You think you can atone for the fall? You think playing balance will lead you to victory? Even if you again manage to somehow keep the Empire from doing something stupid… you should know the warmongers from Alt V won't stay put."*

Air that rushes in through the impregnable union of teeth, a tense jaw that spurs a localized quake.

" *We've got two bombs with our names on their shells, for fuck's sake. Or you're telling me that's part of your plan, too? To be able to scan how a G-Bomb works, how the G-Elements you cannot obtain affect the environment? To test… your theory on causality, on G-Radiation? In hopes of showing the lack of care the Fifth Project has, how detrimental it is when compared to the results you bring about?"*

And as if seeking the stars in the same forest he described, meeting only the distant, echoing cawing, the minimal rustle behind sight, the twisting shadows and silhouettes of a cyclopean forest, his eyes begin to cross.

" *And yet, all you get are two years… and then, if you don't listen, if I die and that's it this time… All that we could prevent if only… if only you would let us in, if you'd welcome our aid. But you won't even fucking expose yourself nowadays, much less grant a meeting with anyone not in the top spots."*

Swirling shapes, bleeding and weeping gazes, wings of pure fire and colossal waves flash in his mind. A cold bolt could have struck him for the soldier arches his back, his spine cracking at points, his ears hurting, ringing. And that gaze, the adusted and draconian gaze which was once branded in red raises back as the gap between breaths shortens and he pants, as his jaw cracks and closes and opens, hard enough to splinter an ice cube in twain.

" *Damn… Damn it all, Yuuko…"*

"… Takeru?" Hastily leaving her chair, Amato firmly clasps his shoulder, giving him a hard shaking. He flinches, sight refocusing, ankles almost losing balance. Supporting his falling body, wrapping an arm around him, she whispers. "What is it? What has spawned such concern in you?"

"Nothing… It's nothing, for real. I'm-"

"Takeru, what ails you now? Echoes of days past?" He nods into the hold, she slowly runs a hand over his long hair. "It is alright, there's no need to force yourself to be logical all the time. You're our last blade for a reason. Sheathe your wrath for now," she orders, patting his back.

"But… But if we waste any more time-"

"Shh," a finger binds the lips, then lifts the chin into her eyes. "Calm down, there are no dangers here. Come on, just as you told me before. Close your eyes," in imitation, in thankfulness, she begins to run circles on his forehead, joining her hands atop his head, massing it, lowering to the back to tend to the nape, "loosen your breath, fall onto me. Relax."

"… But. But we do have to stay alert, if we-"

"Calm down… There, there. Anger has a proper time and a place to manifest itself, now it is not said moment. We shall remain ever vigilant, correct?" He nods, she swirls a strand of hair onto a finger.

"Then, it is no waste of time. I do concur we need to ascertain her intentions soon however it is not worth such a strong reaction. Let us reserve our energies for when it is time to take to battle, yes?"

"… Yes, Raiho-san," he says, almost sleepy, sinking into the embrace, letting the echoes go.

"So, are we calm and collected again?"

"Ye-Yes, I think."

A hand cups his cheek, fingers press and lightly pull at his eyebags, tracing back onto his nose. Her own eyes squint as she leans closer, filling his view, holding his gaze captive. "Do not believe yourself capable of beguiling me. Would your head be hurting once again?"

"No, I'm fine, really."

"Hmm… Remaining hidden in the audience chamber must have been toilsome for you, at this late an hour. Did Her Highness gave you any issues before departing to bed?"

"Sigh… Yes, I had to force her, too," he admits with a nod. "She also didn't want to sleep, again."

"I see," her fingers trace the rim of his ears, he shivers. "Do not clog your mind with possibilities, there is no need for-"

"There will be," he says, low, eyes again beginning to cross.

She is the one who shivers now, barely able to remain grasping his shoulders. "Are you certain of it?" The soldier looks straight into her eyes, nodding, silent. "I… see… Allow me to handle the planning, you can limit yourself to watching over Her Highness."

"… Raiho-san, please don't hesitate to use me if you need the fire."

"I said, limit yourself to watching over Her Highness. I know you are the Captain-in-Chief, and that your suggestions are usually correct,

however, I shan't place you in… such compromising positions again," she ascertains, lifting her chin as she takes a step back. Perhaps more to herself than to him, a reminder of the power and responsibility she still holds within her palms. "We act in concert, Takeru. I will heed your advice so do not resort to aggression without consulting with me first," he nods, she smiles. "While I do share your feelings towards the UN, let us remain calm as you suggested. If and when we see a threat, then we'll crush its fangs. Until then, do not allow such emotions to make nest within you. However, it is already late and today has been a long day. You may retire to your room."

"… And what of you?" He stares, raising a brow.

"Sigh… I am not planning to remain awake for much longer, neither of us will be up by morning if we dally here. I merely need to review the reports and-"

"Then, I'll help you with that," he ascertains, smiling, trying to raise even a fragment of the cheer of better days.

She holds his gaze, unblinking."I suppose, if it'll aid you clear your mind. Are you truly not feeling in pain?"

"Don't worry, I've got the thing under control."

"For real?" She asks, leaning onto him once more.

"Yes, truly," he smiles, sighing short yet heavy.

She returns the smile, a slow, gentle pat on his shoulder. "Very well, could you write me a report on what transpired during the meeting while I course through the folders?"

"Consider it done."

"Thank you, truly. Oh, right. Do we have the confirmation on the Shogun's schedule for tomorrow?"

"Ah, yes. I left a mail in your inbox with that, and some suggestions for our patrols and the like. I would rather get a stricter perimeter set up, and have the crew from Kitanomaru require a pass to enter the castle-"

"We do not possess the influence for such arrangement… but I shall note the idea down. However, let us not go overboard again with our reviewing lest we're still up when Fujikagi awakens," she relents a sigh, rolling her shoulders as she returns to her desk. He chuckles for a moment, procuring his usual notebook from the shelve, nodding in agreement.

And for a moment, after a passing jest or two while he readies some coffee for Amato, both begin to focus on the papers at hand. A few fleeting questions are exchanged, scribbling as the sole noise contesting the tickling of the clock. And yet, despite the pleasant quietness which spurs stable breathing in Amato he finds himself gripping at the pen, licking and traversing the back of his teeth time and again. Thinking about a violet gaze, of the current board he and the scientist face from their, oh, different positions.

" *Sigh… What is it with me and falling for strong women that refuse to let their inner feelings out? It's been four times already… Heh, I never learn, do I? I guess I can only hope the ripples don't screw me over as hard this time… and that you don't choose to preemptively become the Holy Mother this time around."*

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*December 5th, 2001. Around 7 PM.*

*(Takeru's Office.)*

**[Takeru]**

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" *December 2nd, 2001.*

*Dear Takeru Shirogane-sama.*

*I hope it is you who is reading these words and not another, for this letter to have reached your hands safely.*

*I am convinced you might be confused, perplexed perhaps, after receiving this item and seeing the emblems engraved on its envelope. However, please banish all disquiet in you. I am not your enemy, for real. This letter is not a threat of aggression but an endeavor to restore a connection that I thought lost long ago, axed by the cruelty of fate.*

*I have been made aware that the Royal Guards stationed at Yokohama have treated you with undeserved pungency ever since you arrived back to this Empire of ours. I also know that it seems you have lost parts of your memories, and so you might not remember the days we spent together. Due to this, I know it might be difficult for you to favorably welcome these following words, however please know that this is no deception and that I have no wishes to bring harm to your person.*

*You and me used to be close, almost like family. It is true our relation wasn't always pleasant, yet my memories of you are assuredly, overwhelmingly precious. Despite your humble origins, I am more than proud to say that you considered me one of your closest fellows at one point. I would be hoping, and more elated than any words could properly express, to regain that bond we used to share.*

*I understand that, in light of the events that have transpired since your return, you might be inclined to dismiss these words as nothing but falsehood. Therefore, allow me to prove to you now that I am no trickster, that I truly was someone you confided in, lived side by side with before we thought you gone. Please remain composed, I know that you might grow fearful but rest assured, I hold no ill will towards you.*

*You have a soft spot for both mackerel and natto rolls.*

*You usually tend to oversleep if left to your own devices.*

*You dislike being forced to employ formal speech much, usually reverting to your more lax manner of being once you grow either exhausted or famished.*

*You also have a propensity to delve into your inner thoughts often, ignoring all around you whenever that happens.*

*You like going stargazing when you have the time, though you often used to fall asleep as you were doing so.*

*You also tend to employ rather eccentric words every so often, making some of our interactions rather wack.*

*There's also your propensity to begin singing as you pilot, which I admit is legit infuriating at times.*

*And above all, you have a fiery fury lurking within you, manifesting it when you see others being treated unfairly for baseless motives. Driving you to crush the fangs of whoever it is that's acting out of line, at times allowing you to illuminate the enthralling darkness that were those so chaotic days we spent side by side.*

*I know that by now you might be rightfully fearful, to have a stranger possessing such knowledge about you. Yet, please chill down and continue reading. I know not what ails your heart, but please believe me when I say that I was, and still am, someone you can place your trust in. I know all of this because we knew each other well before ruin befell you, before you suffered that regretful accident that teared you from our side. I cannot apologize enough for not having been by you when that happened, whatever it is that occurred, and during all these years you were abroad and alone, for not looking for you and so easily assuming you were dead. From the bottom of my heart of hearts, I implore you to bequeath onto me your forgiveness, Takeru.*

*I understand if you're reticent about recalling events that bring only pain to you. If you wish to move on and lead a new life, then do so with my blessing. Know that, if you ever require anything, I shall do all I can to aid you.*

*However, if there's a part of you that would desire to learn of who you were, even if only to dispel the uncertainty of your records, please do contact me. I cannot fathom how hard it must be for you to accept this offer with open hands, to learn that you once were close to a Royal Guard such as myself. Know that there are no conditions tied to my offer, I wish only happiness for you.*

*If you would desire my aid to learn of what I know of your past, all you need to do is contact me. I shall arrange a visit to your base as soon as I'm able.*

*And, were your answer be negative, then I wish you a fruitful life from now on in whichever path you decide to lead. To have learned that you yet live is enough reason to celebrate.*

*For if your future is smiling, then that is enough to appease me.*

*I wish to at least hear back from you once, even if only to say our farewell. While I do not know when will this letter reach you, I shall say so now in case you receive it at a latter date or if you would choose not to reply back.*

*I wish you a happy birthday, Takeru. May you spend that day free of any worries, along those you consider your current fellows.*

*Well then, I hope this letter brought you some measure of comfort. To reiterate, there are no conditions tied to my aid. All I would be wishing is to merely have the chance to speak with you once more, one last time. I shall be anxiously awaiting your reply, however, if it is painful, I shall understand if you wish to dismiss this letter altogether as nothing but a mistake.*

*Until the day when we can meet again comes, I wish the tailwind's blessings to remain on your side.*

*An old acquaintance of yours*

*Raiho Amato"*

Resting the letter on the desk, sighing as I put both hands behind my head and look up, I can't help but to smile. Guess I won the linguistic war in the end, to have you employ my odd words. The strokes denoting certainty in the writing, she didn't doubt or catch herself in her wording even once. The paper shows no ruggedness, so she didn't have to erase and reword anything. The phrases regarding our 'relation' being more marked, as if she had pressed the tip of her pen a bit more into the paper, the baton in them was more than obvious. As frontal as a freight train, striking like lightning.

"… Though, if she chose to be so direct, she might have had an argument with Yuuhi about stuff after I lost my shit during the call. And with Maya, too."

I doubt those two are in good terms now, considering all that happened before and the assumption Raiho came to back then. Going by my interactions with the Pickles, they do… resemble my friends, the little girls I fooled around before. Sure, they now walk with more of an oomph to their stride since they're guards… and I did scream at 'em quite a lot while I was their Leader, too. But they're worried for real, the small glimmer in their eyes is still there unlike our last months together before, that silly and easy to target string with which to pull at their heart. Shion is still as easy to upset as always and poor Mion has to keep acting as a deterrent.

"Heh, the more things change, the more everything stays the same. At least they're able to display such simplicity, even if only around me." A slow shiver runs down my head, lips purse as I scratch an ear. The sterile office scent is replaced by humid grass, the beating of rain on my body. The lightless, hawkish gazes they threw at me during the CCSE, the invasion. "Then again, that menacing side is still in 'em both. Same for Mana."

… Hmm. Going by how stuff looked today…

The Tsukuyomis are wanting to see if I recall everything or not, and I need to make sure they don't get too close while pointing them in the right track. If there is someone I can trust in that's Mana, but the

Pickles might want to act more quickly than we can afford. Also, being an ass to them ain't nice. Sigh… Making puns could work, I guess? Also, I still need them to be careful not to let Maya in on me remembering stuff yet.

"… Easier said than done, though. I know there's no bugs in this office but…" The second Yuuko notices I'm keeping things from her, she won't let me out of the office until she knows every last drop of intel I can give. And in my current condition, that is extremely dangerous for her more than anyone else.

Slouching from the seat to grab some water, drinking as I pace in circles over the narrow space, my eyes remain fixed at an invisible target while I go through the motions of walking, placing the right folders in place, turning off the PC and the like.

Raiho is not the type to favor indirect methods, though. I assume Tsuhi suggested a letter to her, if she ended up arguing with either Yuuhi or Maya, or both. Not knowing what's going on in the palace is a great handicap to play with… I'd like to believe Tsuhi is still my friend, but time can erode anything. I might be nothing but a ghost of the past to them… and Raiho might be testing whether I am truly me or a faker, I can't be so lazy as to assume they entirely believe I am really me through my freak out during the call. Yuuko did seem honest about how Yuuhi is wanting to see me again… but after all that happened, after these tow years, she might not be who I remember her as.

… And even if she is, it ain't fair to give her any hopes considering what may come ahead. My clock is tickling, and this time no bullshit quantum miracle will come to my aid. After all, shooting stars are fated to burn down anyways.

Sitting down again, picking up and twirling a pen in my grasp, I tap my lips with it, looking up, groaning and mulling. In a way, their struggles are very similar to mine. They might want 'Takeru' but not 'the Leader' to return, just how I prefer 'Yuuko and Yuuhi' over 'the XO and Her Highness'.

… And if that wasn't enough, I also gotta deal with Meiya now. She looked conflicted, wanting to make amends… but that might be her own harsh reprimands over keeping the peace in the squad. And she's the last person I want to get closer to me at the time.

Nibbling at my lips, I sigh from my nose as a bull. "No, even if she isn't close, those feelings already reside in her. There's only one thing left to do… and if that fails too, then it's light's out again. Siiigh… Come on, let's get on with it," blinking fast, rubbing my eyes slowly, I refocus on the still empty paper, starting to craft a report.

Luckily for me, the punishment ended up working more to my favor than to my detriment. Most of the small scale prototypes for the weapons are done, those reports are already done and forwarded to Yuuko in case she wants to find something wrong in them again, and everything else is progressing well. Shame the Shin Kagerou ain't done yet to go for a run…

A beeping breaks my concentration, ruins a stroke in a kanji. Grumbling as I erase the mistaken word and tap at the comms, I shake my head and heave a sigh.

"Shirogane here."

" *Takeru*, are you already done with your prior tasks?" The XO asks from the other side, in the same hurried stride but with less of an edge to the wordings. Also, still trying to trip me with using my name, huh.

"Almost, yeah. Do you want to start the tuning?"

"If possible, yes. Come over to the office, you also need a briefing on the meeting with the retinue from Daikuuji Corp," she orders, before hastily cutting the call.

"Sigh… As bossy as always, huh. Heh, well, at least she's still holding up alright. Anyways, where was I? Hmm…" I grab the

papers, giving them a once over, a small smile and a nod come naturally as I finish. "Yeah, good enough. Let's be on my way."

Closing my office and checking the hour, I beeline to the elevator. Going down, back to Hangar 90, I salute the MP guarding the sliding door, notifying my business to hand over some docs to the crew within.

"Again? Man, I sure don't envy your situation, Shirogane," one comments as he slides an ID card on the reader.

"Heh, it's not that big of a deal, really. Nice experience to flaunt on my resume is always nice to have," I note with a smile.

"Wish I could be that positive," the other sighs, shrugging. "Still, be careful in there, kid," she warns, giving me a full, frontal stare. "There is a detachment from the IRG on some checkups or something, and-
"

"Yeah, I know. They sent me to give them the reports."

Both of 'em gape, tilted harder than Meiya and Yuuhi when reading cooking books, before slamming them onto the floor and trying to play it be ear.

"Eh?! W-Wait, are you serious?"

"Yeah, for real. You know, a test of character during my punishment and all that jazz. *XO Kouzuki* knows no chill, so make sure you don't ever upset her. Been there, doing that, not a nice thing to deal with," I nod, arms folding.

They share a look before sighing and nodding, signaling the approval for me to go into the place. "Be on your guard, kid. We… will have to notify anything that transpires here directly to the XO, after all."

"It's cool, thanks," I salute them, giving a smile. "I've no plans to ruin your evening." With one final nod shared between us, I walk into the silent hangar.

… Still, I can't get used to walk in this super big place. The echo of my footsteps on the bare metal sound so tiny, the whispers and clanking of tools, the distant beeps stretched in the echo of the place. Through the drums and crates I walk, saluting the mechanics that greet me as I do, a few gazes lingering on me as the smell of oil and plastic, the metallic taste which again clogs my lips.

Easy enough it is to locate my target, the lone Takemikazuchi with wires coming out from within its plating.

And a petite shape arguing with our mechanics, twirling a little wrench in her hand. Yep, that's her alright. Hmm… Simply approaching them is a bad idea, she might freak out if I suddenly appear outta nowhere. Time to see if I can pull it off again.

Slowly sink the heels, let the rest of the step follow in quietness. Make the steps shorter, faster. Watch their eyes, where they look, thread the shadows… look for the point most apt to approach.

…

Circling around the area, amidst crates, cables, and who knows that else, now I'm approaching the guards from behind, away from the eyes of the UN crew. Or most of them, anyways. Still, how do I break the ice? The talk with the Chief seems to be about to end, they're again resuming their focus on their laptops and the scans they're doing on the Type-00C.

Now that I think about it, this too is nothing but another ripple. Did Yuuko did this purposefully, trying to have me regain memories of the guard? Maybe, but I doubt she'd have the foresight to account for what stuff I would have recalled if she had had me pilot this thing.

Looking up at it, despite the UN coloring, brings aching to my stomach. Why was I so patient back then? Those years truly are a blank, a dark void of nothingness. I guess love is truly blind…

"Sigh… Not now, focus, dammit." Inhaling sharply, pinching my nose, I step forward towards the IRG's mechanics, leaving the comfort of my hiding.

One of them turns around, posture compacting into solid stone. "Excuse me, sir. We are currently in the midst of… Huh?"

"Greetings. I've come with orders to leave a folder in the hands of the Chief of your crew, Mst Sgt Kazama, I believe? Could you kindly allow me to hand her the papers in person?"

"Eh? Ah, yes… Excuse me, your name would be?"

"Takeru Shirogane, it's a pleasure."

"… Shirogane?"

"Yes, I am Shirogane. I said that just now," I nod, giving a small bow and a smile.

Which makes Onimura's eyes widen a bit, tilted again. "Wait, but… but I… but you're…"

"Corporal Onimura, whatever is the matter?" Chief Kazama calls in her usual delayed and quiet tone, despite the embers that within it lurk as she paces towards us. Still garbed in the pristine white of her Tozama dress, she approaches with slow steps and crossing brows. "What has you platicating with UN personnel?"

"My apologies, ma'am. I was merely… I mean…"

"Excuse me, Mst Sgt," I step forward, giving another smile and a bow, to spare Onimura the scolding. "I was tasked with delivering this report to your hands."

"… What?" Her eyes widen too, blinking fast. "Who… are you supposed to be?"

"Cadet Takeru Shirogane, ma'am. It's a pleasure."

"Are you mocking me?" She throws, taking a step forward.

"No, why would I?" I remain smiling at the quiet kindling, the fixation of the stare that's ready to slay, to smack me with the wrench. "Sincerity is a virtue, after all."

"Huh?" The tide subsides, draining the tension away from the shores of her posture and expression. "Excuse me, you… You said you were…"

"Takeru Shirogane, ma'am. Nothing but a humble shadow working here."

"Shiro… gane? What- How-"

"You are Chief Kazama, correct?" I ask, smiling. She nods, still keeping a closed posture. "I do get why you'd react like this, but please don't worry. I'm not an enemy or anything, there's no need to crush my fangs."

"Eh? Ah, I see… Ahem. Why have you come to our presence?"

"As I was saying, I came here with a report for your hands, ma'am," I give a minute bow as I raise the folder, the letter underneath it. "All I was told is, it is tied to some modifications to this one Type-00C."

Slowly grasping the folder, her lips shrug. When taking both envelopes, a few fingers run about on the letter, striking eyes once more seek mine. "And this… envelope is meant to explain such matters?"

"Indeed, that's what I was told. It would seem it is time for action and not words, and this Takemikazuchi looks like it's gonna be put to quite the strain."

"Oh, is that what you believe?" She asks, a hand bringing the folder to her person, keeping the letter between it and her dress. The noticeable gulp, the small silence that extends, the unblinking stare and squirm of her lips seems to prolong its welcome, until she coughs softly. "Would there be any pressing matters behind this rather… unceremonious way to deliver the papers?"

"Maybe, I don't really know, being a middle man," I shrug and chuckle, before tapping my brows. "But things do look rather tense, one has to wonder where our burnt and feeble present is heading towards at times. Though, in my case it's more due to the rather sticky situation I'm facing more than anything… In any case, please do read the papers at your earliest convenience, ma'am," I say, giving a salute.

She returns it, holding my gaze. "So I will. If you'd allow an inquiry, why would you be in a rather compromising situation?"

"What? You haven't heard anything?"

"No, I do not pay much attention to gossip myself, much less when work is on the timetable."

"Sigh…" I scratch an ear, shrugging my lips. That does sound like you, Chief. "Well, I'm fulfilling special duties due to some prior misses on my end, you could say. Between that and my own cadet course, things are rather hectic for me. But still, I hope all this effort is worth it in the end, if I get to see our future smiling again."

"… Eh?" Again tilted, she gapes for a sec. Before twitching and resetting her poker face, despite the glimmer in her eyes as she takes a step forward, giving an enhanced grip onto the folders. "Would you… have any other words for us?"

"No, that was all I was told. The details are in the papers I brought you. Now then," I again stand in attention, giving a salute, "best of luck in your endeavors, Chief Kazama. May a glimmer of hope shine through in whatever is keeping this Takemikazuchi here."

She returns the gesture, still staring firmly. "That I plan to make a reality. This fallen star will leave the shadows to reclaim our blue skies… soon?"

"I sure hope, if it stops them from being filled with blue fire instead. In any case, I shall be taking my leave. See you later, Chief."

I turn and wave at her, she nods back with a small smile. Another wave I give to Onimura, who remains tilted as he nods, before the Chief slaps him with the folder to send him back to work. Ahaha… As harsh as always…

She then looks back, holding my gaze, giving a wider smile as she safeguards the folder and the letter under an arm while returning a stoic nod. Another nod towards her, I turn and walk towards the end of the hangar. Thankfully, it seems she understood my hints. If she wasn't in the known, Mana might have been overburdened and forgot to relay the news to the Chief. Or she didn't think we'd meet, is all. Anyways, with that letter delivered there is only-

**BEEP! BEEP!**

"Sigh… Hello, Shirogane he-"

"Where are you? I called for you half an hour ago."

" *Vice Commander*, I was delivering the papers you tasked me to. I'm already on the way to the elevator," I whisper back, shrinking my shape as I take a line of walking that'll keep me away from the mechanics, even if it's a detour from going straight to the exit.

"Oh, really?" I can hear her begin to spin as she lets some air out. Siiigh…

"Yes, I'm on the way. Don't feel so lonely, honey. It's only a few minutes before I get back there," I chuckle, avoiding the crates and people.

"You better," she threatens, light embers blooming from the furnace. "If you're not here in ten minutes, I'm sending Yashiro after you."

"Hey, let Kasumi rest. I'm already exiting the hangar, for real. Just wait a while."

"Hmm… Fine, I'll be waiting, *Takeru,* " and again, she cuts the call with that.

Mmgh… Guess I better hurry before she forces Kasumi to look for me. Really, it's just a few minutes. And the reports are already in her inbox, too. Someone sure is being pushy today… I wonder if she noticed anything? No, she would have inquired about it on the call if that were the case. Maybe she's just in a rush? I mean, yeah, Yuuko must be barely containing herself from doing another tuning on her own. The fact she called instead of sending Kasumi without warning is proof of that.

Ahaha… Well, I suppose I can indulge her curiosity on how the 00 Unit works today, too. So long as she doesn't start pressuring me again, that is. As stupid as it is to hope for it, I very much prefer that shiny and curious gaze on you even if it comes with more work.

Jogging the remaining of the distance, I reach the gate, notify my exit, salute the guards and share a joke or two, and with the excuse of being called to the end of my shift, I run to the elevator just in case. Yuuko does have a short fuse whenever results and testings are involved, more than usual.

# To Be or Not To Be

*Chapter 91:*

**T o Be or Not To Be**

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*Some moments later.*

*(B19F, near the Cylinder's Room.)*

**[Takeru]**

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Groaning as I roll my shoulders a few times, I let out a yawn while waiting for a door to unlock itself. Red turns to green, a gentle chimes beeps and the door slides open. Resuming my walk towards the office, slowing down a bit, I idle a finger on my fringe.

I wonder how the tuning will go now. Imagine if Binocchio is one of the few folktales we have available here, Sumika might react very badly to that. Kasumi too, for all I know. Still, so long as she reacts somehow, that's enough for me. If Yu- *XO Kouzuki* sees no acceptable progress, she might try and force me to go back home. As things stand, even if somehow manage to not spur any ripples while going back there, and despite knowing there's little else to do if we cannot successfully heal Sumika's heart, as I am now I'm not certain if I can make it ba-

The sound of echoing footsteps in the distance reaches my ears, snapping me out of dreamland. The shape I see coming towards me is one I didn't expect to see. Rushing straight, cutting the air, I gulp and tense my abs to receive the incoming landing. She grabs onto my arm like a metal drawn to a magnet, falling into my hold with all of her weight.

"H-Hey… Good evening, Sumika," I whisper while patting 00's head, but as usual she doesn't-

"Takeru-chan."

"Huh? Sumika, did you just-"

"Takeru-chan… Takeru-chan… Good evening," she then nods, eyelids fluttering like clumsy butterflies running away from mischievous kitties, slumping her face onto my arm.

And she stays like that… simply leaning on me, using me as a pillow as if planning to sleep on her feet. I stand there, petting her head. She isn't freaking out, what happened here?

"Sigh… Good evening, Takeru-san."

"Oh, hey Kasumi. Say, what's up with Sumika?"

"I don't know," Kasumi shrugs as she comes closer, staring at Sumika. "She was acting as usual while me and the Professor were mentioning the names of the books we had arranged for you to read her, when all of a sudden she got up and dashed out of the room just a moment ago. Is she stable?"

"Yeah, no idea why. She didn't progress at all today?"

"No, the Professor seems a bit mad that it's acting as a computer," Kasumi moves her bunny ears as she slumps a bit, then tries to talk to Sumika but she doesn't acknowledge her. "Sigh… Well, should we go back to her room?"

"Yeah, let's. Come on, Sumika," I whisper, taking a slow first step, "let's go read some books. You know, as we always did by night when we were little?"

One step, she holds me tighter.

Two steps, she groans, her features tighten.

Three, four, she starts to drag her feet, to follow along.

Despite not letting my arm go, Sumika returns to the usual blank, silent state as we walk. Not reacting to Kasumi's attempts at conversation nor to my small jokes, at least it isn't showing signs of anger.

"Um, Takeru-san?"

"What's up?"

"… Are you feeling well?" Kasumi asks, a bit down.

"Yeah? Why, did *XO Kouzuki* ask you to monitor me or something?"

"No, that is not the case… but you seem to be on your guard against the Professor," she notes, flapping her bunny ears, holding my gaze without blinking.

"What, you wanna explain to her the mess of that inner forest?" I ask, raising a brow, she flinches and looks away. "It can't be helped, is all."

"Is that so," she says, almost without energy, like a fan disconnected from the powerline as it slowly regains stillness. "However, your mind seems rather tired, foggy. Are you truly feeling okay?"

"Yes, don't worry. Also, don't try and look into my mind, Kasumi." Things are already dangerous as is, imagine what would happen if she starts seeing some of that stuff. Same for the time I was in the IRG, it might… make her hate my guts, just as she was when I ran away.

"I am your friend," she insists, getting closer. "I would never treat you so coldly," a groan, a pout, a few consecutive flaps of the ears, she stares as if ready to munch at the air. "Takeru-san, I wouldn't bite you… I'm not a real bunny."

"Ahaha… But for real, stop reading my mind."

"Huh? Ah… S-Sorry, I didn't mean to."

"You didn't notice?" She shakes her head, looking down. "Well, just try not to stare into my thoughts too much, okay?"

"Yes, I will try. But… Takeru-san, why was I rabbit in your mind?"

"I mean, you do look like a bunny…"

"Then, um, who was the white bunny? Do you remember now?"

…

Stopping my steps, turning to face her and petting her head, a bit stronger than usual, simply holding her stare hurts, feeling the lingering tingle being my head circling around like a small ant looking for a leaf to pluck.

"Kasumi, please keep that to yourself."

"Why?"

"Will you do that for me, please?"

"But… But why would you-"

A sudden vicegrip on my arm, huffed groans as if trying to lift an iron beam. "No… No… Don't take him from me…"

"S-Sumika, it's okay," I embrace her, bringing her face to my chest, resting my chin on her hair while petting her back. "It's okay, I'm here… Not going anywhere."

"No, don't leave me… No…" she whispers, tugging at my uniform, squirming her face into it, shivering like an abandoned animal at the mercy of the elements.

Kasumi also begins to extend some kindness towards the 00 Unit, it gradually comes back to stability despite it now not wanting to

release me at all. So I sigh and resume my walk as is, Kasumi giving a bow in apology. It doesn't take us long to arrive at the cylinder's room, where the scent of burning fury was barely contained in the walls of the place. Amidst the illusory smoke, one cyclopean creature threatened to unleash unspoken violence upon us the second its unforgiving eyes made contact with-

**CHOP!**

"Takeru-san, stop exaggerating."

"Hey, I'm not."

"… What is the matter?" She asks, bumping a hand onto her chin as she comes closer, staring at me and nowhere else. "Besides you being almost half an hour late to the tuning, is something else bothering you?"

"Yeah, how on fire you look. Something up?"

A brow twitches, arms fold and she looks away. "We'll speak of it later. Are you ready to begin?"

"Yeah, sure."

---

*Some moments later…*

---

"So then, despite the sadness and insistence of his parents, Issun-Boshi departs from his home. Reaching a river, he skillfully traverses it on a tiny boat made out what Nature bestowed him-"

I continue the telling of the third book, barely getting an acknowledgment besides the grip that does not falter. Barely even blinking, perhaps more out of necessity of the system, Sumika remains still. Well, at least it's not freaking out.

"So as he walks, a certain building catches his attention. A most proper and striking house that-"

"Um, Takeru-san," Kasumi interrupts, huddling closer, "how did Issun-Boshi manage to traverse the city, if he was so tiny?"

"Who knows? I still think he'd have gotten stomped on the way."

I mean, let's be real. How the hell does such a tiny thing even get to steer a boat in a river? Skillfully my ass, there's a limit to bullshitting one's way out of stuff and that's coming from me. Also, if the parent's didn't want him to leave, just stuff him into a jar of jelly or something. What's he gonna do, pout about it?

"Wrong…"

"Eh? Sumika?"

"Very skilled… Attentive to movement…" she says in a monotone, not moving her gaze or posture one bit.

"Well, I guess that's right… Issun-Boshi does end up becoming a great leader in the end of things," I pet her head, there's no reaction again. Sigh…

The rest of the tale went without issue, only her hold over my arm tightened more and more as we reached the end. Posture and expression growing tense, breathing slowing down almost to a halt. Stealing a gaze towards *XO Kouzuki* I see her endowing a small smirk as she does that repeated little bump with a hand on her chin, eyes sparkling away. Looks like someone sure is enjoying herself over there… Oh?

Immediately sobered up the second we cross gazes? C'mon, I don't bite. Sigh… She returns a nod, gesturing for me to keep it up. Leaving the book on the pile nearby meets a strengthening of the grip, barely allowing me to stretch to grab one of the few books that remain.

"Don't leave…" she whispers, hands beginning to shake.

"It's okay, Sumika. I'm just grabbing another book to read. See? Oh?" The letters and image in the cover immediately sink in my mind, recognizing the ink painting of a woman with long black hair dressed in a red cloth with the moonlight as her cloak. "Kaguya, huh? You wanna read this one, Sumika?" She stalls a reaction, but the mere gesture of dropping the book causes further tension to rain down into my arm. Sigh…

"Takeru-san, do you not like the book?" Kasumi asks, tilting her head as she stares at the thing while I scuttle back to Sumika's side.

"It's not that, I just think it's rather sad," I shrug, sighing a bit.

"Really? What is it about?" She edges closer, waiting, looking expectantly, firmly into the book, then at me.

So I start my telling, how Princess Kaguya demanded legendary treasures from her consorts in an attempt to not get married. Against all odds, the demands are met one after the other. But when the requests dry up, as Kaguya had found a person she was truly in love with, she is fated to return to the moon. Leaving a potion back to her beloved, the man burns in amidst his suffering since for him an eternal life means nothing if he cannot spend it with her.

"… And then?" Kasumi asks with bated breath, both hands joined.

"That's it."

"Huh? W-What do you mean? That cannot be the end," she affirms with a strong flap of her bunny ears.

"But it is. Sucks, doesn't it?" Her face falls, a pout raises. "But the real sad part is not what you might think at first. Wanna try and guess why?" I ask, nodding.

"Hmm… If it's not that the man didn't find his feelings returned, I do not know what it might be. Is it that Kaguya realizes how important she was for him after she's on the moon?"

"Well, that might be the case, but-"

"Read… between the lines…" Sumika whispers, nodding to herself. Lips pursing as if tasting Meiya's cooking, eyes narrowing as if about to unleash a DMP. "Kaguya was… making a vow. The man didn't… didn't… understand her message… A-And-"

"Very good, Sumika," fiddling with her hair, I rest her head on my shoulder. The premature signs of anger are buried, even if her breathing does not chill. "You have a very good memory, don't you? Do you remember why Kaguya left the potion?"

"She… She was," her eyes close, slightly shivering as if under the rain her hands claw at me, strongly so, "trying to tell him she'd wait forever, no matter how long… how long… U-Ugh, agh-"

"Yeah, a vow of unconditional love," massaging her hair in circles, I rest onto her as well, closing the book to better support her weight. "That's what Kaguya tried to convey, but failed to be understood. The man was too sad to notice, too lost in the grief of the moment. That's why it's a really sad tale, right?"

"… Yes." She nods, sighing.

… She just acknowledged my words! We had a conversation! Sure, Sumika still looks like a statue but this is great progress for a first day. It's too early to sing a fanfare but if things keep moving on this rail, we might-

"It's horrible…"

"Huh?"

"Leaving… never meeting… N-No, no, no-"

"Calm down, Sumika. Come on, now. I'm here, there's nothing-"

A piercing scream shatters my closest eardrum, my arm twists backwards in the hold she enforces. The thrashing continues for quite a while, merely holding her convulsing frame as she tugs and pulls at my arm feels as if I were resting on top of a wheel. A wheel that is cosplaying as a hedgehog. A wheel whose true vocation was to be a potato peeler. Legs feel weak, trembling like jelly, as emptiness is left at the pit of my stomach all the way up to my throat when she eventually loses impulse and goes limp in my arms. Just as every time we tried to tune her. And at the very end, after all was said and done.

"… Siiigh. Is… Is she stable enough to make the shift to Safe Mode?" I ask, looking back as I lift Sumika off the ground.

*XO Kouzuki* nods as she types something real fast in her terminal. "Nothing I hadn't seen yet, as far as readings are concerned. Still, it was another reaction of fear instead of anger. Those only happened thus far when you're around," she notes as she rubs her temple, then her eyes as she avoids the glare of the screen. "It should already be falling into the right protocol, let's connect it to the pod," she orders, walking up to the thing and opening it up. "Yashiro, what was see seeing throughout the session?" She asks as I lay Sumika down in the system, connecting the cables in the right place.

Kasumi's hand shift and shuffle each other, avoiding looking either of us in the eye. "Um… At first, there wasn't anything. But the more we read to her, the more small fragments of memories of her child self I could discern. Takeru-san," she steps closer, helping me fasten the security belts on the pod, "did your father read with you and Sumika-san at times?"

"Hm? Dad? Yeah, at times. Oh, wait a sec, we're talking of this side, right?" She nods, bunny ears flap. "That's a bit weird, then. Dad had his schedule packed, I don't really remember if he had much time to read with us in this world…"

"But I saw him, or someone that looks strikingly similar to you but with black hair," she insists, staring firmly as we finish our duty and the *XO* starts up the pod's functions.

"Well, I ain't saying it couldn't have happened, but it sure was a rare thing over here. So *XO-"*

"Yuuko," she cuts, slices, and slashes me in half, quite the narrowed glare she forwards.

"… Fine, whatever. So, your thoughts on this session are?"

"Let's discuss them in the office. You go there and prepare some coffee, I'll take Yashiro to her room."

"Huh? But I still have to-"

"It's already late, and you can prepare a report before going to bed," she insists, giving the bunny a side glance. "Now, let's be on our way. Tomorrow will be a rather busy day, and I need you up early, you'd understand." And without waiting, she turns on her heels and blasts towards the exit.

"Always marching to her own tune… Well, thanks for the support, Kasumi," I pet her head softly, rustling her hair a bit. "Good night, and see you tomorrow."

"Yes… Bye bye," she nods, waving as she moves towards the creepy corridor. Eventually, as I remain waving back, she finally smiles a bit before leaving, gaining some force in her steps.

… Still, we kinda cut it close.

Looking back at the pod, she looks so calm and peaceful. She hasn't had a single berserk attack yet, but the fact that fear is what she feels the most when around me… I guess Yuuko was right in one thing, and that might be the source of the crux Sumika carries in this

world. And for her to completely become whole, she will have to face what the real Sumika couldn't compute, the end of Lucifer.

"… I wonder what are your thoughts on that, Yuuko. After all, something doesn't add up here."

Though, can't really blame her when everything just flew over my head, too. I only hope she's willing to be honest from now on. Anyways, to ensure that does come to pass, I better hurry and go prep up the coffee. Yuuko's gonna get cranky if she doesn't have her drink. And I can order dinner while she's gone and is unable to stop me.

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*Some minutes later.*

*(Yuuko's Office.)*

**[Yuuko]**

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"I'm gonna just sit here and stare at you until you eat it," *Takeru* affirms as he folds both arms and throws himself quite eagerly onto the sofa.

"I do not recall asking for food. There was no need for you to-"

"Keep the tough act up and I'm gonna sing the parody song instead," he smirks, for some reason.

"… Parody of what?"

"… Don't tell me we don't have Weird Al in this timeline."

"Who?"

"An American singer that makes parody songs of other popular songs. Eat It is a parody of Beat It, you know, the hit from Mike Hackson."

"Haven't heard of either, sadly," I shrug as I start to spin, resting my head on the cushioning.

"… This timeline fucking sucks. Anyways, yeah, could you eat something at the least? Bet you haven' had any-"

"Oh, fine, fine," I roll my eyes, spinning back to the desk, huddling closer to it and grabbing my fork and knife. "In any case, the data procured during this tuning session was satisfactory. It yielded better readings than my testings during the day, and elicited another fear-based reaction." Munching on the meat, pairing it with some small spoonful of rice, I take my time to savor it all before drinking from the coffee *Takeru* brewed. "Hmm… I'll say, you truly chose the most fitting curry for this one coffee. Good job, *Takeru."*

He scratches his ear, looking up. "It's nothing, I just knew you preferred it that way, is all."

"Still, it's appreciated." Even if I don't know how you guessed the new password of my safe. Maybe I followed the same principles from another me, thus it was easy to predict? "As I was saying," I clear my throat, delaying the raise of the spoon, "the fact that the 00 Unit reacted somehow to the books is enough proof for me. We'll continue with this method for a few days, adjusting our estimations as we go."

"Sigh… Good to know," he says, resting his arms on his thighs as if leaving a flower upon a casket. Slow and modest breaths he takes, leaving his lips closed, his eyes on the floor.

After taking another bite of the curry and sip of the burning coffee, I again cough to regain his attention. "So, I assume you already finished your papers to present tomorrow?"

"Yeah, they're all in your inbox in case you wanna review 'em. And no, there's no eccentric words in any of them, I triple checked," he nods much, holding my gaze.

"Good enough, I'll trust you on that then. Now *Takeru,* I have been meaning to ask something. I know it might be hard to gain a definitive answer but, why do you believe Iceberg resolved so differently than Operation 21st?"

Inhaling sharply, looking away, shutting off. "Because the goals of the missions were different," and frosting over his tone, too.

"What do you mean?"

"I wrote that down, didn't I? Iceberg aimed to clear all the bulk of BETA, have the G-Bombs blast them and the monument away to allow a diver corps to rush in, steal the G-Elements, blow up the Reactor, and escape the hell outta there before reinforcements could arrive," he tells, petrifying himself. "To that end, the G-Bombs had to had the biggest effect possible. All the troops sent into the ground that day were nothing but a diversion, what really mattered were the divers. So long as we held the ground and managed to make the BETA spread all over the island, it was all the same," he spits, venom erupting in every word, quite caustic even by my standards.

"So then, the procedure in my mission was not the same and despite that we suffered similar setbacks, huh. Going by your report, there is no feasible way in which we can invade the hive without the XG, right?"

"I mean, you can try. Everyone's gonna die, though."

"Siiigh… I would be liking to obtain the G-Elements during the sortie, if at all possible. Could we do so without many losses?" I lean onto the desk, popping another spoonful into my mouth, enjoying the mild spicing, the soft caress of the heat in the sauce enveloping my lips.

*Takeru* remains silent for a moment as he looks up, twirling his hair and lips, his legs changing positions a few times before he hunches over. "It would require the mission to last longer, to create a more appropriate diversion for the BETA. Even if they won't use our

tactics, the amount of BETA in Sadogashima is more than we can currently handle with the same arrangement of last loop."

"Because of those stragglers that almost surfaced in the mainland, right?"

"Yeah. Even if I manage to pull off the same stunt and kill twenty-something Forts to allow the rest to off the Lasers, there will be more coming at us this time. More Forts, more Lasers, more Tanks. Sure, we have the railgun now but that's a one or two use weapon that we can only recharge by having the XG close by. If the particle cannon cannot fire a third time, there won't be a victory anyways," he states, sober and cold, as both hands go to the back of his head, as he throws himself back onto the sofa and closes his eyes.

"Hmm…" Idling some time as I eat and finish my coffee, the bitter burning igniting lines on my stomach and back, a few fingers slowly grasp my chin. "I suppose, this is why you desire to prevent the coup, so that we have more manpower available?" He nods, without changing his posture in the slightest. "However, if that is the issue you find, I believe we could still get away with having it occur now. All we need is to make up for the numbers with skilled members from the IRG and-"

" *Vice Commander*," he begins, once more with a scorching and almost crossed glare, "I believe I already expressed my opinions on the matter."

"Yes, I know. Did you know 1st Lt Tsukuyomi wanted to know if I was available to receive a call from Her Purpleness in the short term?" I ask, leaning forward, focusing my sight on his.

His features do not waver, he merely raises a brow. "What, she really insisted on that?"

"Indeed she did. I suppose, the Shogun isn't entirely pleased with our arrangement. This rising animosity might play against us, you know?"

"Don't worry, it won't come to that."

"And you're certain of that because…"

"Because I gave some hints to the Pickles so that they calmed down a bit," he admits, shrugging, loosening his back and falling onto the sofa. "I don't think Yuuhi will chill out in an instant, but there's no way she'd actually try anything against you with me being here. And if you deem it such an obstacle, you can erase me whenever-"

Slamming the desk and frowning, I glare at the silence he extends. "I believe I told you to get used to remaining in this world? What will we do if-"

"Yuuhi knows what she's dealing with, don't worry."

"Hmm… Where did this confidence in her came from, again?"

"From remembering my past? Not like you didn't already know, though."

"Sigh… So, you're still opposed to giving Sagiri a little push? Even if it's in our best interests?"

"If that's what you wanna do, why even ask my opinion? Just do whatever you want and deal with the hell you built for yourself," he shrugs, looking away once more.

" *Takeru*, could you kindly answer the question? I am asking for your thoughts."

Again, he stares.

Once more, silence extends.

Saying nothing, resting onto a hand as he calms his breathing into a steady rhythm.

"… Even if you predict some of the stuff that will happen," he starts, low, complexion neutral and dull, "you can't expect a nat twenty to always save your skin. While I can see why you wanna do this, to flaunt the new tech in the Takemikazuchis and our other TSFs as the UN saves the day, there's many links that can go wrong."

"Hesitation creates no solutions, *Takeru."*

"Neither does hastiness," he counters, the embers resurfacing in his crossed eyes. "Furthermore, I already told you this world is far too different to the previous one I looped in. I can guarantee you, the rebels will have way more support here."

"Huh… And can't you do anything about that, *Captain?* Your Swordbreakers could come to our aid, couldn't they?" I ask with a smile, a slow tilt of my head.

Yet, he doesn't alter his frozen features even a little bit. "I did already warn you about the original coup, did I? Of how this world could be affected by leaks, how anyone with a strong emotion or resolve could be on the receiving end of the flowing data?"

"Yes, you did. Do you believe that scenario will repeat itself, then?" He nods, groaning a bit as he fumes at the floor. "Then, why not take advantage of it? Is it really impossible to-"

"Yes, the balance will be broken if the coup happens," he states, firmly, meeting my eyes in full fire. "So, since we've already gone over this, what is it that you truly want to ask, *Vice Co-"*

"Yuuko."

"Sigh… So, what is it now?" He asks again, resting on a hand, still blazing.

"Causality isn't fated to repeat itself, it's all a matter of choice, of willpower. We can break through this adverse situation if only we play our cards accordingly. Am I right to assume you recall… most of

your memories in this world?" He takes his sweet, sweet time to return a silent nod, to break our gazes apart. "Then, let's get down to business. Assuming I desire your aid in allowing the coup to happen with minimal losses, what would you suggest we do?"

"… You're gonna have to let me go, in that case."

"Huh?"

"I'll return to the IRG and fight from within, to spare you the issues that come with this mess."

"… Pardon me?"

"I said-"

"You are not going anywhere, didn't you hear me before?" Frowning, feeling tension and contraction in the back of my head, I hold his stare without blinking, straining my sight.

"You can't involve yourself any further, Yuuko," he retorts, unaffected and loose, relaxed yet still stoic. "There's already enough trouble you're mixed in, and I told you the world needs you standing strong after all is said and done."

"So you wanna go back to Her Purpleness, huh… What of the 00 Unit?"

"I can finish the tuning after the dust settles."

"What if you suffer an accident?"

"That can happen with me standing on either side, to be honest. And honestly," he then smirks, chuckling a bit as he shrugs, "I might even just accept to talk with Yuuhi next time. She might actually listen to my words, unlike a certain someone who doesn't know when to take a step back," he says, bright, honest, shining as the clear sky.

"… I have power and liberties Her Highness does not enjoy. There is nothing you can achieve with her we cannot trounce together."

"As things stand with my squad, I doubt the coup will proceed smoothly, what with Meiya being affected by a negative leak, and the issues the others might also face. There's also the fact that, if things do repeat themselves, our goal is not to calm down the lines for the CIA to screw Alt IV over but to protect Yuuhi from whatever will try and harm her. So, if I'm by her side-"

"I can forward a warning, using your position here as an excuse, the words Yoroi left me on his last visit," I retaliate, cut the stupidity in twain before he spouts more nonsense.

"Sigh…" Shaking his head, ruffling his hair, his features fall, collapse as he stares at me. Before simply closing his eyes and pinching his nose. "If you're dead set on this path, then do as you like. I ain't gonna change your mind when you get like this, so there's no point in arguing about it. Just keep your end of the deal and I'll finish the tuning."

"Excuse me, we're not done yet," I state, standing up and going to refill my mug, stealing glances at him.

"What? There's no reason to-"

"I can show you proof of your stabilization," I say, leaning closer to him, grabbing his already empty cup, meeting his eye at the same height and gripping onto them, staring down at my own reflection. "Once we neuter the link between timelines, only you, a strengthened Nucleus, will be able to reliably access the shared data between worlds. And in front of the diminished flow, you'll be able to rest well and not fear any more sudden catalysts. So, works for you?"

"That was kind of part of our original deal, though," he barely says, daring to cast a side glance my way. "And I told you, I'm not sure if I wanna stay in this world yet."

"Why? I believe I told you we'd be equals if you pledged your services to me…" I ask, feeling acid welling up within my palms, behind the ears as I fill his cup and move mine away.

"And here you are, not listening to a thing I said before," he rolls his eyes, softly leaning onto the sofa, avoiding my eyes. And hesitating on taking the cup, even.

" *Takeru*, what is it that you desire? Out with it, state your terms and I'll see what I can do," I affirm, giving one good nod and never looking away. Taking slow sips of my cup, I stare and wait.

A brow twitches, he inhales sharply once again before going for a sip. His face contorts and twists as if he had just heard the 991 alarm or smelled the acidic sulfur stench of the BETA despite the long while he takes to enjoy his drink. "Phew… Why don't you start by stopping with the tripwires, *XO* ?" He asks, frowning, blazing more than the coffee.

"What?"

"Stop calling me by name, you never do that. I dunno what you're playing at, but stop it."

"… I do not recall to have done anything to deserve such pungency from your lips," taking a few steps closer, tapping his collarbone, I hold his gaze, clashing towering dry ice into the searing pitless flames. "What has you saying such things, I wonder?"

"I told you already, treat me seriously. How many more times do I have to ask you that?"

"I am being serious, however. I'm merely treating you with the deference an ally deserves, is all."

"Huh, for real?"

"Yeah, just that." I then smirk, tapping my lips. "But if you're holding such consternation in you, I suppose I could relent and extend you proof of how much I desire you to remain by me, *Takeru."*

"… You're just messing with me, aren't you?" He sighs, slouching down, deflating and dousing himself, sinking into the sea. Not even a sip of the coffee ignites his spirits or posture back up, despite the superb taste his brew ended up with.

"No, I am not. However, if you doubt me so much, I could give some undeniable proof."

"Like what?"

"Oh, I dunno…" I lean closer, from behind, aiming to whisper to his ear, "maybe, if it would placate your mood, I could wear a santa outfit for you."

"Wh- *COUGH!"*

Out of air as if he were drowning, *Takeru* coughs for dear life for a moment. Spitting the coffee onto the carpet, holding his throat and massaging it, his features contort momentarily. And still, his face is now completely flushed. *How adorable.*

"Wha- What did you just say?!" He asks, standing up and glaring back at me, despite the quiver in his lips, the overall shaky posture of his which wavers more than Yashiro in front of carrots.

"Oh, nothing much," I smile, again tapping my lips. "Just that, if you fancy it, I could give you a… reward, let's call it, and wear a santa costume for you. Would you happen to be into that kind of play, *Takeru?"*

"Wha… What did- Why are- How even… Hauuuawawawa…"

"Oh dear, are you having a breakdown? *How cute of you, fuhuhu."*

"What… D-Did you see it?"

"Hmm? See what?" Smirking a bit, I circle closer.

He quickly steps away. "You… saw that memory, didn't you?"

"I dunno, could you be a bit more specific, perhaps?"

"Mmgh… You know, when I, well…"

"When you 'took care' of another me?"

"Ugh, just… Why? Why that night?! And why now?!"

"Who knows? So, that did happen, huh…"

"No, don't lick your lips like that, dammit!"

"Oh, why are you getting so bothered, *Takeru?* Didn't you desire to be my equal?"

Inhaling sharply again, restoring composure to his features and folding his arms, he holds my gaze. "Look Yuuko, I… Why? Why did you recall that?" He asks, brows almost crossing, lips regressing as he begins to face away from me, as if bracing for a crash landing. Hmm, how odd.

"Well, if you must know, I was rather… concerned while you had your beauty sleep," I shrug, finishing my coffee, resting onto the sofa afterwards. "All these days, the negotiations I've had to tackle weren't particularly pleasant, and while the meeting I held did proceed smoothly, I am not daft. I know what all of them were thinking… Sigh. And as I was reviewing the docs you left me, parts of… what I dreamed about today came back."

The never-ending demands, the sleepless nights, the pressure choking me as it did on my worst nights. My own voice whipping at me, the rejection incoming from every single member of the Council and the HC. The frustration at being so close and yet so far.

And then, a little, frail glimmer of light. An idiot that does not know when to take a no for an answer.

"And I saw parts of… our farewell, when you so desperately asked me for anything to help with. As well as the, ahem, motives of the disgust that came with those echoes," I admit, while going back to my desk and procuring a cloth.

"But… But even then, why would you- Mmfh!" Pressing the cloth onto his lips, cleaning them off stray coffee, my hand slowly rubs at his skin, at his cheek, jawline, descending to the collarbone as the taint spreads over the UN blue of the threads as much as redness claims *Takeru's* cheeks once again.

"And then, there was also the small present you left me on your first visit," I smile, leaving my hand on his neck, grasping, caressing, leaning closer. "If this echo isn't mistaken… You had proposed to be my support back then?"

"W-Well, yes, but-"

"Would that proposition still stand?" I ask, a fingertip tracing his neck outwards, towards his ear. "Would you consider… *remaining by me, permanently, as you swore to do in that world* ?"

"… Did you remember the meaning behind the poem?" He asks, low, finally returning my gaze without moving away.

"Not yet. But I do wish to regain those memories, if only you would lend me your agreement. Would you?"

"… No."

"Excuse me?"

He takes a step back, then another, and another, and shakes his head while a frown erupts into his complexion, ashes and smoke

burning everything about. "I won't. You don't need those memories. If that's what has you insisting so much, then drop the issue."

"Why? I thought you… desired to remain here, to help me and the project," I restore our prior closeness, almost pining him against the wall.

He stands straight, nibbling at his lip. "This and that have nothing to do with each other."

"Oh, yes, they do. It is both a method for me to recall whatever I researched in that world and for you to gain an anchor in this world before we cut the link between worlds. Plus, if it truly would please you…" an arm extends, over his back, his shoulder. He stiffens but doesn't pull away, "I truly wouldn't mind letting you get closer, giving you certain benefits if you continue to produce results."

"… And yet, you don't remember the poem."

"I will, in time. More so if you aid me remember."

"… No, it's pointless," he slowly removes my hand from his person, edging away, towards the door, hugging the wall. "If the feelings are not born naturally, there is no link that can be built."

"Uh, excuse me? I did just dream of that world earlier today, even if only a light echo remains as of now. And yes, I was *very* concerned over your health, *Takeru.* " Of how could I complete the project on my own, of how things would turn out. He won't hear it from me but… I did fear what would happen if he truly disappeared. And when I saw nothing in the medbay, I almost- No, I outright lost it. The thought of him being gone, just like that… "I do value your presence here. And I desire you to remain here, as I've said multiple times already. Teasing aside, you truly cannot be dissuaded to stay here and aid me recall what was of me in that timeline?"

"Do. You. Remember. The poem?" He deadpans, crossing his arms.

"No, not yet." Getting closer once more, placing a hand over his arm, leaning in until I once again see my reflection in his eyes, a line of bolts running down my back, into my legs, I smile back at him. "Tell me, what do you think would happen if we kissed now?"

"… Huh?"

"I said, what do you think would happen if we kissed now? What kind of memories would I see? Would I dream of them tonight? Would they flash in my mind as we make out? What do you think, *Takeru?"*

Tension, contortion once more claims his eyes, squinting eyes as he inhales deeply once more. Veiling his sight, returning the indifference of the silence to me he then takes a single step back, compressing his figure onto itself, further tightening his folding arms. *"* If there are no feelings, then nothing will happen," he answers, dry as the wasteland.

"… And if there were?" Another step forward I take.

Another back he takes, meeting the wall. "… What is it that you want to gain, XO? Are you testing me again? See if I take the bait?" He asks, frowning.

"No. And I told you what I want already," I chuckle, slowly resting a hand on his shoulder, placing myself on the wall by his side, so that he doesn't feel cornered. "I want you to stay, be my vanguard just as you were in that world. I am aware acquiring the agreement from the Shogun will be harsh, equally so to align both of our objectives if you truly do desire to avoid the full brunt of a possible coup… but if you accepted another me in your loops, if closeness is what would sate your spirits-"

He releases himself from me, stepping back, glaring. Gritting his teeth as he taps his brows, as his sight goes odd-eyed. "You shut your mouth."

"Huh? I am-"

"No. Stop, now. There's nothing to be gained through this, XO."

"Yuuko."

"Shut it… Don't you give me this bullshit…"

"I am being completely serious, *Takeru* . If having intimacy between us is what you'd-"

"You don't get it, do you? You just don't fucking get it," he seethes, barely chained blazes which would soon overtake the dam.

"Then, why don't you enlighten me?" I ask, lower, not breaking eye contact but also not getting closer.

For a second, it was as if a guillotine fell upon his neck. Choking, out of air as his eyes closed tightly, an unnatural jerk and jolt of his chest. Taking half a step forward, the hand I offer is ignored as he gasps for a second, short and shallow breaths.

"… How do you think you felt, being trash talked by the entire UN?"

"Awful, desiring to headbutt a bullet, probably."

"Yeah, exactly. Now tell me," he lifts his face, wiping the dampness that was soaking his eyes, yet the fire still remains, "how do you think the grand and mighty XO Kouzuki ended up allowing me, a fucking cadet, to have sex with her?"

"… Well, I suppose I was… devastated, looking for an escape. If you offered me some intimacy in that time, then perhaps-"

"Heheheheh… Intimacy, you say?" An eye twitches, non-stop. His breathing grows more erratic, the frown enlarges. "Don't fuck with me! You think I'm proud of taking advantage of you?! You think I'm happy of having done you as you were drunken out of your mind, crying non-stop?!"

"… Wait, what? Excuse me, what do-"

"Kindness? Intimacy? You think I'm some white knight or something?! All reason and good intentions went flying off the fucking wall the second you kissed me. And you know what?" He laughs again, holding his face as his footing grows unstable, a hand seeks the wall for support. "I enjoyed it, taking you however I wanted, having you reduced to nothing but a mindless slut."

"… Is that so."

"It felt powerful, to reverse the roles. It was sick, and sticky, and it hurt, but fuck me if I wasn't intoxicated at the time… Seeing you slumped on the floor, slack-jawed, just… surrendering to anything I tried… You shut up when I told you to, you let me bounce you and touch you and who knows what else we did as we drank down the entirety of your safe. It felt good, to *own* you."

"Huh… I see… So that's what… happened."

He starts hitting the wall, over and over, slowly, so slowly. "But then, the next day came. The news came, everything started to sink in. And…"

"You couldn't forgive yourself? Even when I forced myself on you first?"

"… If that had been all, it would have been a mutual mistake. But I didn't care, I took advantage of you. When you needed help, support, or even a show of affection… All I did was use you as a meatbag. Do you know how it feels, remembering your crying face, seeing you completely defeated? You… were even begging, for fuck's sake. And I didn't care, and just kept fucking you until I forced some answers out of your mouth…"

The tension leaves his features, the crumbled posture does not lift itself. A hand clutches his chest as he tries and regains his breathing, despite how his eyes are still twitching, crossed.

"Those memories… have nothing of value for you. They're only one of your lowest points in your life… where not even the guy who wouldn't have been alive if not for your mercy had any sympathy to spare for you."

"… And yet, you went to look for me in Sendai," I say, finally walking up to him again.

"T-That's… I was guilty, and lost, and confused. That's all, we simply remained working together on a shared goal, that's all."

"… But didn't you want to 'take care of me'?" Looking into his eyes, the scarred and ashen remnant so them flee me again.

"I just did what I thought was best for the future at the time. Just that, nothing too noble."

"Hmm, I see. Then, how do you want me?"

"Wait, what? D-Didn't you hear me?! I-"

Tapping his lips again, I lean closer. "As the XO? As your boss? Or, do you still want something more? Is there any reason you're taking back your words to go through hell for our shared goals?"

"Siiigh… It's going to be the same as with Meiya. If the feelings don't reside in you… then, there's no point."

"Why not try? All it takes is a small peck, nothing more. You already ravaged me once, what's a little-"

"Shut up!"

"H-Huh?"

"You're not just a pair of tits to fuck for me! I don't want to see the Yuuko of that damn Christmas ever again! I… I am not like that, I will not fall in that same pitfall twice." Clutching his face, groaning in pain, wincing, his eyes remain ready to slay. In a way, one could call

the stare he's giving me… a draconian one. "Haa… Haa… W-While I will try and remain useful for as long as I'm here, if you're trying to bind me with sex I will have to decline the offer. That Yuuko isn't one I ever wanna see again. You don't need those memories, for real."

"… Then, which Yuuko do you wish to see?" Lightly wrapping my fingers over the hand that claws at his face, removing it softly, smiling at the maelstrom of twitches and contraction which in his face resides, I simply chuckle. "I'm not asking you to rail me into the ground. I simply want to regain the memories of the world in which we worked together. After all…" licking my lips, I grow closer despite the shiver which envelopes him in paralysis again, "you and me already worked side by side before, during the invasion. Won't you let me test it? Just a little kiss?"

He turns away, facing the floor, rushing away from me as if my very being was a source of heat. "You don't need to bribe or test me, so long as you help me I shall remain on your side. So, please, don't salt the wound any more."

"Huh… Who would have said you'd be such a coward, *Takeru* ."

"… You do know that you only ever called me by name during that night, do you?"

"Hm? For real?"

"Sigh… Yes. And," again frowning, circling around the sofas, keeping his distance, his guard up, "if you wouldn't mind, could you get to the actual point?"

"Huh? I am being serious, you know?"

"… Let's say I buy that, that you're saying this for real," he stops, leans on the sofa, glaring my way. "What was stopping you from simply kissing me out of the blue to test your idea?"

"I rather have a real kiss, thank you very much," I shrug, walking back to my desk, sitting down and spinning away, with enough force to make my hair flutter. "I can find anyone to fuck with if it pleases me, but having someone willingly coming onto me… That is rare, many are those who think I'm dangerous. That there's great risk in approaching me, even moreeven more with those intentions."

"And they're fucking right."

"Hmm. Curious choice of words, *Takeru,"* I smirk, he raises a brow before again flushing red. "Fuhuhu."

"Goddammit, not like that. Sigh… Anyways, this isn't what you're really asking me about, is it?"

"Hmm? What has you think so?"

I am being serious, truth be told. I do want him to stay, I need him to stay. Well, maybe not need, but I rather he remains by me. And, honestly, if it does please him… I wouldn't mind giving him some of me. *Takeru* himself is already dealing with much for me, he's given me plenty of resources and good results. Really, getting sex with him is but another reward for me. More so if it comes with the possibility of unlocking a leak into my person. I admit that, perhaps, I am being rather… pushy on the matter, in wanting his consent, and in calling him by name too. But I…

I don't want him gone ever again. That void, that crushing emptiness I felt as I saw the empty bed, heard the flat-line echoing about, I don't want to endure anything like that again. Not after finding a proper spearhead, someone who doesn't fear my shadow. Not only is he a good influence on Yashiro, everything he has done thus far was to my benefit. Extending some affections his way… is nothing but a small, tiny compromise, if at all.

He scoffs, folding his arms. "Ain't it convenient, all things considered."

"… What are we talking about? If you're asking about why I'm requesting this of you despite wanting you to regain your identity, it's simply because we can keep this a secret between each other. And just that, nothing more."

His eyes narrow, with slow steps he approaches the desk, never lifting his sight off me nor his high guard. "Tell me, Yuuko. Do you think any random guy could have satisfied you back then?"

"Of course not. I have standards, you know. You simply… must have said or done something right, and I was probably a bit drunk." And heartbroken, and devastated, and wanting to die and disappear. Even if for only a minute, to forget it all, to let it all go. To this day, I still toy with the idea. Of how it would be, to give it all up. But now, that might not be necessary. Because I have someone to lean on when the going gets tough.

"But the point is, even if I said something suave, a virgin would in no way have been enough to press your buttons, right?"

"… Are you gloating?" Can't help but to smirk, chuckle at the blush.

"Wh- No! Dammit, Yuuko."

"Then, what's your point? I mean, you did… well, press the buttons, right?"

"Sigh… Yeah. Care to guess why?"

"Hmm… Maybe you're a nympho at heart?"

"What the hell?! I'm being serious here!"

"Well, but other than that I don't- Wait a second… Inherited experiences? Oh, now that makes actual sense," I lean back, spinning again. I see, if he gained some experiences subconsciously, then I suppose that even *Takeru* could put out a

decent enough performance on his first luster. "So, what's the issue with this? We already know you regain your memories as you loop."

"… We know that *now* . At the time, that was probably the first definitive proof any loops at all were happening," he states, nodding as he sighs, scratching his head. "It was something that was completely out of place, something that made no sense as I thought about it beyond 'Sensei was wasted'. And right now, as things stand for us," regaining his composure, he takes a step closer, as close as he could get to the desk, "there is another little thing that doesn't add up. You wouldn't be testing me again, would you *XO Kouzuki?"*

"Excuse me? What are we talking about? I am being serious about kissing you, though."

"… Look Yuuko, I've already told you all I could about my life, about my loops, the theories and all. And there is one little thing that makes no sense, that is completely out of place, that doesn't belong no matter how you look at it. And, oh, it just so happens to be something related to you," he fumes, extending an arm upwards in an arc, with quite the drama.

"… Wait, what?"

There is? I mean, I already know who he was before in this world. I know what was of his life thus far, the only thing I don't know is what the hell caused him to fall into rage during the mock battle or why he didn't wake up… which I admit I want to get out of him while we're, ahem, trading affections. But something I should already know, something that doesn't align? Hmm… I concur, I do want to inspect every nook and cranny of his body, see how it reacts to different memories, how the radiation affects his functions… and maybe for other purposes too, if it would alleviate any of the disquiet he now feels, to work as his anchor until the 00 Unit becomes like a functioning human. But even then, that doesn't seem to be what he's hinting at, either.

"This doesn't have anything to do with your little nap, does it?"

"It may, it may not. I already gave you all the pointers I could without demanding a clear answer, could you be honest with me? No teasing or plotting involved?"

"… I'm not plotting anything, I am merely curious about those memories."

"… So you won't even tell me, huh. Whatever, then," he turns around, shrugging.

"Where do you think you're going?" I ask, tapping the desk.

"Back to my cell, because I need to be awake early since you want me to take part in the presentation, remember?" He nods, sighing again.

"Hmm. I don't know what came over you but there's something you should know," I stand, approaching him once more. He doesn't move, but remains with both arms folded, facing away from me. "I am being serious in wanting you to stay by me, *Takeru.* And I haven't the faintest on what you're speaking at the moment. So, how about we trade? You give me a kiss and tell me what's on your mind, I deal with that for you and grant you-"

A hand cups my chin, he infringes on my personal space. "Yuuko, please don't. I don't know what you're on about, but if you're not really trying to trip me, please stop insisting on this trail."

"… Is that so," I rest onto him, poking his neck. "Why would that be?"

Lips regress, he shakes his head, which then falls along his shoulders and breath. "I just don't wanna get attached, is all. If it's not meant to be, then I rather have nothing instead of void hopes. I already… made that mistake, after the Babylon Disaster. Just… focus on your answer regarding the coup and the eruption, and in seeing what this oddity is about."

"I see… So why can't you tell me right now?" I ask, poking his chin, cheek now.

He leans back, but doesn't flee the touch. "Because, just like the poem, it's better if you figure it out on your own. Until then, let's keep stuff as it has been thus far."

"Well, that's agreeable, I suppose," I nod, arms folding. "Very well, I get it. You may leave, the briefing dock for the presentation should be available in your inbox. We'll go over the details tomorrow morning, so don't make Yashiro wait. After that, we'll see how we handle Her Highness."

"… Roger. Night, *XO,"* he salutes me, with barely no energy left. Slouching his way to the door, posture aimed down, almost limping even.

*Just as he looked by the elevator in that echo…*

Sliding past the desk, the sofa, I take long, fast steps. *"Takeru*, one last thing."

"Hm? What do you- Mmmfh!"

Cupping his chin, keeping him in place, the aftertaste of the coffee still mixes and entangles for a second. A second where his lips almost part, where the tip of our tongues briefly greet each other. Before he pushes me away, a hand wiping the faint thread that linked our lips together.

"Sweet dreams, *Takeru."*

"Wh-Wh-Wh-What did you-"

"Come on, off you go to sleep. I'll tell you if I recalled anything… worth mentioning to you," smirking back at his groans, I chuckle lightly.

"I… I told you…"

"What? Did you really dislike it that- Huh?"

"I told you… I don't wanna remember that, dammit… Kgh…" Grimacing hard, a single tear runs down his cheek.

"H-Hey, are you really-"

"Just… please, don't. Don't give me hope… I… already lost you once, I don't need another reminder of my failures, okay?" He turns around, still shaking. "So don't play with my heart. Because… I know I can't make everyone happy already. Shooting stars… always crash down and burn, after all."

"Shooting- Wait, *Takeru,* I didn't-"

"I'll be going now, Yuuko. Please, if you're just testing me, stop it."

"Oh, come on! Why are you reacting like this?! What did you even-"

"Because I'm an idiot."

"Huh?"

"Because, deep down, I still… I still love you. That little bump you do on your chin, the sparkly gaze whenever something catches your attention, the impulse you put in everything you do. And I… don't wanna confuse anyone anymore, I wanna solve the ripples for once. Can't do that if I'm trying to link with old memories now, can I?"

"But I am not-"

"Then, would you be mine if I asked?"

"H-Huh? Are you being serious?"

"If you won't take me one hundred percent seriously… then stop. With me, it's either all or nothing. No secret affairs or any bullshit like that. And anyways, we have more urgent matters to take care of,

anyways. So, well, um… Later…" Without even looking back, blasting away faster than his jumps, he rushes out of the office.

And all I can do is sit down back on my chair, lick over my lips, hunch over my desk. And feel a cold cloak cover my back slowly, as a similar voice zooms into my ears for a second.

A pledge to choose me over his squadron, any day.

A request to return to Yokohama, to his side.

"I… see… Heh, I've gone fucked it up, huh. Still… I see… So you… So you *loved me, Takeru? I see, so that's why. Interesting, very interesting."*

# Unnumbered Excuse

*Chapter 92:*

**Unnumbered Excuse**

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*December 6th. Near 6 AM.*

*(Detention Barracks.)*

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A slow gesture blocks the lips that part by reflex, young Yashiro cannot help but to release a long, elongated yawn. Softly rubbing an eye as she makes her way to the soldier's cell, once more does her mouth betray her will, from her chin to the base of her throat stiffness is followed by pleasant looseness. Even the footsteps which could be drowned by the march of ants sound deafening in the emptiness of the hallway, under the glare of the lightning which bounces off the walls. So she cannot fully open her eyes through the fogginess, her chin lowering inwards, almost meeting her dress as the temptation to nod off tickles her nape. It is, after all, a full hour earlier than her usual waking time. And the prior day had been an arduous one, the ones before all the more demanding on her petite shape. So you'd understand the wobbling advance, the sway of her head as if atop a small boat she were, the third yawn which rebels against her willpower.

And yet, through the shrouded and rather pleasant state of mid-wakefulness something reaches her ears, it makes her limiters bounce up on their own. A moment to blink quickly, a second of blindness as the rebounding light meets her unprepared sight, young Yashiro halts her steps and runs a hand over her face, listening. A slow twitch, a gradual ascent of the bunny ears along a singular brow, she tilts her head at the soft echo with dances from further into the hallway.

Now fully conscious, fully curious, she steps towards the source of the sound in a straight line. Through the concrete she perceives a faint cloud, a tiny and frail nebula as one would see during summer's most intense days. A mirage of yellow with lines that shift into a calm violet red, a slow shuffling of the fluffy shape, a calm downstream river.

And the more she approaches the cell the sounds come from, the one she was aiming to reach as per the scientist's orders, the voice becomes clearer.

"Yo quisiera que supieras… cuanto extraño tu presencia aquí," the soldier sings, low, the evening call of a lone bird during spring's closing days. "Y no puedo, no me atrevo…"

Peeking from the corner of the bars, she sees him lying comfortably on the sorry excuse of a bed available, already dressed in his fatigues. The odd cloud was surrounding his whole being as he continues the song in question, to her consternation with both eyes firmly closed as the safe of the scientist normally would be. Minimal is the movement of the lips, evident the markings of tension in his solidified complexion. The shiver, the warm descent of a feather's tip from her nape drives her curiosity to delve, to stare, to scan. And yet, despite the full focus losing itself in the slow swirling of the fluffy and sunny cloud, she can never truly reach the red core of the spiral nor hear any thoughts. Drowning in a droplet, sudden contraction comes to her body. Desiring to embrace herself, clamping arms and legs together as if needing to drive away snow, the emptiness around her person.

… However, the quietness which surrounds young Yashiro elicits a ring in her ears, obscuring everything else in the overwhelming pull which forces fingers to trace from the wrists to the shoulders, to rest upon her neck.

The lone image that comes up, the trail of smoke and fire that loses itself in the skyline amidst the silence is enough to reverse the motions she was about to make, sending the yawn back the way it

came. Even a single shard collapsing from a heart is more than enough to eclipse any and all blasts of engines, as the inner silence which with it comes silences more than the external sounds and sensations of the moment.

"T-Takeru-san?" Young Yashiro asks amidst a small cough, grasping an iron bar and shaking. Not because of the coldness of the material, you'd understand.

The soldier halts his singing, opening a single eye as he barely raises his face. Relenting a smile as he takes a deep breath, both legs curl up before he propels himself off the resting place of the cell. "Hey, Kasumi. Good morning," he nods at her while rolling up an arm as he approaches the barrier separating them.

"… Good morning," she stares, brows almost bumping as the colors in his aura suddenly swirl and become cerulean, calm and at ease yet still showing no thoughts to her ears. "Um, are you feeling well today?"

"Yeah. Save for the shower, you know," he shrugs, giving a wry smile. "So, can you open the door?"

She slowly nods, not lifting her eyes from him as she unlocks the cell and allows him to exit. After closing it again, turning to see how he's stretching both arms upwards, young Yashiro steps closer. "Takeru-san, what were you singing about?"

"Hm? Oh, uh…" he looks up, scratching the back of his head, "nothing, just a song from an anime. Let's be on our way, the *XO* won't like to be left waiting for too long," he states, starting to direct himself towards the exit.

She paces by his side, saying nothing for some moments, hands joining as she stares yet finds no sounds. "Um, Takeru-san?" He hums, looking her way. "What was the song about? Your aura was… a bit odd to the eye."

Slowly blinking while returning her stare, it takes him a second before he pets her head, playing with the strands of hair, tickling her forehead. "Don't worry about it, okay?" He asks as a sigh escapes along the words.

The collapse of the voice, the switch to a midnight blue hue in his aura rivets nails into young Yashiro's breathing, as if the Mjolnir was employed to fasten them into her slim abdomen.

" *Not like I could ever discuss these things with Kasumi of all people,"* his mind's voice echoes, furthering the piledrive which assails her lungs. Along a dim image, distorted, cut and scratched. Nothing but a slim figure raising a hand towards hers, or his, face. Nothing but the brunt of tackling an iceberg, the hull bruised and bleeding ice inwards.

" *That's not true, you can speak of anything with me,"* she counters, half a step closer to his person, arms almost touching.

" *Come on, now,"* he shrugs, gradually releasing the last strand of hair his fingers had captured. *"You know there's stuff I… can't really discuss with anyone.* " He then sighs, arms seeking the cover of both pockets, the sole of his boots remaining in contact with the floor for a few seconds more than necessary with each successive step. *"No one would really understand, and speaking of this shit would be enough to get me into more trouble anyways…"*

" *I am your friend,"* she asserts with a few flaps of her ears, as if attempting to take off the floor. *"Even if some matters are secrets you cannot divulge, you can place your trust in me."*

" *Uhh… You're truly is too good for this world, little bun,"* he whimpers within, relaxing into a small yet honest smile.

Which causes slight redness to come into young Yashiro's cheeks, the interlocking of her fingers enforced further. *"Takeru-san, don't say that. It's embarrassing…"*

" *Huh? Wait a second… Kasumi?"*

" *Yes?"*

" *Are we… talking?"*

" *Of course we are? Why are you asking?"*

" *I mean, look at my mouth… It ain't moving, right?"*

" *Eh? Ah, you're- Wait…"*

"Were you reading my mind just now?" He slowly asks, stopping his steps.

"N-No, that wasn't… I didn't notice at all. My apologies," she tries and bow, he chuckles lightly and waves off the gesture with a small smile. "But I… I can rarely establish such close communication with another's mind…" she wonders, brows narrowing, the warm fall of raindrops on her nape continues, the lingering thread of the fluffy cloud still surrounding her person. *"Can you hear me, Takeru-san?"*

" *Yeah, loud and clear,"* he nods, folding his arms. *"I didn't know you could do telepathy."*

" *I can't. It usually hurts a lot to try and link my mind with others with this clarity ,"* she admits with a sigh, shoulders falling a tiny bit. *" Scanning minds isn't truly easier than actually talking, you know."*

" *Yeah, I know. It's still a bit surprising, though."*

" *What is?"*

" *That I keep learning new things about you,"* he chuckles, his aura brightening slightly. *"I thought I knew all about your little tricks, and now we can have mind chats too."*

" *Um… Do you dislike this, perhaps?"*

Patting her head again, he shakes his head. "Nah, it's just a surprise that you could pull this off."

" *I don't really know why this is happening, I am not doing this on purpose,"* she affirms with a nod, a flap of the bunny ears.

" *For real? Oh, is this due to that… psychic link phenomenon? The synchrony stuff?"*

" *Yes, I think… I never really managed to trigger and maintain said ability, so I do not know if this is how it should feel, but it is the most logical explanation."*

" *Does it hurt you?"* He asks, again petting her head in kindness.

She shakes it slowly, leaning into the comfort. *"No, which is odd. I usually must focus much to establish a link, and sharing sounds and images is rather taxing as well."*

"I see… Anyways, think you can stop it?"

"Um…" she closes her eyes, inhales slowly, focuses on the small, minute pokes in the back of her head. The sensation resembles a full headpat, and there is no thread to cut, to knot to untie, no current to block. Taking some steps back to leave his aura's immediate surroundings does little to nothing, so young Yashiro relents a sigh. "No, I cannot. It's… simply there, your presence."

"Sigh… Well, let's try to not let it impair our work today. Simply tune me out, and don't listen into my thoughts, okay?"

"Yes, but… if you need to talk, all you need to do is ask," she insists, again flapping her ears like a small pigeon which fell into a lake.

He smiles, once more petting her head. "Thanks, Kasumi. But some stuff… You already saw a few as you tried to wake me up, this ain't your burden to carry. I don't mind you trying to talk with me through

this link we now have, but don't look too deeply, okay? You already know… well, what disasters lurk in my mind."

"However-"

"And we already lost enough time," he pokes her nose, smirking a bit. "So let's get going before the *XO* starts looking for us herself."

She nods, he smiles. Yet, as they once more walk to the exit, as she informs him of the time they have left before the retinue arrives, as the elevator descends and the beeping of her communicator interrupts the explanation with a rather bothered voice demanding answers from the other side of the line, young Yashiro's eyes do not lift the downcast posture, the lingering gaze upon the fluffy clouds that were branded in blue. Upon the delayed gestures, the smile that refused to fully open, her own movements imitate the lack of gusto.

"… *Why would you still try to bottle everything up, Takeru-san? You were clearly in so much pain in that forest, by the hill too. Just like the Professor… always remaining silent…"*

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*Around an hour and half later.*

*(Meeting room.)*

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Clicking noises fill the place, a sizzling image flashes through the large TV screen brought into the place. As large as the stock explosions from the game are the gaping expressions of the suits from the retinue.

"May I ask why would you employ such sharp evasive techniques?" Chairman Daikuuji inquires, threading his slim beard a few times over while admiring the spectacle.

"Easier to gain a vantage point," he answers, lips slightly pursing as his base Kaizer proceeds to slice off a few Strugglers in half, rapid

fire sending the few Colossus into a frenzied escape. "By moving in such patterns, I can throw off the radars and auto-aim systems. Then, if the pilot cannot locate me, they're as good as neutralized."

As if to prove his point, his Kaizer dives into the stream of volleys. Facing the pray of the spray, a small smile raises in him. Jumping high, sword set alight far more than the thrusters, a sharp pressure onto the controller causes the Kaizer to shine in blue, to unleash its Break Skill. Blasting through the aggressors like a cannon ball, his air jousting maneuver skewers a few of them. Little but cry and vanish amidst the pixel clouds can they do as the hammer falls.

"Phew…" he circles his wrists as the golden glimmer appears in the screen. "And as you can see, even such line-piercing maneuvers can be taught through the software."

"Hmm… Indeed, it is a most surprising training method," the Chairman notes, relenting a small smile. "Still, it is rather concerning, the application of such a doctrine. The adaptation might not be as smooth as you would claim, cadet."

"Actually," the scientist interjects, returning the small smile, a few thorns in the stare, "there is no need for such concerns, Chairman. Allow me to show you," she quickly types something into her terminal, another recording starts being played in the other monitor as the soldier mutes the TV he was using.

In the new display, footage of some of his trainings started to be shown to the group, some of them already losing grip on the masks of their complexions. And if such a reaction was born when witnessing the failed mock battle between him and his other two squadmates, further did the walls bend as the training he took after regaining consciousness began to play. Low movements, hushed whispers soon follow, as well as narrowed yet puzzled stares towards the unassuming soldier.

"By the by," the scientist whispers, leaning closer to him, " *Takeru*, why did you employ such moves during that training?"

"Just testing my endurance after waking up, *XO.* Nothing more," he simply says, taking a step away from her, not meeting her eyes.

Grasping her chin, she edges closer again. "So is this your best performance?"

He again slightly turns away, giving a sharp nod. "Indeed, that is correct, *XO*, ma'am."

"Excuse me, XO?" The Chairman asks for her attention, coughing softly.

Dulling the cross her brows desired to engage in, she brushes her hair as she faces the retinue one again. "What is it?"

"Ahem… Regarding the footage provided, why would the cadet be partaking in such courses? I did not believe Sgt Jinguuji to favor this kind of practices," he nods, never losing the small welcoming smile.

"Cadet Shirogane's own piloting quirks are what gave birth to both these programs and the maneuvers shown in his training. Due to coming from another base, it is expected some of his tendencies do not align with ours. Shirogane, if you would," she looks back at her soldier, receiving a short nod and the indifference of the silence as the answer.

He steps forward without making eye contact, clearing his throat and standing in attention again, while she simply folds her arms, stares into his neutral facade while her eyelids slightly narrow. He once more begins to explain the reasoning behind his piloting, sharing opinions with the team from Daikuuji Corp on the impact his methods have on the craft as the suits procure notepads and begin to scribble at mach speeds which would leave their TSFs jealous, the soldier apologizes internally to two of the members of the retinue, that he already had a similar meeting with back in his world, before regaining himself. As he navigates the inquiries while never losing his tone or momentum, never leaving a dead trail lingering in the air with the use of some eccentric words on his end to spark further

inquiries and interest into the little sims and his own piloting quirks, Chairman Daikuuji remains staring at the soldier while twirling and caressing his beard.

While the words and explanations were as satisfying as the rumbling of a successful launch, the admiration towards a beautiful and bright ignition, what spurred a gleam in his sight, full focus onto the soldier's features was not due to what he was in the middle of explaining about his rather reckless aerial charges.

There was a certain lack of air, of distance between the dark of his jacket and the white of her lab coat. Even before, as the meeting started, the Chairman noticed the lack of delay in the soldier's movements, the minute gazes which she shared with him only to be followed by the actions, no words required. The simple presence of the cadet was already cause of befuddlement, the shift in the displays as the scientist proceeded to present the little machines and her other announcements would indicate the cadet was more than familiar with what he was doing. If not for his stoic gaze, for the unfaltering stance and wording he employs amidst the stream of inquiries and curious counterquestions, the Chairman would have believed it all to be mere coincidence.

He cannot help but to remain smiling and relent a nod as the soldier finishes tending to the retinue's curiosity. "The explanation was greatly appreciated, cadet. I admit, of all the programs you've showcased thus far, this Valgern-On software would seem to possess great promise. However, we will review the available documentation first before giving our final answer. XO, I assume the HC is already on board with the decision?"

She nods, brushing her bangs. "Yes, the HC would favor having a clear deal at the ready before the official announcement. Thus, I would welcome a rapid answer, if at all possible. Shirogane, Yashiro," she didn't finish the words that both were already on the way to deliver the folders with the respective papers, eliciting a simple but pleased smile in her. As she nods back at them, they each return a customary gesture. The impregnable mask in his

features dull her own, sight lingering on him as he walks past her to stand in attention once more. "Ahem… Shirogane, could you proceed to present the next topic?" She requests, staring.

And receiving another nod, another frozen expression hewn into his face. "Yes, ma'am. Well, if I may have your attention… Now then, as I've already explained, my own frustrations with the shock countermeasures is what drove me towards my current eccentric form of piloting. However, *XO Kouzuki* took an interest in said patterns and ideas," he says, giving her a minute bow, "which then spawned another project to try and adapt said maneuvers into a formal doctrine. Allow me to present to you," he gives a court bow with a large and dramatic sway of a hand, smiling a bit as young Yashiro forwards the correct images to the display behind him, "a new operating system for our TSFs, the XM3."

Skepticism is thawed, melted into shock and whatever comes afterwards as his words and the graphs that Yashiro forwards. The nods and the mini smirk the scientist gives with a small tilt of her head, playing with her hair is enough to affirm the intel provided. One could equal the current expressions of most of the retinue as kitties falling upon the booming roar of thunders.

Except for the Chairman that, despite never losing his smile, never letting ripples bring blight to his lake, is now resting a hand under his chin. "It is most gracious of you to present such intel, XO. However, one could say it is almost to good to be true, haha. Certainly, there is a catch involved?"

"Oh, no, there is none, Chairman," she affirms, the devil surfacing, the little horns shining below her strands of hair. "I do comprehend your reticence to accept the veracity of the given explanation, however if it is clear results you'd be desiring to be presented with…" the smile enlarges, her eyes sharpen, merely the tip of the iceberg indulging in the threat, in the minute shiver of most guests in the room, "I would be more than willing to give you a live show."

"Is that so?" The Chairman nods, clamping his lips not to laugh. Instead he merely limits himself to sigh from his nose and rest his weight onto the cushioning of the seat. It had been, after all, many, many moons since he had seen such cheer in the scientist's eyes. "Would the Valkyries be at the ready to present us the boons of the OS?"

"That will come too, in due time. For the moment, you'll have to be satisfied with Shirogane's display," she ascertains with a strong nod.

And causes the mask to crack, the soldier's brows to interject. "… Huh? Me?"

"Hm? What? You've a mock battle scheduled for the morning training, don't you? Your Gekishin has been outfitted with the XM3 to serve as a demonstrator of what one could expect of a cadet learning under the new OS should resemble. Didn't I tell you?" She says, dripping a few droplets of acid, as she looks away and ruffles her hair. Only to lightly chuckle at the small sigh he releases, the relaxation into gestures she is used to seeing.

"Understood. I shall try my best, *XO,* ma'am," he salutes, giving a firm nod. Which bolts equal seriousness into her features, a momentary narrowing of her eyes and lips.

The retinue begins to inquire about the matters spawning the decision to have the soldier as the demonstrator, and she deflects the questions with enough ease. Giving a nod to her soldier, she waves and dismisses him. With one slow and court bow towards the guests, he turns around and aims for the door.

"Excuse me, cadet," until the Chairman calls for him, approaching the soldier with slow steps.

"Yes, Chairman?" He asks, stopping and standing in attention.

The old man pulls and straightens his dark suit, slowly as his tone are his steps. Giving the soldier a good once over, he smiles up at

the poker face. "It has been most surprising, the news you've delivered. Could we expect a similar performance to come in this training?"

"I shall try not to disappoint, sir," he affirms, giving a nod.

"Is that so? I know it might be out of place however, have you considered pursuing a career as a test pilot?"

"… Sadly, while that avenue has been suggested to me already," his sight veers towards the scientist, that is again indulging, reveling in the incredulity soon to be smashed to pieces, "my place is in this base, sir," he states, returning the gaze and another nod, tightening his hands.

As opposed to his expectations, the Chairman smiles and returns the nod. "I see… Frankly, this answer is also good to hear, cadet. It is a blessing to see a fresh cadet holding onto such composure during a meeting such as this one, to show such grit while being under the direct orders of the XO." *It truly is a blessing, to see someone who can stand behind her in such tranquility,* he relents within, again fiddling with his beard.

Yet, the soldier's expression tightens slightly, looking down. "I am merely following orders, sir."

"Still, one would be remiss not to acknowledge the value of your presentation, regardless of the circumstances that have removed your name from the simulator's documents. Certain I am you will… prove to be a valuable ally for the XO."

"… *XO Kouzuki* does not indulge in charity, this is nothing but the expected results I have to deliver after all the setbacks my presence has given her. Otherwise," grimacing slightly, coughing, he returns his hands to the seams, stillness to both breathing and features, "the moment I am no longer usefulshe'll discard this useless jester away,"he concludes, looking back at her for a moment before shaking his head. *" After all, she did say she'd only aid me 'so long*

*as I help her'*," he repines inside, foolishly blinding himself once again. *"There is no way* Y *uuko would truly allow herself to show such emotion as she did yesterday, she's just manipulating me into opening up to her by pulling at my strings, knowing what another her meant for me. Not that she could really understand… how I felt at the end of it all… how it felt to feel you vanishing from my hold."*

"I see, I concur your situation is rather delicate," the man gives a nod, yet remains smiling. "By the by cadet Shirogane, do you favor card games?"

"Huh? I mean, yes, some of them I do. Why do you ask, sir?"

"Oh, it's merely that I found your words slightly concerning, you see," he looks back, back at the chuckles of the scientist in the midst of a debate, allowing a sigh to finally escape yet never losing the smile. "You see cadet, the jester is usually it is seen as a worthless card in most games."

"… What? Oh, you mean how it isn't allowed in some games?" He asks, raising a brow at the unexpected curve ball.

"Indeed, that is one motive. Even when it isn't exiled from the deck it could be employed as a penalty in many games. In a way, the jester is made to suffer the brunt of the punishments, branded as a card of ill omen," he says, low, before turning to face the soldier once again. This time, his features light up as he takes a singular step closer, leaving the docility of the smile, brandishing the inner edge of a blade in the stare. "However, there are other games in which the jester is allowed to reside in the deck alongside all the other cards in equal footing, and then it is that the its true strength shines through. As the figure who is always joking besides the king, no one pays much mind to the joker. Almost as if it were an ornament, a piece of furniture in the background. And it is why no one can ascertain the joker's true strength, why the joker can seize up all other members of the court and speak truths others wouldn't dare to bring to the king's attention."

"Huh… So you're referring to how the joker can be used as a sort of wildcard?" He asks, lost as a penguin in a desert regarding the seriousness, the firmness of the Chairman's stance and the dissonance it has with the rather silly discussion they're having.

The man forwards a few nods, once more grasping his beard and lowering his shoulders. "That's right, the jester has the ability of adapting itself to the hand you require, becoming the key piece to ending the game in victory. I believe this gives the otherwise punished jester an unparalleled power, for it can be a knight or an ace in the hole… or even a king itself in disguise," he says, somber, smirking and showing his fake, pristine white teeth back at the soldier. "Thus, the value of the jester is not in what others see in it or how it's usually treated, but in how skillfully its wielder can play it, for even a punished jester can be used as efficient bait."

"I see…"

"Thus, even if your situation does prove to be perilous indeed, do not lose spirit, cadet Shirogane. You've shown to be able to deliver satisfactory results, after all. I for one am looking forward to hearing about any new ideas you might forward in the future," he smiles and nods, offering a hand to the soldier.

Who takes it and returns a firm handshake, a clear nod. "Thank you, sir. Your words are appreciated."

Yet, as he tries to pull away the Chairman does not end the lock of their hands. Smirking once more, letting small embers reside in his eyes. "I also am looking forward to seeing what kind of jester he turns out to be for the XO, cadet," he whispers, the unblinking stare, the blight in between words enough to spur contraction in the soldier's features. "In any case, I've held you long enough. Best of luck in your training, cadet. We'll be watching you, with great interest."

"… Thank you, sir," he salutes, before slowly turning around and leaving the room, before blasting away down the hallway.

Sitting back, the Chairman douses the inquiries that upon the scientist fall with a wave, smiling at her and young Yashiro, who hides behind the lab coat. "Now then, if I might ask, the Gekishin unit the cadet will be piloting during this training wouldn't happen to be outfitted with the parts you've spoke about before?" He asks, gasps and gaping ensuing in the members of his retinue.

The chuckles from the scientist only enlarge the already comedic shock they were displaying. "My, was it that obvious, Chairman?"

"Haha, you wouldn't allow such a tantalizing opportunity to deliver a royal flush pass you by, XO."

"Well, what can I say? In the meantime, allow me to present to you the project to refurbish some parts of the Gekishin to new standards. Yashiro," she orders, the assistant hurries to her keyboard.

The demolishing performance of a black Gekishin facing off against many others amidst the ruins of the city at night, the testings of the Blood squadron, the drills of the Valkyries thus far, and some meager intel on the expected performance of the new parts devised are forwarded, kitties and thunders all over again.

"… So as you can see, the cadet's training will be both serve as a test for the new Gekishin parts and the XM3. As I've shown you, the XM3 does require certain parts from my own research which is why I am asking for your cooperation in these deals."

"It is understandable," the Chairman relents, nodding as he watches the movements of the dark knight before the Gekishin engages into an Albright Turn. "Of course, we'd be overjoyed to nurture the partnership we've established with Alt IV, XO. However," entwining his fingers, resting his chin onto them, he smiles, "the progress presented isn't decisive enough to warrant a shift to a new OS, much less for us to become the backers of the proposition."

"Well, that much is true," she says, returning the smirk while placing a hand on her waist, looking back at young Yashiro. "Then, allow me

to show you a glimpse of what could truly be achieved should you support my proposition."

Replacing the footage of the prior fights, a new setting zooms into the screens. Once more it is nighttime, yet the frames shown leave everyone, even the Chairman, lacking sounds and air for a moment. The valiant yellow trades paint with the walls in an attempt to escape from the savage assault of the midnight blue, slashes that meet, windows that collapse, buildings that are hollowed. It always ends the same, with a struggle of Takamura's Takemikazuchi against the Kagerou of the soldier, almost evenly matched.

"So as you can see," she says with a grand gesture, raising her chin and chest, a smirking devil drowning chuckles, "with the right upgrades, even a base Kagerou could face off against a Type-00."

"XO Kouzuki, this is no jesting, is it?" The Chairman asks, blinking quickly as the Kagerou took reign over the skies, trying to skewer the golden plating from behind in an almost perfect maneuver.

"Of course it is, you should already know not to cast doubt to my statements, Chairman," she asserts, still smirking. Upon the call, young Yashiro goes and delivers the folders with the Kagerou's modified parts' intel. The scientist nods to her assistant, pacing in front of the rather large desk in the place. "Again, if left to my decision, I'd rather have Daikuuji Corp be who manufactures both the sims and the new parts for the Gekishin and Kagerou. The official meeting will be held on the twelfth of the current month, so I admit there is little time left for you to reach a decision. I would like to extend an invitation to the meeting as well, should you welcome this proposition."

A beeping echoes, Yashiro notifies the cadets are already on their respective positions to begin their mock battle. The scientist allows the guests to finish their drinks and rearrange their papers, notebooks, and pens, sharing a smile with the Chairman.

"Well, why don't we simply let actions do the talking for some minutes?" She suggests, walking away from the screens as Yashiro sends the correct feedback into each TV.

Sadly for the scientist, she just overshot the duration of the mock battle by several orders of magnitude, you'd understand.

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*Around two hours later.*

*(Yuuko's Office.)*

**[Yuuko]**

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"So such performance is commonplace for the cadet, huh," Chairman Daikuuji nods, still threading his beard as his features lower and lower.

"Impressive, isn't it," so I chuckle back. "I believe it is quite fair to affirm that if a single cadet could overpower its comrades in such manner through the XM3 despite the technological gap between a Gekishin and a Fubuki, the elites and veterans will undoubtedly pay back gracious dividends in the battlefield under this OS."

… Still, way to break the stage, *Takeru.* I told you to best your squadmates, not to ravage their composure, for fuck's sake. I do admit, the silent admiration of the retinue was fun to see, yes, but I think I'm gonna need to tone down your 'best efforts' from now on. I don't need Marimo sending me double digit calls every time I require you to provide a show of might, thank you very much. I know you said you desired to force your squad to improve further by showing your full skill under the XM3, but there is a difference between winning in moderation and an unadulterated massacre.

… Guess I should have seen that coming from the leader of the feared ghosts of the Empire. Neither mercy nor justice for the wicked, right *Captain Takeru?*

Doing a short spin and finishing my coffee, biting onto a muffin afterwards, I smirk towards him as I lean and rest onto the desk. "While Shirogane's tactics are not what one would normally expect, I believe that the results he is providing us with under the Reaper's harshest course yet are proof enough of the worth his ideas possess."

"I am not objecting to it in any way, Yuuko-kun," he lightly laughs, waving a hand about. "I would appreciate it if you ceased to try and send the jaws of my fellows to the floor with each and every presentation you hoist."

"Oh, but where's the fun in that? If I'm not cause of shock, then I'm doing something wrong. And… You do deserve the show of might, after all that has happened in this year. The support you've shown to Alt IV amidst the pressure will be repaid tenfold, I assure you of that."

"Don't, it is unnecessary," he sighs while waving a single finger, shaking his head, complexion dulling. "You've endured much on your own, more so with whatever was stymieing your research. I'm merely playing my part to support the project from my position, nothing else. Although, I shall relent that I am quite flabbergasted at this new pawn you've acquired," he takes a slow sip, holding her gaze from beyond the rim. "Who would have said you'd favor such offensive methodologies, Yuuko-kun?"

"… Sometimes, the threat of aggression is more effective than violence itself. If Shirogane trouncing all obstacles I throw his way serves as a deterrent and a pillar upon which to base my developments, I see no issues with granting him the approval to continue to pilot as he does."

"I see… Haha, I admit the cadet was an unexpected but welcome surprise. However, those new weapons were, how to say it… quite unorthodox," he admits, a cloth wiping the side of his forehead. "I never thought I'd read the phrase 'chainsaw-gun' and see it actually work…"

"Well, Shirogane is kind of crazy, to be honest," I chuckle, spinning slowly, giving small bites to the sweetness of the muffin. "The weapons do require some revisions, and while he insisted on the idea of the gun I believe there might be a better usage for the vial system he came up with. Would you be interested in forwarding a bid for the rights of either the weapons, the sims, or the Shin Kagerou project?"

"Haha, if it were only up to me, I would try and aim to hoard all which you've presented today," he smiles, finishing his coffee. "I will admit, with our current manpower, I can only aid you with the XM3's processing units, the new simulators, and some of the simpler weapons designs," nodding back and staring, he holds my gaze.

So I return a nod, a smile. "That is plenty enough, Chairman. Your support is much appreciated."

"Please, Yuuko-kun. There is no need for such formality."

"Oh, really? Well, anyways, things are going to start getting interesting from now on. It's nice to have you on board with the plans, Daikuuji-san."

"Haha, every time you proclaim anything with such impulse, lighting up your eyes in ignition, most complex situations end up befalling me… So," he clears his throat, crossing both legs and arms, gulping slowly and drying his mouth while leaving a cloak of silence lingering for a few moments, a few seconds, "I assume your project is ready to start its final phase?"

"Well, what do you think?" I smile, playing with my hair.

"Oh dear, this explains the gusto you've shown during the meeting," he laughs weakly. "Were the negotiations for the XG line successful?"

Shrugging, I shake my head as I go for another spin. "Of course not, they refused for the umpteenth time. This little test with the cadet

was but a prelude to see if he could achieve a decent performance to convince others of the XM3's prowess. I'd like to believe America won't remain in opposition after an honest showing from my end, but I am not as naive as to simply hope for the best. So, any news about your project?"

Hunching over as he leans back into the sofa, his eyes gradually close, markings claiming his forehead as he shakes his head. "No, we've obtained no progress on the G-Sun. The attempts of the R&D team to enhance the chipsets you handed us have been met with failure."

"How large a failure are we speaking of?"

"They can't manage to start up either of the three units," he relents with a heavy and short sigh, folding the cloth after wiping his lips. "Perhaps, the XM3 and your new core design could allow us to bypass the taxing system requirements to operate the machines."

"It will be our backup plan if the negotiations break down again," I sigh, emptiness in my stomach. "I suppose I can count on your support to contact Lockweed so that they begin to lobby for the proposition to be accepted?"

"I will do what I can within my boundaries," he returns a firm nod.

"… Also, do you think we could obtain even a single unit of the produced Rapiers along the XGs?" I ask, leaning forward.

He blinks in quick succession, slightly moving backwards, readjusting his posture. "Why would you desire that, Yuuko-kun? Those TSFs are untested prototypes, and outdated by current standards."

"Well, that might be so, but they do have a few nice tricks built into their frames, if my intel isn't mistaken. Do you think we can gain the agreement?"

He groans, hiding his lips as he looks down. "It would be… arduous to gain both lines from the Hi-MAERF Project. If they would welcome the notion, I sincerely doubt they'd bestow you with more than a pair of Rapiers," he admits, posture falling down.

That is plentiful enough, I only have two pilots in mind to be in charge of the XF-108. And if *Takeru* thought it important enough to bring to my attention, it's worth a shot. We already have the negative so inquiring and showing interest in the Rapier is but a small matter that just maybe might play in my favor.

"In any case, it is good to see you in proper form once again, Yuuko-kun," he says, again smiling. "Perhaps, procuring yourself a new assistant has aided your spirits?"

"Huh? Oh, well, Shirogane is nothing but another pawn. A useful piece, is all," I affirm, holding his gaze, narrowing mine into his.

Yet there is no constriction, no hesitation as he once more laughs. "There is no need for you to raise thorns in defense. I am merely surprised that you'd bestow such leeway to a mere cadet, to allow him to stand so close to your person."

"I am merely ensuring he does not cause further issues, that's all. Shirogane is but another grunt, a promising one yes, but nothing but a pawn at the end of the day."

"… Is that so?" Once more interlocking his fingers, a thin smile, a firm stare he forwards as silence lingers for a second. "I believe the roughness in his eyes, the stoic demeanor he can endow in while in your presence is proof enough that… this new cadet is more than he appears to be at first glance. It is also odd that you'd give him credit over these developments, when there was nothing stopping you from coercing the lowly cadet into relinquishing his spoils to Alt IV."

"… I'm merely keeping our relation in mind, it does me no good to gain the animosity of a future subordinate. There is no need for a leader to impose such restrictions onto its followers, one must be

gracious while at the peak. Is that what you've taught me all those years ago?" I rest my chin onto a hand, smirking back.

"Oh, yes, indeed I did," he returns another small chuckle, quickly clouding over his features as a finger courses through his beard. "It is still surprising to see. One would expect the fabled XO Kouzuki to show no second chances to anyone, much less to keep the problem person so close to herself…" Eyes narrow as I hold my breath, arms folding. He again chuckles, not lifting the cheer back to his face. "I won't divulge the presence of the cadet nor will I inquire any more into his situation. However, I'd be remiss not to warn you. The other side will strike back at your project in an attempt to halt your victory, sooner or later. Leaving loose ends and open wounds for them to prey upon is unwise."

"Thanks for the forewarning, Chairman. But rest assured, Shirogane won't become a cause of concern."

"I see… Were you planning to discard the jester once his uses run out?"

"… Pardon?"

He dares, dares to chuckle. "Oh, you see, the cadet seemed rather… reticent to welcome the notion of his prolonged stay in the base as I gave some parting words to him. He described himself as a 'useless jester' as far as your plans are concerned, Yuuko-kun." He coughs, sobriety returning to his features, clear as a lake or the sky as of now. "I know not what arrangement nor plans you have in wait for the cadet, however certainly some concise show of support would be welcomed? I admit, it would be most regretful to see such a promising mind caught in the middle of the warring factions of the Alt Plans."

"… Excuse me, he called himself as a… A useless jester, you say?"

What the actual fucking hell? What does that even mean? I… I was more than clear already to you, wasn't I? No, could this be some sort

of pouty act on his end? Did… my kiss upset him to such lengths? Why?! I… thought we were on the same page, desiring the aid and support of the other?

… And after seeing his repeated, and slightly pathetic, attempts at reaching me in Sendai. Seriously, I never thought I'd be saying this but how glad I am he knows when to end his arguments. To almost start a fight with the guards in the complex… all to give me some pie Kyozuka-san made, another drawing from Yashiro, a letter from Marimo…

I cannot fully recall everything, it's all just bits and pieces, fuzzy and distorted. But his attitude was like that one night when he forced me back into my room. Dealing with that on a daily basis… Sigh… I suppose, *Takeru* does deserve more credit than I usually give him. Not exactly much, mind you, but still.

"I don't desire to delve deeper than I should, however, if you require a place to send the cadet to if his position in the base places you in a compromising position, I could-"

"Shirogane will be staying here, Chairman. He might be… a bit more trouble than he's worth, but I am certain that he'll pay back the chips placed on his back tenfold."

"Oho… It is odd, to see you ascertain such a thing with a resounding a tone," he says, holding my stare, undisturbed. "I suppose, you desire to hold onto your current hand?"

"Indeed. The cadet won't be cause of distress to my project, I assure you of that," I state, returning the gaze fully.

"… I see, that is reassuring to hear."

"Hm? Why? Do you… have some motive to desire Shirogane to remain here?" I lean forward, frosting my own tone. I did not think the Chairman could be related to *Takeru* in any way, however…

"Oh, no, nothing of the sort," he again laughs, finally relaxing and going for another sip. "I'm merely relieved to see you've found someone you'd welcome to stand besides you, even if it is only a mere pawn."

"Wh- Chairman, Shirogane is nothing but a cadet. While he has provided decent results thus far, he is nothing but another pawn in the large scheme of things," I affirm, giving a light slap on a pile of papers.

"That might be so, but it is has been arduous for you to find personnel that would work in your shadow with such efficiency," he remains smiling, finishing his drink. "In any case, so long as you forward a convincing enough appeal, my fellows should be able to work their expertise to allowing the XGs to finally stop collecting dust." He stands, sighs, and once more gives a nod my way. "I trust that this XM3 you've produced will show spectacular results during this coming meeting, so I shall endeavor to bring good news to you soon after."

"That will be much appreciated… after all, this vital piece reached completion in part due to the final exploits of 2nd Lt Daikuuji in her last sortie."

"Yuuko-kun, you need not tell me anything," he winces, waving a hand, shaking his head with even more apathy. "Ayu chose to lead her own life, to live alongside those she considered her fellows and conquer her own battlefield until the final curtain fell, I'm certain. While many words shall forever remain unspoken in my chest now that she departed earlier than me, if your project bears fruit then… then that is all that I could ever ask of you, not as the Chairman but as a father."

"… I will deliver, Chairman Daikuuji," I nod firmly, holding his gaze, a hand outwards. We share a handshake, he barely regains the prior smile.

"If and when the XGs arrive, my fellows are at your disposal, XO," he affirms, back to business once the handshake ends. Coughing and straightening his suit, he once more nods back. "And if you ever desire to attain a few more bottles of quality alcohol, please don't hesitate to call."

"Ha, I might be contacting you sooner than I thought then," I return the chuckling as I press the button and unlock the door.

"I see, I shall be readying myself in that case. Regardless, this visit has been a most welcome surprise, XO. I certainly hope the coming meeting measures favorably against today."

"Oh, believe me, it will."

"Haha… You truly do enjoy flaunting your advantages whenever you can, Yuuko-kun… Still, I shall be looking forward to what you've brewing," he says as he gives a small nod, starting to walk towards the exit, "as well as for what you have planned for this special cadet."

"I said, he's nothing but-"

"Nothing but a jester," he looks back, smirking. "A card you've chosen to keep close to your grip. While I won't divulge anything, I advise you to keep the boy under watch, so that the card doesn't get… confiscated away."

"… What are we speaking about here?"

"Oh, nothing much. I merely hope this one jester does bring auspicious boons to you," he sighs, relaxing his shoulders, giving me a small, honest smile. "I am not blind, Yuuko-kun. Your shortage of reports, these new developments, the brand new OS, it all started near the end of October. A birdie told me that could be when he arrived to the base. So, in all honesty, I simply wish this unexpected ally is able to remain by you. It has been indeed long since I've seen you smile in such shimmering cheer, after all."

"… I'm merely glad I can progress in my research, Chairman. Shirogane has little to nothing to do with that," I say, ruffling my hair, looking away.

"And yet, you allow him to present his own arguments during a crucial meeting," he again smiles, chuckling lightly. "People will notice, Yuuko-kun. Inquiries might even be coming as we speak, if the HC is aware of his involvement in the little simulator's development. You've lost much, and there is little more than I can do in support for the project… So do keep this card close to you, even if you aim to sacrifice it at the most appropriate moment. The cadet is truly a goldmine for you, and even if his eccentric maneuvers do seem hard to replicate, such a champion is what the STF so desperately required. I assume, the Rapiers you desire to acquire are for the boy to pilot?"

"Sigh… I can't truly hide anything from you, huh."

"Haha, one of the advantages I have as your old professor," he nods, lightly hitting his chest. "Thus is why I insist," once more clouding his features, nodding and drilling his gaze into mine, "use this jester to its maximum efficiency. And if there is a… forced play coming towards your plans, do not hesitate to discard it for the benefit of your end board."

"… I see. Is something looming behind the horizon, then?"

"Well, I suppose you've heard of both issues. Of the troublesome sushi bar and the random visitors to settlements beyond the defense lines… We have been hard pressed for spare parts on both ends, and my inquiries met with," he grimaces, scoffing and fuming a prominence, "unpleasant ends. I am glad to see you've procured a fine tool at this stage, I only can dare to hope you need not discard him too early in your plans," he affirms, nodding in dejection, everything in him collapsing. "It truly is good to see someone willing to remain by you in such composure, after all."

"I see. I shall see to these… issues that are arising, do not worry. And as far as Shirogane is concerned, a jester he might be but you should know wildcards are not to be underestimated in the right hands."

"Haha, truly I do. Well then, I shall be taking my leave here, since my fellows should be done with their little tour in Hangar 90 by now. Until the twelfth, XO Kouzuki."

"Until then, Chairman. And worry not, the trial run will be truly an interesting event to witness," I affirm with a smirk, and we both chuckle for a moment before he departs.

# Shrouded Silver Blossom

" *Things have gone wrong, they do more often than they don't*

*I was a child before*

*A soldier in defense*

*I'll take the leap, I've gone so far for lesser gold*

*I wanna know this life, by your side*

*I don't wanna try to fight this love*

*How dangerous can it be?*

*I know the odds are so unfavorable, and honesty's forsakable*

*So many run for safety, run from the-*

*Danger, of falling in love like this*

*Danger, of falling apart*

*In the hands… of another…*

*Danger in falling in love like this*

*Cold sweat craving the dark*

*So completely… so sweetly…*

*… Danger"*

*Danger, by Etro Anime. From Digital Devil Saga: Avatar Tuner.*

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*Chapter 93:*

**Shrouded Silver Blossom**

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*December 6th. A few minutes before 7 PM.*

*(Hallway, near the changing rooms.)*

**[Meiya]**

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"You don't have to apologize, for real," Takeru says, as slow and apathetic as one could possibly be, dismissing it all with but a brush of a hand and facing away from me. "So, was that all?"

Veiling my sight momentarily and keeping air hostage, I step forward towards him. "… Takeru, why won't you accept my apology?"

He once more looks elsewhere, slow and minute movements as he escapes backwards. "There's no need to apologize for how you feel. We don't see eye to eye, and that's perfectly fine, Mitsurugi."

"… You also refuse to refer to me by name, despite our accord," I cannot help but to note, a slight purse in my lips, equally slow a contraction in the pit of my stomach at the lack of an answer, even a mere acknowledgment. "I admit I was undeservedly harsh towards your person, yet please allow me to mend my mistake."

"Sigh… You don't have to do this."

"Yes, I must," I fold my arms, giving a frontal stare into the immutable curtain which has befallen the gestures I knew in him. "You have been trying an utmost effort not to inconvenience the squadron, and yet I stepped over your goodwill once again. Furthermore, if you'd be so kind…" my eyes veer away upon meeting no change, arms release themselves and hang loosely, "I would welcome the notion to become your fellow, as whoever granted you the sword once was for you. If you'd rather have us start over, for me to regain your trust, then I shall acquiesce to-"

"Mitsurugi," he stops, cold, slightly frowning before shrugging and allowing a meager smile to rise. "Can you be level with me and tell me what you're really after?"

"Huh? I am not jesting, I honestly desire to earn back your trust," I state, returning his gaze. Amidst the silence of the hallway, with only a distant echo of hurried footsteps as our company, the almost absent stare only spawns greater a contracting void in my lungs.

For some reason, I truly do not like the look in his face. Be it the new longer hairstyle he now favors or the neutral facade, it makes my skin crawl to be on the receiving end of such deafening extension of quietness. It is almost as nighttime was when I was younger, the grayed out walls, the impregnable silence extending for hours on end with no change to be made. *Why won't you show me a mere emotion? Anything at all, even anger would be welcomed at this point. Takeru, please, look at me…*

Gradual and slow, the descent of his body onto the wall, both hands cradling the back of his head and fiddling with the headband he still has, his eyes remain on the ceiling. "So you ain't here trying to pry any answers or anything outta me?"

"Wh- I would do nothing of the sort! I have been… acting inappropriately, I admit and accept your judgment. However, I would not try and deceive you to such ends."

"Then," he cuts in, tension in his features, a dead straight gaze he forwards, "care to enlighten me on the motives why you told the guards about Sumika?"

"Eh? Ah… Well, I was…" Unable to face the stare, that wrathful pyre he also endowed during the CCSE, I can only sigh and veer my sight to the ground. "I was concerned over your health, over the possibility of you being overburdened due to the punishment. I did warn them of not taking the matter lightly," I nod his way, taking another step closer.

In the absolute void of the hallway, surrounded by the sterile scent of Clorox permeating, the unblinking eyes that seek nothing else drown everything else in sight. Even mere excess saliva is difficult to gulp, not a single muscle can bring about the smallest movement.

"You gave me your word," he barely whispers, looking away as both arms embrace each other, "and you smashed it to pieces in less than a day."

"Wh- That is not- I was only trying to aid you, however slightly! To make up for my mistakes is all I desire. I only-"

"And yet, the first thing you did as we docked earlier today was again bombard me with questions about my piloting," he says, rolling his eyes.

"You cannot possibly fault me, even the Instructor was bereft of words at your performance," I sigh and shake my head, face away from that which burns my sight.

I still cannot believe he neutralized both me and Yoroi at the same time, without any assistance might I add. Considering the Instructor received a call, and then seemed to be at the verge of a headache as Takeru reiterated his orders to not disclose anything, I assume this is also a result of his special missions. Another ripple of the punishment, of my weakness during the CCSE. And to make matters worse, Yashiro once more arrived to take him to another special mission as soon as we were done with our debriefing.

Absent from our afternoon lectures he was as well, thus I haven't been able to share even a word with Takeru until our night runs. And while I do welcome the harsh yet truthful advice he forwarded, as he supported Sakaki's idea to shuffle our positions and we all managed to clear yet another level of the course despite the setbacks, I am not pleased with the slow gestures, the lack of eye contact, the stillness in his voice.

Despite telling the cousins to take their leave for dinner after the training, Takeru did not aim towards the food storage and I almost did not catch up despite my hurried departure from the changing room. Sakaki did held me up for some moments until I clarified my intentions, but still, he has been in a most strange and somber mood today.

… Even if he once more smiled as teasingly as always when a few MP tried to cause friction as we came to the changing rooms, using himself as a shield when Ayamine was about to burst. Sigh…

" *I welcome the aid if you wanna share the pain, man. You wanna be special, too? Then come and lend me a hand in helping the XO with her random assignments. Of course, if you don't mind getting stuck with half rations and cold showers whenever you screw up, that is."*

I cannot believe he'd jest about such an arrangement… A blessing it was the MPs simply left as he tried and gain their 'support', although something tells me Takeru was actually threatening them for some reason.

And now, once more his features remain still, dull, cold.

"But you still broke your word," he says, once more looking away, shaking his head minutely.

"… Takeru, I shan't inquire into what caused your stellar piloting today, and I don't hold any mistaken views against you anymore. However, please believe me when I say I had no ill will when disclosing Kagami's name to-"

"It matters little, you did it and that's what counts," he sighs, leaving the wall and moving away without looking at me for even a millisecond. "I've no intention to antagonize you or anything, so let's keep things calm in the squad. Can we agree to that?"

"… Yes, we are in agreement in that regard. However," once more stepping towards him, entering his sight, I nod and hold the neutral

stare's pressure, "you truly cannot bestow upon me another chance? Surely we can still be fellows?"

"… Why?" He asks, taking a hasty step back, avoiding my gaze once more as if a source of heat it were. "You already made your feelings clear to me, there is nothing to-"

"I am apologizing," I insist, heaving another sigh. "Have you not been listening? I admit I… let my less stellar emotions control my actions. You're clearly not deserving of such animosity, and your words back then made it clear to me you do value our teachings dearly even when our views on the code differ. Thus," stepping once again towards him, bowing down, I lick over my lips as both hands clench, "could you give me another chance to earn your favor?"

…

"… And what happens the next time our views are in conflict?"

"Eh? Well…" idling a hand on my hair as I rise back, my eyes seek the ceiling for a moment. "We can debate on our views beforehand, so that such issues are not anymore."

"Sigh… Yeah, right," he scoffs with barely a move of his lips, rolling his eyes as he retracts further.

"I am being serious, however."

"Mitsurugi, if there is something I know about you is that you tightly cling onto the ideals you hoist dearly," he notes, with a small crossing of his brows, a layer of pungency to the words. "If we don't agree now, there's little debating over the matter will do. It's how you are, and that's it."

"… I was under the impression that you valued much whoever it was that bequeathed you with the sword. For you to display such voracious wrath during our battle yesterday, I believe there are ideals you, too, hoist with pride in your heart, Takeru," I firmly state, taking

another step forward. His apathy does not thaw, those eyes simply remain watching my every move, the thin line that is his mouth remains loyal to stillness. "I… do not believe our views to be irreconcilable, more if you would still desire to share that same fellowship with me. And the rest of the squad too, of course."

I wait, yet he does not answer.

Leaving me to the silence, once more denying me entrance to his sight.

Lips weave wordless phrases while he scratches his head, in the end he retracts behind the curtain once more.

"I understand you to be dejected at my choice, but it was only… born out of concern. You seem to still be exhausted, and I did not desire to see further burdens fall onto you. That is why, I am not asking your immediate forgiveness. Please, state your terms. Allow me to mend my carelessness," breathing in sharply, I once again bow down.

"… Why?"

"Huh?" Raising back, I find contortion to his features, disquiet in his lips and hands. "Takeru?"

"Why? What exactly do you want from me, Mitsurugi? We can remain as comrades even if our opinions differ, I won't hold it against you."

"… It certainly does not seem so, however. For one, you are still refusing to employ my name."

"Sigh… You already told me how you view me, I explained to you how I felt, and that's the end of the line. You don't need to apologize, for real. We're already comrades. Unless, of course," a finger slowly raises to the intersection of both brows, an eye twitches as lips and

cheeks regress inward, "that's not the real motive behind your inquiries," he says, forwarding a squinted gaze my way.

"What? I am being honest, there is no hidden meaning to my request. You must have seen how Ayamine and Tamase were all day today. If you once more show your usual cheer during the training, even if you do not hand over your forgiveness instantly, the morale of the squad will certainly improve. Please, Takeru, you truly cannot welcome my words?"

Finally fully returning my gaze, a slight pressure is inflicted onto his bottom lip. Eyes that remain on mine, nowhere else, fixation strong enough to elicit a gulp, a shiver on me. And a sigh, long and extended, lips that do not close as his shoulders drop, as he veils his sight and hits the wall.

"If I said yes and accepted to be your fellow, is that all you'd want me to be for you?"

"Huh? Uh, I, well- Wait, what you asking of me?"

"If you're only pressing due to your duty, to feeling indebted to an apology, please stop. There's no need, that's what I'm trying say. If you're trying to convince me to be your fellow, I'm also gonna have to ask you to stop. Don't try to recruit me into the IRG, because I'm telling the Instructor on you if you insist."

"Wh- I am doing nothing of the sort. You're deserving of the word, you were bequeathed a blade, were you not? Thus, if your records were cleared, and you welcomed the notion… I could vouch for you, so that it is made clear you're a rightful fellow."

A brow twitches, slow does he inhale as he observes my features. For a moment, then another, in silence. "Why? I can be your comrade without the need for me to follow the same code you do, right?" He tells, slow and dismissive, shrugging as he looks away.

Lips purse, something burns the underside of my ears, the twister in my gut ravishes me again. "Yet, that was only… because of my own misunderstandings. If there is truly no stain on your person and you cherish that woman so dearly, would you truly… not welcome the proposition?"

"Sigh… Why are you insisting so much?" He asks, clutching his face as Tsukuyomi did during the… ahem… ordeal with the misunderstanding.

" *Gulp*… I shall admit that I admire you. Both your skill and knowledge, the composure you usually display, and I welcome your lighthearted attitude. I've let my inner turmoil blind me, because I… do envy your aptitude and desired to one day reach your level." To stand by your side in equal footing, to one day best you in a sparring. Until, one day, somehow, that feeling became… wanting to you as my partner in my style, to share with you my growth. As shameful as it is to admit, even beyond my basest urges which would have me stare at his physique… to find someone who would approach me willingly, shares my style, and displays such resolve is truly nothing but a blessing. "All I desire is… for us to be on good terms, for you to be my fellow. There is no hidden meaning to my words, Takeru. Would you truly not welcome my proposition?"

"Of what?"

"Of becoming my fellow."

"Just that?"

"Huh?"

"Just fellows? Not… anything else?"

"Eh? W-What- Would you… desire something more with me?"

"Would you? I mean, it is weird that you're not giving an inch here despite already apologizing and all. I ain't dumb, Mitsurugi," he says,

low, as he steps forward and locks his sight on mine. "Is a fellow all you want me to be for you?"

"Ugh, well, I- *Cough* . I mean… I only-"

"If you only want a fellow," he shrugs, turning away and departing, "I'm sure there's plenty of people waiting for you in the IRG."

"W-Wait, Takeru!" I reach out as he takes a step towards the stairs, as he grips onto the railing. The coldness of his hand gives me pause, yet he does not pull away. His fingers give a gentle squeeze as he looks back, in silence, waiting. "Assuming I were to extend such a proposition your way, what-" I gulp, returning the smallest grip onto his hold, "what would your answer be?"

"… And if your duty clashed with me being close, what would you do? Discard me away? Ask for me to remain close yet keeping your distance to avoid friction?" He asks, slightly frowning as his hand limply slips from my grasp.

"Why are those the only options? I… am only a Tozama, if you must know. That is why, well," I give another small bow, hands joining, "your fellowship matters to me, which is why I grew so upset… at the thought of you turning your back onto our teachings. I admit, it was petty of me. My apologies."

"It's cool, stop bowing," he sighs, shrugs, then turns away, starting to descend the stairs. "We're still comrades, so don't feel like I'm screening you out or anything, okay? Well, see you-"

"Takeru, please," hurriedly skipping a few steps, again reaching his side in a small rest of the stairs.

His brows cross as he waits. "I need to report to the XO, Mitsurugi. Today was a busy day, and I haven't heard from her since morning. So if we're done here-"

"You are not allowing me to answer," I state, groaning as my arms fold. "If I- If such a proposition went your way, would you consider becoming my fellow?"

"Again, just that?"

"I… *Cough…* I admit I do- wouldn't mind being something more, i-if you so desired and we were compatible as partners in service. Would you be wishing to test my character to ensure I shan't betray your trust, then so be it. If it brings you any respite, you are free to request what you will to see that I truly mean my words of support, my fellow," I affirm with a nod, returning the intensity, the lock of our eyes onto one another. "You did… desire to foster fellowship with me, according to your words during yesterday's bout, correct?"

"… No."

"Huh? However, I thought you, well, said you wished to share with me what you had with… that person."

Sighing once again, slouching against the wall, almost as if desiring to melt into it, he looks up while licking his lips. Stealing a gaze at me, then at the ground, finally folding his arms and shaking his head, Takeru's complexion tightens once more. "Exactly, that's what I meant. But not how you're taking it."

"Then, how did you mean? Sparring partners, mutual retainers, perhaps?" He stares at me, narrowing his sight before heaving a sigh with a dejected sway of his head. "What- What is it with that reaction?"

"I know you're kind of oblivious but this is too much, even for you. And that's coming from me, of all people."

"Then, what did you mean? If you refuse to be my fellow, and would desire something more then, what else could you want? Are you implying that… you were saying such words with-"

"Yeah, dammit, I meant it romantically, you stupid idiot," he frowns, fumes, hits the walls.

"I-I see… **Wait, what?!** Y-You were looking at me in such a way?"

Not looking away he returns a nod, posture sinking as I fumble syllables out of my lips. "Sigh… I thought we could get along, and maybe be something more for each other… Just that, a stupid hopeful feeling, is all," again, hunching over, as if tilting over the edge of canyon, about to fall into bottomless nothingness.

"Is that so?" I suppose, that gives another layer to how supportive he always was towards me. Even to worry about my back during the CCSE, to try and make amends between us while I- Wait a moment… "Takeru, you- you did mean those words with… well… the desire for us to be together?"

"Siiigh…" He nods, not lifting his eyes, posture, or anything at all.

"Then, well," folding my arms, gulping once more, my insides are scorching, "does that equal you shared such a bond with… that person as well?"

"Hm? Yeah, a long time ago…"

"Pardon?"

But- But Tsukuyomi said there wasn't anything of the sort between you two… that she was like a second mother for you.

Yet, the dejection, the contraction of his lips, of his eyelids… W-Were you truly in love with-

"And since it was a bad experience for me," he straightens up, inhaling sharply, both hands tend and care at his face, hewing frozen composure into his features, "I don't think we should interact with each other any more than necessary."

"… What? A bad experience? Yet, weren't you, well, in love with-"

"In the end… they chose their duty over me. When the coin landed, our priorities were in opposing sides. So, please," he bows down swiftly, as formal and proper as everybody else has done since as far as I can recall, "could you keep your distance from me, Mitsurugi?"

"… I can comprehend the reticence you explain, however, the judgment you cast is most unfair. You yourself hold onto your resolve with an iron grip, what had you refusing to support that person?"

A collapsing smile raises, almost silent chuckling leaves his lips. In a mixture of hilarity and sadness he continues to lightly laugh, slightly shaking his head as he does. "I tried, you know. But it's hard, to try and help someone who puts their duty before their own person."

"… All of us, at one point, will lose our individuality. The burdens that on our shoulders rest, all the people that we must support from our position cannot be ignored. I believe you should be praising that person's resolve, even if their absence was grievous for you, Takeru. Isn't the example she bestowed you with her life something you honor to this very day?"

"Yeah, it is… And I hate it."

"Excuse me?"

"I hate it, always acting so self-righteously, never telling me anything, taking it all on her own despite me being right there to lend a shoulder," he hits the wall, again, and again, all the more strongly the more his features tighten, the more he bites onto his lips, the more contorting surfaces near his eyes. "Love is a two-player game, Mitsurugi. And while one can break a relationship if the fire dies down, it has to be clear and decisive. I don't… wanna be strung along anymore by people that only claim to want to have me close, only to focus on their duties full time later."

"What? However, if such is their desire, would it not be in your interest to support them, isn't it?"

"I'm not judging," he counters, ceasing his assault on the wall, heaving another sigh, relaxing. "If that's the kind of life they wanted to lead, then just… tell me, and that's it. We could have ended things on good terms if it wasn't gonna work out on her end. I just… I don't wanna get my hopes up again only to be bitch slapped by reality a third time. So no, I don't think I should become your fellow or anything more than what we are now."

"What- Why are you- Wait, a third time? H-How many relationships have you been in?!"

"… Does it even matter? Let's just-"

"No, wait a moment! I know not what burdens fell onto your prior… lovers?" hesitation claims my voice, causing a stutter, a localized quake to assail me. Takeru dares to simply shrug, avoiding my eyes. Mmgh… "However, I wouldn't do such cruel an act on you. I mean it when I say I want you as my fellow, Takeru. And if you'd desire something else… w-we can debate on the matter, in private," I nod his way, compacting my body, a gentle quiver on my knees as he stares, lukewarm feathers ascending from there, embers swirling in my stomach. *D-Do not stare at me so intently in utter silence…*

Yet, one of his eyes twitches. "Then, let's say you and I start dating."

"… Huh? Wait, are you being serious about this?"

"What, you aren't?"

"Eh?! I, uh, ahem… So, you were saying?"

"Let's say that we get together, and you're then called to serve, to act on your duty because of the blade," he whispers, petrification claiming his person, except for the eye that remains softly twitching. "What happens then?"

"… You could come with me, if such a scenario were to happen."

"What if that's forbidden?"

"Why would it be? If- Well, assuming you'd honestly forward such a notion-"

"Meiya," he tells, loud, echoing into me as he smiles, bright as the clear sky, as he always had been, "I ain't dumb. I can tell which House our blades belong to, and who you serve. If she required your services, do you really think a relationship with a no-name *baseborn* like me would be accepted by the IRG?"

"W-Well, no, it would not come easily… However, that is only conjecture. Furthermore, do not reach the wrong conclusion, please. I only resemble that person physically, there is no… no bond between us…"

"Meiya, please," chuckling, Takeru shrugs. "I won't say a thing, I know you… serve the sun which illuminates the Empire. I can tell, after the whole mess with the blade, the General coming to the base, and your strong resolve. And I ain't holding anything against you."

"… Is that so. Then…" idling a hand on my hair, shallow is my breathing, compact becomes my posture, yet I now cannot flee his stare, "are you afraid of the consequences that come with being near my person? You should not, I shall endeavor to mend what mine own folly-"

"Meiya," another step closer, the smiling sky fills my view, "don't change the subject, please. You say you want me to be your fellow, to stay by you. Then, what happens if you're called to serve? What happens if my own code clashes with yours?"

"What? Say no nonsense, you were given a blade. Certainly we can reach an agreement?" I propose, holding his gaze, feeling the tail end of his breathing caressing my chin.

"But you will support the notion to fulfill your oath, correct?" He insists, clouds to the sky, a cold gust onto my skin.

"But of course, how could I not?"

"… Then, that's all I needed to hear," closing his eyes, Takeru turns away, descends the stairs in quite the haste. And for a moment, I can only stare as he departs.

Only when I lose sight of him do my feet finally react. "H-Hey, wait! Takeru, you cannot simply end the conversation in such manner!"

A few MP pass us by, daring to glare his way before I forward a stare of my own. Once I confirm there are no onlookers, I stomp towards the snail's pace he endows at the moment.

"Takeru, please, is this truly such an impossibility for you?" I ask, grasping at his shoulder.

He stops, barely moving his head to see me. "We've gone over this already…"

"Any predicament of yours is also mine, as my fellow that you are. Even if you… wouldn't request such a bond with me, I am obliged to aid your woes. Please, talk to me about what has you this preoccupied. Allow me to aid you, even if only as an apology."

"Sigh…"

"Please, speak to me…" Look at me again, please let me in, Takeru… *Don't remain silent, please. Look my way, I beg of you. "* Why do you believe you'd be forsaken were you to become my fellow? Is it because of whoever bequeathed you with your sword?"

"You didn't hear, did you."

"Huh? What are-"

He stares, for a moment, before he lightly laughs. "You're too similar to her, Meiya. And I… don't think I could stand by you, as simply a fellow."

"… P-Pardon? Are you truly saying that-"

"Because it was hell, those days."

The severity of the tone, the slamming of a tidal wave upon the shore, the tension which claims his features is enough to make me step away. The gritting of his teeth, the scorching in his glare, is just like it was during the downpour when we were ambushed by the cousins.

"I simply kept moving forward while waiting for any signal, anything at all. She might have been trying to lead by example, show me her resolve through her acts, but there are some things that need to be said. All I asked… was for a single word, that never came. So even if she still held feelings for me, all I can say is that our relation was doomed from the start."

Sharply sighing through clenched teeth, the fiery fury loosens and vanishes. Takeru shakes his head, coughing, straightening back up, once more back to his usual features. And yet, the sting of a blizzard still resides in his gaze.

"It was either one thing or the other, she either gave up on me or kept me close. I kinda just tried to do what I could, to support her from my position, with the only thing I could do of worth, but she never reached back."

"… And did you try to approach her?"

"I did at first… until I realized she wasn't gonna reply. I've already lost much, and I don't want to get any stupid ideas in my head. If you would rather surrender your individuality to the system to accomplish your duties as they did, then no, I can't be your fellow. Can you still be my comrade, even if we disagree on this end?" He asks, in such a low voice, with such a slow, meager nod towards me, posture aiming down as he waits.

"I wouldn't scorn you for choosing your own private life over the duties that come with accepting a blue blade, Takeru," I nod, a minute smile raises in him as he takes a few shallow breaths in quick succession. Gulping slowly, treading my hair, I take a step forward. "However, that does not equal such a scenario will come to be. I know not what duties might have been on that person's shoulders… but I wouldn't forsake a fellow in such manner. Even if your… memories of those days are truly painful, that does not mean I-"

"You can choose one or the other, there is no middle ground in these matters, Mitsurugi," he retorts, shaking his head again, shrugging. "You either stick with your partner through hell and high tide or you don't. And if you're no longer compatible, then the relation will break on its own. And I already went through that, so I know… what the answer's gonna be if I try and remain close to you."

"Spout no balderdash, Takeru. What, you're telling me you can see the future?" I shrug my lips, folding my arms.

He gazes into me, nowhere else, as he idles a hand on his hair. "You've a duty to see through, don't you?"

"Yes, and what has that to do with… whatever it is you're proposing as of now?"

"Then, what if that gets denied, if you're told you cannot be with anyone?"

"Mmgh… Why must you go to the extremes? I am telling you that I wouldn't-"

**WHAM!**

An impact upon the wall, storm into the sky. "Then, why didn't she say anything?"

"Huh? How am I supposed to-"

**POW!**

"Why did she simply leave without word?"

**SLAM!**

"Why remain silent for so long, why leave me hanging?"

**THWACK!**

"After the Disaster of all things, why didn't she reach out a single time?!"

"C-Calm down, you'll hurt yourself!" I plead, blocking the following strike upon the wall. Sighing as he douses himself, staring at the crumpled, ravaged poster that he eviscerated as he would a building during training, the violence itself echoes, rumbles still in his quivering fists. "Why are you this adusted, Takeru? What… What did this person do to you?" To splinter his composure in such manner, just whatever did that woman do to his heart? To leave imprinted such markings, for them to still remain open to this very day… I doubt Mother sowed such emotions in him so… Who is it about?

A sigh overstays its welcome, thunders reign up above. "… I can't remember."

"Huh? Then, are the recollections hurting you?" Tsukuyomi did make a case to warn me of the erratic memories he might be seeing, after all. "Would you desire my aid to search for that person, see if they still live?" Reaching a resolution on the matter may allow his feelings to finally heal, even if… perhaps he would end up desiring to return to that someone's side.

"Sigh… No, it's fine," once again, a hand brushes me away as the other tends to his brows and eyes. "No one but myself can help with this matter…" he says, once again releasing a heavy sigh. "And regardless of the motives behind her actions, even when I can comprehend the weight that was thrust upon her shoulders and the

necessity to answer to the call… in a personal level, I will **never** forgive her for what she did." Eyes that blaze, burn my own as he returns my stare. I can only step back, cold chains restricting, stiffening my movements.

"… What on the Heavens has you this upset? Do you… hate that person, and by extension, the nobility?"

He chuckles, shrugging, smiling weakly. "If I could give into resentment, things would be easier for me. But no, I don't hate her. I cannot. I get the motives, but there's something… No, nothing. Forget it."

"Why? You may talk with me, if it would alleviate your suffering ever so slightly. I shan't divulge a thing, I swear. You've made yourself clear to me, and I will not betray your trust again, Takeru."

"Please don't, Mitsurugi. The ripples are bad enough already, and I should just shut my damn mouth," he grumbles, pinching his nose again. "We don't mix, that's all. Let's keep things calm, okay?"

"… Are you saying any and all nobles would act as that person did? I for one am not-"

"It ain't fair to judge, I know," he appeases, waving down, sighing again. "But I cannot forgive her silence above everything, more considering… who should have joined us shortly after," he tells, oh, somberly, as the clouds twist and collapse onto themselves, as it seemed his ankles would soon follow. "And… that makes me believe we shouldn't interact anymore, Mitsurugi. I appreciate you trying to make amends, but simply remaining as comrades should be enough. There's no point in trying to bridge this gap…" he whispers, turning back and attempting to leave.

Which I don't allow, chasing after his shadow, placing myself in front of his path, the unsteady walking. "Of course there's meaning to try and understand each other, Takeru. Even beyond the morale of the squadron as a whole, I desire to aid you. I know not what imprinted

such consternation into your mind, but, please, allow me to show you I am indeed sorry."

After all, Mother herself looked after you! Tsukuyomi seemed so beyond herself with happiness at the prospect of you regaining your memories. With how many fellows we've lost to the war, with how little people have ever treated me as a person, without fear or formality molding their postures and attitude into patterns I've come to know as the palm of my hand… If you truly desired such of me, if you'd forgive my misgivings and extend such a proposition… How could I ever think of bringing pain to your person? Even now, after all I've done, you still… welcome a talk with me with such honesty.

"… And what of the ripples that come with that decision?" He asks, still glacial, ailing, eyes closed. "You ever stopped to think who is gonna be made responsible for giving me the blessing to join the fellowship?"

"Ah… H-However-"

"Do you know what this means, Meiya? To force her hand to have to accept me into the fellowship, you wanna place more burdens on her shoulders?"

"Never! Yet if your profiles are mended and your memory ever returns then-"

"Then, what happens when fingers start getting pointed? You forgot I killed people in the CCSE? What of her image, her standing?" He demands, dark signs covering the alcove where once only brightness resided, a tense posture as he steps back. "Me accepting your idea comes with lots of problems, for both Her Highness and the XO."

He tries and move past me, my hand seeks his, grips tight, restrains his movement. Takeru again does not let go, again squeezes slightly. Still holding his fingers, I look back into his eyes, getting closer.

"But if you would desire to be one of us… I can aid you, give my support to your person so that no such issues can athwart you from your past. With your service in all these special missions, the XO can grant credence to your character and aptitude. While I admit certain… conservative sectors of the fellowship will be opposed to the likes of you, the fact of the matter is you were given a Minaru Kamui and do hold our teachings to heart. If… If, as an apology for my folly, I would offer you my complete support for you to become one of us again… What would your answer be, Takeru?"

…

"If I… have no choice but to stay, if I have no choice but to return to who I once was… Then that will place me in a position where I am not certain I'll be happy."

"… What? Why?" I seek his gaze, find only a mound of eternal gray.

"I already told you, there's no middle ground in certain things. And while I do wanna clear up the mess of the databases, I don't think me going back to who I used to be is a good call."

"… What of the feelings of all those who await your return? Certainly, someone must be anxiously awaiting news of you!"

"And what of my feelings?" He asks, clutching my hand.

"Huh?"

"What of my life? You'd rather have me again live in the shadows forever?"

"Wh- What are you-"

"… Her Highness cannot face any more setbacks, Mitsurugi. To entangle her with the likes of me will only serve to diminish her image. And I already give enough problems to *XO Kouzuki,* " he sighs, lets go and moves away, slowly so.

"You cannot know until you try, you should remain steadfast on your resolve to see your goals through to the very end, Takeru."

Glaring my way, forcing a step back, he inhales sharply, pulls back the storm at the last second. "I know what will come if I try and repeat my mistakes, what issues I'll bring to your fellowship if I try and accept to be one of you," at the tail end of the sudden eruption, only a cloak of sorrow falls to his features, like ashes raining down, as he winces and grips his forehead, massaging it. "The vows I shared… were broken anyways…" Takeru shakes his head, walking away.

"However… still, I could at least aid you with your situation. Once you regain your citizenship, if you then recall what was of you before-"

"You ever stopped to think why I lost my memories?" He asks, low, as his stride subsides, allowing me to catch up.

"Well, I suppose you suffered an accident?"

"Then, why did no one look for me? Why is my data missing?"

Pursing my lips, I step forward, almost colliding into him. "Do you believe it to have been deliberate, then? Would you desire aid in that matter?"

"What if I told you," he slowly says, smiling yet wincing, "my presence could be a detriment to whoever remembers me?"

"Excuse me? Do you- Wait, you know?!"

"That's why, please, stop it. It's better not to get our hopes up, to chase after something that will never be," he affirms, still endowing the ashen smile, again aiming for the next set of stairs. He does not stop as I call out and give chase.

"Urgh! Can you please be clear, Takeru? Who are you speaking of? Why are you refusing under false assumptions?"

And more importantly, do you remember? Do you believe your presence could play against the fellowship? If he was to be one of us despite his humble origins, if you truly were worthy of a Minaru Kamui, if you're attempting to protect Sister by remaining isolated, then how could I possibly turn a blind eye after all my misses thus far?!

Stomping to catch up before he reaches the elevator, ignition coming to my lungs, I cannot cleanse my features of tension. "Takeru, please. What is causing you to refuse my aid so adamantly?"

"… Is it that hard to get? I got left behind."

"By whoever gave you the blade, I assume? Is- Is that so…" Never did I think I'd see such vanishing dejection imprinted into his features, enough to swallow any and all words, any and all light from his eyes. "However, that does not equal-"

"When duty calls, those of noble blood will always answer. And while I would stand close in support, I… don't know if I can take that again, to be discarded. That's all, I am just acting as I think it's best to make the most of my time. I appreciate the gesture, really, I do. But I don't think we'd work together, as fellows or anything else. And going back to who I was will only serve to give false hopes and unwanted problems to whoever still remembers me. They… They don't need me, they never did."

"I see… So you would refuse me, despite my honesty, despite being given a blade," despite being trained by Mother… You would turn your back on us, when I… when I wouldn't mind… when I am here, offering myself to you?! "Why? Why would you be so stubborn?"

"Heh, look who's talking," he smiles back as he presses the button, calling the elevator.

"Do not jest! I am honestly offering you my support, truly I am," I state, getting closer, seeking his eyes.

"… And what of those who would use that against the fellowship? Not everyone is as noble as you, Meiya. When it was time for actions and not words… both of them threw me away."

"… Both of them?" I ask, a brow twitches.

"You see… I know it ain't fair. To put all the blame, all the responsibility on their shoulders," he tells, slowly placing both hands behind his head once more. "To accept your help, to maybe be stupid enough to fall for you… would be to call upon those same issues, to force a painful decision onto people I only wanna help."

"Huh? Wait, do you remember someone from your past? Wait, in that case-"

"The thing is, you see, things didn't work out then, probably won't work out now."

"Urgh! Why? Can you be clear for once?"

He looks back, staring. Slowly, he reveals a smile. "Because I was blessed with true, pure love when I was little. So I know that you're right, when you're truly set on your road… even if the whole Group would stand in opposition… things would work out somehow. But here… Sigh… The burdens they carry are different, and knowing what's ahead for me it would not be fair on them, to force the matter."

"… So you do recall something. Is this about… who you spoke during the end of the sim battle?" I ask, licking my lips to vanquish the quiver as my feet edge closer.

"Shooting stars are forever fated to burn down, Meiya. Getting closer to one means you'll get burned, too. So, if you truly care, please don't make this harder on me. I already know it's better for me to

remain alone, so just… I dunno, I don't know anymore," with a sigh, he turns around towards the door that slides open.

"Wh- Wait, please! I'm only- Is there truly is no way for you to welcome my words, Takeru?"

"… Go and ask 1st Lt Tsukuyomi if darkest fire could ever reside near the midnight sun, see what she answers."

"Huh? Wait, that wording-" N-No, there is no way… D-Does he know? "Takeru, what does that-"

"Go and ask her, tell her whatever you want about our little discussion. Just remember, that the answers that you seek are not always the ones you wanna hear. I already… know that well enough. And once you get your answer, stick to following the 1st Lt advice, okay?" With nothing but a slow, dejected wave of a hand he says as he walks into the elevator.

"Very well, so I shall do. However… At the least, tell me why. Why do you believe you cannot be my fellow?"

"… Because the blue fire already erased its sweetness. Because the purple one won't ever have that sweetness."

"Huh?"

"And as of now…" he chuckles, throwing himself onto the wall, smiling as he looks up, "I have seven little bunnies to look after. Sigh… Later, Mitsurugi," he waves, closing his eyes.

The doors slide close, only the chime echoes for a moment.

Before I inhale sharply and turn on my heels, constrict both throat and fingers as I begin rushing towards Tsukuyomi's room.

He recalled something, something which is bringing Takeru much anguish. Something tied to his lost data and memories, that he believes could hamper Sister's and the XO's standing. And what he

mentioned just now… sweetness. Isn't that… how Tsukuyomi described Mother's gaze? Blue and Purple fire… He cannot… There is no way in which he knows, right?

He still welcomed a talk, he requested my aid right now! I know not what this is about, but I shall try regardless. Not only for the squadron, but, well.

Lips twist, gaze sinks, steps slow down. I sigh, feeling my heartbeats rising to the base of my neck.

"Worry not, Takeru. I shall clear whatever concerns you now harbor. And then, we can… continue this talk about your fellowship at a latter point."

… Assuming he agreed to my proposition, of course. T-To be fellow guards, that is. Although, I wonder, who were those who you loved? Who could have been the one that still has your heart captive? Going by his wording and concerns… Someone with much responsibility… I-It couldn't be Tsukuyomi, could it? The cousins, perhaps?

No! Focus, myself! For now, there is only one thing to do. Report this to Tsukuyomi, so that she can extend official aid to both Takeru and the XO. And with a stomp of my heels, I resume my march.

# Steering in the Undercurrents

*Chapter 94:*

**Steering in the Undercurrents**

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*December 6th. Right before 8 PM.*

*(Barracks. Mana's Room.)*

**[Mana]**

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"Pacifying her took me many minutes, which is why I could not receive your call until so late an hour," Maya admits, the delayed spaces in between words lending credence to the telling. For the ice cage to be cracking in such manner, she must be truly exhausted as of now.

"I see… Is Her Highness still, well, adusted at the state of affairs?"

Considering I could not convince Kouzuki to arrange another call it would not be odd for her to remain upset at this turn of events. I did an utmost effort to relay that Takeru had started to recall certain matters and was welcoming of the cousins' presence, and that the ESPer is actually looking after him to douse any worries that might have lingered in her mind, yet Yuuhi-sama remained most cold and cutting, ending our conversation while employing one-word answers. My insistence so that she remains steadfast, due to what the cousins reported and how… how it would seem you truly do recall everything now, only helped so much if Maya's tone is any indication.

"Sigh… Not openly, at least," she relents, I cannot help but to share the groaning in concern. "Everything points to Kouzuki taking your words seriously enough that the approval for the UN to join in the evacuation efforts should already have arrived at their HC. That has

alleviated Yuuhi-sama's concerns, albeit not diminished her desire to speak once more with… him," her voice fades, a strong exhalation can I hear through the speakers, hurried steps and a slow closing door. "On that regard, do you have anything else to report on his condition?"

"No, today was a most calm day, truth be told. His performance at early morning was… astounding to say the least, if the cousins' words are to be believed. He was kept busy in some sort of special assignment once again until the late afternoon, yet his interactions with both Mion and Shion have been pleasant according to them."

… There's also the fact that he was not present in the detention barracks but instead came from the underground, but that is a detail that will only serve to overburden Yuuhi-sama's already toilsome state so I shall omit it for the time being. And if his warning is indeed correct, more considering what he told Meiya-sama moments ago then, ensuring Yuuhi-sama remains undisturbed is a priority for us. Sigh… If only you would grant us an honest talk, Takeru. If only…

"I see," Maya says, the drop in tension of rapids reaching low and stable ground. "Was there anything worth mentioning today?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," even if only to give some respite to Yuuhi-sama's heart. "It would seem that Takeru's welcoming attitude towards Meiya-sama has not diminished, only changed due to, well, whatever it is he is recalling."

"Is that so? Was she able to hold a conversation with him?"

"If only for some brief moments, it seems. Meiya-sama did confirm his memories seem to be gradually returning, as he now seems rather troubled about their disagreements of late. She aimed to apologize over her folly, yet he was not dismissive or aggressive. Even said it was not necessary despite insisting on keeping his distance from her. I believe this newfound disquiet he feels is caused due to her resemblance to Yohime-sama."

Even if he probably is only aiming to not entangle Meiya-sama into his own woes. Still, for him to refer to his own person as darkest fire once again… It's confusing. If such is the path to be taken, why remain employing such cryptic words? Tilting the chair back to the ground, a hand covers and spreads all over my nape.

"And now that he's regaining fragments of his past, the confusion Takeru now feels is understandable," Maya repeats a sigh, voice fading, diminishing as the vanishing light of an afterglow.

Resting against the wood, slowly biting onto the takoyaki and enjoying the light burning of the spices, I can only share the silent dejection.

It is one very concerning matter to know he believes the, ahem, vows he and Yuuhi-sama exchanged were broken, although his fury at being left behind is not without warrant. If he has recalled it all, then… then perhaps he's once more dejected at what was done during those days, or at how the aftermath was resolved in his absence. Perhaps, believing Yuuhi-sama wouldn't welcome his return, thinking we only desire him as a shadow. And being more than clear that he is aware that, should his prior identity be restored, Yuuhi-sama will be placed in quite the burdensome position. Thus, he tries to remain useful to us from within the UN? Is he then gauging Kouzuki's response to his current standing to see whether she's worth his trust? Sigh… Predicting Takeru's moves has been hard since he was a child, I doubt I could attempt to do so as of now.

… Even if I admit I am concerned on this matter of the 'three mistakes' he desires to avoid. However, Meiya-sama did say that, while Takeru regressed into his shell once more during their talk, he mentioned that he did not wish to repeat a certain error a third time. That he had already been in more than one relationship.

If Yuuhi-sama was one, who was the second mistake? I can hazard a guess… but reporting such words is bound to invigorate already voracious blazes. Not to mention, ruin Maya's evening. While I believe the words to not imply what Meiya-sama believed, I know

how they will be taken. Sigh… Always leaving me to clean up the mischief of your actions… If only you'd smile and prepare me a nice drink as you always used to.

Tilting my chair backwards, ever so slightly so that I do not repeat a fall, I look upwards as my lips twist for a moment. "However, not all are bad news."

"Hm? Did he mention anything positive?" Maya inquires, alert, restoring her usual tone.

"It seems Takeru is aware that… his situation could place Her Highness in jeopardy, and thus, believes he should remain as he is now. While this reticence is of course a concern, I think that the fact he is taking Yuuhi-sama's standing into account instead of openly rejecting our helping hand as before is a clear sign in our favor. In due time, I'm certain he'll see we do not hoist ill intentions towards him."

"I see… Is that so? That is, indeed, good to hear. Sigh…"

Oh, Maya. Why can you not be open with me?

"In any case," she coughs, regaining the habitual edge, "how is it that he expressed such views? Did Meiya-sama inquire into his situation or were the cousins who did so?"

"Due to desiring his forgiveness after lashing out during yesterday's bout, Meiya-sama's pressure spurred such a counterargument from his lips on their own, of how his position could bring issues to Her Highness' standing. As far as she told me, their talk started with-"

Maya groans every so often, asking me to repeat certain words as the light scribbling of a pen reaches my ears from the other side of the line. I slowly finish my meal during the telling of the report I received, avoiding certain taxing topics as I do.

Still, perhaps once the dust settles he can explain his motives for acting in such an enigmatic way. I comprehend Takeru's desire to not bring issues to either Her Highness or Alt IV, however, to refuse to approach us and instead rely on hidden messages… The shadow I knew would not dally nor hesitate in addressing an issue, even when chained by the lightning.

It either means there is an enemy within the base, which I doubt, or he cannot risk approaching us openly. Perhaps… because requesting our open aid could place them both at risk, cause Kouzuki to delve into his motives until he either acquiesces to her inquiries or she forces the answers out of him. If Takeru so desired, his identity could now be cleared… yet Yuuhi-sama would indeed be placed in quite the difficult position if she tried to restore Takeru to his rightful place. If those snakes still roam our soil, then his presence could work against Kouzuki… or perhaps, Kouzuki could work to his favor. I admit, if he stays here and cooperates with us in the investigations, we could ensure they're removed from the nation.

Unless, of course, he preferred to handle that matter on his own hands to avoid burdens and friction to come to the UN.

… And yet, as Maya resumes her piling inquiries on his complexion and words, I cannot help but to wonder on Meiya-sama's questions as I rest a hand onto the wood, bite onto the last takoyaki ball and feel the scorching spread within my lips.

Why bring her to me? To ensure she doesn't get closer to you? To have her become the shadow you believe you can no longer be? I do admit her rather intense fixation onto you is concerning, and perhaps you noticed it too. Yet, to react with those adusted words…

Still, there is one matter in which I also desire answers. Where and how was he inflicted such scars on his person. Meiya-sama also inquired about those, and I doubt me playing dumb did much to assuage her concerns. It truly resembles being under the Hida Dojo's waterfall late at night, to be on the receiving end of her doubtful stare.

Yet, I still know not what to make of said scars. Raiho-sama claims Maya inflicted those grievous wounds upon him before the day he regained consciousness, whereas Maya would in no way do such a thing, not even in her worst days during the invasion. And it was from that day onward, wasn't it? That you changed, that you started blazing dark. That you stopped smiling at all, started referring to us by rank, calling Yuuhi-sama as Her Highness as well…

"Was there anything else worth mentioning from her words or his affairs?" Maya asks, breaking my focus.

"Ahem… Only that it seems Takeru is showing some reticence towards welcoming Meiya-sama's words, as it would seem his ideas do not match with hers."

"Well… Someone such as him would have indeed a hard time seeing eye to eye with a frontal a warrior as Meiya-sama," she shares the sigh, probably the slow nod as well. "Still, he is not showing signs of exhaustion or anything of the sort?"

"No, not openly at the very least," I relent, she groans softly.

I slowly aim for a bottle, drinking a mouthful of refreshment. While I'd like to inquire again, doing so would elicit yet another abrasive retort from Maya, more so after the last encounter she had with Raiho-sama during his talk with Yuuhi-sama.

So I simply shake my head, roll my shoulders. "Either way, Takeru seems to be faring well at the moment. By the by, Maya, what of the request the XO forwarded to me yesterday?"

A sharp breath in, subtle groaning comes up. "Let's just say our Lady is not at all pleased with the notion of sending him to the evacuation efforts so shortly after his awakening."

"Well, that's understandable. I doubt she'd refuse, however?"

"Indeed, she did not," she admits, slow and fading. "Yuuhi-sama already forwarded the permission so that both Mion and Shion can join the efforts, your squadron as well should it be deemed necessary by the XO."

"Sigh… Is that so? I suppose, I should be hearing shortly about the matter then. Was there anything you were wishing to relay?" I ask, taking a small tissue to cleanse my lips while closing the small box in which my meal came.

"No, nothing else…"

"May I ask what has you showing such tiredness, Maya?"

"Well… These days have been exhausting, is all. Between my duties in Kitanomaru, my attempts to keep matters quiet while Tsuhi delves into the archives, and pacifying Yuuhi-sama's mood so that the meetings can proceed smoothly, I've been left with less free time than I desired. Worry not, I am faring well enough."

"Is the arrangement of the databases proving to be complex? If so, perhaps one of the cousins could-"

"There is no need for you to concern yourself over this, Mana," she states, a bit louder, brandishing an iron wall even if only as a show. "The standard data banks are no issue, me and Tsuhi have mostly dealt with them already. The complex task comes… well…"

"Whenever Yuuhi-sama desires to reinstate Takeru as he should be, correct?"

"Sigh… Indeed. Ikaruga-sama has been insisting on meeting with her, due to some proposal to bolster the castle's defenses she already rejected beforehand and to debate on the approval for the testings the XO proposed, yet finding excuses to delay the matter has been growing harder every day…" she relents, slowly splintered in image of a rock in a desert by dusk.

"In that case, do not let me hold you any longer. Please do rest well, Maya."

"Sigh… I still must ensure Yuuhi-sama is doing so before me, or have Tsuhi do so. Regardless, this report was more than welcomed, Mana. Stay strong, and if anything happens do not hesitate to contact me."

"Likewise. Good night, Maya," I sigh as she simply gives her thanks and cuts the call, shrugging as I tilt back the chair. "As hurried as usual, huh. However, her distress is understandable. I cannot imagine what might happen if his identity or the issues of the databases were to come to light. Perhaps not even due to whatever Ikaruga is seeking with this pressure, but with how the Diet will react. After all… they did not hesitate when demanding Meiya-sama to be handed over to the UN as a political gesture… Pah."

Sighing once again, returning the chair to the floor, slumping onto my desk and playing with my hair, I can only close my eyes and enjoy the silence, the slight burning prickling at my inner lips.

If only we could find a method with which to resolve these issues without risks… Takeru is aware of the situation and is why he insisted to both me, the cousins, and Meiya-sama to remain still for the moment. While it would seem you truly almost lost your temper under her questioning, the words you employed… Darkest fire which will never reside near the midnight sun…

Meiya-sama did seem to have withheld something, as she did reiterate that question. How truthful could it be that he had made those two mistakes, avoiding eye contact as she did so as well. Sigh…

"However, if you think such is the role you must play then, keeping Meiya-sama away from you might indeed be for the best. It does seem contradictory," a hand traverses my hair as I stand, sighing as I remove my gloves, the pieces of my dress, "if you desire to remain hidden, why not approach us and return to Yuuhi-sama's side? If you

do not wish to repeat those mistakes, why then refer to yourself as the fire once more? Sigh… Just what are you thinking about, Takeru?"

I only hope you're being treated fairly by Kouzuki, that she is not warping your ideas into believing you must remain away to keep us safe. With some luck, this evacuation will proceed smoothly and we can arrange a call between you and Yuuhi-sama afterwards.

… And please stop sending such arduous tasks my way, Takeru. Do you have any idea how hard it was to placate Meiya-sama's incessant inquiries? I shall be asking you to repay these efforts tenfold.

Removing my undershirt, folding it all together and placing the uniform into the locker, I sigh as I endow my night attire and flick the switch off. And yet, I simply sit over the sheets, allow the silence, the minute shiver to wash over me as I throw my back onto the bed.

"You better remain safe… and not do anything odd during the evacuation. If not for us, at least for Yuuhi-sama's own composure…"

… However, it is a concern. If he refuses the notion to return as he once was, desiring to remain hidden due to the threats that in wait lie, what is his plan then? If the scars time etched unto his heart are still open, if the adusted wrath yet resides in you, why are you keeping quiet? Waiting, for what exactly?

The only time when he did something of the sort, when he distanced from everybody else while speaking in riddles… when neither me, Maya, Yuuhi-sama, Raiho-sama, nor any of his comrades could tell what was going on in his head…

Embracing my own arms as I sink my feet under the sheets, I hide my face into the pillow, turn myself into a cocoon. Because for every stumbling he faced, for every battle he braved through, there was

one time, one accursed time when he stalwartly refused any and all aid.

That accursed August 5th, that accursed sortie you kept secret from everyone except a few.

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*Same Day. Half an hour or so earlier.*

*(Cylinder's Room.)*

**[Takeru]**

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"… And thanks to the brave man, Crimson Raiding Hood and her granny were saved from the big mean wolf. They then enjoyed the sweet treats she was bringing to her grandma, sharing a pleasant dinner. The end," I slowly help both ends of the book to meet, resting it on my lap afterwards. "So, what do you think of the story?" Looking her way, the frozen expression doesn't change in the slightest. Sigh…

"… Um, Takeru-san," Kasumi edges closer, leaning to whisper, "how did the old lady survive? Wasn't she eaten by the wolf?"

"Well, yeah, but…"

Pressure on my arm, a soft groaning follows. "Wolf didn't chew… so she was safe…" Sumika says under her breath, subtly shaking. "To eat you have to bite… not to just swallow…"

"Yeah, that is true, Sumika," slowly saying the words, resting her head onto me again does not dispel the shaking nor the enforced grip on my arm. "But she was fine in the end, so that's what matters. They all could-"

"No… You'll get eaten, there's no survival."

"S-Sumika, calm down. It's okay, there's-"

"No, no, you'll get chewed, you'll be eaten…"

"C-Come on, please, I'm right here. There's nothing to fea-"

Suddenly, she wraps her hands around me, gripping at my back. Again repeating the same things over and over, just like during last loop. Thrashing into me like an incoming wave, water knocking me below and forcing me to choke, losing stable footing and falling. Ears ring, my back burns as she claws, and grips, and pulls, and hurts the more and more her screams turn to shrieks, shrieks turn to wailing.

"I-It's alright… I'm here, no one will harm you," I barely manage to say as an arm covers her back, halts her outbreak for a second before she begins to retaliate into my chest. Enduring her pincer-like raking on my back, biting back the pain, I caress her hair, rub the back of her head, keep my hold light, all to no avail.

"It looks like… she isn't collapsing," Kasumi says, from a safe distance, wincing a bit. "Should I call the Professor?"

"N-No… Give me a sec here," trying to sit straight again, keeping the wild whirlwind at bay somehow, I lean onto her shoulder as I hug her with both arms. "Say Sumika, do you like the moon?"

A whiff, a small stutter in her breathing. A second in which the outbreak ceased.

"Did you know that people can be connected through the moon? If you both look at it, your gazes will link under the same sky. Right?"

"The moon… gazing at it…" she whispers, the automatic impact delivery of both arms and legs ceases, leaving only a gentle shaking on her shape as it sinks and limps onto my arms, spreading over her like wings of shielding a pigeon from a storm.

"Yeah. By looking at it when its full, no matter how far away we are, we'll always be connected through the moon… Isn't that right?"

Slowly, so slowly, the pressure on my back comes undone, the tide pulls back. Fading away, the wails turn to pleads, pleads to whispers, whispers to stitched syllables until her head collapses onto me.

So I keep on rustling her hair, swaying her ever so slightly, humming to her ear. "It's okay, don't be scared… You're not alone anymore, no one will harm you."

"Takeru-chan… Don't leave me, don't go, don't go…" a hushed voice, a scarred slurring of the words which entangle into an unintelligible plea. Drowning in a droplet for real, curling up into fetal position as I shift her body to better hold the full weight that falls on me. "You'll get hurt- No, don't go away… Please don't- I'll fight for you, so don't-"

"Shh, shh… There, there, it's alright, Sumika. Close your eyes, listen to my heartbeat. I am here, and I won't be going anywhere any time soon. Don't worry, we're safe here…"

I send a look to Kasumi, who nods and goes to put the cables in place, prep up the pod. It took a while, a long one, until the episode subsided, until the shallow breaths and whispered pleas ceased on their own. Once Kasumi confirmed it was fine to make the shift to Safe Mode, we slowly got Sumika off me and placed her in the pod, whirring coming to life afterwards along erratic Christmas-like lights shining.

Resting a hand on the glass as I sigh, knees quiver, ankles try and betray me for a sec as a jolt envelops my legs. None of the books are doing anything for her, the games ain't working either. At this rate…

A small tug on my arm, a soft groaning. *"Do not be so distraught, Takeru-san. You're still making much progress."*

*You think? I am not so sure about it myself, to be honest.*

" *Yes, you are. I could see the memory more clearly this time, the living room you were sitting in, the same small version of yourself I saw in the dreamscape, and the silhouette of your father in his attire of the IRG. Please, don't lose heart,* " she tells with a nod, giving me a smile.

*Uuh… You're so sweet, my little angel… What would I do without support?*

" *T-Takeru-san, stop. That's embarrassing…"*

*Huh? Oh, wait. Kasumi, are you reading my mind again?*

" *Eh? Ah!"* She flinches, letting go and taking a step back, giving a fast, minute bow. "My apologies, I did not notice. I wasn't doing it on purp-"

"It's cool, I know," I smile back, petting her head as her bunny ears flap a few times. "So you think she's progressing?"

"Yes, as I said, I could see the memory far more clearly this time. I believe we're on the right track," she nods, stealing a gaze at Sumika, walking closer to the pod. "After all, her reaction was again one of fear and she did react to both your words during the reading and to that mention of the moon. By the way," her bunny ears flap as she tilts her head, "what was that about?"

"… A silly parallel, nothing more."

"A parallel of what?"

"Sigh… Of an old, broken promise, nothing more."

When I thought it was romantic to part ways by using the stars as a metaphor. That even if we were far, far away, so long as our gazes were seeking the other across space we would never be truly alone.

… Little did I know, the damage those stupid words would end up causing. But hey, what's a more iconic duo than me and fucking things up through naivete? If things will just fall apart… simply say farewell and that's it. Take the loss, stop forcing people to be chained to a mistake. Sigh…

"U-Um…" another slow pull on my sleeve, weaker, softer, like a frail breeze that can barely caress the leaves. Kasumi tries and return my gaze, she recoils back, fading to the ground as her lips fold inwards. "Why are you… so worried now? What is making you feel so much pain?"

"Huh? I'm fine, Kasumi."

"Don't lie," the ears flap again, a small cross her brows form as she stares for a sec. "Your aura is growing dim, foggy, and all blue… like it was in the middle of the dream. Is this… something about your life in this world?"

"Hahaha, no, no, it ain't about that," I shrug, chuckling as I play with her hair again, try and lift the seriousness over her features. "It's nothing but the last mistake I made… as the final curtain was about to fall down. Nothing else, nothing more. Ain't worth talking about it." Much less with you, of all people.

"I… I see…"

"… Well, anyways, I'll leave Sumika in your care. Are you sure she didn't improve much at all today?"

"Yes, she remained screaming kill and wanting to spend her time training to murder the BETA. She didn't show any hints of emotion, much less react as she did while you read us the books," she affirms, limply dropping the hold over my sleeve, taking a step away.

"What did you feel on her heart? Just fear?"

"Hmm…" she closes her eyes, moving her bunny ears up and down for a while. "It was all messy. But fear was the strongest emotion governing her thoughts, yes."

"I see… Well, don't take it too hard on yourself, either. It is already late, so make sure you don't stay up late writing the report, okay?" I pet her head, she relents a nod, lips pursing as her bunny ears flap for a while.

"I won't. You too, Takeru-san. Don't stay up too late helping the Professor."

"Heh, easier said than done. Anyways, I'll go give her my report so don't push yourself tonight. See you tomorrow," I wave back, going towards the creepy hallway.

Kasumi returns the wave, slowly turning towards the pod, simply standing still as she gazes at it.

With the heavy echo of my footsteps, I traverse the dark and creepy hallway, rolling my shoulders, a few lines of pain searing as I do. Sigh… Still, not all is bad news. If Sumika is reacting somehow, that'll be a deterrent to keep the XO from doing anything stupid. Also, as an unexpected surprise, Kasumi couldn't scan my mind as I thought of our farewells. The emotions were too intense, too deep probably. So if it isn't some surface level pondering, she can only see the shift in my aura, huh.

"… Good to know, good to know indeed."

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*Some minutes before.*

*(Yuuko's Office.)*

**[Yuuko]**

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… The support for the Sakhalin frontline seems to be already arranged, the flights for the coming test of the XM3 are already prepared for a trial run tomorrow morning, and the Valkyries are also ready for both this run and the evac efforts.

Quickly clicking away to another diagram, I rub an eye at the report. Isumi is still finding issues to adapt Shirogane's moves to their trainings, huh. There's also the fact Yashiro reported Hayase and Munakata, but more predominantly the former, have been attempting to see his sim runs at night. Well, not like I didn't expect the connection to be drawn, but it's still bothersome. He'll handle it well enough if she ever tries to approach him, surely.

… And yet, none of the results gained today do anything to the plans he presented yesterday. Sigh… While *Takeru* did perform better than expected, a mere show against other pilots won't be enough to gain an agreement for the XG line. Not to mention, the reports from Yokosuka show no progress on locating the stray BETA that are supposedly roaming the mainland.

The Diet cannot have that issue be brought to light, neither the UN.

It instead could be used to forward an aggressive proposition to evacuate Japan, to have another Gwangju. If the pressure is inflicted, the issues revealed, then the coup proceeds as I imagine, the Empire will have little excuses left to employ.

With the instability of the nation taken as fact, support for Alt IV might dwindle, deadlines and requests enforced onto me.

A sigh extends and reaches the hands that loom over the keys as my eyes remain locked onto a particular report. Mitsuko-nee confirmed that we do have the agreement to sortie for the evacuation, along another little matter.

How the HC is again inquiring into *Takeru's* standing and situation. Not only that, but the Security Council is demanding, demanding

answers for the request for a mission. The two little accidents didn't do much to distract them, in the end.

Throwing myself against the seat and closing my eyes, a hand tends to my temple as I slowly spin. Another sigh hollows me out, coldness at the tip of my toes, a shiver that crawls up.

Without the XG, Sadogashima won't be a success.

If the Empire is destabilized, no one in their right mind would think of granting me even a bolt of the XGs. And not to mention, further requests over the safety of the base would be placed onto the demands under 'concerns of another uprising'.

Sight blurs, merely placing my heel on the floor to propel the spinning causes contraction, pain into my ankle. A soft ringing echoes in my ears as I slump into a hand, into the seat.

… Should I try and convince him to fully support me, then? *Takeru* should know what we're up against, yet still refuses to go through the motions. It's true, it will be difficult to safeguard his position yet… yet if these readings on the 00 Unit do not lie then, once I figure out how to properly-

Knocking on the door, makes me flinch and try to stand straight. Only to feel binding pain on my lower legs, paralyzed and stiff. Groaning as I rub them for a moment, brushing my hair for another, I unlock the door and slowly stand.

He slides into the office, dodging the papers and books, and not a single mote of emotion remains on his face as I remain watching him while I fiddle with the coffee machine.

"So, how did it go?" *Takeru* asks, hands in his pockets while pacing closer to the desk. Straight to business without any attempts at the usual idle talk, not unwelcomed but still bothersome.

"Ahem… The numbers seem to indicate there was some stress put onto the 00 Unit," I note, licking my lips, hearing a low sound as I try and stand straight.

Once our mugs are filled, I hand him his and then go back to my desk. There is something… odd about his complexion. *Takeru* has been in an ill mood since his little nap, yet I expected more signs to show up in his face after what seemed to be another overload. There's also how he did not contact me at all today, while it seems he arranged the matters of his consoles and weapons back at his office.

The warm bitterness meets my lips, yet it does not burn. Unlike the cups he offers when I wake up, brewed to almost perfection. And while the line of lukewarmness ignites my posture to its usual, the caress within my lips aiding my relaxation… the same does not happen in him. If anything, he seems to be sinking more and more, resting both arms on his legs, minimal movements to propel the coffee to his lips. *Concerned over something grave, something that he can't stop mulling about?*

Closing my programs and then the notebook, I rest the cup on the wood. Entwining my fingers to rest my chin onto them, I lean forward and stare. "What happened, *Takeru* ?"

Shrugging as he scratches the back of his head, he slowly begins giving me the report. Small breaks, pauses to drink and look away, to settle on a word. He does not show any hints, while I simply remain watching and listening, finishing my drink before he does.

"… And after that episode, we could safely make the shift to Safe Mode. We connected her to the pod shortly after."

"Is that so… I see, I see…"

"Anything odd on your end?"

"Oh, no, it's not that. I'm simply surprised, is all. I had the 00 Unit do some intensive training today, and anger was all I could get out of it," rolling my eyes, I spin away. "Its ODL was replenished fully before you arrived, so to see it depleting so fast… is a good sign," I smirk and nod back at him, resting my still interlocked fingers onto my stomach. "If she is struggling, it means the emotions are true, deep ones. And if it did not devolve into wrath, then it is trying to assimilate the memories. The readings on its support systems do indicate a more dramatic exertion, more akin to a full panic attack, so I suppose you're doing a decent enough job at this, *Takeru*," I assert with a nod.

He barely reacts, merely returns the nod. "Good to know, I guess. So, anything else you'd like to share?"

"Hm? Of course, there's much to talk about. First things first, thanks for the show of might earlier, you really helped my case," I chuckle, folding my arms.

"You know, you could have told me I was gonna pilot the XM3 again today," he complains, eyes narrowing as he goes for a final sip.

"Can't do that. You need to be in the dark, to avoid links to be formed. Also, while I appreciate you being serious, try and not demolish your squadmates so savagely from on."

"Sigh… We need them to be better, so I will aim to have them improve for real from now on. If the Instructor has a problem with my moves then-"

"I've got your back on that, don't worry. Just don't be so decisive, walk by them instead of ahead of them. Sounds good to you?" I ask, smiling. He sighs, shrugging as he rests the mug onto the table. "Good. Now then, I already received the approval to deploy the younger Tsukuyomis to the relief efforts along you six."

"Huh… Quite faster than expected."

"Well, I guess Her Purpleness doesn't want her dear stepbrother getting hurt, huh," I remark, giving him a sideglance.

And he doesn't even flinch. "So, did they agree with the petition?"

"Yes, easy enough. Takamura also agreed, so we're all covered on that front as well," I nod, walking up and aiming for his mug. Yet as he raises it to hand it over I do not pull to take it, nor do I let his eyes escape from mine. Remaining looming over him, tilting my back just a tiny bit, until I see the dead stare reflected back at me in his eyes. "Will this be enough to show you my commitment to your ideas?"

He does not blink nor twitch, he simply gives a subtle upwards nod. "For now, yes, it shall suffice, XO."

"Sigh… For the last time, it's Yuuko," can't help but to shrug my lips and look away, leave the mugs as always before I crash into my seat, into another harsh spin. "Now then, could you tell me what the daily argument with Mitsurugi was about?"

One of his brows twitches, he crosses his arms and faces away from me. "Don't make it sound like some expected segment of a show or something."

"Then, what was it about?"

"She just wanted to apologize, is all. I had to drive her away when she started pressing for answers of my standing and junk. Nothing you should worry about, *XO."*

"Yuuko," I remind, narrowing my eyes. "Still, the readings today…" quickly tapping the right buttons, smiling at what the screen returns, "do indicate a more gentle absorption rate. Couldn't you use this to your advantage to get Mitsurugi to resemble the one you favor the most?"

"… First, leaks don't work that way and you know it," he groans, glaring and glacial. "Second, I just don't want to confuse anyone

anymore. This world's Meiya is… too different to the one from my world, so reaching a simple agreement to coexist should be enough," he says, then slowly rests onto the sofa, closing his eyes.

"Hmm, is that so. Do you know why she dashed to 1st Lt Tsukuyomi's room as soon as you got into the elevator?"

"Sigh… I told her we should stay away from each other, to not cause any issues. Meiya probably is still going to insist on me becoming her fellow, though," he shrugs, rolling his eyes.

"So you believe that avenue to not be worth pursuing then?"

"Is that what you'd like me to do? Return to the IRG?"

"… I did not say anything of the sort. I'm merely suggesting to gain her support to have you regain your citizenship. Clearing that issue is something we both desire to be resolved swiftly, correct?"

He nods, again fiddling with his hair. "Yeah, but there's little point in getting closer as things stand now. Plus, you should know what I mean with the fellow stuff, Yuuko."

"I know, I know. I was only probing to see if you thought it was worth a shot, nothing else," I rest my hands onto the seat, slowing down the spinning then edging closer to the desk. "So then, does that equal you've chosen to remain here?"

"… Did you remember the poem?" he asks, again somber, again cold.

So I idle a finger on my chin, lightly pressing onto my inner cheek. "No, I haven't. However, I did see… figments of other times. You thrashing about to hand me some souvenirs of some sort, I believe. By the by, why were you so aggressive back then?" I lean forward, staring.

He turns away, shrugging his lips. "I've told you enough about that world."

Hmm… World. Singular.

Despite all the loops he should have undergone, he refers to that result as a singular experience. Why is that? Why show such reticence to gain my support? I believe, everything points to us becoming allies in that possible branch. While the concern over worsening the ripples of causality is fair and all, aren't I his greatest ally to mend said collateral damage?

… Why are you still refusing to look back into my eyes, *Takeru* ? What fears are plaguing your mind? Well, if you won't come to me… let me go to you, hehe.

"In any case," I clear my throat, rolling my shoulders, "allow me to inform you of my preliminary conclusions regarding your reports on Operation 21st and Iceberg. There are some details I want some clarification on," nodding his way, the graphs I worked on flash towards the monitors in the wall, I stand and signal him to come closer.

And for a moment, as I tell my opinions and queries, he returns to his usual loose posture, the open and forward chest facing out, eyes that do not flee, hands and arms that remain relaxed and quiet as do his lips. Battered as a desert, yet quiet by nighttime.

"… So, if you do believe we need the extra manpower, is there no way we could safely attain the IRG's support?"

"You do know they won't deploy in time anyways," he repines, slightly frowning. "The IRG will always sortie last, to be the 'saviors' of the day. And that's what they do best, really. If you want the G-Elements of the hive, saving the Takemikazuchis for then is the key."

"Why? I assume you took part in some hive raid in a Type-00?"

"… Simply believe me when I say that, so long as we keep a stable supply line, the Takemikazuchis will be enough of a backup plan if the third blast fires and you still want the spoils," he tells, low, standing straight and stiff.

"I see… Yet, for that to happen, we need both the XGs and the support of the Empire. Was your performance on the XM3 trials similar to this morning's bout?"

"No, because now I do remember my best moves and I didn't freak out," he nods back, then sighs and looks away, again scratching the back of his head and neck. "But I get what you're asking, and no, I don't think we'll make do with a simple live show."

"So we'll need to… arrange a proper show of might?"

"If you see no other solution," a sudden breath in, eyes that expand and seek no other target, *Takeru* takes a step closer, "make sure no unneeded casualties happen."

"Worry not, nothing of the sort will happen, to Marimo or anyone else. So, well, we'd have to-"

"Release the BETA, yes. The yanks accept nothing but facts, and sadly that's what is gonna take for the XGs to come to you. By the way, what did you have in mind to have us graduate in time?"

"You already know," I simply state, his expression tightens, so I then take a step closer, "in the board we face, there is only a handful of solutions that will grant Alt IV the stability it requires to bear fruit. And before anything," patting his shoulder, the premature release of words halts and his lips remain sealed, "your warnings do seem to apply to this world as well."

"… Then, you're going through with the coup?" he inquires, never blinking.

"The only reason I am aiding with the relief efforts is because your situation with Her Highness requires us to stay in her good graces. There are other sparks that could cause a downwards spiral into chaos, and a predicable accident would be preferred to unhinged confusion. Still," I lean closer, he twitches and tries, dares to escape until by my grip his shoulder is kept in check, "if you deem it such an issue, we could test the waters by having you regain your citizenship."

"… You mean to scout the enemies that will try and strike at you through me?"

"And whatever idiots have a problem with the cadet that opened the pigeon's cage," I smile, circling over him, tracing his neck with my fingertips while I stand behind. "There are many issues I need clarity on, and you could help in those matters. It appeases your dear Yuuhi, works to give us intel on the landscape we face, and will ensure none of our future moves meet with failure. So, would that seem agreeable to you, *Takeru* ?" resting onto his backside, treading his hair, I whisper the query.

And he remains still, saying nothing. Lowering his shoulders as a sigh leaves, he shakes me off slowly. "Is that your answer then?"

"What of yours?" I walk into his sight, again brushing my fingers against his arm.

"… I already told you we cannot bring any more problems to Her Highness," he asserts, stepping away from grasping distance, almost stumbling over his own feet.

"Hmm, is that so. Certainly you won't-"

"I know we need to take measures that bring change, yes, even if it means clashing with those who support Alt V. But my past will bring problems to-"

"I am enough to shield you, *Takeru.* And you should know that."

"Yeah, and what of Yuuhi? What do you think will happen if she having a baseborn stepbrother is revealed?"

Taking step closer, and another, until he meets the sofa and cannot escape anymore, I tilt my back until our eyes are at the same height, until there is a twitch in his otherwise immutable features. "Why would such a thing reach the light? I can deal with those issues."

"And bring further burdens upon yourself?"

"You're worth the cost, and the intel we'll gain doubly so. Isn't that why you asked me to think about the little poem?"

"I wasn't- That's not what I meant, and you know it," he edges away, sighing, deflating. Sinking further, all the signs that lurked in threat just below the surface remaining as such, for some reason.

"… Are you still upset?"

"Huh? About what?"

"Oh, come on. You were clearly avoiding me during the meeting at morning, and now you're again taking on the same posture. Out with it, what is it with you?" stepping closer to him, hands on my hips, I stare.

Yet he raises a brow, squints his eyes. "I've no clue what you're on about now."

"So you're not upset we kissed yesterday?"

"Wh- Mmgh… Sigh. Bothered, yeah. Did you get what you wanted out of it?" he clicks his tongue, turning away, folding his arms. Eyes remain squinted, lips contorted as if facing an incoming downpour. Displeased, much.

"No, since I can't recall what the poem was yet. Still, all in due time. For the moment, ensuring your safety should be our priority. So *Takeru*, what is your answer to my proposed idea?"

"… Are you going to give me your answer, then?"

"Will you stay by me? If yes, you already know my answer," I smile back, giggling a bit at the minute shock that sends him into a few steps back. "Why are you fleeing, *Takeru?* It's just us two in the room…"

"Exactly. Can you please stop fucking around and start being serious with me?"

"I'm not fucking with you. Not yet, at least," chuckling as I tap my lips, I sit on the sofa he usually uses. "I am being completely open and honest. So, could you grace me with your reply?" I ask, throwing myself back onto the cushioning, his upside-down figure glaring at me.

"Sigh… Why are you being like this?"

"Just trying to lighten the mood a bit, you're way too stiff and formal. And I do mean what I say before, just so you know."

Slowly walking closer, as slow as a falling leaf, the ashen complexion is all that fills my gaze, the same burnt apprehension he displayed yesterday, the reticence to grow closer or move away. "Yuuko, what is it that you're truly after with this act?"

"… What? It's not an act, however."

"Yeah, right," he shrugs, rolling his eyes. "You of all people being so nice and open, get real. Come on, let's be honest with each other. What do you really want from me?"

"… Is this about that odd matter you mentioned yesterday?" I ask, sitting straight again. He nods, silently watching me. "Then, why not enlighten me on the matter? Help me understand, and I will repay your efforts.

"… You do not do charity, XO. And I know that as soon as I run out of uses, this useless jester will end discar-"

"You're no jester," raising my voice, gripping the sofa, glaring in full, I remain staring as his features do not thaw. "I've told you that you'll be my right hand already, if you remain by me. I assumed this to be in alignment with your wishes?"

"And yet, you still are not telling me the truth," he relents, hunching over a bit.

"… What are you on about now? I told you already, I want to… know what I researched in that world, to quickly put both XGs in working condition and perhaps gain some insight into what has you this preoccupied. Surely," I stand, smile back as I pace closer, "you desire me as your ally?"

"And that's what doesn't make sense, either," he notes, nodding as his arms fold, as he faces away again. "Why would you entangle yourself with me when you're so close to reaching your goals? Discarding me after the 00 Unit is tuned would be in your best interests, after all."

"Do you think it could work without you-"

"Yeah, it totally can. Also, Sumika did try to get me off the Valkyries once," he says, lips regressing, hands shuffling about his arms, straightening and loosening his uniform time and again. "And anyways… you didn't even believe in me by the end of things."

"I am not those versions of myself, remember that well," again leaning closer, lashing out in poison, I poke at his neck. He coils unto himself, but again does not flee neither my touch nor my gaze. "What are you scared of?"

"Are you sure you didn't realize that already?" he inquires, leaning a bit closer, tone and posture turning to stone yet still craving the medusa.

"… I am not the one looping over time-space, there are signs and warnings only you can deliver to me," I admit, the finger traveling up to his chin. "So, tell me already what's in your mind. And no, I won't betray the trust you placed on me. I've no intention to let ruin befall your home world permanently, we are mending the ripples."

A moment of silence, of quietness.

Where his expression grows all the more frozen, yet cracks surface in the dry ice.

Through the white blindness of the mist, a swirling black lurks.

Those pupils, those dilated and crossed pupils that remain locked onto me, not letting me look away, sharing the freezing into my own limbs, leaving that finger at the tip of his jaw.

"Besides the work on the ML-Engine," he begins, slow, barely even moving the lips, "which I'm sure you can recall subconsciously while toying with the XGs, there's only defeat in those worlds waiting for us. And yet, you still insist… despite me asking you to stop, you still insist. So Yuuko," he smiles, showing me his teeth, clenched and compact, as a hand raises to return the poking to my neck, "why don't you stop stalling and tell me straight up… that you want to know how you truly came up with the Nucleus' theory?"

"What… Wait, how did-"

"Oh, no, no, no," a gentle grasp, barbed wings covering my neck, pulling me closer to those two black holes that are now twitching, "no running away, Yuuko. Come on, now. What's up?" he asks, still smiling, sight still crossed, the light hold over my neck reaching my nape, pressing my sides.

"… *Takeru*, let me go."

"I refuse."

"Wh- It's an order."

He dares, dares to chuckle. "I don't take orders from an equal, Yuuko," he so calmly says, leaning closer. "You want us to work in unison?" thumbs find my chin, a slow circling on my nape, a gradual yet binding massage. "You wanna know so badly what happened in those worlds? Or do you wanna actually recall what my world's Yuuko inherited before everything went to hell?"

"What… Wait, wasn't the little thing that doesn't add up how you could have inherited memories before the conduit was formed?"

That's what I thought he was getting at. That the surge of his identity in this world was not an accident but that he himself was the one living in here since the moment of his birth. If so, what forces sent his data to this world as a unified entity? And what ramifications does that have for his world and the ripples of the conductor? That's what I thought he was getting at, what he wanted to truly mend even at the cost of his erasure. Yet…

Coughing, I try to squirm away. His lock readjusts, not letting me leave, not impeding my breathing, always massaging in a slow rocking while his eyes still remain on mine. "I thought you were concerned over how your existence was assimilated into this timeline. Do you believe the Nucleus' theory to be tied to this matter?"

"You do, and that's what matters," he chuckles, fingers lowering to the base of my neck, continuing their work through the fabric. "You're telling me you did not notice this little thing that should never have been there in the first place?"

"… *Gulp.* I admit I was curious, but didn't… really think much of- Ah! Mmh… *Takeru, stop, not so hard…"*

"So you don't mind if it's gentle?"

"Wh- Mmgh… I didn't know you were into this kind of play," I chuckle, smirking and raising a brow, teasing.

Yet, his expression and motions do not falter a tiny bit. "It ain't my fault you people refuse to take a fucking break."

"Oh, we can take a *fucking* break, if that's what you'd like."

"… Is that what you really want from me?"

"What?"

"Do you really want that from me?" his hands stop, he blinks a few times, saying nothing. "Because you're gonna remember all the awful stuff you went through under Alt V if I give in and stop holding back, you know? You really don't want to recall that Christmas, for real."

"… Memory leaks cannot affect-"

"The XM3's test of last loop begs to differ," he says, finally releasing my neck, stepping back enough that he meets the wall. "Don't underestimate the flow of memories, even if it only manifests as subconscious trauma. It almost cost me my life during the trials last time."

"I see…" licking my lips, running a hand over the warmth imprinted in my neck, moving it and hearing nothing crack, nothing pulling at it in pain from my back, I simply sigh. "So you believe the Nucleus' theory comes from… the worlds in which you fell in love with another me?"

He relents a nod, closing his eyes, placing both arms behind his head. "Yeah, it's from that world."

Hmm, singular. Again. "Then, how do I recall it? What will allow me to-"

"I already told you how to recall that, how and why things might have happened," he says, low, again brushing down his uniform, running a

finger over a brow. "And again, it might only come with problems. Don't blame me if you start having nightmares or we call Alt V over our heads earlier."

"So the poem is tied to that theory?" And your thirst for affections as well?

His lips shrug as he looks my way, saying nothing, before a leg crosses over the other as he turns away. "Yeah…"

… Wait a moment. His warning about the memory leaks, the reticence to grow closer upon my teasing, the mention of the poem, the importance he gives to it. Is the catalyst- Ugh… What the- Why is-

Colors.

Swirling and mixing, exploding and contracting. A kaleidoscope rotating onto itself. Dizzy and unfocused, I can no longer feel my limbs. Only a ringing in my ears, a soft pain behind my eyes.

It's cold, all of a sudden. Something… Someone pats my shoulder, wipes my eye, clears my sight.

A relaxed and goofy smile that shrugs at me. *"Don't worry, I'm gonna go back to being my idiot self. I can shift gears real quick."*

" *And that's completely fine. The last thing I need is you trying to understand all of this, anyways…"* pressure and pain at the pit of my throat, trying to shut down a coal oven, burning. What is even-

The touch disappears, the smile too. *"Yeah, I know. Just make sure not to get any nasty hangovers from now on, I won't be there to catch your fall."*

" *Shush, you. If that's all… just be on your way."*

" *Yeah, I'll do just that…"*

Those eyes move away, downwards some sort of ramp. There is no salute, instead a gentle and apathetic wave of a hand meets my gaze, burns it. Raising a small smile that cracks and wavers, much akin to a leaf dangling down into a bonfire.

"… *Farewell, Yuuko."*

*And then he turns around, and simply leaves. Saying nothing else, never turning back, never looking back.*

" *I see… So you won't even give me one final 'See you later', huh…"*

"K-Kgh… *Cough* ! *Cough* !"

C-Can't breathe… What's this freezing feeling all over my back?

It pikes, and rakes, and hurts. As if I were kneeling over grains of rice for hours on end, my ankles again fall prey to paralysis.

"H-Hey, what's up?!" Takeru calls out, the hasty approach halts as I raise a hand and look away.

Massaging my neck while supporting myself onto the desk, a few deep breaths manage to subdue the coughing attack. And yet, the snow cloak is not lifting itself off me. On the contrary, it's creeping higher and higher.

What was that? A memory? So vividly? However… The ramp was-wasn't it supposed to-

Running a hand over my face, burying my nails over it, the lone figure by the ramp is shrouded, fading.

…

"A-Are you okay, Yuuko?" Takeru calls out, consternation raiding his prior mask into the ground. "Did you see anything… painful?"

"… What exactly do you believe could I have seen?"

"Well, no idea… You never really told me what was of you in Sendai, and…" scratching his head, he again looks away.

Again, that same face. That same dried leaf, last and lonely leaf falling into the snow, fated to be buried and forever forgotten.

"I'm fine, it was just a… momentary shock, nothing else. A freezing feeling of… resignation, you could say. Clean that expression of your face, I am alright."

"Sigh… I knew this was a bad idea, we really should stay away from each other," he shakes his head, pinching his nose and endowing a grave expression, which does not fit his features at all. "Let's stop talking abo-"

"There's nothing you should concern yourself with, Takeru. It was… similar to prior dejections I've felt, is all. The frustration I feel at the setbacks might be responsible for this, stop drowning in a droplet already," I scold, straightening my uniform, holding his gaze until he nods. " *Cough*… Now, regarding your prior question, let me take a wild guess," I sigh, leaning back onto my desk, caressing the underside of an ear, swallowing a coughing, "did it happen before the sortie for Iceberg?"

Takeru remains frozen, still, compacting his posture as he watches me silently. Until he finally deigns a nod.

"And the, ahem, intensity of the emotions is what you're most concerned with, correct?"

"Not like that wasn't a given from the start," he shrugs, I frown and he recoils a bit, facing away as if looking at the distant sky… for some reason, it just looks like that.

"Sigh… I assume, a similar reminiscence could happen to others you interact with, so that's why you've chosen to remain silent and cold," he nods, I fold my arms. "Still, while I… suppose I could try and take

your warning seriously, I truly had no idea the Nucleus' theory was the result from those worlds."

"It's the only place it can come from," he relents, shaking his head. And again, singular.

"Then, what does this have to do with our plans thus far? I admit I am… more than curious about this phenomenon, however, if it could impair our working relationship or the tuning then… I shall default to your judgment. Why is this a threat, if the effect of the links only grows when around you and we already know of the Nucleus' theory?"

Looking my way, and nowhere else, Takeru slowly steps closer as if thrashing against barbed wires. "… Simple enough. Answer me this. What are your plans for the next 00 unit?"

"Excuse me?"

"Can you answer the question, Yuuko, XO, or whatever mode you're in now?" he insists, ashes rekindling behind his eyes.

"… Was my research taken from me in those worlds?"

"No, you should know people think Alt IV is a con, a laundering scheme," he frowns, rolling his eyes. "But that won't be what happens here, nor was it what happened last loop. And even beyond the coup, the war won't truly end shortly after. So choosing your allies in the Empire will dictate what paths are available to you, what compromises you'll be asked to relinquish."

"And you don't want to support those who once preyed upon us after Alt V was enacted, hmm. Still, surely you can see and understand the progress that the tech has? As well as the structure that was required for it to flourish? I do need to show results about my research."

"And you think a second tuning could come to be with ease? I certainly ain't on board with leaving that tech in the hands of the same pigs that ruined the worlds I looped in, with the chance of them doing… experiments with the possible candidates."

"Morality is only a binding chain, Takeru. I appreciate your concern, but these are matters only I will handle."

"… Then, answer me something else," still frowning, the ice begins to burn from within the cracks, becoming truly upset, "would you be okay with going as far as Alt III went with the ESPers?"

"… I thought you did not know that- Oh, wait, did you recall something?" stepping closer only empowers the thorns that raise, the sting of the ice as he steps back, posture compact and alert.

"Yeah, plenty. Both the giant machines with water, the fucking meds… and what happens when an ESPer overloads," tightly veiling his sight, he punches a bookshelf, biting his lips as his hand reddens. "Is that what you want to bring about? What will be of Sumika after our missions?" Takeru asks, stepping closer, his sight once more crossing behind the molten veil of pure white that is rage.

"Siiigh… If we are to be equals, this talk was going to happen eventually, I suppose," I walk up to my seat, spin on it as the cushioning welcomes my back, he approaches the desk once I lean onto the wood. "Tell me, Takeru. Do you know who Von Braun is?"

"Hmm… I think he was a famous researcher or something?"

"Yes, technically. You see, Von Braun was actually not very smart when he was young. He couldn't do math to save his life, was beyond salvation on the matter."

"… What's with that smile?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing. Just saying. Anyways, the man had a dream. To build rockets and send them into space, as far as they'd go. Odd

that you don't know of him, if you were studying to make jets. Did he not exist in your world?"

"I am very good at ignoring information that doesn't catch my attention. I focus on one thing at a time and everything else can be damned. Also, I suck at history so, meh," he shrugs, closing an eye, before reinstating solemnity to reign over the ice. "So, what has this to do with our talk?"

"Well, that he worked hard on surpassing his limitations to see through his dreams. One could say he was obsessed with the idea."

"… A result of the causal pull, huh," he notes with a slow nod.

I smile back, fiddling with my hair. "Exactly. Regardless of causality, he was determined to see his objective to fruition. So, how do you think Von Braun managed to acquire a position to work on rockets and the funding to do so?"

"… I mean, with the space race that happened back home, I suppose he was recruited for something crazy like the Apollo that landed on the moon, right?"

"Well, as far as the general population is concerned, yes, that is the case. Von Braun's beginnings occur before that time, however. As part of the Third Reich's researchers."

"Wh- What?! The guy was with the Nazi?!"

"Yeah, because he wanted to make rockets and the only avenue for his dream was through the military applications said rockets could possess. Why, do you feel like commenting on the matter?"

"… Why are you bringing this up? Some sort of… allegory?"

"No, nothing of the sort. However, after the war ended, Von Braun joined the allies' research, the multi-stage rocket development to be

precise," I tap a button in my PC, the diagrams appear in the wall monitors.

"Wait, is that… a Gekishin?" he asks, gaping.

"Its prototype. Do you know who invented the Jump Unit System you're abusing all the time?" smiling at the contortion of his features, I cannot help but to chuckle. "And that is the smallest of his contributions to humanity. Did I ever show you the images of our first picture of the BETA in Mars?"

"Yeah, back when I arrived the first time. Was that guy involved in that too?"

"Of course. Keep this to yourself, but Von Braun was one of the reasons the Daedalus Project was able to be fruitful in the first place. Oh, wait, you don't know what-"

"The thing that found the planet the Migrant Fleet will depart to, if shit hits the fan," he tells, waving a hand while still looking at the old diagrams shown in the monitors, showered in the incoming brightness. "So I guess you're trying to say that, so long as you get to see your objectives realized, you won't hesitate on anything you have to do?"

"… I suppose you know that better than I do, in all honesty. If you told me a few months ago I would place my crew in danger and consider lending a hand in destabilizing the government, I would have shot the messenger right on the spot. And yet, this is the hand we're dealt with and there's little to do," I rest my chin onto a hand, returning his stare as the monitors return to their habitual idle graphs. He says nothing, simply tensing his features, scowling behind the veil, howling within. "If you're displeased, I suppose you could… return to your home world once we're done working together."

"… There is no home for me to go back to."

"What? No home? Wait, what are you talking about?"

"Yuuko, you know I can't go back home without ripples coming after me. It's either erasure or remaining here, forever."

"So you're… saying you'd rather die than to remain working with me?" raising from my seat, taking in a deep breath yet still leaving crumpled, crushed papers behind, I slowly, gradually approach him again.

He remains immutable, still residing behind the veil of neutrality. "I want to make the future smile, can't do that if the stupid warmongers get your research to play with."

"We have to do what we must, and hesitating on our objectives will give us no spoils. Even if some dealings are made with the Devil, Alt IV must see success."

"So you wanna be Von Braun 2.0?" he asks, stepping away, facing away as if repulsed.

"If it saves our world? Yes. Are you saying the outcome of this Ouka mission you've spoken was truly not satisfactory for humanity?"

"There is a catch in your logic, Yuuko," he chuckles, sight once again crossing yet not going back to normal. "If the Axis had won WWII, the man would have continued making rockets for crazy warmongers, rockets that would have delivered nuclear winter to the world if it meant to see his dreams come to fruition. And that reminds me of the Babylon Disaster, a whole lot," still frowning a bit, his lips shift while he idles a hand on his hair, looking away. "Is that how you wanna go? Having your developments be remembered as harbingers of destruction, *Holy Mother* ?"

Grabbing the neck of his uniform, pulling, bending, hearing something tear, by the grip Takeru comes closer, still endowing in frozen displeasure. "Then, enlighten me. What do you expect me to

do? You're certainly… not going to threaten me with leaving my side again, are you?"

"If this is the road you wanna follow, then yes. I ain't working for you after the tuning is done, if this world truly knows no hope then feel free to burn in it. I ain't adding fuel to the fire."

"Heh, so you wanna die with a clear conscience? Is that it?" I expected better… Didn't you say you worked with me? That you understood? And yet, his expression doesn't change. He dares, dares to remain scowling. "Do you think I enjoy this state of affairs? Everyone in the chain gets a say, everyone has to be appeased. Isn't that why you desired to have me remain strong?"

"And what the fuck does it matter if you align yourself with people that will send us to hell anyways? Is asking you to be responsible over your creations that hard an ask?" wincing, the leaf again falls. Only this time, there is barely no sound, only the scattering of the ashes into eternal formlessness. "If this research is the work of your life, then it's your responsibility to see that it is not misused. I mean, for real this time, can you imagine the chaos that would ensue if a raging 00 Unit gets hold of an XG? You wanna make this world into a real parody of Galaxy Wars?"

As I pull him closer, enough to see my reflection in his eyes, his features shuffle but do not entirely thaw. "I shall see that such an outcome does not come to pass, if you aid me in not losing power and warn me of who I should be careful of. Certainly, you ain't turning your back on me now, are you Takeru?"

"… And you will heed my words?"

"I am, you know."

"What if some idiot wants to do some… testings on Sumika?"

"You're free to shoot them in the face, if you so like. I do not… particularly enjoy the rampages she goes on, mind you. And no, I am

not entirely pleased with the schematics for, well, the process of the 00 Unit's digitalization. Kagami was the perfect subject, but to employ the procedure to a living human… Sigh. I relent on that front, it might even make the tuning nigh impossible."

And cruelty does not truly bring forth better results, that much is certain. I suppose, if I was left to work and slave away for Alt V, my analogy of Von Braun might have done more harm than good to convey my point across. It did do its job, to show me he truly is concerned over myself and the future. As well as the oddity of the singular world where that was not the case. Knowing I probably worked for the G-Bombs that killed his comrades, and who knows whatever else he recalled, should have been enough to make Takeru repulsed at the notion of working with me.

And yet, here he is, still holding my gaze, a bit upset but seeming more scolding than anything else. A tiny ball of flowers defying the winter, refusing to remain buried.

"So, you will halt the ripples shortly, I assume," he says, still not pulling away.

"Indeed, once we deal with your citizenship. Do you have some sort of plan to avoid ruin to fall on us?"

"Yeah, and if you really think you need stability right now, we can accelerate things if you're okay with some risks."

"… You visiting the Capital, I assume?" I ask, pulling a bit more on his uniform, yet he nods all the same. "Sigh… Are you planning to threaten Sagiri or something?"

"You should not know, just in case. Reminder that you need to stay strong and firm after Kashgar falls."

"And reminder that you're a key piece of my plans. After all," smiling, leaning closer, "you're also helping me with the research. If I am the mother, that makes you the father of the 00 Unit's plans with your

attempts at tuning. I cannot simply lose you, so there's no need to hold back. We're already deep in this together, so your safety matters as much as mine or the 00 Unit's. Are we clear, Takeru?"

Inhaling sharply, eyes crossing again, blazes return to clear and burn away the mist. Leaving only that clear ignition, the usual impulse that's a staple of his features. "Yeah, crystal. Don't worry, this dark armed dragon ain't doing anything stupid." Again with that wording… Why insist on naming himself after that? Considering what he has told me since waking up, and his concerns over my research… A dragon that needs no Heaven, huh. How did I not see it? " *Cough*… So, I suppose you will give me an answer now?"

"Hm? What, was that not enough? Do you want another kiss, perhaps?" chuckling I tap my lips, letting go of his uniform.

Takeru groans as he flattens his clothes, lips shaking for a tiny bit. "Then, you'll help me mitigate the effects of the coup? No secrets or anything?"

"No, none at all. Will you then tell me what have you been playing at since your little nap?"

"Once you recall the poem, yes. Feel free not to tell me everything until then, just to be sure."

"Huh… Fair enough. So, what now? Do you have a plan to share? I'm listening."

"If you still need the coup to happen… then there are a few things that need to be prepared to ensure it does not go wrong. While using me as bait will spark up a reaction, I cannot stress how much we gotta look after Yuuhi."

"Then, what's the big idea?" I go back to my seat, firing off my notebook again, a flurry of windows to note and cross-reference what he tells. "We assign you as her escort, have you remain in the

Capital when the coup happens so that you and your 'fellows' bring the spoils to our port? Would that appease you?"

"Well… Yes and no," he sighs, folding his arms. "There is a simpler solution to all this. One that won't place you or Yuuhi in any danger, and works the best to gather intel so that nothing goes wrong."

"You certainly won't ask me to let you return to the IRG as a dead man, will you?"

"Of course not, chill out. So long as you help me, I am on your side."

"Hmm. Well, make that permanent and get used to it because you ain't leaving the UN."

"Sigh. Whatever."

"So, what would this idea of yours entail?"

"Oh, nothing too complicated," he shrugs with a smirk. "You send me to pay a visit to the snake's sushi bar."

# Small Steps

*Chapter 95:*

**Small Steps**

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*December 7th. Around 9 AM.*

*(Amidst the ruins, near a portable Command Center.)*

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"You're certain there is nothing you'd like to report, XO?" the Instructor asks, tapping an arm with a finger as her lips shrug, oh, so tightly. The pressure that compacts her whole posture increases tenfold as a smirk greets the query.

"Oh, are you casting doubts on good old me, Marimo? How awful of you, just when I decide to pay you grunts a visit too," the scientist complains in falsehood while ruffling her hair and facing away. "Isn't that right, Yashiro?" she asks, causing the young assistant to sigh and glare in silence.

"Sigh… At least tell me the motives behind your presence," the poor Instructor repines, rubbing her forehead in small circles, futile attempts at dousing the headache that was already landing atop her scalp. "It has to do with Shirogane's reckless movement pattern of yesterday, right?"

"So what if it does?" she retaliates, unblinking, taking a step forward with vipers lending venom to her glare. "Would you happen to have a complain with *my protegee's* piloting, Sgt Jinguuji?"

Immediately stepping back, looking down and feeling the seizing caress of the cold gust upon her nape contrasting with the cloak of warmth incoming from the lithe amount of daylight of today, the Instructor gulps, slow and heavy, while taking in a deep, deep

breath. The cold humidity mixed with the permeating scent of oil and fuel dries up her mouth even further, no amount of hustling of her tongue can allow a retort to form as her eyes once more meet the gorgonic menace that still glares. And so, for a few seconds, only the distant rumble of the machinery setting up the six TSFs for the coming mock battle practice can be heard in the small elevation near the mobile command post.

"… Why are you placing Shirogane in such risk, XO?" she finally asks, hands beginning to hoist a veil of sweat despite the chilly air of December. "Between the rumors already lurking in his shadow, why force him to show off in such manner? He could even injure himself again!"

"He won't," she dismisses, ruffling her hair as her eyes veer to the Gekishin marked with a six in the distance. Facing away from direct sunlight as she watches, the scientist can't help but to chuckle lightly.

"Yuuko, please," she insists, face contorting as if undergoing a sharp maneuver, boulders and spikes raining onto the pit of her stomach. "He already has enough to deal with, the same with the rest of the cadets. Hayase and Munakata came to request some advice and-"

"Not another word," the scientist warns, glaring back and eliciting a flinch, hoarse choking on the Instructor's throat. "Not here, anyways. Your concern is noted, Marimo. However, this odd overprotective strike is not necessary. Plus, didn't you want to see your cadets flourish into decent pilots?" she asks, tapping her chin.

"That's true, however… Such patters are too dangerous, there is-"

"Then," she pats her friend's shoulder, smiling as she whispers, "it's up to you to find a way to teach them all to polish this doctrine, isn't it? Certainly, you will agree that we need more Reapers for the STF?"

"… Not like this," she says, holding the glare, a breath and a gurgling mixture of acids and poison in her gut. "I did not train them to

become killing machines or kamikazes. XO, please, reconsider whatever you're doing now."

"And lose whatever spoils we could gain through Shirogane's eccentric patterns?"

"Is that worth more than possibly losing all of our new recruits to these aggressive methods? I… I am not going to train them to become cannon balls, Yuuko," she states, clamping her lips, drying them as her knees shake and quiver, become dust under the petrifying stare.

"… Sometimes, a board breaker is what we need, don't you agree?" the scientist asks, relenting a sigh, standing aside and gazing at the six machines that are being outfitted with their pylons and weapons of choice. "Letting the cadets explore their limits in a controlled scenario is what will allow them to flourish. And you, Marimo, are their baton. Feel free to be as abrasive and hurtful as you deem fit when they make mistakes from now on, but I want them to iron out the kinks of these ideas Shirogane has."

"Do you… truly need such aggression in your troop, Yuuko?" she asks, a hand gradually trying to close but being unable to, instead it tugs at her uniform. The edge of a knife, of cold steel rustles her nape and hair as the wind blows again, the shiver and scowl do not come from either the temperature or the strong odor of the machines nearby.

"… The threat of violence is sometimes more effective than violence itself," the scientist says, closing her eyes and folding her arms, a single finger tracing an edge of her neck. "Even if it comes with unwanted attention onto his person, having *my protegee* display such skill is a show of might I require of him at the moment, and will need of him in the future. Not only from Shirogane, but from all of my subordinates."

" *Gulp*… However, they barely have had-"

"Then, give them hell once again, Reaper. Forge them into the best pilots you can make, use Shirogane as the fire upon which their frame shall be measured against. If they can't even match his performance in a Gekishin while using Fubukis, I am not certain I have a use for the other five," she shrugs, tilting her head back and forth as she walks towards the mobile command post.

"Wait a moment, you-"

"After all," her steps stop, lips regress as a hand pinches and presses and grips at her neck, "he won't be always here to lend them a hand."

"Wh-What does that even mean?"

"Oh, nothing much. I mean, Shirogane is *my protegee*, so I have…" a small smile, a gentle slither of the tip of her tongue over the rim of her lips, "other uses for him besides being fodder for the STF. So, make the most out of his presence, Sgt Jinguuji. I am expecting a good show today!" she chuckles and turns around, entering the command post.

The poor Instructor simply groans while her lips coil and twist, the chilly breeze aiding not a single bit with the overall contraction she now feels. It is quite fair to affirm a part of her desired to march after her friend, but Jinguuji knew no answers would she obtain from such a course of action. Instead, a sigh hollows the bog of venoms she was brewing in her stomach as she gazes at the six machines that now stand on opposite sides of the city at the ready, the support vehicles already retreating from the ruins that will soon turn into a battlefield.

A few beeps reach her ears, the confirmations are accepted and she thus walks into the command post, groaning as she sees the scientist took the main seat and was spinning on it again. Only green lights return her checks, affirmations coming from all six cadets. The Instructor still can't help but to note the odd paleness of the soldier's face, as if he were now showered in bright moonlight. Soft pink

clouds resting under his eyelids, and a rather large spot in one cheek would indicate he is not in top form despite the numbers from his suit telling otherwise.

Licking her lips as she goes through the motions, something pulls at her elbows. Shivering as if touching water, barely meeting at the surface without sinking, she turns around towards the scientist that was in the midst of a joke which made young Yashiro pout and flap her ears, strongly enough that she might have taken off before the TSFs did.

"That is not true, Professor," she repines.

"Really? Because I think it is more likely, you do hate carrots after all."

"Um, XO?" Jinguuji asks, breaking the sparks which tied both gazes.

"Hm? What's up?"

"Sigh… Again with the lax wording…"

"Come on, now. Don't start, Marimo. So, what is it?"

"… About Shirogane's condition, he seems to be rather exhausted. The tone of his skin is rather pale, and he wasn't as chipper as always this morning either. Considering the exertion of his maneuvers yesterday-"

"Don't worry, I'm telling you," she waves, shrugging. "He's going to be fine, even if he knows no chill."

"… Huh? Wait, that word… Yuuko, why are-"

"I think it's more likely that Yashiro will eat her carrots than Shirogane making a mistake, for real."

"That is not true, Takeru-san does tend to push himself too hard for his trainings," young Yashiro notes, fingers tightly interlocking as the

bunny ears flap a few times. "And I am eating my vegetables…"

"Only one or two a day, though," she counters, smiling a bit. Yashiro groans back, earning a chuckle from the scientist. "Anyways," she turns towards her friend, giving a nod, "there truly is nothing to fear, Marimo. I had a thorough talk with him to ensure he practices his patterns in moderation. Takeru won't be a detriment to your training course, and if he ever is feel free to guide him and the others towards the most proper path to make the most out of his tendencies."

"… Understood. However, well…" lips contract again, arms lightly fold, eyes veer down. Ice, motes of ice poke at her body that rustles and coils unto itself.

"What is it?"

"… No, nothing. I'll begin the final checks," she says, nodding and turning around.

Still, there was something, a small bug crawling up, slowly, so slowly up her backside that almost spurred hands and lips to move. The odd wordings, the fact that she'd joke of the matter, be present in the training of all things, and even refer to him by name.

While observing his projection in the monitors, Jinguuji couldn't help but to sigh a bit. *"I only hope you gained her interest for good motives, Shirogane. Please, please don't force me to reprimand you any further."*

A few calls meet with final affirmations, the all green signal flashes through all pop-ups. The echo of the vehicles approaching their position meant the city was now deserted, thus with one final inhalation she presses the comms.

"CP to all units, the mission will begin in T minus One. The objective is total annihilation. Cadets, remain in standby."

"Copy that," all of them reply.

And so, sitting down by her friend's side, Jinguuji simply stared at the number as it went down and down, before the small beep flared to life and the mock battle began in proper form.

Only to be followed by two gasps and shrieks, coming from Sakaki and Jinguuji herself as the Fubuki marked as Zero-One propelled itself off the ground, as the soldier normally would.

"What… What was…"

"Fuhuhu… It seems we are going to be seeing quite the fascinating spectacle," the scientist says, leaning back comfortably, crossing her legs.

"Yuuko, what did you do?!"

"I dunno," she shrugs again as she rolls her eyes. "Enjoy the show, Marimo. And pay attention at the control logs while you're at it, okay?" she then commands, losing the tease and nodding.

The poor Instructor can only allow herself a groan before further beeping takes her sight back to the screens. Lips grow loose and fall apart at the speed with which three of the dots were moving, as if bouncing off every landing.

"04, I've located 02. She's to your Eleven," Sakaki warns, one eye closing on its own upon the exertion of a boost.

"Copy that. Currently engaging 03," Ayamine squeezes through clenched teeth, also adapting to the adusted impulse which threatens with fusing her back into the seat.

Though, 'engaging' would be a too forgiving a word to employ. The afterimage that Ayamine's Fubuki had become followed upon the directives issued by the soldier, and even when faltering on the timings the thunder pattern of the zigzags kept the radars at bay, the

auto-aim system not granting any advantages to Yoroi, whose panicked yells grew in intensity with every passing second.

Retreating upon the desert twister which swallowed everything in its stride, Yoroi cursed under her breath as Ayamine rebounds off a building towards her flanks, almost delivering a shell to her engines and ending her participation in the fight. So minimal were the seconds when the opposing frame came into view, so delayed was the update of the radars, and so scared Yoroi had become when she realized the shock countermeasures were not working on her rival's stride. As she gulped hard and an eye twitched when a sweat bead fell down her brow, the incoming rumbling from behind forces her veins to surface in her skin.

Collapsing into the open ground with scattered motes of paint all over, Mitsurugi's Fubuki stalls a reaction until it can stand again. Short and shallow are her breaths, as the time delay between the jumps and gliding of her rivals thus far. As dry ice forced its way down her throat when a barrel met her stare, Yoroi's covering fire deterred Sakaki from delivering a killing blow, forced to backboost. Still, the paint rounds didn't even graze or share the same air as the frame, and thus Yoroi's lips shrugged more and more just as her hands choked the living daylights out of the controls.

"What in the Heavens is going on here?" Mitsurugi repines, allowing herself a second to breath in.

"02, how are you holding up?" Yoroi asks, keeping an eye on the radar and another on her surroundings.

"… I know not how I managed to elude my chaser, truth be told. 05, have you located 06's whereabouts?" she inquires as she switches her already tattered shield for a rifle.

And then, silence.

For quite a few seconds it extends.

And equal to the Instructor's is their groaning at the delay for the answer, only that they are not either sinking in cold nor frowning a bit. Sadly, poor Jinguuji had to deal with the unhinged laughter of the scientist at the results she was seeing, and at the out of tune song she, her assistant and her friend were made to hear.

A beep comes up in both Yoroi's and Mitsurugi's radar, a hostile approaching from their Six. Immediately after, almost in perfect sync, their chasers blast away in threat. Fireworks spread over the city, staining it in multicolored layers upon layers of paint. Whether they are fighting for their lives or painting an abstract representation of an aneurysm, I know not.

And yet, the modest and compact pace the two were endowing in, the contention of a scarecrow undaunted in the eye of a storm begins to show cracks in each step, in each jump.

Erratic like thunders exchanged between clouds, the frames of their rivals blurred in sight, inched closer and closer. In the second where their hands twitched, halted their pull on the controls upon a break in the clouds, a moment of respite as the Fubukis retreated after quite a push, a small beeping comes up in their ears.

And this time, their fears and shock is indeed equal to the poor Instructor's, exploding like a little toad being fed a cigarette.

For a small shape was taking reign of the skies, as if attempting to high five the sun.

Only for it to start to sink, to fall into a slicing stance towards the two battered Fubukis.

Despite not taking as much altitude as possible, the battering bolt fires itself off towards its mark. Along a song, a shrieking voice that knows no pace nor tune as the soldier throws himself deep into the danger zone, towards the raised barrels that greet his aggro.

"06, be careful! You could-"

"Don't worry, 01. I've got this!"

**BOOM!**

"… Oops?"

"Ahahaha!" the scientist hits her thigh over and over, the manic laugh turning into coughing and hacking, to the point that young Yashiro rubs her back in an attempt to douse the episode.

"Siiigh… XO, what is the meaning of this?" the Instructor asks, complexion contracting all the more as the signs on-screen display the soldier did not care a single bit about being hit in midair.

" *Cough.* Haha, sigh… Didn't think he'd actually persevere and complete the maneuver with one arm less," she nods slowly at the projected progression of the battle, at the last moments of the duo before the notification shows the deed has been done. Small it may be yet that smile is very much satisfied, you'd understand.

"Yuuko, what is going on? Their patterns, their inputs… It's as if Sakaki and Ayamine had suddenly become Shirogane's pupils. I demand an answer!"

"Oh, nothing much. The formal documentation will reach your hands…" she looks away, groaning subtly as she fiddles with her hair amidst a slow spin, "shortly, I guess. In any case, you oversee the return to the base. I'll take the data from the mock battle. Yashiro," she orders, and the small bunny goes to do her thing to the control panel.

The Instructor moves aside to let the assistant do her job, rubbing her temple. "XO, what is- Why are you-"

"All in due time, Marimo," she says, chuckling a bit as she extends both arms upwards as if praising the sun. "Don't you think it would be amazing if all our pilots could one day pilot with this dexterity, regardless of the aggression in their stances?"

"I cannot fight against these results, no. However, they almost crashed several times. To say nothing of Shirogane's recklessness at the last assault," she comments with a slight frown, shaking her head. "And their bracing countermeasures were not working at all, if they exert their craft and a limb breaks off-"

"That is why we're testing this, isn't it? To ensure no such thing comes to pass."

"Wait, testing? Yuuko, you can't use the cadets for such purposes! High Command will-"

"HC is not, and will not be, notified. This little matter is tied to my research, do you understand?" she asks, raising her chin, the fangs dripping petrifying venoms.

"Mmgh… Is this why you brought Shirogane here? The result of his special assignments? Do you… plan to keep sending them to suicide missions with this doctrine?"

"… In normal circumstances, a stress test would be coming up in the timeline, yes," she notes, arms folding as do her lips. Yet, her head tilts, a light scratching, tickling poke in the back of her neck which compulses legs to meet. "However, this particular card does not seem to desire to go along my every command…" she complains, shooting a look at the screens, at the small square labeled Zero-Six, as lips and legs compact upon one another, as a pair of feathers brush both sides of her neck.

"… What?" yet, the poor Instructor was left as lost as a penguin in a desert, eyes and brows narrowing a bit.

"Anyways, you have a battle to end. I'll be waiting back at the hangar. Yashiro, let's go," she then turns around, and departs with as much haste as she arrived.

Jinguuji remains staring at the backside that shrinks in the distance, simply standing as her every thread went limp. Looking back at the

screens, the common channel was open at the time. With a gentle push she starts the connection, sounds once more thriving through the speakers.

"Stop dallying! How did you achieve such performance?" Mitsurugi demands, hitting her control panel and again almost sending her cockpit off the machine.

"You could say our tactics were more so *fish* ticated," the soldier says, moving both brows up and down.

"I'm asking for details, Takeru."

"Come on, now. Don't get so *crabby*, Mitsurugi. I *sea* what you mean, but that's just how we roll now. Though, I didn't expect us to start *whaling* on you guys so hard."

"Stop spouting nonsense and answer me!"

"Oho, didn't think you'd catch the drift, Meiya-kun. I knew I raised you well," he nods a few times, causing groans and much pressure to come to Mitsurugi's hands.

"Awawa, I didn't even see you approach me…" Tamase barely whispers, folding herself into a small loaf. "Were you all taking part in some secret mission as well?"

"Sadly, silent we must remain," Ayamine retorts, in unneeded solemnity. Before giving out a small smile and a chuckle, hitting her forehead with the back of a hand in slow motion. "However, it was *dolphin* etily a surprise to be sure, that we managed to move with such *fin* esse."

"Can you two cease this tomfoolery for once?" Mitsurugi repines once more, blazing.

"Yeah, bring out the pun gun, why don't you," he shrugs, faking a miffed expression with ballooning cheeks.

"But Takeru, how did Chizuru-san and Kei-san get so nimble?! I couldn't even lock onto your frames!" Yoroi repines, slumping forward as her expression falls.

"Well, we kinda *sharked* the rules a bit," Ayamine says, shrugging with one eye closed.

"Oh, but if you want any tips, let *minnow,"* he follows up, giving a wink to the projections. Despite the lifting tailwind it gives to Yoroi and Tamase, the gesture only elicits further embers from Mitsurugi's eyes as she pinches her nose, as hard as she would shake his neck in demands for answers.

"Ignore these two idiots," Sakaki says, then sighs. "I suppose we'll hear a formal explanation once we're back at the hangar."

"Cadets, the mock battle has ended. Return to the starting positions," Jinguuji sighs after issuing the order, brows crossing at the chained fish puns the soldier exchanges with Ayamine to the piling frustrations of Sakaki and Mitsurugi. "Siiigh… At least you still have your good spirits, Shirogane. I wonder just… how much of an effect you actually have in these matters. To have Yuuko refuse a proper test in live combat… Just what is going on here? And if she's in a good mood, why are you still referring to her as 'XO'?"

Allowing herself a moment to drink some water, the incoming reports from the mechanics as the TSFs were brought back into the support vehicles reach her ears along the coordination with the rest of the team. For some moments, feeble moments, she can simply sit down and rest, review the footage as the mobile command post returns to base.

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*Around half an hour later.*

( *Hangar* .)

[ **Meiya** ]

"Takeru, please, tell me!"

"Can't you just wait a moment until the Instructor gets back, Mitsurugi?" he says, taking a step back and facing away, once more insisting on employing my surname.

"But, but! Come on, just a little hint!" Yoroi joins in my plead, groaning as she stares. Tamase soon imitates her, Takeru's complexion softens ever so slightly yet once more looks away.

Takeru always possessed talent, that much is true, however yesterday and today he was an even more fierce adversary than usual. It's reminiscent of the time when he ceased holding back in basic, as if this were always his truest skill.

At first, I thought it was merely the difference of employing the Mugen Kidou into his patterns, but the maneuvers employed, the sheer speed at which his machine bent and twisted at impossible angles all the while never losing momentum under constant suppression fire… It was akin to the haziness of a perfect scenario envisioned in a dream, a fantasy of what next generation technology could bring about.

Perhaps, is he remembering his training to join the Guard? The aggressive stance does remind me a bit of my bout with Tsukuyomi, despite the far more ruthless approach.

And yet, even in front of reiterated queries all he and the other two do is remain silent and dodge our gazes as they did to our bullets.

"Takeru, even so, are you alright? You do look a bit pale. Are you not exerting yourself?"

And yet again, his gazes flees me. "Thanks, but it's fine. I need to get back on my groove ASAP. That's all there is to it," he simply says, sighing. "My apologies if my more… aggressive methods have

upset you, though," swiftly bowing down, he remains in position for a second.

W-What is wrong with him? I don't like it, I don't like how he looks and sounds. Even less that he is once more placing a wall between us. Tsukuyomi might have dodged the issue yet… yet certainly, you would not deny me a handshake as of now, right? You would… stop using my surname once I-

"Squad, assemble!" the Instructor commands, the impact of her steps reaching my ears.

We all get in line, only to find a quite wrathful expression in her, as she hasn't been in many moons. It is similar to the contortion she showed me during the CCSE's evaluation that night, the displeasure evident in the compact arms folded over her body. In striking opposition is the XO, whose hands lie in her coat's pockets and her smile is relaxed, her stride slower and no disturbances affect her breathing at first glance. Equally calm is Yashiro, who walks behind the XO.

"Well then, normally I would give you an assessment of the battle, however…" the Instructor gazes at Takeru, lips twisting, "it would seem the recklessness has infested this squadron. Never thought it'd be displeased with a decisive a victory, much less one where Sakaki and Ayamine worked in unison, yet I must say this. Shirogane, what were you thinking when performing that sky dive?"

"That it was really cool. Also effective to deal with the enemy by making myself bait. My diversion would have allowed my squadmates to nullify their threat, more so if they were the lifeline of the enemy's forces," he states, sober as he nods back, standing straight and returning the glare in perfect composure.

For some reason, one of the Instructor's brows twitches. "However, there is no denying that you could have injured yourself or your comrades with the maneuver. Your argument is solid, but do endeavor to look for… other solutions for next time."

"Ma'am, yes, Ma'am!"

"Now then, I am sure you three have as many questions as I," she says with a sigh, looking in mine and the other's direction. "You fought admirably against impossible odds and the unknown threat, do not let this hamper your efforts," she nods, holding our gaze. "Well, that shall be all from me."

As she slides aside, the Professor coughs and steps towards us, with a clearly gleeful smirk in her features. "So, girls, what did you think of your rivals' performance today?"

Saluting her as I step forward, I nod and look upwards. "It was simply exquisite. Their movements were so fast my radar had quite the trouble in keeping track of them. I already knew cadet Shirogane was skilled, but today he was completely overwhelming. To say nothing of his partners' display, which was equally astounding," I salute and step back, giving a minute nod to the other three. Sakaki and Ayamine return a faint smile, Takeru however remains looking forward… with one of his brows permanently docked downwards.

The XO chuckles a bit once everyone said their piece, pacing in front of us slowly as she delivers the explanation behind the sudden improvement. This new OS, the XM3, to think this was another of Takeru's missions… You're amazing. I can clearly see why Tsukuyomi would desire to regain your fellowship. And yet, you still won't look my way, won't utter my name except in jest. Tsukuyomi suggested me to remain steadfast and not breach your wish for peace, however…

Coughing, she ruffles her hair."So, I suppose that's all? Well, that's the basic gist of things."

"XO, why was I not notified of this at all?"

"Come on, Marimo. All's well that end's well. Anyways," coughing once more, her expression tightens slightly despite the smile never waning, "Shirogane will be the exclusive user of the OS since it's a

patent of the UN for now. Thanks for proving the adaption to it wasn't solely related to his preferences," she says, giggling as she nods.

Takeru remains looking down, eyes narrowed. He does not like this arrangement. For some reason, the gaze he sends towards the Professor seems to further ignite her chuckling.

"XO, you shouldn't pick favorites," the Instructor counters, pacing into her sight, standing in front of us as she gestures our way. "I'm sure all the squad would benefit from this OS, even if they do not employ such aggressive patterns. I know their recent numbers are not pleasing, however, maybe this is the motivational push they so badly need. Did you not desire to aid them improve?" she asks, holding the Professor's stone-cold stare. Only by looking at her do I realize, her knees are slightly shaking.

To hear the Instructor defend us like this, when we have been giving her such problems… It brings heat into my stomach, tension to my legs as if preparing myself for our prior running drills. We have to step up, I cannot disappoint her too. All she has done for us thus far, another person might have already given up the squad. And yet, here she stands in front of the Professor. For our sake.

The XO shrugs, once more toying with her hair as she looks away. "Marimo, that is nice and all, but some of them don't want to stay on the UN, if a birdie wasn't wrong. Actually, I think some of them see this organization as badly as the Americans," she states, giving us all her focus, the imposing glare which solidifies my arms onto my sides. "Why would I expose my most newest OS to people who just want to jump ship first chance they get? Also, since their first mock battle, they started getting worse results and he has bested their efforts time and again after coming back. That's proof enough for me," she crosses her arms, facing away.

Looking down is all I can afford. Deny the words would be a lie for me, yet my thoughts… well, they are not as black and white as they used to be, no. It is true I will place my people first and foremost, for a servant is what I am, yet I believe not all of the UN's crew are

equal to those traitors who abandoned our olden capital. And yet, my throat and lips constrict, the words simply do not come. I… I have to-

"E-Excuse me, XO," Sakaki takes a step forward, despite her shaking fists she bows down for a moment. "I know our attitude and results leave much to be desired, that is true. However, at the least I do not wish to jump ship," she states, posture firm and undaunted.

Eh?! Sakaki, when did she- But I thought she was planning to return to the IJA?

Coughing at the lack of an answer, the cold stare the XO forwards, Sakaki clears her throat. "I wish to do what I can and learn all the UN has to offer me, and am willing to stay under UN command until I've fulfilled my role here and proven with my results that I am worth the resources you poured on me. There are many," her eyes veer back, towards him, "lessons I've apprehended here which are key for my growth, I believe many more are still waiting for me. So please, would you reconsider giving us all the authorization to use the XM3 in our trainings?" she bows deeply to the unflinching Professor, a slight tremor assaulting her knees and hands.

"Huh… And? What about the rest? You sure you want to mingle with foreigners? Won't you end up corrupted by 'The American Way'?" smirking a bit, this time she spoke coldly, sending poison at us along the dismissive gaze.

I understand why she thinks that. We did discriminate Takeru, her special protegee, when he arrived and after the CCSE. And yet, it would seem he's been working more than any of us all this time.

What if he was helping with this OS until late night and as soon as he woke up when I was intruding on his room?

What if he still was pulling allnighters after he was given his punishment?

What if the reason behind his recent hesitation is due to exhaustion due to both the punishment and the extra duties he is tasked with?

After all, to recruit someone who brings as much trouble as Takeru, that he himself is aware enough of it to request me not to get closer, would mean the XO would then request equal or greater compensation for the cost of safeguarding him from the-

…

… Oh. I never even… gave a thought to that. What is the cost he has to pay for the XO to shield him from the IRG? The inquiries over his profiles, if taken to court… could obviously place him in quite the conundrum. But it also could be a detriment to the XO. Then, what has she asked of him?

… Hasn't he been away since he returned from the CCSE? I do not clearly recall what was that Ayamine said when we returned, about how she found him in the hallways, however testing this OS must not have been easy. The same for those odd simulators we once used.

… And yet, he now is barely looking up. Only gazing with a displeased cork of his brows at the Professor as the Instructor steps in front of Sakaki, debating once more in our favor.

… What is the cost asked of you? Is that why Tsukuyomi advised me not to approach you? Just… *Just what manner of tasks are you being made to shoulder? What has she requested out of you and why would you not accept our aid?*

However, if there is anything I can do… to even alleviate his burdens ever so slightly, when in reality it is only another benefit for myself to train with said new OS, what has me remaining silent? Didn't I call myself his fellow, request a handshake of him? Isn't it time I show Takeru some concrete support?

Sighing, I step forward. The small debate between the Instructor and the Professor ceases, their gazes lock onto me. A swift bow I give,

remaining in position by Sakaki's side. "XO, I do know we have showed you quite shameful a side of ourselves in the past. I admit, I was most foolish at times towards both the crew at large and your protegee in particular. Regrettably, I cannot do anything to change the opinion you have of me as of now. But I assure you, I desire nothing more than to keep training here, to remain in the UN until I proved my worth to you all and repay the chances you've bequeathed me with. If it would align with your designs, I'd gladly volunteer to join in the testings of this XM3 OS."

And anyways, I am nothing yet. I've let my pride blind my moves at times, I am not Her Highness' shadow yet. The Heavens have blessed me to have one such as Takeru by my side, to possess squadmates as forgiving as mine, and an Instructor that would not scorn me for my reiterated follies. I shan't deny it, I do hoist doubts about the UN at large, but I believe that at the least I can trust in the people I've seen working every day, in the Instructor, and in my squadmates. Certainly, when it is time for action and not words, we'll see eye to eye.

"I-I… I also would like to train with it, if you allowed," Tamase wavers in her steps forward, never does she look up yet still comes by me and gives a bow. "I never had plans to leave the UN, I do w-want to do my part on mending our relations from here, like Papa does. Please XO, grant us the permission to train with this OS," she says, almost shouting, as her sight tightly closes, her entire posture compressing itself as if she were facing the downpour of a frozen waterfall upon her person.

Yoroi slowly walks up to Sakaki's side, clutching an elbow. "I don't know how good I could get or if my results would be of use to you, XO, but I wish to improve and be as good as I can. I also don't want to leave the UN, I like this place a lot. Perhaps my results are not up to par with everyone else, but I wish to repay the kindness and patience you all had with me," she slowly says, hunching ever so slightly before bowing down. "Please, let us train like Takeru."

And for a moment, there was only silence. Until a slow, almost imperceptible sound repeated itself. Chuckling, drowned and subdued. Peeking up from my bowing position, I find the woman staring down at us with her fingers idling on her chin, and the largest smirk I have seen in her features thus far. Chuckling, so much.

"Well, what do you know? Looks like some of you learned a good lesson," she says, lightly chuckling as she gestures for us to raise. Before she looks over to the side, bumping a hand onto her chin. "Ayamine, what about you?"

She had remained still, as expressionless as always. And now, gazing at the Professor, then at Takeru, her brows lower and cross as tension comes to her jaw. "… Why was a Cadet involved in the development of an OS?" she asks, quiet, coldly.

"I'm sure you remember the simulators, right? He showed potential, so I enlisted his help for the project. Should I take your answer as a no?" she asks, taking a step closer, further dryness do I swallow upon the minute contortion in her features which do not lose their smile.

Ayamine doesn't flinch, she slightly narrows her eyes at the Professor. "Yes, I do want to train with it. However, why are you pushing him to do so much stuff? Shirogane is only a cadet. Isn't being overworked like this why he fainted in the first place, too? XO, this could be considered a case of abuse of power, in my opinion," her tone grew lower than usual, showing a glint in her eyes which only appears when debating with Sakaki. Even the forwardness of her posture and expression is sturdier than usual, as perhaps the steel of our machines when they ready to cross strikes.

"Ayamine, come on. Don't be-"

"Shush, Shirogane," she scolds, despite not losing the smile. "Who would have said it, Ayamine. You're that worried about the American?" she says, arching a brow as two fingertips raise to

restrict her nostrils when looking his way. Takeru grimaces, shaking his head and sighing, oh, so heavily.

"He's my squadmate," Ayamine retorts, giving him a nod, glaring her way. "And I don't think it's healthy for him to be overworked in this manner, under the guise of his punishment."

In front of the defiance, the smile grows instead. It spreads, the glimmer in her eyes growing as incoming dawn as the chuckling resumes. Not only Ayamine, but all of us gape slightly and exchange gazes. Except Takeru, who facepalms.

"Hmm… Well, thanks to all that work we now possess this OS," she concludes, shrugging. "So, if you're so worried about Shirogane's situation, you all better start pulling your own weight so that he can stop babysitting you all. I will not tolerate lacking results in the XM3's trainings, and will adjust my judgment based on your results. Of course, this will also have an effect on your final score when you earn your commission. Do you still accept to join in?" she asks, smiling again.

"Yes, ma'am!" all of us answer, sharing one good round of looks and a nod afterwards.

"Well, color me surprised. Fine, you can keep training with the OS, just make sure you don't cause Shirogane any issues during the runs, since you seem to be so concerned with his situation. Of course," she taps her lips, the smile grows and her teeth shine at us, "you can also repay him by sending some affections his way."

…

W-What did she just-

" **Yuuko** !" Takeru and the Instructor shout in unison, making the XO frown. Did he just use her name again?

But why did she suggest such a thing? C-Certainly she isn't implying what I believe she- No, no, no, no! Don't stare at his chest, don't stare at his face, don't think about the-

" *Listen well Meiya-sama. The, ahem, milk you were speaking of is actually-"*

No! I-I wouldn't- Aaah! Focus, myself! I must not lose composure, even if Takeru is indeed quite attract- No! He isn't! Gah… W-Why can't I tear my eyes from him? If only he cut his hair again… T-Then, I suppose, I could see him regaining his charm.

…

Not again, myself! Focus! Within the warrior-

While the Instructor admonishes the XO, he simply sighs and shakes his head, rolls his eyes while messing with his hair. And our eyes meet, for only a moment, a brief moment where I smile and nod.

And yet he looks away, his lips cascading as do his shoulders.

Why? Why won't you look my way? What must I do to regain your trust? Surely, it is not too late?

"In no way should you suggest such things, XO."

"Oh, come on. Lay off me, will you?" she shrugs, rolling her eyes and facing away from the boiling monstrosity the Instructor had become. "Well, since all of you seem to be telling the truth, I'll allow you to use the XM3 from now on. Marimo, I'll send the docs to your mail after the crew installs the OS on their Fubukis. You may proceed with the schedule as planned for the moment, I'll notify you what to do for simulator practice at a latter time. If you have any doubts, ask Shirogane. That's all. Have fun with it!" she says with a smile, waving at us. And with that, she turns around and goes her way. Yashiro looks at Takeru, nodding his way and sharing a small wave before she also departs.

With a heavy sigh, the Instructor looses all tension and heat, what but ice cracking under direct sunlight. "Fine, just leave without answering anything. Squad, you may go get changed. Shirogane, I assume you will be available for the afternoon lecture?"

"Yes, ma'am. Would you like me to explain the XM3's quirks during it?"

"It would be appreciated, yes. Well… This shall be all. Dismissed!"

"Salute!"

She nods our way, also departing from the hangar. Yet, her feet drag on the floor, almost leaving marks in the slowness of her pace. It is as if she had fifteen tons of iron falling upon her head at this very moment.

"… I wonder if she is feeling well."

"Well, anyone would be left drained after a one-on-one discussion with the Professor," Sakaki reasons while tapping her glasses, sighing as she loosens her posture. "Anyways, let's not dally around. Let's go get changed," she orders as a finger traces a circle in midair.

We leave the hangar, the stagnant and heavy air of morning vanished from our backside. Despite the glares which follow our steps, everybody is as relaxed and radiant as they were before the mock battle with Tsukuyomi. Despite the downcast eyes of Tamase and the self-hugging of Yoroi, there is no lingering clouds nor fog in between us. It truly… is a blessing.

"But really, do you think we could also move in that manner?" Yoroi asks, stealing glances and enforcing the one-armed hug she gives herself.

"Of course, if we could with no prior practice you can too," Ayamine nods with a smile.

"Yeah, it's all in getting used to the sensitivity of the stick, really," Takeru asserts while rubbing his cheek, and the rather comical hand-shaped red mark he has in it.

"Shirogane-kun, how did you even do those movements?" Sakaki asks, standing close to him, arms almost touching. "I did try to hustle, but those repeated changes in direction, and the bounces off the buildings too were out of my reach."

"I was just doing my usual. Remember Ayamine's advice and move just a bit faster, other than that you just gotta get used to the new controls," he smiles, nodding.

"So, would it be fair to say we all could replicate these results after some practice?" I ask, edging closer to his other side.

Yet, he steps away, bumping into Sakaki. "… Yeah, I think."

"… Takeru, are you alright? Maybe you should take it easy for today?" brushing my hair, I look at him. But he avoids my gaze once more. Why? W-What did I do?

"I'm fine, really. Don't worry about me, Mitsurugi."

I cannot do that. I can't just look away when my fellow is so clearly pained.

"But Shirogane-san, those jumps were amazing! Your slashes were so quick too! I couldn't even hit you once…" Tamase looks down again, playing with her hair.

"Don't be so down, Tama. You had a clear disadvantage and still forced me to go into full boost to avoid your shots. Be a bit more proud."

Why do you beam at her and not me? Tamase looks down for a moment, then gives him a nod and thanks for his fair compliment.

"Special-kun, you sure you okay?" Ayamine asks, still endowing in firm seriousness as if about to start a bout.

"Yeah, don't worry 'bout it. I've got this."

"… Last time you said that your Gekishin lost an arm, though," she retorts with a smirk.

"Wh- That doesn't count," he complains, folding his arms.

"Really, you do know no moderation," Sakaki remarks with a smile, elbowing him a bit. "But at least it seems you are not as invincible as you look."

"Save that for the time when you actually beat me, though. An arm less and all, I still got the job done," he notes, puffing his well-defined chest out with a smile which rivals today's fair weather.

Ayamine returns a cocky smile at him as she lightly punches his shoulder. "Challenge accepted, Special-kun."

"Copy that, Ayamine. Your bravery shall not be forgotten, grasshopper," he gives her a half hearted salute, making Tamase and Yoroi laugh out loud.

Why do you smile at her like that? Why do you make jokes with her and not me? Why won't you look my way for even a second?

… Are you still upset?

"Um… Takeru? Do you think you could give us some pointers about the XM3?"

"Hm? I guess… What did you wanna ask? Just keep it simple, I'll go over stuff in the classroom," he says, nodding my way. The smile does not fade, his sight does not veer away, remains fully focused onto me.

… So he didn't want apologies or worry, he aimed to clear the air with his usual quips. I see, now looking at Tamase and Yoroi their postures lost the restriction of wires that had them clamped upon themselves. I admit, I don't really get his jokes or humor so the notion flew over my head. I suppose Ayamine is more perceptive than I gave her credit for, I didn't think she would try and join his efforts. But in any case, you look so, so much better like that Takeru.

He starts giving us a summarized explanation of the XM3, tending to our individual queries without monopolizing any one of us. That being said, the small delay in his words, and that odd swollen cheek more than anything, are a sign of concern. And if the XO thought it necessary to test our character, to show her displeasure at our conduct… Are you still perhaps repaying your 'debt' over her protection?

Is there anything I could do to help? You just wait, Takeru. I do have to repay you for all you've done and are doing for me, my fellow.

Eventually, we reach the changing rooms and he gives us his parting words. While the other four debate on the feeling of piloting with this new OS, I begin removing the suit while tuning them out.

I do wonder why you were so down, Takeru. Someone so useful to the XO, she wouldn't want him out of her grasp. He even warned me, and Tsukuyomi seemed rather distressed upon my following queries. But before that, I need to stop being a burden on my fellow's shoulders.

I am certain that, once we can debate openly again, we shall agree in our views. Certainly, if you hoist such concerns over Her Highness, we must have the same opinions and desires. After all… if Mother taught you herself…

… Could you perhaps one day tell me of her, even if only a meager memory? How do I measure up against her? What of those… lovers you said you had? Do I look lacking in comparison?

Placing my suit in the locker, I take out my uniform. Sitting down to put my pants on, my feet gets stuck as I try and simply force it down. The same happens as I attempt to hurry and squeeze my ponytail through the small hole of the tank top. Finishing before the others are even halfway out of their suits, and again reassuring them I won't try and talk with him of delicate matters, I exit the room.

Takeru is nowhere to be found, there is no light visible under the door of the men's changing room. So hiding my hands on my trouser's pockets, I pace towards the PX. Licking my lips, recalling our bout, it all simply eludes me. The small smile, the fleeting gazes, that swirl in my stomach every time he employs my surname, that sensation of being dredged up in muck and vile as we were amidst the CCSE's worst day. Being unable to move, to do anything other than look down and bite on my lips.

Or on the contrary, the light buzzing in my ears, a current of warm water running across my back and sides, a pleasant and blossoming tension in my chest as if I were running under sunlight that follows whenever he does look my way, or as I cannot help but to stare at him. Or to foolishly recall… certain thoughts…

"Sigh… Try as I might, I cannot escape it. I… I am smitten with him, aren't I?"

This bubbling frustration upon his negatives, this fixation upon his features, his kind gestures… When did I start seeing him covered in such a radiant halo?

Would it ever be permitted for one such as me to… to fall in love? N-No, how do I know this is love in the first place?

…

I mean… I still don't know if he'll accept being my fellow or if he'd favor to go back to the Guard. But then, what can I even-

No, don't think like that! He's my fellow! Lovers or not, I have been blessed to walk the same path as him.

Steps wane, stop cold. I look at the ceiling, different images flashing through my mind. The surprised, perhaps scared, expression he showed me when we met that night, the usual smile as he chains jokes, the crumbling straw wall when I shunned him off, raw fire and thunders mixing together as he roared under the rain in the CCSE, the rather apathetic look of these days which wouldn't even flinch when surrounded by thorns or blades. With my eyes half closed, I bring my hands to the back of my head as I resume my walk and sigh.

Who is the real Takeru? And, is this love or passion what I'm feeling? How do I know I'm not being superficial right now? What *do* I like about him?

Hmm…

I admire his skill and dedication to his training, despite being so adept he continues to hone himself further. Also, never has he not offered a hand back to us, a rope to reach the height he now resides in.

I very much like his informal way of speaking to me. It's relaxing, and I enjoy his company much. While his humor is lost on me, I certainly can appreciate the effect it has in our squad.

I also favor him for being always so kind. He's always looking after us, even when we treated him badly. Not to mention how he helped us during the CCSE.

I also… cannot negate that I am physically attracted to him. Even if I have it under control, I do find myself staring at his chest or face from time to time. Luckily he hasn't noticed it. But what if he did… and was just keeping quiet…

H-He did grew flustered upon my, um, demands for 'milk'. I wonder, do you… How do you see me? To your palate and judgment, how do I measure up against Mother or those you favored?

But… But more than anything, I like his smile. Not just the way he talks, albeit odd it is welcoming and truthful, but the way he looks at me… or used to look, anyways. The minute way in which his eyelids contracted, the small smile that always raised, the full focus which he bestowed, the open posture and words he forwarded. Sigh… I do miss that, more than I thought.

Takeru's attitude could be considered rude, that is true, but I much prefer him to all the other formal people I've met which either freeze or return empty pleasantries my way. To be honest, no one but my retainers has ever clashed opinions with me. And while of course I have the Instructor and my squadmates now, none of them has posed such a challenge as Takeru has.

Looking through the windows as I reach the ground floor, at the clouds which try and seal the sunlight away, I can only wonder. Wonder what it is that makes his vision different than mine, whatever it is that has his gaze and thoughts captivated to such extent.

Maybe I'm being selfish, maybe I'm being shallow. But… Is it so wrong to want to have one thing in my life all for myself?

Takeru has been nothing but a great help to me, and he's always being especially nice to me. Even when I confronted him about his blade and got suspicious. Even during the CCSE when I was being cold to him, he still worried about me and gave me those massages. Even now, after my shameful behavior after the mock battle despite how he is, perhaps, suffering from whatever recollections he is having of his past.

Now's my time to repay all these favors, all the goodwill my fellow has given me.

Even if he doesn't love me back, even if he doesn't come to the Guard with me, I want Takeru to grace me with that radiant a smile again. And perhaps, if he deems me worthy, if I prove to him I am not a 'mistake' to be repeated…

"… M-Maybe we could be something more for each other."

… Even if, I admit, I would like you to openly accept my aid. More so if the XO is pushing insurmountable burdens upon you as of now. At the very least, to aid you reclaim your past is what I desire. If only so that no false claims fall on you. Maybe then, perhaps, we'll be able to talk about Mother, about whatever those odd shadows that mire your eyes actually are.

# Wavering

*Chapter 96:*

**Wavering**

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*December 7th. Some minutes past 5 PM.*

*(In the staircase leading to the rooftop.)*

**[Mikoto]**

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Rubbing my arms, each step echoes a bit more in the loneliness of the place. There's no light illuminating these stairs, a few ponds of dust settling in the corners of the steps. The silence makes me circle my neck, makes the crack I hear all the more evident. Even cracking my knuckles seems like a rude noise.

Sigh… I barely kept up with Takeru's lesson. Barely managed to keep up taking notes and asking questions, barely understood the implications of his words. So now we don't have to worry about stumbling over, but there is another layer of responsibility to treat the craft with care so as to not damage the joints unnecessarily. Inertia and lag seem to be greatly diminished, yet these combo actions are what worries me the most. Everyone gets to further enhance their strengths with the supposed accumulation of data that allows the OS to predict and preemptively respond to our thoughts and moves, to generate foundational patterns that will streamline our piloting and reduce wasted time, yet that's only if the pilot can bring out valuable data.

Takeru did say that the XM3 is not autopilot. Even if it is fitted with his data by default, if we do not try and access said maneuvers the

OS won't respond. And rookies that only try and imitate what has already been done… end up being nothing but cattle on the side.

Sigh…

The doorknob meets with coldness to the touch, the door creaks a bit as I open it. A gust greets me as I step outside, the sky that was clear as I came up here now lays fully buried under graying clouds. Heh, as always. I get out, it starts to rain. Sigh… Oh?

"Hm? Is that you, Mikoto-san?"

"Tae-san! It's been so long!" closing the door, I walk up to her. "What a coincidence, seeing you here. We haven't really crossed paths in the hallways since you got commissioned."

"Eh? Ah, yeah…" she chuckles, cracking a bit. Tae-san scratches her head as her hair flutters in the air when the wind blows. "Last time we saw each other was during your first sim run, right?"

Despite the chilly embrace and the full lock of gray up above, we edge closer to the fence and look at the training grounds, catching up on random stuff we saw on TV or how our squadmates are holding up.

"So Akane-san is still as amazing as always, huh."

"Yes, even if she has met a fair wall as of now. Takahara is still as brazen as always too, sadly."

"Haha, nice to hear you're all doing well in your new squad. We're… kind of holding up, despite some trouble."

"Oh, is it because of that Shirogane guy?" she asks, brows furrowing as her shoulders sink in.

"No. Well, kind of. Takeru hasn't done anything wrong but… well, people don't take kindly to him in the hallways. Thankfully, nothing has happened yet, but it is worrying."

"I see, so he's not some sort of brute?"

"Not outside of battle, no. I think he's really kind, honestly. Thanks to him, our trainings are more or less going smoothly as of now," I smile back, nodding a bit. "By the way, how has training been for you guys?"

"Uuh… Same as always." she says, sounding as like toads croaking under the moon, frail and fleeting. "It sure it tough to keep up with the others, more so with my superiors. It's as if there was a barrier," she looks up, eyelids and lips gradually collapsing as a hand grasps and pulls at the fence, "a barrier that I can't overcome no matter how much thought and time I put into my training."

"… Yeah. You know, sometimes… when I look at how good the others are getting now that we're piloting," my eyes also seek any thread of light, yet only find the never-changing gray of swirling clouds, a slow rustling of cold wind as the sole answer to my call, "I wonder why I was chosen to be on the Surface Pilot Academy. When you think about it, it's like we're pigeons trying to fly along eagles."

"Ahaha… It feels like that sometimes. Oh sorry, I didn't mean to get so down," she immediately bows down, pulling at her hair a bit.

"It's fine, I feel like that from time to time, too. At least you're already commissioned, so you can show your worth to the UN."

Her eyes again seek the clouds, leaning onto the fence, nose poking outwards as her fingers grip at it. Tae-san then sighs, slowly, as a single hand lets go and limply slides to her side. "I don't know…"

"I mean, you're able to properly fight now, yes? Even then, earning your stripes is proof you must be doing something right."

"… Sometimes I don't really know anymore. Sometimes I feel as if I didn't really deserve to be here."

"Why? Didn't Akane-san say you're her favorite partner when we trained? Is there, um, something giving you trouble in your new squad?"

She averts her eyes, her lips curving and twisting. "Yeah. There's a new course we're taking that's… hard or arduous doesn't begin to explain it," expression tightens, falls apart before she shakes her head. "Whenever we practice, I'm always on the lower end of the scores. And since a few days ago, no one has given me any pointers or anything… I think," she wraps and constricts both arms around herself, crawling ivies biting into her flesh, "they're giving up on me."

"… Is it that big of a gap?"

"It's not about skill or finesse, I guess. Akane and the others are catching up truly fast, but when it's time to fight I can never score even a draw against our superiors. Haha, I guess I just don't have it in me." Stopping to take a deep breath, putting her hands in her pockets and continuing to look up, like a pigeon after it got hit by a rock, knowing it will never soar those clouds. "I don't really know if… if I'm actually helping, if I'm worth my rations. Maybe, you know, it would be better if a more experienced soldier were in my place. I'm sure the Captain and the 1st Lts think so."

"… I can see what you mean. Not everybody can be an elite pilot, after all."

"Yeah… Siiigh…"

Without nothing else to say, we simply look up at the clouds that refuse us a mere speck of sunlight before it all goes dark again for the day. The grip on the fence doesn't lift but it wavers, lips quiver as she hunches over a little bit. Words get stuck in my throat, jumbled together as if there were an ant army marching through it. A slow feeling, the shock of a splash of cold water but constant, makes me sigh too, hunch over a bit.

I always got along well with Tae-san, mostly due to how simple we were. Us and Kashiwagi-san used to hang out a lot back when we all were Cadets. Asakura-san and Chizuru-san were always being strict on our roles and duties, Kei-san didn't listen at all, Takahara-san was always challenging Akane-san to one up Chizuru-san, Meiya-san was so cold back then too, and Miki-san was even more reserved.

That's why I get how she feels. How it is to walk behind prodigies like them all, to live in the shadow they cast.

What I know best are medical topics and survival in the wild. When I enlisted, I was sure they were going to be train me to become a military doctor or something. The letter for admission to the Surface Pilot Academy was a shock, even more when I read where I ended up assigned to.

Chizuru-san has a keen eye for keeping us in check and can plan ahead with hawkeye precision, Kei-san is great in CQC and can adapt on the fly to almost any situation, Meiya-san's skill with a blade is off the charts and her pool of knowledge seems to simply know no end, and Miki-san is a great sniper and an even better comrade to work with. And then there's Takeru, who can do anything and is even a great asset to the XO herself. And in the last spot…

There's me, the mediocre one of the team.

Since I didn't knew as much as Chizuru-san or Meiya-san, they often cut me off quickly. They still do, from time to time, even when all I want is to clear the air or get back on track of the conversation. I know they apologized a few times but, somehow, I'm still reluctant to talk openly with them.

And all of them are important people to boot. One related to the Prime Minister, another to the nobility, the other to the Undersecretary and the last one to the infamous General Ayamine. All that's left is for Takeru to also be some sort of illegitimate son of a noble for jackpot. In comparison, I'm just a normal girl. I don't really have a bigger purpose to fight more than to earn my living… since I

can't recall when was the last time I talked with Dad, when did he answer even one of my letters or anything…

Even Dad thinks his job is more important than me, why would anyone else care? There's nothing to gain, I can't really… contribute anything to the training or any conversation… All I can do is heal them after they fight, and only superficial injuries at that. I thought I was making some progress, finding my niche, but no matter how much I reach out the clouds will always elude me, it seems.

… Looks like I'll always be a one-winged bird, mom. Only able to trudge on in the soil, only dreaming of what it is to truly fly beneath the sun.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to bring your mood down," she apologizes, enforcing the grip on the fence.

"It's okay, I also… feel the same."

"Are the others excelling in their trainings?"

"Ahaha, yeah, they are. All of them were amazing, really. Oh, Chizuru-san and Kei-san finally worked together today. Can you believe it?"

"Huh?! Really?! You're not pulling my leg, are you?"

"I wish I were, they didn't give me any windows to try and trade shots. It was… crushing, today's defeat." Both in the battlefield and in the classroom. All of them had questions and clarifications, understanding of those complex terms Takeru elaborated on.

And then, there was me trying to scribble it all down, make tables and keep things tidy.

"… You know, seeing Chizuru-san and the rest improve so much got me thinking," I whisper, tugging at my elbows. "… What if I just don't

belong here? What if everything I've done until now was just a fluke?"

What if one day I can't take the screams anymore? What if I freeze like today in real battle? What if my lack of results ends up getting someone killed? Outside of survival in the wild or patching injuries… there is nothing I can do for my squad.

"But you're still not that far behind them, right?"

"Sigh… For now. Is Akane-san not helping you train?"

"I… don't want to hold her back," she says, shrugging with a dry chuckle. "That's why I'm staying awake at night, reviewing my notes and all. But I'm sure everyone notices I'm barely keeping up… so at least I don't wanna ruin their runs, you know?"

"Yeah, I get what you mean… I've tried suggesting some tactics to Chizuru-san or Meiya-san, but you can imagine how that went."

Really, if not for Takeru, I don't know if we'd still be called a squad. Thanks the Heavens Kei-san is no longer provoking Chizuru-san, and that Meiya-san seems to be regaining her habitual composure, but I know that all it takes is a spark.

"Haha… I suppose we can just march on and hope for the best," she suggests, the low and lost tone betraying the words spoken. Shrugging, shivering as another gust surrounds us, she rubs her arms. "Brr… It's getting really cold. I think I'll be going back inside. Are you coming with?"

"… No, I feel like staying for a while longer. Send my regards to Akane-san and the rest, though."

"I will, I will. Well, maybe we'll cross in the hallways soon. Until later, Mikoto-san," Tae-san waves at me, finally smiling. I return the gesture and she hurries back to the stairs, despite how her posture is still aiming down and not because of the cold.

So I turn around and look up, up to the darkening clouds. The almost uniform gray sheet that covers the sky as the afterglow already retreats for the day. The lights of the base's perimeter come to life, the trackfield gains illumination as well. Looking down at it, I notice there's someone there… going by the shape of the hair that must be Meiya-san.

Even at this hour, she's still training. Maybe because it's getting colder so she rather do it now instead of later at night?

"… And here I am, unable to lift a finger. Siiigh…"

As stagnant as the clouds, gray and unchanging. All I can really do is remain behind the others anyways, so I guess it fits me well enough. Another month of Dad not responding my letters, and this time there was no plushy either. Maybe he only wanted me out of the house…

Sigh… Don't even have the energy to go sit on a tree and rest, or to try and climb somewhere. If it had been earlier I could have paid the hill a visit, but time simply flew me by as I checked my notes.

"… I wonder if there is anything I can really do to be of use, even with a single wing."

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*A few hours later.*

*(Simulator Room.)*

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Resting against the rails, arms dangling to the air without tune or reason, I eye sideways the monitors that are now turned off despite the thrashing of the sims. Apparently, these testings are to be some super top secret matter. The Instructor justified herself by saying she doesn't want to have Takeru showing off and eliciting an aggressive response from some soldiers, even a few stares still clung to us as we proceeded with the runs.

A buzzing in my ears continues to echo, to drill deeper every second. It's as if I had roots growing inwards, crushing and clawing at the back of my head. Uuh… I barely could keep up with Kei-san, the added impulse was truly something out of this world. And yet, the system didn't feel as natural as before. The sensitivity aside, some turns and moves weren't mine. It was as if the TSF was piloting me instead. Even if Takeru said that with time our own data would gain hold in the system, the worst of it all is… without those insane dodges I wouldn't have made it to the end of the drill.

I passed the training because Takeru's imprinted patterns saved my neck. If it had been my own moves, I would have failed. Once my own patterns take hold and his are erased, replaced by my own style, once the way in which my machine stands and aims changes… Will I start losing performance? Wouldn't it be better than to simply roll out the TSF without me in it?

Hehe… In the end, an empty machine mimicking him is better than me…

"Hey Mikoto, what's up?" Takeru calls out, coming up the stairs towards me while fiddling with his headband. "Feeling down?"

Lifting myself off the rails, choking them and taking a deep breath, I return the smile. "What? I'm not down, I was just lost in thought about the training."

"Really? Well, how's it going for you?" he asks, stopping by my side.

We then rest a little while chatting, doing small talk of our trainings. Apparently, the system will still retain his insane dodging skills but I still have to think and learn the patterns to trigger and improve them, mold them to my own convenience. I wonder if someone like me could reach such a level of aptitude…

"But I wish everybody could be as positive as you Mikoto," he shrugs, ruffling his hair as an eye closes. "If only the others could try stuff out as sincerely as you do."

"Ahaha, what are you saying? They're all better than me… Positivity won't make my piloting better."

"Uh, that's not true? Not giving up in front of a challenge is key to improving. And I do think you're better in some stuff," he nods, facing me frontally, openly, not blinking for a second.

"Me? Better? At what?"

"You never shy away from a challenge, and you try things out without any preconceptions. That's really important for growing as a pilot, or in any job really, that you're always looking for new ways to do stuff."

"I think you're giving me too much credit. I'm nothing special."

I'm not you. I'm doing my best just to keep up. I try many things because I do nothing right, because I need to know to adapt to whatever I'm needed to do to remain useful. Just that, nothing else. A parrot can repeat and learn many words, but it will never properly be able to hold a real conversation.

"Hey, that's not true," he looks straight at me like a hawk gazing over prey, but he smiles warmly as usual. "You're doing well, Mikoto. Sure, there is much you can improve on but you should be more proud. Not everybody could adapt as fast to the XM3 as you seem to."

"… It's easy to fight when your data is there to save my neck, you know," I sigh, facing away, interlocking my fingers.

"Well, yeah, I guess," he admits, saying nothing for a moment.

The permanent buzz of the sims remains as the sole company in the void vastness of the sim room, I can't help but to again rest on the rails and let my hands sway.

"But you did save our backs many times during the drills, remember?" he comments, the welcoming chirp of morning echoing.

"That was no fluke, that was your awareness at its peak," Takeru is staring as I look up, with a radiant confidence in his gaze. Without any tension or trying to flee my eyes, breathing relaxed as well.

"That was… Takeru, do you really think I'm that good?"

"Yeah. You can get better, but I think you're doing fine so far. We're being trained in one of the harshest courses possible, Mikoto. And now we're treading unknown ground with the OS. So, yeah, if you ain't crashing you're doing fine."

"… That's a pretty low bar, if you ask me."

"Do you wanna guess how many times I crashed myself attempting the sharp dodges and aerial charges you guys are all forcing out of the OS now?"

"Eh? Well… Someone like you probably got it right immediately. I mean, you were cruising the sim practice since the start," I shrug, tapping an ear.

"… Our hands and feet combined wouldn't be enough," he whispers, closing both eyes as he shakes his head.

"Oh… Was, um, during your special missions?"

"Huh? Oh, right… Yeah," he nods, scratching his head as he looks away, "the *XO* pushed me to my limits when starting the work on the XM3, you see. And back then, I failed and crashed far more times than I can remember as of now."

"But it only took you a few weeks in the end… You're a genius, it seems…"

"… A genius in tenacity, maybe."

"Huh? Tenacity?"

"Yeah. I guess being a stubborn bastard is my best quality, I just… don't know how to give up, for better or worse."

"How can not surrendering be a bad thing, though? If you're always doing your best, I believe that is worth much praise." More with the spectacular results you bring about. Compared to that, my efforts are just a dime a dozen. If we were tables, you'd be serving a banquet while I'd have a stumped leg under a cat's sharpening claws.

"Well, not knowing when to quit it is dangerous, you know," he simply says, shrugging, arms falling as he looks at the sims. "But I am here because I keep moving forward, despite the unending pile of failures I cause. And with enough time, you'll also be able to bring about a better performance, Mikoto," he nods back, smiling again.

"… I see. Well, sorry for the weird question. Say, there was this new dish in the PX-"

"Is everything alright, Mikoto?" he asks, holding my gaze.

"Ahaha, yeah, I'm fine. So anyways, about that dish. It was so spicy! I felt as if my tongue was going to just dry off and fall," I clasp my cheeks with my palms, remembering the taste as I narrow my eyes.

"… You sure everything's fine? You don't need to fake it with me."

"Fake it? Haha, what are you talking about? That dish was really-"

"Mikoto," Takeru crosses his arms, expression clouding over as he edges closer, our elbows almost touching, "anything troubling you?"

"… Was it that obvious?" in a low tone, I ask while looking down.

"Well… While you usually go into weird tangents, you tend to scratch your left ear whenever you're nervous or bothered."

Huh? I… do what? He noticed something like that? Wait, was he looking at me so much? When? Why?

Ugh… Dammit, now I don't know what to say!

"So, I can lend you an ear if you want," he suggests as he fiddles with his hair, stealing glances my way.

I gulp, making circles on my legs for a little while. Toying with the fin add-on in our wrists, lips quivering as if I had just had ginger tea, I tap two fingers and look his way, seeing he is still gazing and waiting.

"Say Takeru… Do you really think I'm a good pilot?"

"Again, yeah, I do," an immediate reply, an even faster nod.

"… You don't think, like, that I don't belong?"

"… Why do you think that?" he asks, brows lowering as his tone. His stare on me remains, the kindling of the sun on my body at dawn when camping.

A hand raises to my ear, only to poke its underside before tracing my chin as I again flee his eyes. "Well, I'm sure you know. Everybody in our squad is someone special, and then there's me. And I am not the best at anything."

"Your midrange shooting is awesome, what are you talking about?"

"Yeah, but yours is better. And your maneuvering is also better, Kei-san and Meiya-san are also better at CQC, Chizuru-san has more tactical knowledge and Miki-san is the best sniper. What do I have?"

Nothing.

Nothing at all.

Why am I even asking him this? To force him to lie? To force reassurance out of Takeru?

Heavens forgive me, I'm such a piece of shit. Seeking pity as the sole reason for others to bear my presence.

Siiigh… Maybe I should really call it quits and request a transfer to another training course or something.

"Haha, sorry. I totally ruined your mood, right? I'm like a crow tainting your morning with its cries, aren't I?"

He's been doing great, even despite the accident and all the rumors, and here I am showering him with my problems. I'm sure Takeru has a lot of problems, real ones, to deal with already. Who am I to bother him even more with my issues? I never helped him in anything… I didn't even stand up for him when Chizuru-san and Meiya-san turned their back on him before the CCSE. And under the rain, I ran away.

I ran like a coward, without looking back for a single second.

I abandoned him to his misery. And the same afterwards, what *did* I do to repay his goodwill?

Nothing.

Nothing at all.

… Not like someone like me could do anything of worth for a genius like Takeru.

Hahaha… In the end, I should just shut up. It's not like anyone cares about what I think anyways. Not even my parents had time for me, why would anyone else? I can't contribute anything of worth, have nothing to offer… I should be grateful to have a roof and meals every day instead of venting at other people.

"Speaking of birds…" Takeru slowly says, ruffling his hair.

I look at him, he had his gaze lost into the ceiling, his lips curving inwards, the hand on his head caressing his hair slowly but with

some strength in it. Soft, the nibbling on his bottom lip. Tight, the breath he holds hostage. Narrow, the eyes full of… sorrow? Why is he wincing in such way? D-Did I say something wrong?

He lets out a sigh, long and heavy, and then fully closes his eyes. "Do you know of a bird called the jian, Mikoto?"

"… Huh? W-What?"

"It's also known as the bird who shares its wings," Takeru tells as if to a toddler by bed, repeating words I haven't heard in a long time. "It only has one eye and one wing, so unless both the male and the female work as one they won't ever fly. Individually, they're incomplete. But together they can do what by themselves would be impossible."

"… Where did you heard of it?"

"Where?" He opens his eyes, curving his brows downwards. Staring at me, fully, before his lips shrug and he again scratches his head. "Someone… I liked a lot told me about it once. Back at my old base, I mean."

"… I see."

Of course it's a coincidence. There's no way Takeru ever met my Mom. And I never had anyone special to say those words to. Well, not like the jian is something only Mom knew about.

"But it is a sad tale, that bird," I sigh, hugging my arms. "If it never finds anyone to share anything with it, it will forever only dream of the sky." And with nothing to give, no one would desire to give the battered bird a chance.

"Thing is, I think most of us in the military are like that bird," he ascertains, nodding to the air, looking up as he winces again. "You say you can't do anything well enough, that the others are better

than you, but do you think any of us could fly without the silent work of our mechanics?"

"No, but what I meant was-"

"And do you think we could do our best without the chefs doing magic with the synthetic stuff we get as ingredients?"

"But that isn't-"

"Yes, it is." Eyes ablaze, he returned my gaze. "No one can protect its life alone, we can't fly by ourselves. So, what's wrong in you being our tailwind?"

"Tail… wind? Me?"

"Yeah, you keep our backs safe, you give us the space and peace of mind we so much need. I'm sure the rest feel the same way about you, Mikoto. All of us are, in a way, reliant on the rest. No one can be a one man army, not now, not ever."

"… But wouldn't it be better if a more skilled soldier was watching your back?"

"I mean… Yeah, but you also could be fighting with better soldiers in front of you. And, anyways, I at the least wouldn't trade you for anyone."

"Huh?! You… Why?" He's messing with me, I'm sure. Why am I getting so-

"I doubt I could get along so well with anyone else, you're the only one who truly gets my bad jokes." Not a single hint of joking in his voice… "Sure, if we had a bunch of vets with us things would be less daunting, but even so I really rather have you on my team. There's just this feeling when you just sync up so well with someone, you can't replicate that anywhere else. And I feel safe with you behind me, so I wouldn't trade you for anyone else."

"… But why? Why me? I can't measure up to the others, and I don't shine anywhere, don't really contribute to the tactics' discussion…" looking down, I sigh again.

A strong pat on a shoulder, a smile welcomes me as I raise my sight back. "Well, for one, you have a better outlook."

"Outlook?"

"Yeah. Sakaki has the pressure of the leader on her shoulders, and Meiya too in a way. So, they don't know what it is to look at a squad from the rear. Tama can do that too, but she isn't as quick on her feet like you. You can support us from any position, be it the rear, the midfield or the frontlines, and you're always aware of what's around you despite how you might seem to be always out of it. You're terribly attentive to the micro-side of the battlefield."

"… Huh? Really? You really think so?"

"Yeah. These drills with swapped positions are proof of that, you know? The others are having trouble but you're adapting just fine, right?" he suggests, nodding again.

"… One of the perks of being a jack of all trades, I guess." And master of none at all.

"Come on, don't be like that, please," the tender crack in his voice stabs my gut, enhances the buzz in my ears. "Mikoto, hey," patting my shoulder again, leaving his hand there, he waits but… but I can't look up, "how many times have you saved someone's back in the sim runs?"

"… I don't know. And that's all I can do, in the end."

"Hey, that's really important, you know. We can move forward because we know you're behind us. You are also braver than most, since you're the only one that actually tried to follow me and my dumb moves. The fact that you realized my dodges are triggering is

because you are attempting them, to also break them into your own style. You're doing great for a first run, for real," he says with a small chuckle, winking at me when I look up as he steps back.

"… But in the end, I don't really shine. All I can do is remain behind someone and watch their backs. If you ever needed me…" I hang my head, hiding my hands behind my back.

"I'm sure the rest also think they're at fault now that they're trying out the XM3, to train like this is a great jump from what we were doing. And you all were already trying hard to get out of your first slump, too. Don't be so down, Mikoto."

"But when I'm needed, I end up coming up short. I'm sure you could find someone as good as me anywhere else," turning away, resting onto the rails again, I sigh and nibble at my lips, gripping at my elbows. "In the end, we'll end up shuffling through many squads. We're all just pieces in a board, when you think about it. When one of us goes down, you'll have to move on and find another partner."

And someday that will happen. And that's why me and Tae-san are so scared of our own shortcomings. Because, unlike elite soldiers like you, we're replaceable, expendable. No one would notice if we disappeared one day, no one will weep for our deaths. I bet Dad won't even notice there's no more letters arriving at his office, he might… even be happy I stopped sending them, might not even learn I died until who knows when.

"Mikoto, please," slowly coming to my side, he again pats my shoulder. "That doesn't mean your efforts are any less valuable, right? Sure, work is like that but right now you're with us, and we do appreciate you being here."

"… But if I ever fail, you'll have to move on and keep climbing the ladder, even if using my head as a stepping stone. That's how things work, no one will remember the losers."

"… So you're saying that if I drop dead or end up in a wheelchair for the rest of my life, you'll just forget about me? Dude, that's real cold." He squints his eyes, puffing his cheeks a bit.

"It's not that! It's just…" Ah, why am I saying such cruel things to him when Takeru is only trying to cheer me up? Ugh… "I mean, everybody is expecting great things from me since I'm here, and I don't… I don't know if I am up to par with their expectations." I inhale slowly and bring my hands together, I look upwards as I sigh. "I don't want to disappoint the rest or the Instructor, but I know I'm not that good. And we're not allowed to fail, not in the battlefield. So, well, maybe it would be better if someone else were here in my place. That's what I think sometimes."

"I see…"

Then, silence around us.

Gulping is hard, looking up is impossible.

Here he was, trying to lend me an ear, a hand.

And here I am, venting and bitching at the only person that has tried to listen to me in… I don't even remember anymore.

Sigh… I really deserve it. I'm the worst, to ruin his night with my problems.

"… Then, the solution is simple," he says, smiling again as he nods a few times.

"Huh? Really? What is the solution?" He always seems to have the right words, somehow. What is this solution?

"Simple. Make love to your fears."

"… Huh?"

"You will fail, you know."

"What?"

"We all do. Making mistakes is a part of the learning process. I know tests and evaluations punish you for screwing up, but that is an integral part of the curve. If you don't try it out, you'll never know what you're doing wrong. So, while I get the 'Do or Die' mentality we need as soldiers, taking stuff in with such apprehension ain't the right call, Mikoto."

"But… But I'm always the one that-"

"And yet, here you are," he chuckles, looking straight into my eyes, far more bright than the overhead lights. "Despite the hellish basic course, the shit of the CCSE, and all that has come since then, you're still holding up nicely enough."

"… It won't be the same once we get commissioned, coming up short then would make it obvious I was just winging it the whole time. I don't… I don't know if I-"

"People will die Mikoto," he winces, and his face lost all sunshine. Dusk was coming in his complexion as he gazes up, as he hits the rails. "I assure you, if you could somehow go back in time a thousand times, you will never find a way to save everyone. It's a cruel thing, yeah, but people will die. Not because of your lack of skill or not, but because that's just war."

"B-But I-"

"Do you think the Instructor didn't lose comrades? Does that make her a 'failure?"

"N-No! I'm not saying that, someone like her is capable of saving many lives, I'm sure. But, well…"

Takeru's face does not thaw the almost predatory glint, the aggressive clenching of both fists and jaw. He takes a deep breath

through his nose and ruffles his hair again, slowly weaving strands in between his fingers.

"It doesn't matter how good or bad you are. People will die, that's a fact. And if you survived, that's enough. If you ever want to stop fighting, that's enough too. The results might say you're a coward, that you failed in protecting what was dear to you…" he again closes his eyes, folding his arms, "but shit is going to hit the fan eventually. So, instead of worrying about what you can do, of what might be, try to do what you can."

"… Is there really something I can do to make a difference here? It doesn't look like it, you're all so much better."

"See what you do best and try to do it better, try to find a new angle to complement it, and try to make peace with your fears. If you prepare yourself mentally it will make the pain easier to manage. Sure, there's some stuff… no one wants to prepare for," he bit his lips for a second, sighing afterwards. "But it's better to learn to live with that pain, to carry it with you, than to bottle it up or to look away from it. Trust me, you don't want to do that."

"… Did something of the sort happen to you?"

"Yeah. Remember how I told you guys I learned most stuff I know from my old squad? Well, wanna hear something crazy? When I started out, I was a total wimp. An absolute zero that couldn't even run a klick."

"Huh?! No way, get out of here."

"For real, I was a disaster. Couldn't even hold a rifle straight, and I got throw to the moon and slashed in half in CQC practice all the damn time," he nods, puffing his chest for some reason. "But even though I was a mediocre piece of shit that only knew how to complain, I had people that were- are dear to me lending me a hand to stand up every time I thought of laying down and giving up. So," he looks back at me, the small yet honest smile, the complexion

unfaltering as a recently washed TSF, the bright gleam in his eyes which would put even dawnbreak to shame, "if I could become this good, you also can reach a future you that makes you proud. Small steps, Mikoto."

"… You're not lying?" He shakes his head, lips pluck a bit. "And, um, how did you deal with your… situation? I mean, your prior squad… well…"

"… I won't say that's easy. Persevering when the sky falls on you and the sea collapses below is torture at times, yeah. But above everything, there was always something I wanted to do. Don't you have a dream, even if it seems like a fantasy, that you'd like to see through?" he asks, holding my gaze until I nod. "Well, then you simply have to calm down, halt the gears of thought, and rest. Once you're well rested and without those bad ideas spoiling your head, then you think on what you really can do well and how to polish your rough sides. So long as you maintain a clear head most of the times, things will be a bit easier to manage even if life likes to sucker punch your fucking kidney outta nowhere."

"Pfft… Don't be silly."

"But doesn't it feel like that at times?"

"Well, yeah, I guess. Sigh… So I just gotta think things calmly, huh."

"Yeah, for real. You say you're not useful or something, but really, review the footage of the trainings when you've got the time. See for yourself what you do for the pacing of the team," he nods with a smirk, I can't help but to return the gesture. "In time, I guess you'll learn to handle your own bad strokes. But, one day, if you do make even a small effort to keep that side in check, you'll realize you're no longer getting paralyzed in front of what you once feared so much. And then…" he chuckles a bit as he looks at nowhere in particular, raising a finger-gun at the ceiling. "And then it will be time to fuck whatever it is that scared you as hard as you feared it. Sadly, facing that stuff head on is the only way to deal with it. And that, is a fight

you have to play on your own, Mikoto. No matter what I say or do, if you don't see what little good things you do it won't matter. So, uh, well, if you ever want to train or test anything my ears are always open," he nods again, as welcoming as he was in the first day. Without any scorn or arrogance, simply offering his hand.

… Thanks.

"But what if I can't face these… bad thoughts?"

"You can. Just that it'll be different than how I did it. Some people pump themselves out in battle, others hold tightly to their duty or religion, others dedicate themselves to an activity, others write bad novels. The important thing is, you find a way to deal with whatever it is that scares you. And for that, you must chill, Mikoto!" he says with a grand gesture, pointing the finger-gun at my forehead. "Once you're calm and collected, then you think about what you can do. No guilt or self-loathing involved, you hear me? You despair after you die," he says, low, as he leans a bit closer. I nod by reflex to my own reflection in those eyes, that remain on mine and nowhere else, to that smile, small and slow, which makes my lips again quiver a bit.

… Was it always so simple? All I had to do… was give me enough time to think things through? All this time I didn't do any introspection on my results, I just kept on marching onward without much thought other than blaming myself for not being as good as the rest, and trying to compensate for that. I never thought my weakness could be my strength, or that I should be open about my fears. The Instructor was so firm about us having to be resolute and driven as soldiers ever since we arrived under her care, I always thought speaking of my insecurities would make the others look down on me, save for Miki-san.

"… Thanks a lot, Takeru. I… still don't know what I want to do regarding my place in our team, but I think I'll try being a bit more open with the gang for starters."

"Good to hear. And really, don't be so down on yourself. Why don't you try letting the rest fight without you for once? See for yourself what they do without you."

"Oh, to actually let them fight as a flight? I wonder if the Instructor will let us do that."

"Don't worry, I'll go bother her later for you," he says with a smug grin, holding a chuckle.

"Hahaha, you'll get punished if you do."

"Don't sweat it, worst case I bug the *XO* instead."

"Come on, don't be silly. Your punishment is gonna get worse if you do that."

"Ah, what's a few more days in the cell? Anything they throw at me is nothing after so many nights of cold showers," Takeru then puffs his chests, ruffling his hair with one hand.

"Heh, don't be an idiot."

"Squad, assemble!" the Instructor calls, so we share a look.

He shrugs with an eye closed as he moves, so we go to her summon as the ones practicing exit the sims.

… Thanks a lot Takeru. Really. You say I'm always looking after the rest, but even in that you're better than me. But you're right, I have to try to move past this doubts that plague me, before it's too late.

So even if it is mortifying, I suppose I first have to get in the right mindset. To not despair until I die, and make the most of my present. I suppose, what he said does ring true then. We're all like the jian, tending to the blank points of our comrades. I have to be brave for them, just like how they're brave for me. That's how we started feeling like a squad after the CCSE, when we started working together under the same goal.

So, little by little… I'll try and offer my grain of sand, wherever it is it finds its place. And one day, one day I'll be enough to repay this kindness, to properly stand by and protect you, Takeru. To lend you this little wing I am, for whatever little reassurance I can give.

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*A/N: I know this chap kind of kills the pacing of the issues Keru and Yuuko are dealing with, but since there hasn't been anything for Mikoto thus far in the story I decided that giving her a chapter was long due. Also works for the incoming end of the arc, which is closing in before ten or so chaps if I stop splitting them.*

*I haven't had time to reply to reviews, so thanks to all those commenting. And while shipping is one thing I won't confirm or deny, I'd wait until the end of this arc before waving a white flag for Meiya. The hints are already placed to figure out the new twist of this section, so hopefully it lands well despite the, um, graphic nature of the incoming mess.*

*Anyways, I won't be replying to reviews for a while but thanks a lot for leaving them. I think the pacing of these last chapters will clash with the last, uh, twenty-something but the gas has to e stepped on at some point.*

*As always, thank you all for reading. Stay safe.*

*Zuoriel*

# Anchor

*Chapter 97:*

**Anchor**

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*December 8th. Near 1 PM.*

*(Briefing Room N° 4.)*

[ **Chizuru** ]

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"… And that is all," the Instructor concludes, resting the report on the nearest desk and facing towards us, casting a shadow over the projected images on the wall. "Any questions?"

Gulping slowly, exhaling with even more delay, I try and step forward. Only to drag my feet on the ground, almost recoiling away from the locked stare that seems to glimmer in the low light available in the room. "Instructor, ma'am, are we to operate on our own in the field?"

A minute contortion in her eyes, that veer towards the other three lined up besides us, she coughs and faces towards them. "No, we shall have you cadets divided in pairs. Each one will be accompanied by one of the Royal Guards here, to both prevent any unnecessary struggles from occurring and support you cadets in case of emergency."

"Instructor, how will the chain of command work then?" Mitsurugi asks, keeping her posture bolted in perfect composure, her face and eyes upwards.

"I shall oversee the operation myself, 1st Takamura and both 2nd Lts Tsukuyomi shall remain assigned as temporary support for UN crew," she says, taking a second to nod their way. "Of course, we all shall

be relying on their expertise but the final say will be in my hands, no matter how dire the situation becomes. Are we clear?" she inquires, facing ever forward as if to bathe in sunlight. Her eyes, the mark of the scythe, remain on Mitsurugi's, who relents a nod along the expected answer despite the clear twisting in her lips.

… It isn't as if I couldn't understand, for my own insides are enduring cruel nails being hammered in at the words we're receiving. A volcano of the Southern Yatsugatake Mountains may erupt soon, so both the Diet and the Shogunate requested UN aid, in consonance with the speech Her Highness had done a few days prior. And for some reason, we have been chosen for the task. I suppose, a low effort to not decline the request, a meager commitment to avoid sending actual soldiers in case of emergency. Since the MDF is busy rebuilding the defense lines after the last attack from Niigata they don't have the hands required for the evacuation, so I guess deploying us to this unexpected request is merely an attempt at parley. Who knows what transpired behind curtains to have the Empire openly forward this plea.

So, sharing a look with Mitsurugi, I lightly shrug and sigh, she imitates the gesture with a light scrunching for only a passing second. While the Instructor proceeds to describe the topography, warning us not to fly too high just in case, the marks of the terrain is all I can see. The desolate barren land of the wilderness in which these civilians willingly have chosen to remain behind.

I do welcome the chance to prove my worth, and by aiding my people too, but it does feel wrong to have the UN meddling in our domestic affairs. I know the MDF doesn't have the people nor the time to perform an evacuation over such a large lot of land, but still, it's the people's land, their homes and villages.

Must we truly coerce the civilians away from their own property, for the sake of some possible future BETA incursion? If such a thing as a concern, a true one, then the UN authorities would have demanded a thorough evacuation beforehand at some point since the invasion was halted in 1999. The eruption seems to be more of

an excuse for an agenda of today instead of a concern of those in power to safeguard our people.

And yet, the diagrams shown nor the cracks evident in both the Instructor's and the guards' slow gestures tell no lies. To leave the civilians at the elements' mercy in such precarious conditions in the literal middle of the wilderness, with the risk of an eruption as well, would be equal to abandoning them to their luck.

… However, will their lives truly be better in the slums, in the already overflowed shelters? What do we even do if they refuse?

… Drag them by force, point a barrel to their temple?

Feeling my breath clogging at the end of my throat, I steal a glance at the others. Mitsurugi also seeks my gaze, with the same conflict swirling in her eyes as if a perfect mirror she had turned into. We both tighten our lips, acknowledging the reflection. Tamase is doing her best to remain standing in attention as her knees threaten with betrayal, not to mention and the unnatural, statue-like straightness she's endowing. Yoroi is the opposite of her though, unable to cast away the clouds which mire her face and rain down on her posture. Ayamine retains her usual unreadable face, but she is strangely focused on the speech. Our eyes cross, she returns a slow but firm nod as if taking in air to endure the rocking of the cockpit.

… Shirogane-kun, however, was clearly not paying much attention. His skin is paling again, which is understandable for how brutally he bested us during our last training moments before. Yet there is no sway of his head, no threads keeping him standing nor crushing pressure in his features like with the rest. Lacking any signs, he's the only one in the room that's still calm. An easy flow of breaths, a relaxed albeit tired posture. Well, compared to what he suffered in Yukon such a mission may not be as-

"You will all sortie with real armaments," the Instructor tells, eliciting a drowned gasp on me and the other four.

We never used real weaponry yet. Watching her as she paces in front of the projected image, there is no hesitation in her eyes or steps as she switches the displayed images.

"You will carry with you Block C weaponry, which consists of a Type-74 Blade and a Type-92 MPS Armor. Your TSFs are already being worked on for this operation and the crew are already preparing the Type-87 Maintenance Trailer and Support Vehicles. There is at least fifty people working at this very moment to ensure this mission meets success, you know?" she says, looking at us one at a time while folding her arms. The unblinking stare sends a shiver to slither down my spine. "I believe I've already taught you of how much it costs to deploy a TSF, even to something as simple as a mock battle near the base. I suppose, it is now time for you to see the other costs of an operation."

The Instructor hastily clicks something on the laptop she had by her desk, the slideshow of images fades to a simple white. We share some gazes, I see the three guards nodding slowly in agreement to the notion. Shirogane-kun simply idles a hand on his hair while looking away, uninterested, absent.

The Instructor clears her throat before hitting a key, a new image replaces the blinding blankness. This time, however, the projector shows the cameras on the hangars. Mechanics fine-tuning the joints, part of the crew mounting the Jump Units carefully into the cargo. The image changes to Yoroi's TSF being brought into its trailer with both shoulders moved to the front. Another click, more personnel outfitting the other support vehicles with tools, machinery and supplies, as well as a few of them being loaded with the weaponry we will use during the mission.

She clears her throat, nodding our way and again scouting our eyes. "As you can see, the mission has already started. We pilots are nothing more than the hammer that puts the nail in its intended place. Make sure not to forget what you're seeing now when you're in the field, cadets, regardless of what setbacks you may encounter."

"Yes, ma'am!"

But of course, this is yet another reason a surface pilot has to contribute to the success of any mission it takes part of, to not waste the work of all the people that made it possible for the TSFs to fly. It does feel kind of surreal, seeing foreigners and Japanese technicians working alongside each other so normally, so coordinated. The other four are also wide eyed at the images we were shown, seeming to bring back luster to their expressions and postures. Except Shirogane-kun, that is now rubbing the gap between his brows as he sighs, low.

"All of these people are doing their damnedest effort for both the Japanese people that need help and for you to be able to complete your first sortie without problems. It is rare for cadets to be sent on official missions, do not let this chance pass you by," the Instructor tells, raising voice and chest, offering an ember to us. We all return a nod, she reveals a smile for but a second. "Now then, I'll announce the formations so that we can get that out of the way. Team A will be Sakaki and Tamase with 2nd Lt Mion Tsukuyomi, Team B will be Yoroi and Ayamine with 2nd Lt Shion Tsukuyomi, and finally Team C will be Mitsurugi and Shirogane with 1st Lt Takamura."

Huh? Again?! Pressing my lips upon the scythe's glint, I merely eye sideways. Mitsurugi also seems taken aback, seeking his gaze as all the others in the room. Yet, Shirogane-kun remains calm without a speck of tension or anything.

"Sgt, may I inquire on the reasoning behind the arrangement?" Takamura slowly asks, eyes ever so slightly narrowed.

"HC settled on this setup, according to compatibility," she answers in perfect poker, yet still allows a sigh. "I did try and change one particular team, but any and all issues will have to be taken to the XO in person. And frankly, it is not worth getting hung up about. I shall rely on you, members of the IRG, to guide the cadets should an unexpected setback appear," she says, staring as her arms fold

again, the creeping glint of the scythe again making a xylophone out of my spine.

Takamura relents a nod, a small shift in her posture as if bracing. Both Tsukuyomis give a silent nod in acknowledgment, as does Mitsurugi. However, despite the Reaper's shadow cast over his features, despite the odd retraction of the two Tsukuyomis as they seek his eyes, that enhances when he taps his brows as if they were fleeing heat, despite the lingering eyes and sinking posture of Mitsurugi that seeks even a slight gesture, Shirogane-kun shows not a single ripple in the fold of his poker. Nothing but a calm nod in silence does the surrounding stares get out of him, also a raising brow as the extension of quietness delays its departure.

The Instructor again clears her throat, shutting off the projector and turning the lights on. With furrowed brows but a long sigh, she faces us once more. "I will be in charge of the CP during this mission to coordinate both our tasks and what reports we receive from the other squadrons deployed. Twenty four hours is all we have at our disposal to evacuate all the civilians safely without risk of getting caught on the eruption. The rest of the briefing will be done in situ once we reach our destination. The departure shall be at 2000 hours, I expect you all present in the usual hangar one full hour beforehand. You're free until then, make sure to prepare and rest accordingly. Understood? Good, well then… Dismissed!"

"Salute!

The Instructor returns the gesture, then picks up the laptop and folders she had, shuffling them under an arm. "I know it is a hard ask at the moment but, don't let your thoughts delve too much on the matter, squad. You have plenty of time to platicate and rest before the sortie, use it wisely. Shirogane, are you still on a special assignment?"

"Sadly, yes," he says with a shrug. "Gotta make up now for the time I'll be off base. On that note, I'll be taking my leave. Guys," he looks

our way, giving a thumbs up, "take it easy, okay? Everything will be just fine."

"I hope so," I manage to say before sighing softly, Mitsurugi mimics me while the other three can't even return a nod in their stiffness.

"Well, listen to the Instructor and chill out while you got the time."

"Well said," the Instructor nods. "By the by, Shirogane, are you certain you cannot be excused for the day? I could try and-"

"It's fine, for real," he waves erratically. "Do not worry, there are no physically taxing tasks on my tab today. Anyways, I really should be going," he salutes again, nodding. "Later, guys. Oh, and I suppose we'll be working together again, 1st Lt," he says with a smile, glancing at Takamura.

Who slowly turns away, brushing her hair as both eyes and lips narrow. "I suppose so, yes."

Shirogane-kun raises a brow, but quickly waves our way as he leaves. Both red guards salute us before following after his shadow, stalking his every step. It is admirable, how composed he remains under the ever vigilant gaze of two Shinpan. They are the ones who seem the most disturbed by the arrangement, and Shirogane-kun's stoic mask when they're around.

"Well, the clock is tickling. Squad, I shall be seeing you at the hangar," the Instructor orders, then leaves after giving us all a nod, a firm and delving gaze. Takamura mimics the gesture, deigning a smile this time before taking her leave.

"I suppose we should be going to the PX," I say as I look around, meeting almost paralyzed nods and soldered lips.

Departing the room, for a moment only our footsteps on the bare metal accompany the automatic walking. It does little to ease the

tugging of strings on my neck and stomach, forcing two fingers to try and calm the stings in my forehead.

"So," slowing down my pace, I look back, "what are your thoughts on this?"

"Hauu… W-We're going on m-m-mission…" Tamase starts swirling left and right with whirlwinds instead of eyes, the gentle quiver evolving to a full-blown earthquake. Not that I blame her, though.

"When Her Highness made that conference, I never thought something like this would truly happen," Yoroi says, low, dragging sole and sight in the tiles. "A volcano erupting… I hope everything goes right," she then tightly clasps both hands together, wincing a bit.

Ayamine pats her shoulder, giving a nod despite the extra tension of the fingers on Yoroi's shoulder, of her own tensing brows. "Don't worry, we'll complete the assigned task without issues. The Instructor will be there to support us, not to mention the guards as well."

"Ayamine is right," I follow, tapping my glasses as we take a turn. "Overworrying will accomplish nothing, such concerns will only make you blank out in the field."

"However, we have to put to practice most of what we've learned thus far," Mitsurugi notes, slowly letting a hand swim into her ponytail, also failing to bring forth the habitual shine to her veneer. "It is a great duty, to be chosen to lend a helping hand to our people. All I hope is that no altercations occur due to our uniform," she then sighs, closing her eyes. The others mimic the gesture, slowing down.

"Squad," stopping my steps, inhaling sharp as I look back, "let's not waste this chance we have been given. I do understand your… concerns over the UN taking part in the evacuation, but that is not something we as cadets should mull over. The truth of the matter is, those people do need a helping hand. Let it be us who extend it to them!"

"Yes!" Tamase and Yoroi cracked, Ayamine as usual barely squeezed it out yet nodded without breaking eye contact, Mitsurugi almost stuttered, almost didn't follow through.

And so, without much as another word, we resume our walk to the PX, eventually lining up.

Sigh… As if we didn't have enough in our plate, an official sortie. To an evac call, with the UN meddling in it as well. And with Mitsurugi and Shirogane-kun assigned together, to boot. I know she said she would try and make amends, yet he has kept his fair distance from her thus far.

I still wonder if he's truly alright. During sim training this morning, one of his cheeks was reddened again and he seemed almost about to doze off. Those eyebags are growing more, as well as his silences. Sigh… And all I can do is heed his pointers to not give him trouble during the runs.

… It is amazing, how he pilots in such dexterity. Now that we caught a glimpse of the XM3, his patterns now take on a completely different light. It's hard to believe we are again on course to completing Level C despite our slump.

I reach the end of the line, receiving my meal but not seeing Mst Sgt Kyozuka today. So I merely walk to our table, minding my steps and looking down, away from the crows which drill their unblinking knives into my nape. The warmth of the miso gives some relief to my lips, synth it may be but at least the broth retains some of the traditional taste as opposed to the prepackaged food dad used to leave stocked back home. The others come and sit, yet only the background chatter accompanies our lunch.

Halting the ascent of the chopsticks to my lips, slowing down the munching on a ball of rice, the desolate map returns to my eyes. The red dots, the estimated number of people, the conditions in which they must be enduring at this very moment. It is enough to make these small grains ricochet off my throat and land with as much

violence as Shirogane-kun's acrobatics into my stomach. Sipping some more miso, I can't help but to release a sigh.

And I haven't yet repaid him for saving me during the CCSE. He supports my idea to shuffle our positions, continues to give me and the rest pointers on our runs. And all the while, I've done nothing for him. I just handed him some notes the day before the HSST Accident, some drabbles he obviously didn't need.

That day… I saw for the first time with my own eyes how much we do need the UN, their meddling notwithstanding. If not for that experimental weapon, this base would be no more. Who knows what kind of repercussions that would have had? UN it may be, but that terrorist attack was also aimed at the sovereignty and stability of our nation. We were never told what was up with that, and the news made no mention of the incident either. At least the Professor isn't having Tamase perform some top secret testings like with Shirogane-kun, her already wobbling shape would be far more bruised than it is as of now, almost mechanically eating in utter silence.

… Nobody can protect its life alone, I thought I had apprehended that teaching a long time ago. However, the same logic applies to nations, I guess. In this day and age, there is probably no nation that can be self-sufficient to the point of not needing the rest of the world. Even America would suffer if they couldn't do business with anyone anymore, if suddenly the rest of the world ended up swallowed by the ocean or something.

That's when I realized, as Tamase told us her story, how little I was doing for my squad. Always quarreling with Ayamine, barely listening to Mitsurugi's and Yoroi's advice, not doing anything for the man that saved my life. Then, when I started to look around me, to properly pay attention, I noticed a lot of little things, odd yet interesting.

The mechanics of our TSFs talking about how much they miss their families. The MP saying how they miss their regional cooking. Some

of the pilots that are also in the sim room have given us advice from time to time, especially as of late. But they all agree in one thing.

"You're lucky you still can fight to protect your homeland."

I never had tried to actually listen to any of them, the notion to request such was the farthest in my mind. Now, however, their resilient strength is more than apparent. They're still fighting to someday go back home and rebuild their nation, or to give someone else that chance. For them, every grain of dirt in the planet is worth fighting for, because they don't want anyone else going through what they have. I know everybody isn't like that, but when you look around closely you can find decent people here. I just never bothered to.

And thanks to that little change in this scenery, in those tells I now see amidst the tired or bored gestures in the soldiers around, I can understand what Dad said, about us needing to strengthen our international bonds. I still don't agree with everything he said last time we talked but I concede on that point, by its lonesome the Empire has no future.

Taking one strong munch of rice, another of sip of miso, I extend an exhalation while crossing a leg, idling the tip of my chopsticks on the rim of my small bowl. To one day stand by Shirogane-kun, to relay to others what he and the Instructor have, I need to learn more. The real strength of the UN, the real scope of their operations, of the possibilities that in this organization lie. By learning all I can here, from all the contrasting points of view that are available here, I'm certain that I'll grow so much more than if I solely remained in the IJA. And if I can forge some bonds with the crew here, it will make a great difference when I eventually go back to the Imperial forces.

… But even so, before I get all fired up about the future, there is quite the daunting obstacle to overcome. And I've no idea how to breach the silence no one has dared to lift… Sigh…

"… You think Special-kun will be fine?" Ayamine's question makes me flinch. The others stiffen in their seats, she merely eyes us one at

a time with the tip of her chopsticks stuck within her lips.

"Takeru… isn't so weak as if to let some meager concerns plague his mind," Mitsurugi affirms, resting her chopsticks on the tray. "I do not believe the XO would place him in any taxing duties if she herself devised our formation. He merely needs some rest this afternoon, is all," she nods, to herself most likely, despite the almost crossing brows and shrunken lips.

"Shirogane-san did look like he was in need of more sleep today," Tamase notes, eyes still on the table, while resting her cup on the already empty tray. "Do you think his extra tutoring last night overburdened him?"

"That can be it," Yoroi chimes in, then gulps all her remaining miso before sighing. "I do not like his skin tone at all, and the lethargy of his movements does mean he barely slept well."

"… Wanna call up the Instructor?" Ayamine suggests, tilting her head.

"Do you want another punishment to fall on us, right at this time?" I ask, she lowers her gaze and slowly, dejectedly shakes her head. "Shirogane-kun said he would manage, and this is no training drill. Let us trust in him, as he has with us, alright? Also, Mitsurugi, please try and intercede if you see Shirogane-kun pushing himself during the mission. I'd like to believe he wouldn't try anything but, well…"

"Say no more, Sakaki. I shall ensure Takeru does not bring further pains to himself. Furthermore, 1st Lt Takamura shall be alongside us. Such disquiet is unwarranted," she affirms, trying to lift her posture while folding her arms as always. A smile fails to meet its quota, her eyes veer away. "I do relent that perhaps placing us together was not wise, considering our recent arguments, however I shall endeavor to not be a burden."

"… I see. Do you think you could, uh, try and talk to the people yourself? I don't think it'd do him any good to receive any strong

worded opinions from the civilians."

"Of course, leave it to me," she replies, yet the hold of her hands in the fold increases a bit, enough to bend her sleeves.

"Still, Shirogane-san does not look good… It's odd that he'd be so quiet, unfazed in the briefing too," Tamase notes while slowly toying with her tags.

"You think the Guards are harassing him?" Ayamine shoots, bouncing both chopsticks with only her lips. Mitsurugi's brows twitch yet she remains silent.

"Kei-san, why would they do that? Didn't they say they were tasked by the Professor herself to make sure Takeru didn't run into trouble?"

"Yoroi, think it well," I say, finding a finger doing circles. "Anyone in his position would be thrown off by the constant surveillance of the IRG stacked on top of whatever his special assignments are. I think we can all agree from where the petrification in his posture comes from, right? The pressure is getting to him, he is also human," the words simply leave me, the excuse blurts out. So I shrug and lean on the table, picking at my cuticles. I also have been under pressure… and I ran away, abandoned him without ever looking back.

… And instead, he came back for us. Am I going to sit by again, just because I don't know what to do? Even if he says he's fine, is there truly nothing we can do to ease his burdens just a little?

"I do not think those two wish Takeru any harm," Mitsurugi starts, words slurring and almost colliding, looking away as she fiddles with her hair, "but I do concede that his complexion is most concerning."

"It's still odd. Special-kun was hurt by them and he still doesn't look back to good health, while they stalk his every move. Something's up here," Ayamine counters, rests the chopsticks in her bowl and slumps her chin on a hand, lips twisting in.

"It might also be related to his punishment, we cannot start assuming anything," I remind, finishing a few circles as I nod. "In any case, we have to do our best to not burden him anymore, starting now. If we keep advancing at this pace, we'll reach Level B shortly. With only the final drills of Level A left, our final test is looming closer," I tell, entwining my fingers. They all tense up in attention, seeming to have forgotten how to inhale. "I know we are all aware of this from when we started basic, but the Instructor is a fierce opponent. I've no idea who her partner might be, but our last mock battle will be a great factor in our final score to decide where we're being sent to once we graduate. And the best way to ensure that comes to pass is by applying what we now know in this coming task."

They all nod in agreement. It's… such a shame. Now that we kind of started working well together, it won't take long for us to be separated. Who knows where we'll end up once we earn our wings? Akane and the rest got to remain in the base, so maybe we'll receive the same treatment. More so with the special tests of the OS, but the XO did say our coming results could and would change her approval. I bet she was hinting at this coming sortie to the evac efforts, to test our character in a high-stress situation. To see whether we have what it takes or not to be worth her consideration.

I believe it's a given that Shirogane-kun will remain here, under the XO's wing. I don't know… if I have what it takes to be chosen as his equal, if I'll ever be able to repay my debts with him. So the least I can do as of now, as their Squad Leader, is guide them all to the best score we can achieve in what little time we have left together.

"Well, let's not get all gloomy about it," I say, smiling while standing, grabbing the tray. "We have a few hours of free time, so let's make the most out of them. I think we should all go for a check-up in the medbay just in case, maybe also get some small talk with the staff there."

They all nod back, cleansing the air around the table. Our steps as we leave are lighter, faster, as if propelled by what faint daylight filters through the glass. Despite the silence that still remains, there

is no gap in the formation, no one purposefully walking behind the rest.

… Our first sortie, huh. At least it came at a rather good time, with us all starting to coordinate. I can only hope to be up to par with whatever it is I can aid with on the field. And that… this first mission doesn't end up being our last. An eruption, huh… Despite earthquakes and the like being more than common, despite the indigenous tectonic activity the Empire suffers from, to be faced with dealing with the issue, to perhaps end up face to face with the lava…

*Gulp…* Let us hope it does not come to that, anything but that is preferable.

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*Same Day. A few minutes past 6 PM.*

*( Hallway, B19F .)*

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Step after step, the heels shave a bit against the floor. Two fingers massage her temple, the scientist allows herself a sigh. Closing her eyes away from the rebounding shine of the bare metal in the hallways, she delays her stride, her strokes on her forehead while groaning to herself.

" *The preliminary reports from the crew of Yokosuka are not auspicious, there are no trails to follow after the BETA that are supposedly in the mainland. At the very least, my sources did confirm the area to evacuate is a safe one. So long as Takeru can keep Mitsurugi in check, I believe nothing will get out of control,"* she reasons, curling a strand of hair.

Pausing to take out her ID and swipe it at a lock, letting her almost closing eye be scanned, the second of wait the mechanism puts her through is enough to cause brows to almost collide, further groans as her arms softly cross. The following steps are not instantaneous, more akin to someone trying to gain stable footing on shifting sands.

Pinching her nose, she stops for a moment and takes in a sharp breath.

" *All the testings we did today met with the same dead ends, albeit in more radical ways. I did not expect such wrath from the 00 Unit, for a real berserk overload two days in a row. Sigh… Now if only I could gain a quick answer to my counter-proposal for Operation 21st, then I could devise a proper path forward after this little sidequest Takeru so badly wants us to take,"* she repines, fingertips waving to and fro on her scalp as she slowly walks, gaze lost upwards. *"Actually… What was he doing all this time?"*

Taking out her PDA, she quickly shuffles through bloat mails but does not find the sought name with ease. Lips pluck, eyes narrow, taps gain haste and a bit of impulse, and yet the deep dive into her inbox returns unsatisfactory results, a light kindling to her features and a propelling stomp to her stride.

"Why hasn't he reported anything yet? Yashiro too, for that matter," she wonders as she stuffs the little machine in her lab coat's pocket. Deciding that arriving to the office faster would be better, she sighs and speeds up once more. *" Not to mention, I haven't been able to find a single lead on this supposed sushi bar. Not the prior owner of the establishment, what was it used for, nor who did he refer with 'snake', even if I have a hunch on who was he talking about."*

The wall of dry ice the soldier had mounted that day after his suggestion, the blazing inquiries she forwarded to try and wrestle any slip of info out of his lips, the ceasefire he suggested until the evac efforts were completed only brings further pressure onto her steps and lips, a strong sigh escapes through her nose. After all, many are the checks and reports she has to go through just to ensure the coming sortie of the cadets can truly be successful, you'd understand. So that it does not become a premature spark.

Turning around the corner, seeing the elevator was not resting on this floor made her eyes squint a bit, wondering where her soldier could be at the moment. The remaining distance between herself

and the office was sliced in half harder every passing second, much to the wailing cries of her heels against the pristine floor.

Upon approaching the sliding door and setting foot in her dwelling, a flinch spawns on her person as her nostrils catch a mixture in the air. A second later she opens her eyes, and finds herself on a different place than she expected to be in. A vast open area near the entrance, all the books and encyclopedias lined up neatly against the wall, no stray papers nor stacks daring to try and kiss the ceiling, and a formation of folders by the wall she had seen once before.

And sitting on the usual sofa, typing in a laptop there he was, barely raising a hand in salutation.

She blinks, once and twice, before firmly entering the room, approaching the sofa. "… Takeru, when did you rearrange the room?"

"Hm?" he looks her way, raising a brow before resting his back onto the sofa. And giving her a small smile. "Why, goodnight and hello to you too, *Vice Commander.* How you doing? *"*

"Sigh… Yes, yes, hello. What did you do here? I do not recall requesting a cleanup."

"The usual? I simply tied everything up again, since I had to file the reports anyways."

"What reports?"

"You know, all the papers about the coming mission, the checks on the databases for the equipment used, stuff like that," he says, nodding while rubbing an eye.

"Wh- You already did that? But you're not allowed to- Oh, right, your ID," she catches herself, rubbing her forehead again.

"Are you feeling well, *Vice Commander* ? You look paler than Kasumi," he asks with a stare, slowly standing up. "Dinner is already there on the desk, by the way," he points to where usually babel towers of papers are, their reign resigned to order and a tray with chicken a la creme.

The minute contortion of a frown clears itself away as the smell reaches her nose, tongue tracing the back of her teeth and swallowing the small excess saliva thus spawned by the food. "Huh… How did you know I was arriving, though?"

"Kasumi. Also, my schedule for the sortie," he notes, doing a circle with his neck and cracking something which brings forth a small moan. "We did need one last talk before I leave, and I thought you could use the quality food today of all days, is all."

"… That is appreciated, Takeru," she smiles, nodding as she walks up to the desk, slowly sitting and basking in the scent. Before touching it however, she again stares at her soldier. "So, why did you not notify me you'd be here?"

"Uh, I tried?" He again raises a brow, shrugging. "I came here as soon as I could after training, but no one was here and you weren't answering your comms. Thought you were busy with some negotiations like last night, and Kasumi was also away then, so I was about to leave to my place when I noticed you left the office open… and took the chance to spare you the need of overseeing all the incoming reports of this sortie. I've already checked the databases, the reports are in the usual place ready to be filed or shelved, and there were no issues whatsoever during the prep work thus far," he reports, standing in attention.

She nods back, taking a bite off the chicken, licking her lips as she nods twice with a gradually enlarging smile. "Good… Very good."

"… The dinner or the report?"

"Yes," she chuckles at his groans, taking small bites off the mushrooms. "So, I assume you filed all the requested papers already?"

"Yeah. Had to let the calls come in through the voicemail to avoid inquiries, but I already sent the right papers to most offices through 2nd Lt Pyatkh."

"And you told her what regarding you doing such?"

"Punishment, you had readied everything beforehand and left me as the paper delivery boy for the afternoon," he tells with a smile, shrugging again.

"Good enough, I suppose. Did any important calls come in while I was away?" she asks, stacking mushrooms on top of the small chicken slices, before joining them with a large spoonful of rice, all of it softly melting together as her legs do under the taste.

"No, the office was calm today, mostly."

"… I see." *Makes sense, since I was personally dealing with most stuff anyways.* She clears her throat, the tip of her tongue tracing her lips, daring her to resume eating, but she rests her fork atop a cloth for a moment. Instead, she stares at the small redness in one of his cheeks. "Did you already attempt another tuning?"

"Yeah… Kasumi came back a while ago, lent me a hand in finishing the work here. So once we confirmed the ODL was replenished, we gave it another spin but…" he looks down, creaks down, crumbles down along a sigh, the slow descent of a dry leaf towards eternal stillness.

"Don't take it so hard, Takeru," she reassures, giving a nod. "If the 00 Unit is endowing in such aggressive reactions even when around you, it equals she is beginning to parse the emotions she inherited from Kagami. She's beginning to properly react to the recollections

instead of freezing under them," she asserts before filling her lips with more rice, causing a ballooning in her cheeks.

"I know, I know… It still ain't nice to see her go mad like that, screaming bloody murder to the four winds," he barely says, not lifting his gaze. "By the way, do you already have an answer for my proposal to link my memories of her little self to her current psyche?"

The spoon halts, the tongue scouts the metallic shape. Slowly removing it, going for a spin, she sighs, short, and shakes her head. "No, I don't. Let me get some more readings on her current state, to ensure no recoil falls onto you or Yashiro. By the by, where is she?"

"In the cylinder room, watching over Sumika while reading some books. Don't worry, we already filed the results of the tuning, too," he tells, scratching an ear as he nods despite not entirely lifting his eyes, the shine within them. "So, do you have any results from the tests Motoko-san has been doing with whatever the headband is supposed to be doing?" he asks, poking the thing as he sits down and begins to close the programs in the laptop.

"Oh… Yes," wiping her lips as she nods, coughing softly the scientist gains a small smile. "The good news is that your consciousness isn't going anywhere. These last nights we could track your brainwaves with ease through the headband. Don't worry, you're not going to slip into another world suddenly in your sleep," she tells, breathing easing up and resting fully onto the seat.

"I see… For now that ain't a concern, I guess," he says, returning the nod before he closes the laptop.

After all, this was a thorn, a chain that had prevented the scientist from fully setting her mind at ease. If the Nucleus the soldier now is had become stronger through his experiences, and considering all the possible links and leaks that pull at him and are being pulled towards the anomaly, it is quite fair to affirm she did indeed fear, felt her inhalations turn up cold at the thought of him getting teleported

elsewhere amidst his sleep would his radiation levels become too low again.

Throwing himself onto the sofa, placing both hands behind his head, he looks at her, almost chuckling as he finds her with a hand on a balloon for a cheek, stuffing herself with the food as the Shogun would with strawberries. She flinches as she notices his lingering stare, wiping her lips and narrowing eyes and brows his way in silent retaliation. He, however, can't help but to smile. "So why do you think this is different than last loop, with me being a stronger anomaly now? Not gonna lie, that was a concern I had, of slipping again without enough radiation in me. Any ideas?"

"Well, maybe someone is still thinking about you in their dreams?" she suggests, resting a cheek on a palm, returning the small smile.

"Do you have to tease me like this?" his lips twist and narrow along a groan, she returns a drowned chuckle.

"Oh, I'm not teasing you, however," the scientist retorts, playfully tapping her chin with the tip of the spoon.

"Sigh. By the way, I know it might take a while but, how are you going to stabilize the Nucleus?"

Resting the utensils and dropping the teasing, she nods as she interlocks her fingers, tightly. "I still need more time, I can't risk anything going wrong here."

He leans forward, unblinking fixation he returns onto her eyes. "Even so, if that characteristic of my existence cannot be reversed, it would be for the better to play to that assumption. Even if the conductor can be neutered, I am already a strengthened Nucleus, capable of bringing forth sudden changes if high emotions happens near me. We can't rule out the possibility that this will play against us, too. If so, I still think erasing-"

She slams the desk, enough to make the utensils flutter and displace what few folders he had left for her. With a vicious glare that could splinter a cockpit open, venom slithers within those pressed lips. "No, because as I told you, our lives are entwined, Takeru. You vanishing from this world could, and most certainly will, have dire consequences for the psyche of Her Highness and her devotees, you'd understand."

"Better to deal with a certainty than to fight against the unknown," he reasons before taking a slow sip of what cold coffee remained in his cup.

"You are worth the cost. Plus I am trying to fix the memory loss problem, but without actual data I can't make any promises," she relents, going for a sharp spin to loosen the raking, the tearing in her nape. "And remember that I can't guarantee that the machine will work, it only has a 40% probability of success. If, for whatever reason, there's an error when we're using it, you might end up subjected to causality's whims again," she tells, slow, slower is her breathing when meeting his eyes in the full cloak of new moon. "I rather we tread the one road that guarantees both of our goals to be completed, despite the inherent risks. I believe our wishes coincided in this matter, Takeru?"

"… Fine, I won't press for now. But you do have an idea, right?"

"I do, and it's quite simple," she resumes a playful smile, grasping her chin as her heels stop the spinning. "Since we can't keep kicking the ball forward for much longer, we just need to anchor the magnet to this world. To give you an unwavering reason to stay here, a motive so strong that it will remain always in your subconscious or that it makes you accept you're no longer going to another world. You did told me that in your firsts loops you stopped dreaming about your world once you got together with one of the girls from your squad, right?"

"Yes, that's true. But don't you have anything a bit more… I dunno, conclusive?" he requests while scratching his head, narrowing both

brows.

She simply shrugs and takes another bite of chicken. "No, not without using the 00 Unit to help you regulate your own data," she tells, flatly. Only to smirk, wipe the excess cream that drips off her lips with a fast swipe of her tongue. "Why, would you not possess enough incentives to remain here, mmh? Do I really have to put on the santa suit to convince you to-"

"N-No! Dammit, stop bringing that up," he flares up, harder than his Jump Units.

"Oh, why so bothered? I'm only trying to help you establish a stable link in this world?" she says, the edges of her lips curving, a gentle glimmer in her eyes as dawnbreak which washes over her soldier.

Who inhales sharply, folding arms and compacting his already petrified posture. "Come on, get real. I told you already, that night isn't-"

"But that doesn't erase the issue at hand. You need an anchor, and Kagami is not yet ready to liberate you from the conductor. If you'd like me to go along your ideas, I need a certainty that you *will* remain here, to make the cost of the arrangement worth it for me. So," smiling back, slithering over the wood, bumping a hand on her chin, "why not let me be it? Unless you prefer your dear Yuuhi to become the anchor, that is."

"You know what my identity could cause for Yuuhi, she doesn't need someone like me by her shadow," he spits out, poison and blight as he veils his sight, hits a thigh.

"Then, who else could be your anchor? Kagami is not ready, you don't want to mix up your squadmates with your prior lovers, and Her Purpleness is a no go too. Who's left, Yashiro?"

"You leave the bunny out of this," he threatens, bursting into a glare. "Kasumi already had enough with the mind dive."

"So then, who will be the stabilizing anchor you so desperately need, Takeru?" she asks, staring as she finishes her plate, yet he simply looks down and compacts his features into silence. "… Let me remind you, I need you to finish the tuning. Not to mention, in proper form for the missions to come, coup or not."

"What of all the problems me being here causes? If you won't let me handle stuff on my own, it's only a detriment to keep an anomalous Nucleus in this world," he shakes his head, finishing his drink and resting the mug.

The ashen retraction in his features is replicated in the scientist's, and no caress of coffee can cleanse her complexion. "You're too important to lose, Takeru. If and when it's time, you shall be escorted to the Capital by our men. There is nothing to be gained by exposing you to any threats in such an open manner." *Much less to a place Yoroi brought up, that my scouts can find no trustworthy intel on. Even if you were to confirm my suspicions… I cannot risk your life in such manner, no matter how precious Her Purpleness is for you.*

"Same goes for entangling yourself with my problems," he shoots out, standing to leave the mug in its proper place.

As he does, she stands behind him, fingertips tracing his arm and shoulder. "We're already entangled, sorry to notify you."

He looks back, seeing himself in the reflection of violet, taking into the lunar scent which surrounds the lab coat. "It's not too late yet, not with the spoils you're about to reap. We can't risk a repeat of what happened in my home world to happen here."

"I said, you're staying in this world. I wouldn't be proposing such a thing if I were not certain of the inherent risks."

"Then let me tackle the sparks, Yuuko."

"Only if you allow me to be your anchor."

"If you want the intel from that world, we can debate that after-"

She taps his lips, slowly shaking her head and edging closer, causing him to softly collide against the furniture. "I want to attain the certainty of your safety, that is all I desire, Takeru. Will you let me be your anchor?"

"Yuuhi will notice, you know? And the whole 'not confusing people' also applies to you. If it's just a temporary patch, it won't work out," he squeezes himself away from her, hair flowing down as he looks at the ceiling while licking his lips, still sensing her perfume. "I am thankful for… you trying to help me in this way, but there's no need to force yourself to being the anchor."

"… Why would it be forcing?"

"Sigh… Then, what of the idea I forwarded? If you want me to be your spearhead, which I don't oppose by the way, we are going to have to deal with that sooner or later," he affirms, speaking the truth and nothing but the truth, fully returning her gaze. "I won't find Sagiri on the news when I return from the evac efforts, will I Yuuko?"

"… No, you will not."

"So your answer is positive then?"

"… We shall continue this conversation once you're back from the evacuation and I've reviewed the affairs of this one sushi bar, thoroughly," she affirms, yet groans and holds her fingers a bit harder at the lack of a retort on his end. So the scientist clears her throat, playing with some hair. "Let me tell you something good though, we got the approval for the XM3's test. It will be done next Wednesday. I plan on letting you all graduate after it, if your performance during this sortie and the trials is satisfactory enough," she nods back at him with a smile.

He returns the gesture, easing his breathing. "Got it. Well, if you don't need anything else I'll be going for my rations before meeting at

the hangar with the rest," he tells, standing in attention. "Goodbye, *Vice Commander* ."

"Excuse me?" she quietly inquires, gaze narrowing to endure the binding of chains, to slice the clouds in twain.

"What?" he raises a brow, blinking fast at the sudden threat of an early eruption.

"It's 'See you later', not 'Goodbye'. Also, Yuuko," she scolds, lips shrugging.

"Yes, yes, my bad, Yuuko," the soldier relents as he fiddles with his hair, looking away.

"Hmm… Well, make sure not to get in any danger while out in the field, you hear me, Takeru?"

"Sigh. Yes, I know. I've no plans to let this mission repeat its take of my first loops," he nods back, meeting a pleased smile on the scientist. "Well, gotta be on my way. Later, Yuuko," he says, gently waving instead of reiterating the salute.

And with the slow raise of a hand to return the wave, she smiles. "Yes, see you later."

Finishing her coffee, she spins in her desk while placing a hand over her full belly, smiling small yet pleased. For the moment, the scientist allows her eyes to close, her feet to propel her to spin, and relaxation to ease her breathing and thoughts. Almost in equal measure does the soldier's breaths relax as he steps firmly towards the elevator, towards the goals he hopes can be resolved for their shared interests. Similar is the small smile, the circling of the neck, the nostrils that seek that fragrance that no longer is nearby. As he gets inside the elevator and she boots up her computer, both look upwards, extending a prayer of protection towards the other, a sigh as they roll their shoulders. A wish so that all their preparations since

their meeting can, finally, bear fruit amidst this harshest winter they are to face.

However, despite the advantage they play with, the sailing of this tide won't be smooth for either Not if the rumbling under the soil manages to surface once again. Not if the soldier ends up meeting certain people that will be left behind on sentry duty.

… Devotees that will recognize his face and name, that were branded by the freezing fire of the shadow he once used to be, the remnants he left behind.

# Distortion

*Chapter 98:*

**Distortion**

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*December 9th. A few minutes over 2 PM.*

*(Old Settlement. Near Mt. Tengen.)*

[ **Takeru** ]

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"Please, I beseech you! Do not take my land from me!"

The old lady laid again on the ground, kneeling in front of Meiya, begging to let her stay here. Takamura could not bear to look and avoided the scene by closing her eyes tightly. Only a sigh I can take, facing away from the sad spectacle.

Up above, just like back then, a mostly unchallenged blue greets the view, the calm silence of the area only disturbed by the occasional light gust, maybe some small rolling dirt down the elevations. Taking in the scent of the coldness, of what little grass remains in defiance of the winter that's almost knocking on our doorstep, Meiya's apologies and reiterated pleas for the woman to raise are met with increasing begging, fingernails raking at the dirt.

Sigh…

Thankfully, everything so far has gone good. The people did make more of a ruckus than what I remembered at first, but when they saw Meiya and she asked them, albeit reluctantly, if they were willing to leave the people accepted immediately. Going white as a ghost, some even unable to speak or meet her eyes, despite how they were oozing bloody murder when I issued the call to request to speak with

them. No setbacks for now, no soldiers having to drag the people to the relief vehicles or anything, for us or the other teams. One good thing, fucking finally.

This time, however…

"CP to all units," The Instructor's face appears on my view. She again informs us that the volcano seems to be close to erupting, recommending us to hurry.

Believe me, NotMarimo-chan. If I could hit the speed up button, it would be broken already. Not only to get past the unnecessary begging of the old lady and Meiya's poor attempts at doing what she should be doing, but to get away from this place as well.

I thought I was over that, I really did. But when I felt the first tremor shake the ground, as my feet almost slipped away, those damn sounds started to crawl back from within my skull.

The electric shock waves, the tearing wires. Asphalt breaking, glass shattering, the fall of the lightpost.

I thought I was over it, that after coming to terms with everything by the hill I was really steeled over. Guess some shadows will always live by me, huh. So, I completely understand how the old lady feels now more than ever. This tiny village is her whole world, a treasure that cannot be found anywhere else in the entire expansion of existence.

"1st Lt Takamura, how is your end?" the Instructor asks from her corner in my vision.

Looking her way, Takamura took some steps away from the 'argument' and is now coiling and choking a strand of hair. "We're still negotiating with some of the civilians," she answers, dull and composed.

A momentary squinting of her eyes, the Instructor returns a subtle nod. "I see. Please do hurry, we do not know for sure when the eruption will happen. CP, over and out."

Takamura sighs, slightly dropping her shoulders yet not moving one inch. I scratch my head, mess with my hair as I take a look towards the giant stone. Tapping my visor to start scanning the area, nothing out of the ordinary comes out at first. Of course, the fissures on the rock aren't showing up. Yet. Hmm… I might have to do some sonar scanning, walking over the nearby area to reveal any fissures that may be there. Hopefully they are, if not waiting will be the only option we'll have left.

The old lady retreats into her house, shortly after the small chimney starts to act up. With slow steps as if dragging an iron ball on both feet, Meiya slouches towards us.

"She does not desire to be removed from this village," she states, eyes locked on the ground.

"And yet, we cannot simply do as such," Takamura retorts in the same submerged, almost cavernous voice that cannot raise to the surface. "Cadet Mitsurugi, do you truly believe she would not welcome the notion to depart on her own will?" she asks with a glance at the house, a little cloud smoke coming out of its chimney now.

"She stated her terms quite clearly," she counters, arms folding, face clouding over. "You two must have heard the declaration as well, surely. If she is to perish here, she shan't escape. I am aware our orders are to retrieve all civilians to safety, however…"

"But you have no intention of ever taking her away, do you?" I conclude, passing over the reluctance both are displaying. Meiya shoots a blazing glare at me, wordlessly accusing with the further squinting of her face and posture.

"Cadet Shirogane, what would you propose then?" Even Takamura seems to have been offended by my words a bit, returning the same pleasantry as Meiya.

"I'll go have a talk with her and see if we can make a truce," I simply say, not flinching away from their attempts at intimidation.

The words strike the chord, causing a shriek in their faces and further fire into their eyes. Meiya, in particular and as expected, blasts towards me as an arrow shot by Miki.

"Do not be foolish! You were witness to her wailing pleas, what words do you think can be employed to convince her?"

"Huh, then what are you getting at, Mitsurugi?" I ask, taking a step forward, raising the ante.

"What?"

"You say words are useless, wasted on this woman. Then, is force all that's left?"

"Wh- Don't you dare! Did you not hear what she-"

"First, you're gonna lower your voice. Go scream at the mountains if you're pissy, but you ain't blowing the fuse on me," another step forward, a frown I return into the fire which recedes a bit. "Second, you're the one that's already giving up. If words are useless, then on our orders we will have to take this person out of here through force. And sorry, I ain't up for that shit."

"Neither am I," she immediately replies, again folding her arms. "However, she made her terms clear. What could we say to her to change her stance?"

"I've an idea, that's better than standing around hoping she'll change her mind. Old people are really stubborn, so I don't think simply waiting will do anything for us as it is."

"Takeru, do not be foolish. Cease on this obstinacy at once."

"Have some faith in me, will you? I'll just try once, and in the meanwhile you two can think of a way to solve this if my idea doesn't work."

"Cadet Shirogane, I do not think it wise someone such as you should attempt said course of action," Takamura says, gazing, no, glaring my way as her lips purse. "Your actions will only bring us further setbacks. As the leader of Team C, I order you to stand back and remain in standby."

"I refuse."

"W-What?!"

"I don't take stupid orders. If and when the Instructor calls, I'm reporting you two are twiddling your thumbs."

"You… You do realize this is insubordination?" she threatens, messing with her hair.

"You do realize your actions are tantamount with treason to the UN, 1st Lt? To do nothing and wait, to try and grant her wish in this manner will only be to our detriment."

"I will not repeat my words. You will stand back," not dousing the impulse, she then raises the bet, the flames.

"Then, what do we do when the Instructor calls back for a report? Lie and get our own records dirty? Sorry but I don't have a bunk in the IRG to go back to, you know?"

"Takeru, there is no need for such pungency. Let us wait some moments, she may have a change of heart if-"

"I don't deal in hypotheticals, Mitsurugi. Also, if her resolve was strong enough to remain here until now, I think she was saying those

words for real. She is willing to stand her boots and die here if it comes down to it."

"… Then, whatever do you believe you could say to convince her otherwise?" Takamura inquires, casting a sideglance my way.

"Nothing much, I'll offer her a truce. If she says no, I pull back and we notify the Instructor of it."

"Why? You heard her voice, did you not?" Meiya asks, lips starting to shake. "What is it, some moments of wait?"

"… And if she doesn't change her mind? What are we doing? Wait out the eruption?"

"It would certainly be better than forcing an old woman away from her home," Takamura replies, wincing as if smelling rot. "It is our duty to ensure this mission is resolved, peacefully so. Cadet Shirogane, this is my last warning. Return to your Gekishin and remain on standby."

"… Or what? You do realize our conversation is getting recorded by our suits, right? You, a Royal Guard under a mission for the UN, is currently threatening me, a UN cadet, to disobey my orders with Mitsurugi as your accomplice. You do know what's gonna happen to you, to your dear railgun project the second I tell the XO of this, right?"

"Wh- What… What are you saying?! Are you… threatening me?" blazing eyes gain further impulse, further tension to her compact and defiant posture.

"No, I'm merely trying to use common sense here," I shrug, sighing. "Even if I don't say it, you should know the recordings will be scanned. And don't give me that bullshit about how she could change her mind, if we do nothing we're gonna be sitting here when the lava starts coming out of the mountains."

Both of them darken, covered by the smoke of their blazing. Takamura faces away, crossing and pressing her arms, needles knitting her lips inwards. Meiya relents a sigh but also doesn't return my gaze fully. Just as that prior experience, a stalagmite standing in proud freezing.

Sadly, this is a very personal matter for me so I ain't gonna back down no matter how much these two pout about it. This is, in a way, an apology for what I did to the old lady last loop. For how I betrayed her without trying to think of a way to solve the problem without harming her and the other people. And as a thanks, for the goodwill she spread in the shelter while I was locked up in my first loop after the fact. Now I think I can see why the coup did not happen in my first loops, since someone told a different tale, a tale of two young idiots placing their lives and machines on the line for a single old lady and her tiny village.

… That must have struck something in you, right Doc? That's why you didn't act up.

In the end, I will never know if my actions then went against Sensei's plans or not. While now, after all that has happened, I do tend to assume the worst out of her all the time, maybe the coup wasn't tied back to her entirely.

But right here, right now, that is not the case. Even if the XO would desire to spark up the uprising, this is a card I can play against her. Luckily, Kasumi cannot scan my mind's deepest thoughts… But I won't get another chance to get more time, to convince Yuuko to neuter the ripples before it's light's out. It won't be the same as first loop, no, but I can only play to my outs. Because if this doesn't work, then… then it will come to blood again. And all the ripples that will be spread.

So I slowly fold my own arms, meeting their eyes one at a time. "We're just going to be debating here on what to do, on whether it's right or not to insist. And going by her words and your stances, that sounds like a waste of time. So what's the difference between me

trying to speak with her just once and me remaining here? At least we get confirmation on her posture, and that words will be useless."

"Do try to not make this harder on us, cadet," Takamura says, whipping out the acid, the full frown. "When she approached us at first, clear it was that she hoisted strong rejection towards you due to the colors you're garbed in. What could you possibly have to say for her to not start screaming at you as soon as she sees you? Please, you should know how we Japanese see *those* like you," the calm yet mired tone, flowing easily into a bog. The purse in her lips and brows, what flames still remain in her gaze.

"… I didn't think you saw me as a dirty American as well, 1st Lt Takamura. Thought we had gotten along while we worked together."

"This and that are unrelated. Also, you've showed… certain colors in your canvas that reveal unpleasant aspects to your person, cadet," she affirms, not loosening the sailor knot that constricts her posture.

"Heh, is that so? So you too, huh…"

"Please, let us not fall to animosity," Meiya asks, standing in between us. "Takeru, please, would some hours of wait be such a hard ask?" she holds my gaze, lowering her chin, waiting.

"And what happens when nothing happens?"

"I, well, we could…"

"Lie to the Instructor? Jump into the lava? Abandon the old lady?" Both of them frown, I shrug. "If you don't want to see it come to that, then start thinking about how to solve this if my idea fails. In the meantime-"

"You will do nothing of the sort," Takamu- No, the Fudai dares to threaten, to raise her voice. "You will return to your TSF, that's an order."

"… If you force me back to my Gekishin, I am contacting the Instructor. And you can say goodbye to your railgun, while we're at it." Not like we should let you take it, considering what signs you're showing right now, *Royal Guard.*

"You think such insubordination will be left unpunished?"

"Compared to your threats and refusal to comply with UN code? Is letting me talk with the woman one single time that hard an ask? Oh, but if you wanna take it to our superiors, come on," lowering my back, eyes meet at the same height as I flash a smirk. "Come on, flip the coin. Call the Instructor, see what happens."

"Why are you going this far, cadet?"

"Because I ain't leaving things to chance. We are retrieving this woman to safety, and that's all."

Gritting teeth, she takes a, quite, noticeable gulp. "You are not to take her by force, am I clear?"

"I never said anything about doing that, *you* are the one who will lead us to that outcome by waiting pointlessly. But enough is enough, I'll be rolling my dice. You two think on something if this doesn't work," I say, nodding back to the Fudai as I turn away.

But an extended hand prevents me from advancing more. Meiya places herself in front of me, the chilly gust hitting my face along the snow motes her frozen imposition drills into my gaze. "Takeru, please desist. Not only you are causing unnecessary friction in the team, you are ignoring the matter at hand. You've heard her plea, there is little words will be able to do."

"… Are you surrendering to employing force, then?" I ask, narrowing my eyes.

As expected, her own imitate mine for a second before she takes in some air. "Surely you know how it feels, to be all alone in the world.

To lose everything you held dear, be left with only scraps. Please, give her some time. I'll talk with her again in a few hours, and will take responsibility for what may transpire," she bows down shortly, then remains watching, waiting.

To lose everything. I know that better than anyone in this fucking world, thank you very much. And I am not willing to have you getting hurt or worse this time around. You've no idea all that's riding on this operation, not that you should, but still.

… I know I shouldn't.

I know you're not her, that to lash out against you for something you haven't done is wrong.

But it pisses me off… so, so badly. Again putting your ideals atop a pedestal, honoring them to the bitter end. Your vows and duty be damned so long as you get to see your little wishes to fruition, without any concern over those who live by you. Again surrendering to the tantalizing carrot, of being useful to your nation.

Sorry honey, but you ain't charging into the lava or the Superior today.

You ain't gonna do no heroic speeches nor place yourself in danger over something that can be solved easily.

Your 'resolve' is gonna have to take a step back, because I ain't letting it ruin our… No, my efforts.

… Sigh. My world's Meiya would have understood, we would have been able to platicate about this, what to do. You're not going to back down, though. Not even if it means calling curtains, after all the Empire is what you truly love the most. Just like your sister, the greater good matters more to you than anything, anyone else.

A deep breath, a step forward. Diving straight ahead into the blizzard of those eyes, not looking away.

"Move aside, Mitsurugi."

"I will not."

"Will it come to blows, then?"

"Wh- Have her feelings not touched your heart?! Is the result of the mission all that matters to you?" she questions, with that begging look. That squinted and pained gaze, that hides behind the veil of ice. Probably wishing I would agree with her, that I would nod and desist.

I do understand you, and want to protect her feelings. And I would usually do my best to support your ideas, since we usually agree. I do not like that look on your eyes after all, even if you're not my Meiya and never will be.

But not today. This… This is something I want to do. Not because of a mission, not because of the danger. Because I need to prove to myself that I can make a difference, that things can be different. In other times, yeah, I would have simply called the Instructor and get this resolved immediately. Not today, not only because of the looming threats but for what I aim to do. And to teach you that no ideal is worth marriage, seeking the perfection you envision within your mind with no compromises brings about only two things.

Doom to yourself or betrayal from others. Usually both.

"Stop being so obnoxious and let me go talk with her," I sharpen my gaze, she holds it unflinching. Resolute as always, my dear.

"… Why? Why must you insist so much?"

"I have my reasons. So, please move away."

"I refuse. Not unless you tell us what you're planning to do. If you have an idea let us discuss it first, then we can try to reach out to her together."

"… No."

"Excuse me? Why are you refusing my aid?" she asks, pursing her lips, clenching both hands and cheeks.

"Because I plan to talk about some… personal stuff that I don't want either of you to hear, to try and reach a compromise with the old lady."

"And, beg your pardon," the Fudai asks, walking into my sight as her own narrows, "why would you be so reticent to revealing what these matters entail?"

"Personal stuff is personal, are you deaf or stupid?"

"Wh- How dare you! Have you no shame?!"

Slowly looking at her, opening my eyes wide, my sight gets distorted a bit, seeing her face overlap on the sides as a small chime beeps in my ears. Tapping my brows as I inhale slowly, blinking, my eyes fix back up as I step towards the yellow and black. "If you have an idea on how to solve this, I'm all ears," I propose, she again recoils and tightens her expression, intimidation. But in the end, she says nothing. "Yeah, that's it. You've got nothing, so shut up and start thinking. And if you try and pick a fight again, I'm calling the Instructor for real," I say, in joke since that's not my goal here, and walk away.

Only to feel a grip on my arm, a pull keeping my feet in place. And purple fire meeting my eyes. "Takeru, stop it. What are you trying to accomplish? To pressure her in this manner until she-"

"To ensure tomorrow never becomes yesterday, that's my goal."

"… What does that even mean?"

"Exactly what I said," I shrug her off, returning the gaze as I fiddle with my hair. "So if your only plan is doing nothing until the lava

comes, then do me a solid and start thinking on something better."

"… However-"

"Cadet Mitsurugi," the Fudai pats Meiya's shoulder, shaking her head, "move aside and let cadet Shirogane go have a talk with the woman." She then looks my way, endowing in embers too. "I am certain that you won't try anything violent, but if you see she reacts poorly back off immediately. You get one chance, that's all. And if you bring us any issues, I will be reporting your insubordination, Shirogane."

"As I will be towards your actions, *Royal Guard."*

"Please, cease this at once!" Meiya stares blades at both of us, sighing as she rubs her forehead. "We shouldn't be accusing each other in such way. I only… I do not wish to remove her from this place, it is literally all she has. The hope to live with her sons, to welcome them back to the house that saw them grow. I… I only desire to safeguard her."

"… All three of us do, certainly," the Fudai comments, lingering acids as she throws a slithering glare my way.

"Sadly, as things stand, we don't have much choice. And I rather not suffer more punishments just because you two don't wanna stain your honor," I shrug, ignoring the pointless bark of the Fudai.

After all, Meiya wasn't sent to the detention barracks with me. I was the only one punished for what happened back then. She and Takamura have their noble blood as protection, but me? The second an accident happens that's more burdens on Yuuko's plate. *You can parrot about your ideals all you want because you'll never suffer the consequences of your actions, you can stay on your ebony tower prattling about honor and whatnot while our people burn and starve. Always putting the cart in front of the horse, then whipping at it because it's not fast enough.*

Sorry honey, but I can't let your inner demons send you into a mistake. You ain't jumping into the lava today, no matter how strong your 'resolve' is.

"And don't worry," raising a hand back, I smile at 'em, "I have no intentions of sparking a fight. So you better stop moping about and get to thinking on how to reach a compromise before the lava comes to say hello," facing away from the frowns, a sigh escapes as my arm falls down.

I slowly approach the house, looking at it well. A deep breath as my steps wane, letting the air go as I stand by the door, licking my dry lips. You still offered us some food and tea that night, complaining about why we were sent here. Your words of thankfulness were probably what convinced Marimo-chan not to whip my ass back then, despite Sensei's protection. To my side, the wood has some stains, raked like the small table me and Miki sat by in the area of her dojo where the kitties came to visit. Darkened, with moisture sticking to it and evident at first glance. No wonder this will collapse in just a few hours with the aftershocks in the ground.

… And that outcome has to be prevented. Neither Meiya nor Takamura should get injured today, or that will have horrible consequences.

I knock the door twice and wait, a slight shiver on the back of my head. After a short while I knock twice again.

And wait, as the clouds above float out of sight.

Until some quiet footsteps come closer, and the creaking disturbs the air in the slow opening of the wooden door.

"What now? Oh… You," the old lady grimaces as she sees me.

"Good afternoon, ma'am," I start with a bow, talking slow, loud enough to be heard but not sound intimidating. "Could I perhaps speak with you for a second?"

"I have nothing to say to someone like you."

"Then, could you simply listen to what I have to say?"

"… What do ya want? You going ta tell me I gotta go with you because it's dangerous to be 'ere?" the venom obvious in her every word, her posture remains seeking the wooden frame as a shield.

Taking a breath, steeling myself to not fuck it up, I not look away and simply nod shortly. "This place is precious to you, isn't it?"

"… Of course it is. What? Got something to say?"

"I can understand how you feel. My home is… gone too, and I'll never be able to go back there." Her stiffness diminished, I see her eyes slightly losing the edge they were displaying, the fingers no longer gripping at the door. "Not just the land, the people as well. It's all gone, forever. So I think I can understand why you do not wish to leave. To stay here is your own personal war, isn't it?"

"… Yes, this is my fight. If you got that, then why do you not leave me alone?"

"Because if you die, then so does this town."

"If it gets destroyed, then I might as well be dead! I rather die here, in the house I built with my husband!" she points a finger at me, her eyes overflowing with layer upon layer of the same lava that will soon consume this place.

But short of flinching or running away, I smile back. "Who said anything about letting the town get destroyed?" Heh, I got her.

Eyes widen momentarily, then she remains scanning my face for a few seconds in a more somber glare. "What do you mean? If the volcano erupts, my town will be destroyed."

"That's only if the lava gets here. I do have an idea to prevent that outcome, and would like to hear your opinion and thoughts on it as

the last member of the village. Could we perhaps talk inside? If you refuse after hearing it, I will leave you alone and won't insist on you leaving this place. How does that sound? Could you hear me out, for just a moment?" I slowly say, giving another bow at the end.

The woman closes her eyes for a few seconds, I see her hands tremble a bit. She finally opens her eyes, returning my gaze without shadows of doubts in her eyes as she lets the door go. "Fine. I'll hear ya out, soldier. But ya better not try anything in here."

"I won't, ma'am. Of that you can be sure," I nod back, smiling a bit.

She gives a nod, moving back and retreating into the house. I follow after, closing the door behind me.

"Cadet Shirogane, what are you planning to-" I turn off my comms, and the pop-up request to return to the common channel.

This is my mission. And I can't let them hear some of this stuff, no matter what. Pretty sure they won't be stupid enough to disturb me now, after all I did get the chance to talk this out. Unless Takamura, for some reason, decides to be a bitch. She has been rather cold today, despite me remaining cool in what help I gave. Heh… Guess this is a ripple of the mock battle, can't be helped.

Focusing back on the now, I take a look around. The inside is really worn down, the elements' impact visible in the walls, small little markings in the ceiling too. The heating is still working well, thankfully. The old lady opens the window to let the daylight to seep in then slowly walks towards a small wooden table, with six wooden chairs around it and the modesty of the place.

"So, soldier. What is this plan ya were talkin' about?" she asks, sending a direct gaze at me.

I sit on the table in front of her, entwining my fingers. "It's simple. I want to block the entrance to the valley. That way, even if the

volcano erupts, the lava won't reach this place and the village won't be destroyed."

"And how do ya plan to do that?" she presses, narrowing her eyes.

"By using the giant boulder over there. I heard that it was some sort of protector of this region, right? Then, I think it would be fitting for the guardian to be the one who saves the town," I tell with a smile.

After a sec of shock, her features enlarge as a watermelon showered in wine. "How did ya know that? You ain't from 'ere!"

"Well, the UN does have a large amount of information about stuff. Someone told me to be careful about the regional deities, that's all." Bullshit, is is necessary. "But what do you think? Would you allow me to break off the guardian from the mountain to close the valley?"

She closes her eyes, groaning a bit. Rubbing her chin in slow motion, she extends the silence as the incoming light fades to a cloud. I let out some air through my teeth as I await her answer, peeking out the window and seeing the other two at the distance, huddled together.

She clears her throat, hand still in her chin. "But then, does that mean you won't take me away?"

"I fear we would still have to," I relent with a sigh. "This is something of a truce, a compromise. I can try to protect your town from the lava, so that you can have somewhere to return once things settle down."

"Pah! Liar! Things won't get better, it's been always the same thing with-"

"Things will get better. I assure you of that. Sooner than you think."

"… How can ya be so sure, soldier? The war has only gone from bad to worse," she affirms, drilling her gaze into mine along the extra wrinkles added by the slight frown.

"Trust me on this one, things will get better. Important people out there are taking the steps to ensure yesterday does not become tomorrow. Did you happen to hear the speech Her Highness made a few days ago?"

"Aye, I did. It was a soothing day, to hear the Lady's voice again," she says, clutching her chest softly with both hands as if in prayer.

Seeing the old generation treat you with such divine reverence will never not be weird, Yuuhi. Imagine if I told them you like to choke on strawberry muffins with no restrain whatsoever. Heh, I wonder if there is anything left of you in the Shogun…

Sigh… No, don't be an idiot. Not now, you've got shit to do.

"I mean, not to point out the obvious but, surely, you understand why that person is here with me?" I say, low, waving my brows up a few times as I lean forward. "For someone of her station to be present in the field, I think you can guess the reason."

And again, surprise floods her face like kitties hearing thunders or fireworks. "Are ya saying… the war is going to end soon?"

"… No, the war won't end. But it will get better for us, soon."

"Then, why do ya need me to leave my home?"

"Well… Did you hear the news of Niigata?"

Grimacing, she nods. "Aye, heard the monsters came again. Many soldiers died and a city was hurt."

"Yeah. That's why we were sent to help you as well. Even without the volcano, your life is in danger. So, if us soldiers know you're somewhere safe, we can be a bit more reckless and daring. Because when someone is behind is, we cannot fail. But that… will soon be over, this place will be safe once more. When that time comes, you can return here and nobody should stop you."

"And how are ya sure it's gonna be like that?"

"Well, you can ask 'her' to allow you to return here. I doubt anyone could refuse her words."

Thank God you two are so similar. Though, I do wonder why nobody notices their different hair color. If someone threw a bucket of blue paint on top of Yuuhi, we wouldn't be able to tell them apart until they spoke up probably. She could pass as Meiya without anyone noticing, and the same in reverse. Imagine if they swapped placed and I had to deal with Yuuhi being in the squad instead of Meiya…

Yeah, no, I better shut up. Different or not, I rather deal with Meiya than with you.

"… Do you think the Lady would grant me this selfish wish?" she asks, cracking away.

"If I can be honest with you, she does wish to grant it. To the point that she won't leave this place without you."

I mean, worst case scenario, I can… ask Mana for some help, I guess. I think that I could somehow make the old lady return here after we triumph in Sadogashima. Without the BETA and if there's no more risk of a volcano erupting, if she wishes to return to her land… then that's her choice. Sure, it is selfish, but it would be worse to simply keep her alive in the cramped slums. This world is different, I can't simply assume the tiles will fall as well as they did without me trying in my first loops. Sigh… Mana is gonna ask me quite the retribution for this 'favor', though. Or she's gonna snap at me.

"Eh? Why do ya mean? Why won't she leave? Someone like her… Someone as the Lady should pay no heed to these old bones," again, slumping in that prayer pose, in deep lament as if reprimanded over a sin.

Swallowing the sigh as I lean back, a hand messes with my hair for a sec. "She values every single person here in this Empire much. In a

way, I am also extending this request for her sake," I admit with a nod. "This is nothing more than me attempting to find peace between your wish to keep this land's memory safe and safeguarding you from any danger. Of course, I am not saying this to dissuade you or anything. I'm certain that you have a very good reason to remain here." I know she does. And in a way, we're the same. We're fighting to honor those who no longer are, in our own ways.

"Soldier, does the Lady really not wish to leave? Couldn't you convince her somehow? I can face my own death on my land, but to bring harm to one such as her…

… I think I would have an easier time stopping the lava with my bare hands than convincing Meiya to leave you, for real.

"Surely you can tell that she won't back down on her resolve no matter what," for better and worse, that's who she is in this world. "She wishes to protect you and your village, above anything else. But that's besides the point," clearing my throat and leaning forward, I stare straight ahead. "Tell me, as the last member of the village, would you allow me to use the guardian to block the valley? Even if it still meant you would have to leave?"

She again rubs her chin, extending the silence. The incoming light does little against the clouds in her face, the sheet of lukewarmness the old stove spreads in this tiny home cannot prevent the shaking from surfacing in her wrists and features.

"Soldier, have you made a deal like this for all the other peasants?"

"No, I haven't."

"Then, why do ya worry about an old lady like me? Why can't you just leave? If it were the Lady, I could understand. But why do ya worry so much?"

"… Because I'm still hoping."

"Huh? Hoping for what?"

"For a different solution, to not have to resort to abandoning people or employing force to get what I want. I'd like to believe in that, if nothing else."

It'd be far easier, to simply report to the Instructor for real and call out both Meiya and Takamura on their bullshit. It'd be far easier to send assassins to get rid of Sagiri, to give word to the Pickles to beware of Yuuko if she proved to be against me.

… It'd be so easy to focus on all the shit I've gone through, to stop giving a damn about anyone else, to call forth that ruin and use it to choke an agreement out of the Vice Commander.

Maybe I am no longer fit to be a soldier, since I am putting my own selfish interests ahead of the current mission instead of simply following orders. Maybe they were right, and the shadows do fit me better. But, if nothing else-

"I'd like to stop the endless suffering this war has brought, and I can't do that by forcing more pain onto others. Those methods will catch up to me in due time, and cruelty is not necessary to obtain results. And even if it is a selfish request, to allow you to return here in due time, the chain pulls on both sides. The system can ask the people to endure and resign their treasures, but only for so long."

And I rather die again than let the disaster Meiya and Ikaruga brought about after the Babylon Disaster, just to safeguard 'muh traditions and soul'. My world is proof enough that end was avoidable, not that I can bring that up against anyone here, sure, but I know we can make things better than they currently are. If only our armies would cooperate instead of being pricks with one another.

Looking out the window, remembering Sagiri's words, my hands clench, I thought he was an idiot, that it was irresponsible to have done what he did with the BETA breathing on our necks, and even more stupid after Iceberg. But he was only trying to save what he

thought was his land in one last desperate gambit. Sure, I still don't forgive him for killing Chizuru's dad, but he was just… trying to save his home last loop, to try and get as many people off the Empire before the GOC arrived to swallow us all. Just like me, simply struggling to try and save those dear to him.

And now, I can see we really are not that different. We both were simply fighting against history as it was meant to be. Even when the 'correct' path would be to forsake others to death, to create 'the perfect scenario', we'd still stand our ground and defy fate. Be it for an entire nation or the memory of a single person.

The old lady groans, rustling both hands together and sending gazes at me, not meeting my eyes. "But why insist? Taking the guardian off the mountain won't be easy, soldier."

"But it's not impossible."

"Ya don't need to put yourself or the Lady in danger for these old bones."

"That's what a soldier has to do, it's our job to protect the people."

"Pah… From the way some of the young'uns I've received, that's a rarity nowadays."

"Heh… Someone once told me something similar," smiling at my interlocking fingers, I edge closer to the table.

"Oh? That ya soldiers are not helping? Did somethin' happen today?"

"No, it was… a long time ago, back when I first enlisted. Someone said to me what we pilots receive the name 'Eishi' more due to the meaning our actions were supposed to take than to what duties we actually perform. And yeah, I can see where you come from and why you'd not believe my words easily…"

More considering the end results of all of my loops. Either face destruction and ruin, or leave all the hives and 00 Unit tech in the hands of the same assholes that hesitated not in choosing the easy solution for their own lawn, without bothering to look around. A life by the knife, with no escape from the edge. And even when we'll never truly outrun violence as an answer-

"I don't think it's a bad thing to honor the implication in our title, to be guardians above warriors. Because while I can't save the world, I can try to help those who are near me. To try and ensure our future does remain smiling. I think that those little sparks of kindness mean a lot, especially with how dark everything looks as of now."

Even the smallest light will trounce the eternal night. I know that very well, since Yuuko, the one from my world, was always there to remind me of that both last loop and after the disasters hit everyone.

"And what if ya get in trouble for trying to help? What if ya get hurt while striking the guardian down?"

"It's better to take that risk on my own hands than to either abandon you to die or surrendering to remove you by force. Sure, I might not be able to do much, but this meager effort is within my possibilities, if you accept my deal. I know that I cannot help you in your own fight, and that if you leave you really might not be able to come back, but I am willing try and protect your town and the memories that lie in it."

The old lady remains looking at me, expressionless, for quite the long while. And yet, my eyes are maybe not what she truly is seeing, that gaze seems as lost as if casting a wide glance over to the horizon buried in between blue waves and azure skies, lost in the depths of reminiscence.

"… Thanks, soldier. It's good to hear such young people be so kind despite the war. There may still be hope for us," she closes her eyes and clutches her hands together, letting a small, hollow sigh out.

"Of course there is, Ma'am. So, well…"

"Soldier, could you try to convince the Lady to leave with you?"

"Believe me, she won't."

"… Are ya sure? Have ya tried to talk with her?"

"She's very stubborn, I'll have you know. Once she sets her mind on something, no one can change her ways, no matter… what you have to say about it. So, I know it isn't fair to say it, but she won't leave without you."

"I see. But I also cannot leave. My sons and grandchildren are out there, fighting for the Empire. I cannot leave the town until they come back," she states, giving a light hit to the wood, nodding once but sharp.

I know they're already dead, but I can now understand her. No one could simply accept a beloved one is gone so easily. Just like how despite the power plant blowing up I still was shocked when Maya-san confirmed that both Meiya and Tsukuyomi-san were truly dead. Just as I refused the thought of the guys being all dead after the fall of Yokohama. And like when I lost it, as your heartbeats slipped off my fingers.

"Are they in the Empire?" I ask, low. Let's go along, I can't just shut the talk down even if I already know they're dead.

"No, my sons were sent away. They still… haven't returned. None of them. My grandchildren are still here, but they haven't come to visit in a long time."

… I don't recall her talking about her grandchildren during my first loops, though.

"I mean, if you'd like, we could try to locate them. You could then go with your grandchildren until things settle down here."

… Oh shit. The bitter smile, the watering eyes… They're dead too, aren't they?

"… I would like to, but no one can tell me where they are."

"… Sorry, I shouldn't have asked," I bow, biting my lips. I just had to. No, you could not do it without harming her, you had to screw it up.

"Don't apologize, soldier. Your words, the look in your eyes sort of reminded me of them. It has been… long since any visits came to talk and not shout at me to leave," she tells, wearily, before slowly standing up, walking towards the other end of the place. "Let me show you why I can't leave yet."

I also get up and slowly get closer, she opens a drawer and takes out a small black box that glimmers at the sunlight that seeps nearby. Signed with the logo of the IJA, and a small lock she slowly undoes with some effort and a sharp clicking noise.

"This is… all I've got back. When the first arrived, my husband… couldn't take it," she says, barely audible as her shoulders hunch over. I grimace by reflex as what was inside meets my eyes. "My two sons died on the same day from what I was told. This is the paper the soldiers brought back to us then."

A KIA document along a unit patch. The death date was on June, 1997. However, what leaves me unable to speak, tongue regressing backwards, is not the date or any other little detail in the IJA's parchment. But their last name.

Fukuha.

The image of a man appears in my mind. A slim dude, with short, brown hair and dark magenta eyes bearing a rather weird grin while wearing the dark uniform of the Guard. The worried scuttle to deliver reports, the almost manic expressions as things seemed to be about to require a delay, and the usual scolding and deadpanning upon my puns or songs.

I see… So she was that relative you spoke of.

The old lady subtly shakes for a sec, a lone tear running away from her eyes. Tightly holding the papers, she takes in a good breath of air.

"How could a mother ever accept her sons are dead with some meager paper? I know that they probably died, but my heart just cannot accept that… The same for my grandchildren."

She takes another paper from the box. Another KIA document and another patch of the IJA. Rokuro Fukuha was his name, but the image on the document is not that of my fellow, even if he does look familiar.

"I'm sorry, for making you remember this. It's alright, I understand your stance. We can go talk with the Lady if you still want to."

"Thanks soldier… Thanks for listening. It has been a long time since I had anyone to talk to. Ever since he died, nobody ever came here. Except the soldiers that tried to take me away, that is," she tells with a final sigh while taking the last paper from the box, holding it tight, close, closer. The more closer that little scrap got to her, the more her features contorted and caved in, dampness dwelling in between her soldered eyelids. "I could attend to Rokuro's funeral, at least I could bury him. But… But… Those damn Americans! They killed him with that awful bomb!"

…

Of course, the G-Bombs. I never really thought about it, but for the loved ones of those who were murdered by the G-Bombs it must have been a devastating news. Their sons, daughters, lovers, relatives or whatever they were, they didn't die to the monsters, they were murdered by America. Of course people would despise them, of course they would reject them.

But, of course, that's what she thinks. The reality is, perhaps, worse than that. After all, if not for my insistence to sortie, maybe he'd still be alive. My crew died not because of the G-Bombs, but because I refused to back down from what was obviously a dead end… trying to make even a slight change, to maybe finally reach the Valkyries, was it?

And they followed me, despite knowing the risks. And that got them killed, left the old lady alone. And the families of my other squadmates as well.

… Sigh. I guess, shooting stars truly are fated to simply crash and burn. Should better make sure they don't hurt anyone on their way down, right?

I inhale deeply to calm a rising prickling feeling on my throat, this vacuum that expands on my stomach. "Sorry."

"Please, don't apologize… Seeing you sort of reminded me of him. Musou was just like you, soldier. He also wished to help people despite knowing he wasn't that strong. I was so proud of him when he came back once, wearing such a fine dress of black."

"Was he accepted into the IRG?"

"Aye, seems like his hard work paid off," she tells with a smile, looking at the small picture she attached to the KIA report. "Despite his duty, he still did his best to come visit. Like you are, he was very stubborn on getting me to leave to the Capital, but I always refused. And yet…" taking in air, wiping her eyes, the shaky hands slowly rests the papers back, burying them in the lock of the box.

"… Please, don't take it so hard, ma'am. Remember him with a smile instead, I'm sure he must have done much good while he was here."

"Heh, I wonder… The last visits he paid me, Musou looked so beyond himself. Always with his face all scrunched up, not meeting my eyes…"

"… Still, his fellows must have valued him much. Especially in those days, that composure and concern were lifesavers, for real."

"Huh? How do you…"

"I mean, you make it sound as if he was a real trooper. If he was a commoner that remained in the IRG, I'm sure he must have been a great help, right?"

"… Aye, I suppose."

"Sigh… I know it's easy to say, but please don't let his memory turn to poison, ma'am. Don't let the cruelty of the war ruin what good things you still have."

"I wish it were that easy, soldier… This may be somethin' I'll never be able to bury."

"… Even so," licking over my lips, feeling cold goosebumps on my back, a finger raises to massage the lower side of an ear, "even if you may be unable to bury them, either in body or mind, at the very least recall the good things along the bad. Don't let them slip off your fingers, I'm certain he'd want you to remain smiling when thinking of him. Sure, it might hollow your stomach and choke your throat, but there are some snapshots in time that… are truly not worth losing to the resentment of reality."

"Snapshots?"

"Oh, right. You know cameras, right? Well, aren't there any little moments you recall, precious moments about your sons or grandchildren? Things that… you know, ain't worth forgetting despite the pain? How they grew here, some moments where you read them a book, taught them to write or something along those lines?"

"… Aye," she smiles, looking to the windows. "It was in days like this one, with some light but when it got too cold, that Rokuro and Musou would remain sitting here, bathing in the sunlight. Simply sitting

together as they learned their first hiraganas or kanjis, drinking tea during the cold afternoon as we listened in the latest songs in the radio," her head flutters a bit, both hands again joining in prayer, moving to face the sun as if to raise her heart to it. "We waited any letter from my sons, enjoying the quietness as they studied. Nothing more, just that…"

"I see… Then, please, remember them like that. The war has already taking much from you, so please don't give up in this fight, at the very least. I'm sure they'd be happier that way, even if you… truly cannot ever bury those shadows. Losing your beloved ones is… something harsh to move on from, especially when," nibbling at my bottom lip, I close my eyes and sigh through my teeth, "they became casualties of unnecessary cruelty."

Even when sometimes you just gotta grin and bear it, even when there are some that can smile and continue onward without as much as a mote showing up, to have your family suffer at the same hands of the system they were trying to protect…

… is truly enough to make anyone go mad. She's far stronger than me, to silently honor their lives in this town and still be willing to listen to my words despite my uniform. Sigh… All I really know to do is either shut down or burn everything around me, it'll never not surprise me how composed others can be at these things. Maybe I'm still weak deep down, despite everything.

"Sigh… Aye, maybe. Thanks, soldier. It is very rare for young'uns to be so patient."

"It's alright, really." It was my own stupidity that took your grandson from you. Please, don't thank me. "I'll be waiting outside, if you wish to speak with us."

"Wait… Soldier, I have one last question for you." She cleans her eyes, flattening her clothes when facing me again. "Soldier, can we trust in the UN? They won't betray us like the Americans?"

Her gaze turned harsh, piercing. For many, the UN and the US are the same here. And considering what happened last time… I am sure people didn't react well to the news of Sadogashima being nuked by a G-Bomb.

"There are people that I don't agree with, but most of them are here trying to earnestly lend a helping hand. At the very least, they're not the same as the Americans that broke protocol during the invasion."

"… I see. If the Lady is collaborating with them, I suppose I can trust your words, soldier. Please, help the Lady in these harsh times. I'm sure my grandchildren will be with you in your fights, even if you're with the UN," giving a nod and a smile, she closes the window. "Soldier, could you tell me your name?"

"I'm Takeru Shirogane, ma'am."

"I see. Thank you, Shirogane. For listening and being kind, it is rare for soldiers to be like this. I wish I could also have gone to fight back then, I envy this generation of women so much. Sigh…" Her gaze wanders away like a leaf dancing on the high wind as she sets the small box back into the drawer. At the very least, even if she refuses my offer, I think letting the words out helped her, just a little.

Not enough to make amends for my fuckups in the Swordbreakers, but well, not like atonement is an option available for me at this point.

"Well, I'll return to my unit. Please, think about what I told you. We shall be waiting," I bow to her, standing in attention.

"Aye, give me some time to think. I'll go talk with the Lady one more time later."

"… Thanks. Then, I shall be goi-"

A cold gust hits the back of my head, the door is blasted open brusquely. Enough to make the frame screech, enough to make me

flinch away. Takamura enters the house, looks at me, and erupts as hard as the volcano is about to.

"Cadet Shirogane, why were you not responding?!"

"Apologies, 1st Lieutenant. I was talking with-"

"That is no excuse to cut your comms! Do you have any idea-"

"Please, Royal Guard. The soldier was merely indulging me. Do not shout at him," the old lady requests with another reticent bow, again shrinking in apprehension as if seeing an anointed sage or something.

Which helps chill down the Fudai's temper tantrum, a finger running through her hair as she nods. "I see, is that so? My apologies for raising my voice, I did not meant to frighten you. In any case, you will have to accompany us, lady."

… Uuh, Takamura? You're kind of ruining all I was doing? "1st Lt, I think-"

"Silence, cadet."

"What's this about? The soldier said you'd respect my final answer," she says, trying to stand her ground, not as fiery as she was in front of me.

However, the Fudai sighs and gives a bow. "Forgive me, but we have just received word that the BETA are advancing in this direction. We are required to sortie to battle, yet cannot leave you alone."

… Wait, what?

"You're pulling my leg, aren't you?" I had to have heard that wrong.

However, the quivering within her eyes says it all. "Sgt Jinguuji reported a moment ago that the IJA scouts partaking in the relief

efforts contacted her with a request for air. It would seem BETA from Sadogashima are again advancing towards the shore, but the group will surface in a path coming to this direction. Apparently, the Oceanic Defense Line is already engaging them as we speak."

"Huh?! Wait, they're that close?!" You have got to be shitting me! What the fuck is going on here?!

"Sadly, it seems to be the case," Takamura winces in imitation, shaking her head. "We've been ordered to take all civilians to Komoro Base and remain in standby in case we are required to fight. However," she looks towards the old lady, giving another bow, "while I comprehend your stance, I must insist. Please, could you agree to evacuate under our care?"

"… Could I speak with the Lady one last time? And would you give me some moments to… take some items with me?" she asks, not meeting our eyes, fading in between the strands of what little light come through the opened door frame.

"But of course, ma'am. Shirogane, let's go back and prepare to depart."

"O-Oh… Yeah, got it."

Shit, everyone isn't ready to fight the BETA. If… If the Laser-Class get too close… No, even without that, they don't got the XM3 nor any experience so far. If things are as dire as Takamura made them sound then-

They're sending us as meat shields, aren't they?

To buy time for the IRG to haul their asses once the numbers are thinned down.

Anyways, why are the BETA surfacing now of all times?! This didn't happen ever before. Shit, shit, shit, shi-

"Soldier," the old lady calls out, softly. "Please be careful, Japan needs young'uns like you alive for the days to come," giving a nod, she raises a smile to me.

For someone who lost her sons and grandchildren to the war, someone who must harbor so much resentment towards the UN to give me these words… despite how it was my own fixation what sent my squad into an impossible fight…

Clamping my lips, I salute her back and return the nod. "Thank you, ma'am. And don't worry, we will be alright." I will make sure of it. No one dies today. I won't fucking allow it. Slowly turning around, following after Takamura, we exit the house.

"Takeru, what did she say?" Meiya slowly comes towards us, wonderment sprouting in her eyes as she sees the old lady coming out as well.

"She wants to talk with you one last time. Make it count, Meiya." I raise a fist at her pairing it with a smile. She nods, the steel of her inner resolve glimmering against the sunlight all the more with

each step she takes to meet the old lady.

Once we got a fair distance from them, I slow down my pace, resting one hand on my Geki's legs. Dammit, my eyes… My throat constricted onto itself, I feel an acid whiff coming out of my stomach. Why now? They ain't ready, we don't even have the XM3 with us. I get Yuuko can't risk her special units out of her grasp, but damn… Of all the times when shit could hit the fan.

"Whatever is the matter, Shirogane?" Takamura asks, low, as her steps edge closer and closer from behind.

"Nothing, just… I was not expecting any BETA today," I say, shaking my head as I return myself upright.

And find a squinted glare, further venoms lurking in. "Huh, you do not say."

"… Something up, 1st Lt?"

"Oh, no, I was merely wondering from where your rather adusted insubordination stemmed from. I did not wish to lend credence to the rumors, yet it would seem they had hit the mark."

"… So that's what this is about, eh. Got any problems with me you'd like to sort out?"

"Hmm…" she walks, circling over me in slow motion, never letting my eyes go, "you seemed quite opposed to the notion of granting the old lady's desire, quite insistent on having her leave to the shelters."

"Anyone would want to save her life."

"… I wonder. Living and being kept alive are not one and the same," she spits out, stomping short as she faces me, folding both arms. "Your own attitude against me and Mitsurugi was far too confrontational as well."

"Your fault for trying to break UN protocol."

"I did not attempt to do nothing of the sort!"

"To have kept waiting would have done nothing for us, and to have lied to the Instructor would have been equal to breaking our oath. To lie in such manners to the UN is equal to treason, you should know that."

"Yes, yes, I do, indeed. And yet, one cannot deny the audacity of your words," she smiles, cracked, as she twirls a strand on a finger. "To even dare to mention my project in your threats, it would seem you were set from the beginning to have us retrieve all peasants to the shelters, regardless of their desires."

"… Think whatever you want, but that's not what I tried to do."

"Huh, is that so. Could you kindly tell me what you spoke of with the old lady, why you silenced your comms?"

"I refuse," I state, resting onto the Gekishin as I fold my arms.

"Hmm, is that so," gaze narrows even more, she again paces around. "Quite curious, indeed. Almost as much as your posture."

"Huh? What?" Can't help but to blink a few times, yet the dead seriousness hewn into her features does not thaw.

"You're shielding your backside, as you did during our prior discussion. Rather curious if you ask me," she nods to herself, tapping her forearm.

"Uh… What are we talking about here? What's wrong with how I stand?"

"Oh, nothing much. It's simply… odd, one could say. To have someone who basically would push to have any and all civilians forced into the shelters, who would so easily fall to threats upon his comrades at the minimal disagreement, and even go as far as show such pungent animosity in his features… Perhaps, asking you the motives behind the silencing of your comms is unnecessary. Perhaps those markings engraved on your back are explanation enough," she erupts into another frown as a gust propels her hair to flutter, covering the blaze in a layer of frost.

"Wait, what? How do you even know of my scars?" I leave the Geki, getting closer.

She immediately retreats in equal number of steps, compacting her posture. "You seem rather riled up about the matter coming to light. I wonder why that could be."

"What are you getting at?"

"Remind me something. You also came from Yukon, did you not Shirogane?"

"… Yeah?" What is she getting at? Why is she- Oh… "Oh, so that's what you're playing at, huh…"

"Why the adusted expression, cadet?" she asks, taking another step back, shielding her abdomen with both arms.

"Them's fighting words, Fudai. Keep up this bullshit, and you'll regret it. I can, and will, take it to the authorities if you try anything," I glare, also folding my arms.

The wind blows, coldness sticking to my face. She scans me, a hand taming the waves of her hair in the air. Lips compress, eyes are set alight, she holds her breath hostage for a sec.

"Why would you be growing so defensive? Can you not clarify where and how were you inflicted such 'scars'?"

Clicking my tongue, spitting away, I shake my head. "That's none of your business. If you try and say anything, know that I will be raising claims of defamation on your head."

"Huh, and you believe to have the support to issue such a challenge?"

"And what has you thinking you can spew bullshit and get away with it, huh? You think your noble blood excuses you to act like an ass whenever you want?"

"Already falling to insults, huh," she cast a sideglance, scoffing.

"Only because you insulted me first, equaling me to those bastards. I ain't gonna repeat myself, Takamura. You dare to point fingers at me, and I'm taking this to the XO," I step closer, tapping my brows. For a second, her figure grows hazy, overlapped onto itself, before a deep breath restores my sight. "The second you put me in the same bag

as those extremists is the second we become enemies. Think whatever the hell you want about me, *Royal Guard.* But I ain't letting you use my issues to bring problems to the XO."

She holds my gaze, in equal sturdiness, without blinking. Deigning an upwards nod, she faces away. "Very well, for the time being I shan't bring this up. However, you are aware of… the meaning behind such markings being engraved in-"

"We're being recorded, for fuck's sake. Can you use your fucking brain and shut up?" I shake my head, massaging my temple.

Kgh… Fuck, sight's going double again. Grabbing my stomach to keep the void at bay, air enters me through open lips time and again. Simply thinking about those motherfuckers is enough to bring the hold, the caress of cold hands all over me.

"I am aware, however… If I am not mistaken, you were inflicted-"

"One more word. You say one more word and it comes to blows right fucking now," I glare, stepping closer to the hazy shape, colliding into it in a light tackle.

"Ugh! H-Hey, what are you-"

Leaning closer to whisper, to properly see her face, the venom simply seeps out. "You dare to equal me to those terrorists, to bring more burdens to the XO, and I'll report your treason to the UN. Open those pretty little lips of yours, and the railgun gets canned."

"… So were you inflicted those scars during-"

"What the hell does it matter to you? You already cast your judgment on me. Heh, what did I expect of a noble," walking away, I tap my head controls and activate the pulley from my Gekishin. I expected more, from you, from Meiya to actually keep my secrets as such.

Godfuckingdammitall, if she really opens her mouth we're gonna lose the railgun. Yuuko can't simply let her stay in the base if this discussion reaches the light, and I might be left with no choice but to face erasure if she claims I'm an Allegiance agent. Heh, putting me in the same bag as those bastards… Guess that is all what people will ever see in me, nothing but a violent element, a burning shadow, a dark dragon. Sigh… Fuck this shit.

"Shirogane, wait," she calls out as I grip the end of the pulley. Looking back, she slowly steps closer, arms folded. "If you are not… in league with them, what has you reacting so negatively today?"

"… I already told you, saving these people matters to me. Because I only ever manage to leave ruins and debris wherever I go. For you, living in the slums with no direction might be a fate worse than death, perhaps you'd rather die in honor doing something for the greater good. But, you know," looking up at the clouds that block the sun from view as the wind howls again, as the chimney is turned off, I can only sigh, "someone has to remain behind. Be it to tell the memories of this place, the recipes of food, or just to teach kids how to write or to read them some books. Maybe that old lady will be something like that, maybe her words of goodwill for what kindness we extended will give some hope to the other people in the shelter, you never know."

"… All of us would desire to safeguard our people, yet you immediately resorted to threats," she accuses, again glaring in fire.

"Would either of you have listened otherwise? No, you would not have. That's all."

"I… see… However, well, regarding your scars… Did you suffer them in-"

"Those bastards took something away from me, yeah."

A beep echoes in my ears, flat and unchanging.

The soft rustling of the clothes that limply fall off my fingers burn at my skin, force the suit to tighten in response.

The added weight that presses onto my legs, forcing me to almost kneel, bending my ankles and burying needles into my feet.

And that touch, that touch that seeks and fails to reach my cheek.

"I will **never** be able to forgive them. And if you dare to accuse me of being part of that cult," I glare back finding her figure blurry, distorted, overlapping, until I tap my brows, "I will do anything and everything in my power to make of that your last mistake."

"Ah, eh, m-my apologies, I, well, jumped to-"

"Shut it, I don't wanna hear your corporate and empty words of apology. And don't bring my scars up, or I will have to notify the XO. I don't need more setbacks, thank you very much. So long as you don't throw shit my way, everything's cool. Still, thanks for telling me how you really see me, *Royal Guard.* "

Triggering the pulley and reaching the cockpit, I enter and quickly make the Geki stand again, facing towards the entrance to the valley and walking towards it in slow motion.

"Cadet Shirogane, what are you doing? Komoro Base is not-"

"I made a promise to the old lady, to seal the valley in exchange for her agreeing to evacuate. So don't get in the way, Fudai."

"Sigh… Please, I am apologizing. Your situation was simply too odd to-"

"Shut up, I'm busy," flipping the switch on, the sonar scan begins to do its thing, the green circles echoing from my center, all the more when I step and cause waves.

"However, how will you even-"

"I'll break the large boulder there off the cliff and seal the entrance, so that even if there is an eruption this village remains safe."

"D-Do not be ridiculous!" her words gain haste, her small dot in my radar gets a bit closer. "There is no feasible way in which a TSF could perform such a feat."

"Yes, there is, 1st Lt," sighing as I roll my neck, I tell her the plan me and Meiya came up with who knows how many loops ago. "So, considering I've my fuel tanks near full capacity, I should be able to do it."

"Your Gekishin does not have the maneuverability to properly evade the rock slide you'll cause, even if the strike is certain. Still, I suppose it is a small compromise to make, to ensure this hamlet remains intact," she softly says, sighing heavily. "Remain gathering sonar data, I shall perform the strike with my Takemikazuchi."

"Sigh… Whatever."

"… Please, leave the pungency behind. If you truly hoist no links to those people, then cleanse your speech of this animosity. Others will assume worse about your character than me, and you… did not show such glares during our dinners or work."

"All the good that did, you still are accusing me over nothing," I click my tongue, resting onto the seat.

"Sigh… Then please regain your usual composure, Shirogane. We… We will be marching against the BETA, after all. Surely you remember what the Incident-"

"No need to ask, I know full well what mess we're in. So hurry it up if you're lending me a hand, those bastards won't wait until you're done with the fake apologies," I throw, pulling the controls and making the Geki move once again. She sighs, cutting the connection and walking to her yellow giant.

… One problem after the other, what the fuck. Can the guys really stand up against the BETA? How many will there be? Will we have any aerial support? Missiles or tanks? Shit… What is going on here? Why is this different again? There's no way there were leaks due to the 00 Unit, right?

… If that's the case and this is the first offensive, the base is fucked. We don't even have the XG to use as bait for the BETA…

A small beep, a few fractures appear in the scanned area. Smaller than what I thought, but to be fair we are attempting this way earlier than during my last loops. In the distance, Meiya is guiding the old lady to her Fubuki as the Takemikazuchi approaches me and the data link shares our data together.

Sigh… Just one time. Give me one good roll, causality. Not today, don't force my hand into a set path again.

"Shirogane, do you copy?"

"… Loud and clear, 1st Lt. So, what do you think?"

"Hmm…" her eyes narrow slightly, before corking a brow, "I shan't say it is impossible, but I doubt a single unit could truly cause a fall of the boulder."

Well, the cracks are way smaller than before since there hasn't been as many quakes, and no eruption too. "You think it's a no go, then?"

"Sigh… If you gave your word, we cannot simply back down. Give me a moment," she seems to fiddle with her controls, shortly after a few numbers and graphs zoom into my view. "I believe this maneuver would allow us to strike down this guardian, yet it will require you to match my Type-00's movements to almost perfection. Do you think to be able to do so?"

"… I mean, not to brag or anything, but pretty sure I can," and as the sole user of the XM3 in the squad, thanks to Yuuko giving me the

agreement so long as I was careful in case of emergency, these numbers are nothing I can't produce as I am now.

"Huh, is that so," she gives a small smile. "Well, start the preliminary checks on your unit, and share the intel once you're done. I shall take point on the left, and you strike at the right side."

"Copy that. Also, uh, my Gekishin has some modifications to its OS, 1st Lt. The XO will have to check the logs to ensure the shared data remains in UN hands."

"Oh, really? Wait, is this about that special training you six performed some nights ago?"

"Yes, yes, I can't tell you anything else but don't be shocked at the output of my machine. Also… thanks for lending a hand."

"It is nothing," she sighs, shoulders dropping, "think of it as an apology for my insensitive words before. Now then," she links her unit, passing me her numbers. I do the same, her eyes turn into balloons as she gapes. "Wh-What the- How is this even…"

… I tend to forget how awesome the XM3 actually is to the people in this world, huh.

"Those numbers work for you, 1st Lt?" I ask, tapping my brows.

"Ahem… Indeed," she coughs again, brushing her hair. "Alright, cadet Shirogane, start to heat up your Jump Units. We engage the maneuver in T minus One."

"Copy that."

For now, this ceasefire shall suffice. If we both make it out alive, then I'll see how to deal with you once we're back at the base.

… Kinda hard to believe, that this really might be one of our last talks. Just, please, don't let this be a repeat of the defense of the base…

Sighing through clenched teeth while gripping the controls, the numbers shave closer to zero. Releasing all the fire into a crushing stomp, melting my back into the seat, both the Geki and the yellow beetle blast away, up towards the cliff.

# Goodbye

*A/N: Sorry if th e last chapter came out a bit more messy than you'd expect, I couldn't really bring myself to place as much effort into it to polish the edginess away . Maybe it's just burnout, but this feels like an appropriate time to take the plunge.*

*I'm done with this story.*

*A few interactions have soured this franchise for me, some recent bad decisions from the company as well, and I honestly kind of feel alienated. From both being outright asked a 'Why are you even here' some time ago to simply not vibing with the overall focus most give to the BETA war in the franchise, and I'm kind of indifferent towards that side of the canon myself, to be honest.*

*Problem is, whenever I think of something that motivates me to write, it clashes against the mold of the BETAverse. Most importantly, it clashes against some core characters and teachings of the setting. And I'm tired of adapting to the mold of canon, it has taken the joy out of writing to try and justify why the plot happens without ruining characters or the setting.*

*Doing a light reread of Unlimited, the coup and other key moments from Alternative a few days ago, I saw why so many readers were rightfully criticizing my writing of Yuuko, how it doesn't fit her persona to act as she does since chapter 85 on, and how that also applies to the rest of the story at large, how the AU elements I added, Smolkeru and his relation with Yuuhi as well as his daughter being the narrator, stick out and feel out of place.*

*But when sitting down, seeing the comments about how Yui was OOC, which also applies to Meiya and Yuuko, and thinking if I wanted to change the direction to portray them more faithfully to canon, my answer was no. I don't want to make this story adapt to this mold.*

*So Reversal doesn't feel like it belongs in the Muv-Luv universe to me anymore, and I rather take the story and characters where I want them to go despite it clashing against the setting that inspired me to take the pen, or keyboard I guess. The bugging feeling that had been telling me to slice this in half proved to be correct, that's why I'm dropping the fic. It doesn't feel right to continue writing these characters that made nest in my head under these names and scenarios, in a setting I can't portray well enough. Now that I could sit down calmly and reread parts of the trilogy, I can see that all those critiques I received near chapter 69 were spot on and I was indeed throwing a hissy fit over my plot not working in the world of Muv-Luv. I simply couldn't capture the feel of the trilogy and its cast, and to continue bashing my head against the textwalls won't make anything better.*

*So no deleting chapters, no more rewriting, no tagging abandoned or removing comments, let's simply say goodbye. To all those who have silently followed up to this point, to those who stuck since the beginning, to any and all who left a comment, there are only a few things left to tell you.*

*Thank you for reading and being there, our interactions made the pandemic so much better to deal with for me. Special thanks to both Dash9 and That One Harsh Guest, whose critiques helped me improve my English a lot.*

*So keep staying safe, y'all.*

*Goodbye*

*Zuoriel*